

The Baker's Daughter Study Guide

The Baker's Daughter by Sarah McCoy

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: McCoy, Sarah. *The Baker's Daughter*. Broadway Books/Crown Publishing/Random House. 2012.

The Baker's Daughter, an historic novel by Sarah McCoy, is comprised of two parallel stories. In the novel, seventeen year-old Elsie, who is living in Nazi Germany, seeks to survive the war as she hides a Jewish boy. The second story is about Reba, an editor who lives in contemporary America. Elsie's and Reba's stories intertwine when Reba seeks to interview the now-eighty year-old Elsie for a Christmas story.

As the novel begins, readers are introduced to seventeen year-old Elsie and Reba, both in their respective times. Seventeen year-old Elsie is an unenthusiastic Nazi living in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie's pro-Nazi parents run a bakery, and her older sister (Hazel) is in the Lebensborn Program. In the Lebensborn Program, girls are impregnated by SS officers to produce Aryan children. Elsie finds herself engaged to SS officer Josef Hub. While Elsie likes Josef and knows the marriage would be a good match, she is not in love with him. Josef, for his part, is constantly wracked by guilt between his moral conscience and what the Nazi Party expects of him, though on the surface he exudes a cool demeanor.

When the war comes to a close, Elsie shelters a Jewish boy named Tobias. She is brutally raped by an SS officer investigating the possibility she has sheltered a Jewish child, and her engagement to Josef ends when the Americans arrive in town. Sheltering Tobias has awakened Elsie to the horrors of even unenthusiastic Nazism, and she imagines Josef is only evil. Elsie begins seeing an American soldier named Robby, whom she ends up pregnant by. Elsie's mother helps her to force an abortion with poisonous tea, but Elsie ends up poisoning herself as well. Only the intervention of American doctor Al Meriwether saves Elsie's life. Though Al is much older than Elsie, she quickly falls for Al. The two marry and moving back to the United States. Elsie opens a German-styled bakery in El Paso and has a daughter named Jane who comes to help her at the bakery in later years. Only later does Elsie come to pray for Josef and to ask forgiveness for him for the past, realizing that not everything is always black and white.

In 2007, the now-widowed Elsie continues to work in her bakery alongside Jane. The bakery is visited by Reba Adams, who is doing a Christmas story for *Sun City Magazine*. Through befriending and interviewing Elsie, Reba comes to learn about the past and the present. Elsie and Jane also recognize that Reba is carrying doubts. Though engaged to a good man, an American Border Patrol agent named Riki Chavez, Reba wears his engagement ring as a necklace rather than on her finger. She worries about the future and does not want to be stuck in El Paso forever.

While Riki seems content to stay in El Paso, he has struggles with his own work as an agent. He is a proud, patriotic American, but he feels bad about having to deport people to Mexico. Also, after struggling with Reba's reluctance in the engagement, he finally



moves out to give her some space. Reba goes on to get a job as an editor in San Francisco. That experience turns out to be everything she does not want, and she misses Riki.

When word comes that Elsie has passed away, Reba returns to El Paso for the funeral. While there, she and Riki reconnect. Riki explains he has quit Border Patrol, while Reba says she has quit her editing job as well. Reba and Riki reconnect, and Reba returns to El Paso to set a wedding date. The novel ends with Jane mailing a dozen of Elsie's recipes to Reba in honor of the upcoming wedding. She confirms that she will bake the wedding cake.



Prologue – Chapter 10

Summary

In the Prologue, it is July, 1945, in Garmisch, Germany. Late at night, an unidentified woman sneaks downstairs from her husband into her bakery's kitchen. From a split in the floor boarding, she pulls out a letter she has hidden. It features delicate handwriting and an old-fashioned wax seal. Hiding the note beneath the mattress, she returns to bed with her husband.

In Chapter 1, it is November 5, 2007. The address is 3168 Franklin Ridge Drive, El Paso, Texas. Reba Adams from Sun City Magazine calls Elsie Meriwether at Elsie's German Bakery on Trawood Drive numerous times. Reba is calling for an article she is writing, but she receives no response. The article is a feel-good feature on international Christmas done locally. Riki, Reba's fiancé who works for US Customs and Border Protection, heads out to work. Reba reflects on first meeting him while doing a story on immigration and how their relationship is disintegrating.

Reba decides to drive over to Elsie's German Bakery. When she arrives, Elsie's daughter, Jane, is working the front counter. Elsie is kneading dough in the back. Reba introduces herself, and Jane apologizes for not getting around to checking the messages. Then, Jane explains her mom will be out shortly. She hangs up a photograph taken on Christmas Eve, 1944. The photograph is of Elsie as a teenager. Jane reveals that her mom is German and her dad was Texan and a veteran. Reba explains she is from Richmond, Virginia. She has been stuck in El Paso for two years, hoping to get work in California. Jane agrees that El Paso is a town for people stuck between places and that she herself dreams of getting away someday. She goes on to say that dreaming does not do a bit of good.

In Chapter 2, it is December 20, 1944, at the Lebensborn Program in Steinhoring, Germany. Hazel Schmidt writes a letter to her sister, Elsie Schmidt. Hazel is furious to hear that Estonia has fallen to the Russians. She notes that many of the girls at the program have lost loved ones, including the fathers of the babies they are producing for the Fatherland. Hazel herself has given birth to three babies, including twins. Hazel hopes Elsie will marry rather than become a mistress, reflecting on her own almost-marriage to Peter some years before. In the letter, Hazel asks how the Schmidt Bakery is doing.

Elsie writes back to Hazel from the Schmidt Bakery at 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany, on December 21. Elsie says that the Bakery is good but that there are annoying customers like Frau Rattelmuller who complains about Elsie's appearance to Mutti and Papa (Mom and Dad). Elsie explains their friend, Josef Hub, has been promoted to lieutenant colonel and transferred to the SS in Gramisch. Elsie says that despite Josef's promotion, he is still the same old Josef, coming into the bakery to visit and eat. Josef and Papa have struck a deal to provide the bakery with goods in short



supply, such as flour. In exchange, the bakery will produce goods for the SS each Monday. Elsie tells Hazel the family is proud of her for what she is doing. Then, Elsie explains she and Josef are to attend a Nazi Weihnachten party together. Josef is even buying her an ivory dress for the occasion.

In Chapter 3, it is Christmas Eve, 1944, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. While Elsie has never been an enthusiastic Nazi youth, she is still excited to attend the Nazi coming out party. Her parents, who adhere to Nazi doctrine, tell Elsie she looks beautiful. They remind her that Nazi women are to be temperate. Papa takes a picture of Elsie and Mutti before Josef arrives to take Elsie to the Nazi banquet hall on Gernackerstrasse. Josef tells Elsie she is beautiful. There, they run into Major Gunther Kremer of the SiPo. Kremer is Josef's old comrade and friend. Kremer explains his wife is around somewhere. Elsie is thrilled to be with Josef and to be around such a luxurious place. When she tastes champagne for the first time, she feels like an American movie star. As Elsie dances with Kremer, he accuses her of being a spy. He wants to know why Josef would waste his time with an uneducated girl. Kremer slips his hand beneath her dress. Fortunately, the dance ends. Elsie returns to Josef.

Elsie tries to explain to Josef what has happened, but Josef quiets her as proceedings get underway. A child sings "Silent Night." Josef explains the child is the son of a Jewish mother and a Polish composer. Josef explains the boy sang to arriving prisoners at Dachau and that tonight is the boy's last performance before being sent back. Elsie reveals her nephew, Julius, also sings. Josef then proposes marriage, overwhelming Elsie. Instead of waiting for an answer, Josef puts a ring on her finger. Elsie worries about the Jewish boy, arguing he is only half-Jewish. But, Josef says a Jew is a Jew. Elsie excuses herself; but, instead of going to the restroom, she leaves the hall through the back alley.

In Chapter 4, it is November 5, 2007. The place is Elsie's German Bakery at 2032 Trawood Drive in El Paso, Texas. Riki texts Reba saying he must deal with a van full of illegal aliens and that he will be home late. Jane asks about Riki. Reba shows Jane the engagement ring, which Reba is wearing as a necklace. Reba explains that the ring is too tight and wearing it makes typing difficult. Jane suggests resizing. Jane says that she herself is past her prime and no longer fit to marry, but she has been in a long-term relationship. An emergency order for a cake comes in, meaning that Elsie will not be able to talk that day. Reba says she will come back, and Jane gifts her with a lebkuchen since Reba says she does not eat anything with milk.

At home, Reba stays up late, jotting down notes and thinking about college where she first began claiming she did not eat milk. Her college roommate, Sasha Rose, was pretty, dainty, and vegan. She made Reba feel ugly by comparison. Reba reflects on how she decided to copy Sasha. However, unlike Sasha, Reba could not give up milk. She hid that she was drinking it from Sasha.

In the present, Riki gets home late. He explains that a family found to be living out of a van will be deported the next day. Riki struggles between supporting immigration laws and feeling bad for Mexican illegals. Reba reminds Riki that he has always said rules



must be followed, or there will be consequences. Reba herself has hardened to illegal immigration because it occurs so much. She tells Riki about her day and brings him upstairs.

In Chapter 5, it is Christmas Eve, 1944, at the Nazi Weihnachten Party at 19 Gernackerstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie feels overwhelmed, and the ring feels ice cold against Elsie. She examines it and realizes it has an inscription in Hebrew reading Ani ledodi ve Dodi Li. She can only imagine it was confiscated from a Jew by the Gestapo. It is then that Kremer discovers her. He grasps her, kisses her neck, and attempts to force himself on her. Suddenly, there is a high-pitched scream which causes Kremer to drop Elsie to the ground. Elsie and Kremer are startled by the Jewish boy, who is screaming from where he has been left outside in a crate. Josef then emerges as Kremer breaks open the crate and prepares to shoot the boy. Josef lifts up Elsie and stops Kremer, demanding to know what is going on. He empties Kremer's gun, returns the gun to Kremer, then brings Elsie back inside. He orders Kremer to follow. Elsie can only think of the boy, who reminds her of Julius.

In Chapter 6, it is November 10, 2007, at Elsie's German Bakery at 2032 Trawood Drive in El Paso, Texas. Reba puts off calling her sister, Deedee, promising herself that she will e-mail Deedee the following day. Reba is warmly welcomed back to the bakery by Jane. Seventy-nine year-old Elsie now makes her appearance. She is white-haired and plump. She brings cinnamon raisin bread that was baked without milk for Reba's pleasure. Reba asks about the Christmas Eve photo. Elsie says it was a long time ago and that she left Germany not long after the picture was made. She explains she does not miss home as people often miss things which do not exist, or which stop existing. She explains she will not find her home again on this Earth.

In Chapter 7, it is Christmas Eve, 1944, at the Nazi Weihnachten Party at 19 Gernackerstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Josef encourages Elsie to eat some of the cinnamon reishbrei being served to help calm her nerves. Josef does not ask what happened in the alley. Elsie is grateful for this. She asks to leave early, and Josef readily agrees. He does apologize for what happened, trying to make excuses for Remer. Josef explains Kremer's marriage is one of convenience, so he always looks elsewhere. When they arrive at the bakery, Josef asks for an answer regarding his proposal. Elsie says she cannot give him an answer. Josef says he understands, saying it was probably too much for one evening.

At home, Mutti has waited up for Elsie. She is glad to hear Josef was pleased. She reminds Elsie that Josef is a good man. Elsie stays up late. She is startled when the Jewish boy shows up at the door, saying he followed the car. She tells him to leave. He says that he helped her and he needs her help now. After hearing men and dogs approaching, a reluctant Elsie lets the boy in, believing she can turn him out tomorrow.. Elsie hides the boy in the oven for the night, telling him to trust her.

In Chapter 8, it is November 10, 2007, at Elsie's German Bakery at 2032 Trawood Drive in El Paso, Texas. Elsie explains that she may have been a German and may have supported her family, but she was not a Nazi. She explains they were trying to live, and



that was enough. She says that the photo was taken prior to a Nazi Christmas party she was invited to. Reba asks if Elsie ever witnessed any Jewish abuse. Elsie says yes and no, but she does not know what the difference is because not everyone is honest about their pasts and only God knows enough to judge. Elsie then demands to know more about Reba, saying she will not answer another question unless Reba opens up to her as well. Reba talks about her fiancé being Riki and what Riki does for a living. Elsie questions why a date has not yet been set. Reba says she is not yet ready. Elsie tells Reba it is not often that fate gives a girl a good man to love and that everyone has a dark side. If that dark side can be forgiven, then something is gained. Elsie tells Reba to wear the ring or give it back.

In Chapter 9, it is Christmas Day, 1944, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. It is still night. Four Gestapo enter the bakery. Papa tells them the family has nothing to hide and the Gestapo can search anything they wish. The Gestapo apologize but say a Jew has escaped, so they have no choice but to search. The oven narrowly escapes a search when one of the Gestapo, a fifteen year-old boy, speaks highly of the free cookies given to him by Papa. When the Gestapo move on, the family goes up to bed. Elsie opens the oven. The boy identifies himself as Tobias. She tells him to come and extends her arms.

In Chapter 10, it is November 9, 1938, known as Kristallnacht, in Munich, Germany. Josef Hub is a second lieutenant in charge of a three-man group including nineteen year-old Peter, a recent Hitler Youth graduate. They knock on the door of the Hochschild house. When there is no answer, Josef orders his men to break down the door. Inside, Frau Hochschild says no crimes have been committed. Josef notes that Herr Hochschild is under arrest. Josef must force aside his personal feelings for the greater good of Nazi Germany, as Hochschild was Josef's literature professor at the University of Munich, and as Josef was a welcome guest at the Hochschild house in those days. When Frau Hochschild moves to strike Josef, Peter shoots her. She dies within seconds in front of her screaming children. The Gestapo soldiers then seize Herr Hochschild and drag him out. Josef then kills Peter and must force himself not to vomit as Hochschild's son calls Josef a traitor. He orders his people onward, reminding himself there is only one people, one empire, and one leader.

Analysis

Sarah McCoy's novel begins mysteriously, with a woman intercepting two letters and hiding them away. The date demonstrates that World War II is over. The woman's identity is intentionally masked. The opening event will make perfect sense at the very end of the novel. Nevertheless, this brief introduction to the novel should be very carefully remembered by readers. From the beginning of the novel, readers should also note that the author weaves back and forth between the past (Nazi Germany during World War II) and the present (Texas of the United States of America between 2007 and 2008). The constant factor throughout the book is Elsie. In historical chapters, she is the seventeen year-old daughter of bakers. In the modern-day chapters, she is the owner



and operator of a bakery in El Paso. It is through the bakery and the Christmas-themed story that readers meet Reba, whose own life parallels Elsie's in different ways.

As Reba interviews (and ultimately befriends) Elsie, McCoy begins laying the foundation for her thematic argument that few things in life are ever morally absolute. Readers are confronted with the SS officer, Kremer, who is the embodiment of pure evil. Then, readers are also confronted with Josef, who is a reluctant member of the Nazi Party. His conscience is at war with his political ideals, especially on the personal level. Note that he kills one of his own men when one of his own men kills Frau Hochschild. This causes Josef to vomit, as the entire situation is traumatic for him.

At the same time, readers are confronted with Papa. Though Papa is a strong supporter of the Nazi Party, he does not personally participate in any actual cruelties. There is Elsie, who is an unenthusiastic Nazi, who goes through the motions because it is what is expected of her. As Elsie notes (and as McCoy argues), Germans did what they had to do in order to survive during those years. In many instances, it meant betraying conscience and losing one's moral nature (such as in Josef's case) or in simply going along with the motions (in Elsie's case). McCoy understands that people often have real depth to them, and her decision to explore Josef's character as well as Reba and Elsie demonstrates this clearly.

As readers learn more about Elsie, they learn more about Reba as well. Reba is not happy in El Paso, and she wants to move on. However, her engagement to Riki seems to be holding her back. There is the symbolic importance of Riki wearing her wedding ring around her neck –not like a necklace, but like a millstone weighing her down – rather than on her finger. Elsie, like Reba, was not sure about her wedding, but her uncertainty was for different reasons. Elsie's own engagement ring from Josef is symbolic of deception and irony. The ring has been stolen from a Jewish married couple, and it is inscribed with Hebrew. It is the symbolic equivalence of stealing love and life, as the lives of the couple have been stolen. Their love, symbolized by the ring, has also been stolen. Yet, the kind of love between Josef and Elsie is clearly not the same as the love between the Jewish husband and wife from where the ring came.

Despite being an unenthusiastic Nazi and her disinterest in all things political, Elsie's experience with the Jewish boy, Tobias, serves to be her moral awakening. She sees in Tobias her own nephew. She realizes that Jews are not the horrible creatures Nazis have portrayed them to be. There is symbolic irony in how Elsie saves Tobias. In the concentration camps, Jews are exterminated through the use of ovens. In the bakery, Elsie saves Tobias's life by hiding him in an oven. As McCoy argues through Elsie's selfless act, conscience awakens in different people at different times for different reasons. Elsie's being saved by Tobias and her saving Tobias serve as an awakening.



Discussion Question 1

Elsie contends that she and many other Germans did what they had to do in order to get by. What does she mean by this? Given the situation in Germany, do you believe this is a realistic or a morally defensible argument? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How do the characters of Elsie, Josef, and Kremer reflect McCoy's contention that few things are ever morally black and white? Why does this matter so much?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do the pending marriages of Elsie and Reba reflect one another? In what ways do they differ? Why does marriage seem difficult for Elsie and Reba?

Vocabulary

incriminating, legibility, pristine, dirndl, nostalgic, conjectured, dignified, debauched, effervescent, permeated, juxtaposition, emulate, rambunctious



Chapters 11 – 20

Summary

In Chapter 11, the date is November 10, 2007. The place is the US Customs and Border Protection office at 8935 Montana Avenue in El Paso, Texas. Agent Bert Mosley sends out Agent Riki Chavez to check on a report that a couple of junkers are parked near a jogger's trail behind a resident's house who suspects some Mexicans might be living in them. When Riki arrives in the neighborhood, the rich woman who made the call says her husband said to leave the situation alone. However, she believes there are children involved, and she cannot abide children living in junk cars. The woman says the mother of the children should be ashamed. The woman introduces herself as Linda Calhoun.

Riki heads out to check out the car, near which is a trailer. Nearby is another set of car tracks. Riki knocks on the car, and a woman and two children answer. The woman begs not to be deported. Riki realizes she was probably swindled in a smuggling operation across the border. She had paid every peso she had to be taken across only to be abandoned over the border. Riki thinks about how immigrants must either be patient or wealthy. His own parents were very patient, coming to America legally. Riki himself was born in El Paso. He is an American citizen. Even though Riki believes in laws –be they from the Bible or from the government –he still feels bad about having to deal with situations like the one he is seeing. The mother tells her children to gather their things, and they go along with Riki.

In Chapter 12, it is Christmas Day, 1944, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie writes to Hazel, saying she and Mutti have come down with a fever. She also explains she has been given a ring by Josef. She has hidden the ring beneath her mattress. She says Josef is a good man and would be an excellent match for marriage, though she does not love him.

On December 27, Hazel responds to Elsie's letter from Christmas Eve. Hazel apologizes for being unable to come home with Julius, as the Program has banned travel due to the battle raging in the Ardennes. Julius has asked about his father, but Hazel explains to Elsie that she does not have the heart to tell him his father is dead. Hazel also says that if Josef is not single, perhaps, Elsie could also join the Program, as Hazel can get lonely sometimes.

In Chapter 13, it is November 10, 2007, at 3168 Franklin Ridge Drive in El Paso, Texas. Reba has no idea about what to do with her article because Elsie has said nothing good at all about Christmas. Reba decides to take a bath. She reflects on the past and how she hated the changing of summer to autumn. She thinks about her father's mood swings and how he became physically abusive toward her mother. When Riki gets home, he talks about his day. Reba reminds him he has to emotionally distance himself from his work. He is a law-abiding American, and the illegals are not. Riki thinks putting fences around people like that does more harm than good, saying everyone needs



someone. She notes that people betray each other, which causes Riki to tell Reba the ring would look better on her finger. Reba tells him she does not want to get into it again about the ring. Reba feels as if Riki has tied her to El Paso, but she does not say this. Riki tells her they need to set a wedding date, talk about having a family, and make some decisions.

In Chapter 14, it is January 1, 1945, at the Lebensborn Program in Steinhoring, Germany. Hazel Schmidt writes a letter to her sister, Elsie. Hazel encourages Elsie to accept Josef's proposal. Hazel notes that she does not attend church, as the program frowns upon religion. She says that the Battle of the Ardennes has forced many program homes to shut down. The girls and their children will be moved to Steinhoring. At Steinhoring, living arrangements have been altered. Hazel's new roommate is Brigitte, who has received awards for her fertility and offspring. Brigitte has hated Hazel for a while now, since one of Brigitte's regulars, SS Major Gunther, chose to sleep with Hazel over Brigitte.

Elsie writes back to Hazel. She says that she is getting over her sickness. Elsie has been having nightmares about death, including a dream in which Josef is killed. Elsie also writes that she has accepted Josef's proposal for marriage. She goes on to tell Hazel that she has a grave secret which could endanger everyone's lives. She wishes Hazel was home to give advice. Elsie turns from writing her letter as Mutti enters the room with soup. When Mutti leaves, Elsie gives the soup to Tobias, who is now hiding behind a wall panel in Elsie's bedroom. She asks him what the engagement ring says in Hebrew. Tobias says the ring reads "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," from the Torah.

In Chapter 15, it is January 6, 1940, at the Garmisch Bahnhof, Germany. Josef has chatted up a female secretary and convinced her to pull Peter's files. He travels to the Schnitzschulstrasse. He has been wracked with guilt and nightmares over Peter's murder. He speaks with Frau Abend, who runs an inn, Schnitzschulstrasse. Frau Abend is the mother of Peter. Josef explains to Abend that he was there by Peter's side the night Peter was killed, and that Peter was a good soldier. Abend explains her son was engaged and that Peter had a good Aryan son through Hazel Schmidt who, though illegitimate, went into the Lebensborn Program. Josef next goes to the Schmidt bakery, where he meets Elsie, who is young and pretty. Elsie confirms Hazel and her son are in Lebensborn, but she refuses to say anything else because Josef is a stranger. Josef admires her boldness. He then meets with Papa Schmidt, who is interested to learn about Josef.

In Chapter 16, it is November 11, 2007, at the US Customs and Border Protection office at 8935 Montana Avenue in El Paso, Texas. Bert invites Riki home for dinner with his family, but Riki declines, saying he has purchased Taco Cabana. Riki reflects on how his own family, his parents, always reminded him of his roots and told him he could only ever trust his own people. Riki, however, considers himself an American, but feels more in common with the people across the border than the politicians in Washington, D.C. Riki speaks with the mother and her children, who will be returned to Mexico the following day. She explains she is from Barreales, Juarez, and that her family is all



dead. Riki then brings out the Taco Cabana meals he has purchased. The son, Carlos, wants to pay for the meal, but Riki does not want to accept the penny offered. Carlos explains the men who brought them and the others in their group to the U.S. made them pay for everything. Riki then calls Bert, saying he has a lead.

In Chapter 17, it is January 4, 1945, at the Lebensborn Program in Steinhoring, Germany. Hazel Schmidt writes a letter to her sister, Elsie. Hazel writes that while her twin girl is healthy and perfect, the twin boy is weak and sickly. The boy has been deemed inadequate, and the staff wants Hazel to sign paperwork releasing the boy from the program. Hazel does not know what will become of the boy, and hopes the boy may be raised by her family. Hazel says she has always been committed to Lebensborn, but this is too much for her. Two days later, Hazel writes again, saying her boy has been removed from the program, for her maternal feelings have been outed to the program by her roommates, Brigette and Cata. She admits her faith in the program is gone, that she has been shunned by God for shunning God in the first place when she joined the program after Peter's death, and that she could be killed for such sentiments. Two days later, Hazel writes again. She is furious, having learned that inferior babies are killed, burned, and buried with Jews. Hazel now longs for the arrival of the Americans and the Russians. Hazel's last letter speaks of her love for Elsie, and how she will miss Elsie. She prays there is a God who is forgiving, and hopes Elsie will understand she has done what she must.

In Chapter 18, it is January 19, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Josef pays a surprise visit to the bakery, startling Elsie. She worries Tobias has been found out. Rather, Papa has asked to meet with Josef, showing him a letter from Hazel in which Papa explains Hazel is not in her right mind, and could be in trouble. He wants to travel to Lebensborn to set Hazel right. Josef agrees to help them in the journey, but notes it will be dangerous, and that the family could not stay away for long.

In Chapter 19, it is May 23, 1942 at Saint Sebastian Chapel's cemetery in Garmisch, Germany. Josef is still haunted by Peter's death, and relies on meth-amphetamines and weekend visits to Garmisch to help him cope. He does not know why, but something draws him to the church to visit Peter's grave. The grave is circled by a daisy chain. With Josef's own family all dead, he wonders who will mourn for him when he is dead. Josef continues to be plagued with guilt for what he has done as a Nazi, but rationalizes it as for the Greater Reich. Knowing his presence causes grief rather than comfort to the Abends, Josef has stayed away. He is determined to make up for the past and to atone for his sins by making things right through the Schmidts. They are his only connection to Peter.

In Chapter 20, it is November 16, 2007, at Elsie's German Bakery at 2032 Trawood Drive in El Paso, Texas. Jane greets Reba upon her return with a hug. Jane explains Elsie is currently out at a doctor's exam. Reba thinks about how Riki has moved out, wanting to give her space to make up her mind. Reba reflects on how, at first, the space felt good, but now it feels bad. Jane notices Reba is not doing well. She asks if Reba is there for the article or something else. Reba recovers and says she is hungry, which



excites Jane. Reba explains she is no longer anti-milk, which makes Jane even happier, as Reba can now try any number of goods. When Elsie returns, Reba presses her for the story of the Christmas in the photograph, hoping it would be happy and joyous. Elsie explains her Christmases back then were not happy or joyous.

Analysis

The novel continues to weave back and forth between the past and the present. This allows the author to fully explore now the characters of Riki and Hazel. The characters of Riki and Hazel present a new moral dimension and question to the novel, that few things are ever morally absolute. Riki, though a proud and patriotic American, still feels bad when he has to deport families. He knows they have broken the law, but he feels bad because those who have broken the law in this case are a young family. Hazel herself cannot be considered an avidly political Nazi, though she does place great faith in the concept of a master race. She essentially allows herself to be used for the purposes of breeding Aryan babies through the Lebensborn Program. She believes she is doing the right thing –until her baby boy's life is put in peril.

As McCoy continues to argue, conscience awakens in people at different times for different reasons. Hazel, who though not a politically-active Nazi, has been a faithful Nazi ideologically speaking, is pushed over the edge by the situation with her baby boy. She realizes she has been supporting something horrendous. Her maternal instincts and her conscience catch up to her as she learns the truth –that inferior babies are systematically killed. It will not be learned until much later what becomes of Hazel –but it can already be correctly surmised that her baby boy is put to death. At the same time, while comparisons between the U.S. Border Patrol and Nazism are disingenuous at best, what is clear is that Riki's conscience continues to be challenged. The Border Patrol does not abuse, harm, torture, or imprison illegal immigrants the way the Nazis did –but Riki still finds his work to be difficult.

In present-day America, Americans have the freedom to follow their moral consciences. In Nazi Germany, this was not always possible. As McCoy continues to argue, in Nazi Germany, many Germans did what they had to do to survive. For Elsie, this means accepting her engagement to Josef so that he could continue to protect the family and provide baking goods. Josef's protection also means Elsie's ability to continue to protect Tobias, as Josef's relationship with Elsie generally keeps the Gestapo off their backs. Despite the darkness swirling around them, Elsie does her best to focus on her love for her family, and on her growing love for Tobias. Love, McCoy herein argues, can be found in even the darkest places. Josef hopes that something like love will blossom with Elsie.

Interestingly, McCoy continues to explore the character of Josef by following him through time. Josef has killed one person –and that person was Peter, in response for Peter's killing of Hochschild. Not everything, McCoy continues arguing, is morally black or white. Josef's moral conscience is at odds with his Nazi beliefs; and his own killing of Peter has morally wracked him even though it was in response to Peter doing a horrible



thing. Specifically, readers should note that Josef actually wants to atone for what has been done. How he will seek to do this remains uncertain, but that Josef recognizes a need for moral improvement demonstrates that there is more to his character than one might first assume. Josef symbolically assumes no one will ever remember him or mourn for him –but this will prove to be false in the end. Likewise, there is far more to Josef than even Elsie herself assumes. In many ways, Elsie’s assumptions mirror Reba’s assumptions about Riki. Reba does not genuinely listen to Riki’s moral concerns about his work –and this, in part, leads to a splintering between them.

Discussion Question 1

What ultimately leads to the dissolution of the engagement between Riki and Reba? Who is to blame for this? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the author seem to draw a comparison between the U.S. Border Patrol by way of Riki and the Nazis by way of Josef? Do you believe this is a fair and accurate comparison? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Riki, Josef, and Hazel all face moral dilemmas in this section of the novel. What dilemmas do they face? How do they want to handle their dilemmas? Which individual seems to be poised for success in doing so? Explain your reasoning.

Vocabulary

quips, instantaneous, trepidation, dormant, extolling, imbued, reciprocation



Chapters 21 – 30

Summary

In Chapter 21, it is January 24, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie's parents have been gone for five days, having left for Steinhoring. Elsie has stayed behind to run the bakery, and continues to shelter Tobias. She has even let him help her out in the bakery making pretzels early before any customers arrived. Today, she does the same. She closes the shop early each day, at noon, so that she can spend the afternoon preparing for the next morning. She also worries about Tobias's health, who eats bread and winter vegetables, but never sausage since it is not kosher. Tobias opens up, saying he does not know where his parents are, but his younger sister, Cecile, is at the camp. He says Cecile likes ribbons, and that one day, he will buy her new ones. Elsie tells Tobias that one day, he will be a great singer and have large audiences. When Tobias retrieves some firewood through the back, Elsie is stunned to find Frau Rattelmuller present.

In Chapter 22, it is November 26, 2007 at the US Customs and Border Protection office at 8935 Montana Avenue in El Paso, Texas. Based on a tip, the padlocked trailer on the trail has been reported as having new occupants. Riki and Bert lead a group of vehicles to the site to do a roundup. They are all armed. Riki would rather use rubber bullets because there are so many women and children, but Bert disagrees for the purposes of self-defense. He argues that real guns and real bullets make people think twice about breaking the law. Bert tells Riki not to go soft and that they have American citizens to protect.

Some thirty immigrants are there as the agents approach. Riki notes that a girl has a split eye. When he asks Bert to get the medical kit, a seventeen year-old boy kicks Riki in the jaw, slashes the vest of another agent with a knife, and makes for the door. Bert shoots the kid in the leg, and cocaine is discovered on him. An ambulance is called. Bert checks in on Riki to see how Riki is doing. Riki is stunned, bleeding, and in pain. Bert also reports the man smuggling the immigrants across the border, for \$4,000 a person, has been caught. He is an American from Nebraska named Carl Bauer. Riki wishes there was a way he could serve his country, and uphold his personal convictions. He thinks there must be a better way to do such things.

In Chapter 23, it is January 24, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Frau Rattelmuller questions Elsie about her new helper. She believes him to be the Jewish boy the Gestapo searched for on Christmas Eve, but Elsie denies this. Rattelmuller knows better. She tells Elsie the boy cannot stay with her, or everyone will be in danger. She explains she has secretly been helping Jews to escape to Switzerland. Elsie wonders if Rattelmuller can be trusted.

In Chapter 24, it is December 4, 2007 at 3168 Franklin Ridge Drive in El Paso, Texas. Reba's story headlines the holiday edition of Sun City Magazine. The article focuses on



families whose loved ones are away at war. Reba continues to wear Riki's ring around her neck, though she has not spoken to him in three weeks. She wonders if Riki thinks about her, and if he has seen the article. She continues to bond and grow closer with Jane and Elsie. Reba speaks by phone with her sister, Deedee, who wants to know when Reba is coming home for Christmas. Reba hesitates, prompting Deedee to explain she will be in El Paso between Christmas and New Year's, and has already bought a ticket. Reba is stunned.

In Chapter 25, it is February 2, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie turns seventeen. Three days later, Mutti and Papa return home with Julius. Julius announces he does not belong there. Josef says goodbye to Elsie, saying he must report to Dachau, and will not be home until the Allies have been turned back. It feels an omen. Elsie now wonders who will protect the family, and how they will get by with Tobias in hiding and Julius now living with them. Elsie finally asks Mutti about Hazel. Mutti explains that Hazel is missing, that she simply left. Only with Josef's help, it is explained, that Julius was let out. Mutti reminds Elsie she is a woman, and must always keep her place.

In Chapter 26, it is December 27, 2007 at Elsie's German Bakery at 2032 Trawood Drive in El Paso, Texas. The bakery is packed with Christmas crowds, but Reba is happy to bring Deedee. Jane and Elsie are thrilled to meet Deedee. At Reba's, Deedee is furious that she has had to learn about Reba's engagement from someone outside the family. Deedee is more amused to have learned that Reba has given up the milk-free lifestyle. Reba then fills Deedee in on how she met Riki, how Riki treated her so well and respectfully, and how they had a fight and he moved out.

Deedee suggests calling him. Deedee says marriage can be tough and notes how the war tore up their father's gentle heart. Nothing could ever put it right. Anger spills out of Riki, who accuses Deedee of pretending everything was better than it was when she went away to boarding school, and that their father hanged himself. Riki admits to both loving and being afraid of their father. Deedee apologizes for the past, saying that the truth can become confused with time. Reba apologizes to Deedee, saying she does not want to be like their father. Deedee says their father could never see how much they loved him, while Reba notes that Riki is a genuine man.

In Chapter 27, it is March 23, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Rumors of coming German defeat are in the air. Julius is sullen, angry, and sad, thinking himself above the family's status as bakers. Food is scarce. Elsie gives up most of her food to Tobias. Gestapo patrols have increased. Frau Ratemuller has not come in for her regular morning order, which disturbs Elsie. Ratemuller comes in late, and asks to meet behind the woodpile out back. Elsie agrees.

Ratemuller explains that word has come to her that Americans and Russians are approaching and the Jews will be forced to march out of Dachau to Tegernsee. She intends to pay a man to bribe a guard to turn a blind eye as the Jewish women and girls move between the workhouses and sleeping quarters, providing the means for escape.



But more payment is needed. Elsie gives up her engagement ring, saying the ring was never truly hers. Rattemuller tells Elsie she has the heart of Daniel. While she cannot help Tobias escape, Rattemuller agrees to ask after Cecile. Elsie asks to have Cecile told that her brother will be the one waiting with blue ribbons.

In Chapter 28, it is January 3, 2008. Leigh Goldman, editor of San Francisco Monthly, formally offers Reba a job. Reba tells Deedee about this, saying it is a sign she needs to move on from Riki. Deedee reminds Reba that she must not take the job out of fear, but because it is truly a step forward.

In Chapter 29, it is April 29, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Since Josef's departure, the bakery has stopped receiving supplies and their output has fallen tremendously. There is little to eat. While Papa exerts some control over Julius, Julius is annoyed by church. As a result, Papa requires Julius to collect nuts while the family attends church. When Julius put this off, Elsie confronts him, telling him she is tired of his arrogance and selfishness when so many other good people are suffering because of boys like him. Julius begins crying, declaring his hate for everyone. He grabs his Pimpfen uniform jacket and runs outside.

Later, the Gestapo, led by Kremer, storm into the bakery and ransack Elsie's room. Elsie is terrified, saying it is only one Jew. This catches Kremer's attention. He threatens to kill Julius unless the Jew is revealed. Julius cries and wets his pants, angering Kremer to calling Julius retarded and inferior. Kremer says such people are dealt with by a bullet to the head. Elsie realizes she has no choice but to bring out Tobias.

In Chapter 30, it is April 29, 1945, on the road between Tegernsee and Garmisch, Germany. Josef is on the march with the SS and the Jews. The roads are choked with German civilians. When Josef witnesses an SS soldier shoot and kill a Jewish woman dragging her mother, he has had enough and abandons the column for home. He decides he will flee to South America.

In Chapter 31, it is April 29, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. The Gestapo seize Tobias, but he bites one man in the hand and flees while Kremer rapes Elsie in front of the crying Julius. When Kremer and the Gestapo give chase, Elsie is comforted by her parents. Word comes the Americans have reached Dachau, and could arrive within the hour. By May 1, word comes that Hitler has committed suicide. Half the town calls Hitler a coward, while the other half calls him noble. When the Americans arrive in town, Elsie is surprised by how friendly, kind, and human they are, as propaganda had portrayed them as horrible and cruel. Everyone in the village worries what the Americans will now do to them. Elsie is particularly captivated by an American soldier who resembles William Powell and smiles at her. Elsie also receives a note from Josef, urging her to flee Germany with him. Elsie, thinking of the horrors of the Gestapo and of Dachau, now thinks horribly of Josef.



Analysis

Sarah McCoy continues to weave the past and present together through this section of the novel, as chapters shift back and forth through time. Times of plenty, wealth, and ease in life in modern-day America are contrasted with the dire situation in Garmisch toward the end of World War II. As McCoy continues to argue, in Nazi Germany, many Germans did what they had to do in order to survive. For Elsie, it meant remaining engaged to Josef even though she did not love him, and even though she came to view him as evil.

For Josef, it meant following orders and reporting to the notorious and hideous concentration camp at Dachau. At the same time, it meant good people, like Frau Rattelmuller, working together with Elsie in order to save the lives of Jews. Readers should note the great symbolic importance of Elsie giving up her wedding ring to Rattelmuller to secure the release of some Jewish girls. The giving up of the ring is a symbolic rejection not only of Josef, but of the evils of Nazism. It also represents a symbolic move for atonement, as Elsie will now again be personally responsible for saving lives despite having earlier supported Nazism. Stolen from Jews, the ring will now symbolically be returned out of love for life.

Conscience awakens in people at different times for different reasons. Rattelmuller's own moral awakening is never explored, but one suspects that Rattelmuller never bought into Nazism from the start, as from the beginning, she has been helping Jews to escape to safety in Switzerland. Josef himself is repeatedly morally challenged, but the march between Dachau and Tegernsee is too much for him. He actually abandons his post—something previously unthinkable—and sets out for home. Josef is a broken man, however. His soul has been shattered, and he has had to rely on fear and drugs in order to keep himself together. Josef, readers surmise, is too far gone to be saved. His desire for atonement has been replaced with a desire to flee Germany to avoid punishment.

The outside world will understandably not care about his moral struggle, as the ends Josef served were simply evil. Readers get a taste of how the rest of the world will treat Josef when Elsie herself flatly turns against him, thinking horribly of him. This comes in large part in comparison to the Americans who show up in the village. They are kind men with good hearts who liberate the camps and treat civilians with dignity and respect. It is a far cry from how the German military itself—especially through the person of Kremer—treated their own people. Kremer himself brutally rapes Elsie while the Americans behave civilly. Kremer also puts Elsie in the position of testing her conscience: she is given the ultimatum of saving her family or giving up Tobias—but fortunately, Tobias escapes.

While McCoy draws parallels between Josef's situation and Riki's, she does not actually state they are identical. Riki, who still believes wholly in America, and is still proud of being an American, nevertheless finds his work as a Border Patrol agent increasingly difficult. The Border Patrol continues to behave admirably and kindly, even to their detriment. Note that Riki's commitment to kindness for the girl with the hurt eye is taken



advantage of by the teen who kicks Riki in the jaw and rushes to escape. But rather than killing the boy, Bert shoots him in the leg in order to stop him. Even in a life-and-death situation, the Border Patrol behaves admirably.

Bert and Riki come to reflect two sides of the same moral coin. Bert believes that upholding the laws –which are just and moral –is moral itself. Riki does not argue with this aspect of things, but intensely dislikes having to deport women and children. There is an additional moral layer to things that Riki considers, and this compels him to drift away from his commitment to the Patrol. Meanwhile, Reba’s own life seems to break down in the area of romantic love, while it picks up in terms of work and familial love. Readers should note that Reba reconnects with Deedee through the confronting of their past, while Reba is offered the job of her dreams in San Francisco. Deedee cautions her to accept the job based not on fear, but on the future.

Discussion Question 1

How does the appearance of Americans in the village change things? How do Elsie’s first perceptions of the Americans clash with Nazi propaganda about Americans? How do the Americans themselves compare to people like Kremer?

Discussion Question 2

What finally causes Josef to break from the Nazis and turn toward home? What does he hope he will be able to do next? Why? How does Elsie respond to this? Why? Is Elsie’s response understandable? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Deedee cautions Reba to accept the job in San Francisco based on moving forward, not on fear. What does Deedee mean by this? Do you believe Reba is taking the job in California based on fear, or based on a genuine desire to move forward? Why?

Vocabulary

cadence, infused, motorcade, prematurely, caustic, ingenuous, saccharine, ominous, rancid, alleviate, prudence, transcended, depravity, catatonic, indignant



Chapters 32 – 40

Summary

In Chapter 32, it is January 7, 2008, at 3168 Franklin Ridge Drive in El Paso, Texas. Reba receives a panicked call from Jane, who says Sergio is being deported and will not be allowed back for ten years. Jane explains Sergio came over legally, but allowed his visa to expire ten years ago. Jane asks for help given that Riki was Border Patrol. Reba agrees to try. Reba calls Riki, thinking about how much she misses him, and asks about Sergio. Riki confirms Sergio is in detainment. Riki says there have been paper oversights recently, and that he can buy Sergio a few days. Reba says she misses Riki, and that she was wrong. Riki says he was wrong too, and needs to change. Reba then sees an ad for California on TV. Reba, Riki, Jane, and Sergio meet the next morning at the county clerk's office. There, Jane marries Sergio, ensuring he will not be deported. Jane insists Riki celebrate with her, Sergio, and Reba at the bakery with cake. Riki agrees. Elsie is thrilled to learn of the marriage, saying she wants grandchildren.

In Chapter 33, it is May 1, 1945, in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie does not meet Josef but ends up talking to some kind Americans at the train station. Among them are Sam, Robby, and thin, soft-spoken Ami. Elsie gives them bread, and quotes American movies at them, which amuses them. The soldiers give her chocolate in payment for the bread, which they find delicious. They introduce themselves to one another, with Elsie speaking as best she can. Josef, hiding in the shadows, is enraged by this. He sees she is not wearing his ring.

In Chapter 34, it is June 26, 1945, at the Armed Forces R&R Center at 19 Gernackerstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie is teaching Robby, the cook, how to bake while earning money for her work in cooking at the center. Robby teaches Elsie how to make certain American foods, such as apple pie. All of the Nazi programs in the area, such as Lebensborn, have long since disappeared. Papa always brings up Josef, asking if Elsie has heard from him. Elsie hopes Frau Rattmuller has been able to join her Jewish friends, and has been successful in her mission of freeing Cecile. Meanwhile, Elsie grows closer to Robby, and the two end up having sex while baking.

In Chapter 35, it is January 30, 2008, at Elsie's German Bakery at 2032 Trawood Drive in El Paso, Texas. Reba and Riki are back together, but are taking things slow. Everyone comes together to celebrate Elsie's birthday. After the party that night, Reba decides she must tell Riki about San Francisco. She says he could come. Riki says his life is in El Paso.

In Chapter 36, it is July 28, 1945 at Strassenfest in Leopoldstrasse in Schwabing, Munich, Germany. Elsie goes with Robby, Sam, and Potter to the festival even though she does not feel well. Lately, her appetite and taste have both been off. While there, she runs into the secretary whom Josef had prevailed upon for records, who reveals that Josef and a large number of Nazi officers were discovered dead on a boat in



Brunsbüttel, having all committed suicide. Elsie is shocked. When the woman learns of Elsie's problems, she notes she feels the same way due to her pregnancy. Elsie wonders if she herself could be pregnant.

In Chapter 37, it is February 14, 2008. Reba is now settled in San Francisco, and writes to Riki by way of e-mail. She tells him about moving in, and seeing the staple sights and sounds, such as the Fisherman's Wharf. She tells him she misses him and loves him, and asks him if he has been by to see Elsie lately, as Elsie has not responded to any of her calls.

In Chapter 38, it is August 2, 1945, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie seriously considers the fact that she must be pregnant, as she has not menstruated in months and everything about her body is off. Mutti sits down with Elsie and confirms Elsie is pregnant. Elsie does not know how her mother knows, but she does. Mutti counsels abortion by way of a special tea, of brewed pennyroyal and cohosh. Mutti says no one else will have to know. Elsie nods.

In Chapter 39, it is March 5, 2008, at the US Customs and Border Protection office at 8935 Montana Avenue in El Paso, Texas. Riki has been having nightmares and has not been sleeping well. He misses Reba very much. Word comes from Bert that the Juarez kid deported recently has been accidentally shot in Mexico by Border Patrol agents defending themselves. Bert says the media is spinning it to make the Border Patrol look like the bad guys. Riki becomes sick when he realizes the boy, nine year-old Victor Garcia, was part of the first family from the trailer he had been called in on. Riki now blames himself for Victor's death.

In Chapter 40, it is April 12, 2008, at the El Camino Apartments at 2048 El Camino Real in San Francisco, California. Reba writes an e-mail to Deedee, saying she is already bored being an editor. She says she will come home as soon as she can, and that Riki is doing fine, but they have not been talking much lately. She wonders if San Francisco was the right decision. She feels distance between her and Riki, and feels unfulfilled in terms of community at work. Deedee writes back, encouraging Reba, and urging her to bring Riki home with her.

Analysis

While Josef tragically intends, but fails to find a way to atone and redeem himself, Riki, though Riki has committed no actual moral sin or done anything illegal, is able to find a way to help his own conscience. He comes through for Sergio and Jane when no one else is able to do so. He does this not only out of his continued love for Reba, but because he believes it is the right thing to do in and of itself. It is a moment in his work where he is able to do something moral, rather than something which breaks his heart.

However, this is not enough to prevent Riki from nearly falling apart when he learns one of the kids he deported has been killed in Mexico by a stray bullet. This ultimately serves to be the singular moral event that causes Riki to decide he must do something



else with his life. Riki is to be contrasted with Josef who, rejected by Elsie, condemned by the free world, and whose conscience is irreparably shattered, commits suicide. This stuns Elsie, but she does not feel bad for Josef for long. Josef, she believes, has made his own choices, and was as evil as the system he represented. Not until years later (in the final chapters of the novel) does she come to reconsider her judgment on Josef.

As the Americans come to occupy a portion of Germany, their presence serves as a moral awakening of sorts for many Germans. Those opposed to Nazism from the start are now safe and free once more. Unenthusiastic supporters and those who ultimately came to rebel against Nazism are also now safe and sound. Supporters of Nazism who now see alternatives and can look at the evidence regarding the barbarity of the Nazi regime come to regret their support. Die-hards Nazis, like the SS officers who commit suicide on a boat in the harbor, will never be reconcilable. Few things, McCoy argues, are morally absolute –but the Americans represent genuine moral goodness which vindicates anti-Nazis and provides a chance for a better way forward for repentant Nazis.

As the darkness of the Nazi regime comes to light –and is brought to justice by the Americans and the Allies –the chance for love blossoms. As McCoy argues, love can be found in even the darkest places. Elsie comes to date Robby Lee, an American cook, and quickly becomes lovers with him. However, when Elsie becomes pregnant by Robby, Elsie and her mother decide they must settle on abortion. Elsie is morally conflicted about committing to an abortion, but once she decides to do so, she has no regrets about it. There is a symbolic and tragic irony in the abortion. Elsie is surrounded by death and her nephew is missing. Elsie is hoping for a better future and love. Ironically, rather than embracing the hope of the new life she carries, Elsie settles on abortion.

Discussion Question 1

Riki blames himself for the death of Victor. Do you believe he is right in blaming himself? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Redemption proves to be elusive for Josef, but proves to be possible for Riki. Why is this so? What circumstances prevent and allow for redemption, respectively, in the lives of Josef and Riki? Why is this so?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Elsie choose to have an abortion? Is Elsie's decision to commit to abortion morally questionable? Why or why not? Do you believe she should have an abortion? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

reconciled, enunciated, morbid, reaffirmation, continuum, benign



Chapters 41 – Epilogue

Summary

In Chapter 41, it is August 7, 1945, at the American Armed Forces R&R Center at 19 Gernackerstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. It is now Elsie's fifth day taking the tea, but it has yet to take effect. Suddenly, she doubles over in pain. Robby rushes to get a doctor, a man named Meriwether. Meriwether gives her charcoal-infused water to drink to flush the poisons from her body. The baby has been lost, but Elsie has also poisoned herself. Meriwether gives her amore water and a chalk-like tablet, telling her she must now eat something to help. He promises not to tell anyone, including Robby. Meriwether considers Elsie just a kid, as he is much older, but Elsie tells him she has experienced more of life than he could imagine. Meriwether tells Elsie she must rest. He then departs.

In Chapter 42, it is May 5, 2008, at the El Camino Apartments at 2048 El Camino Real in San Francisco, California. Reba has made friends with her neighbor's Chihuahua, nicknaming the puppy "Shrimp." She drinks wine and tells Shrimp how much she hates her work, dealing with freelancers who are late and complaining about how Leigh is out at fancy lunches. She then meets Shrimp's owner, Jase DeLuca, who reveals Shrimp's real name is Jerry Garcia. He invites her over for dinner. She wakes up the next morning in Jases's apartment in her underwear, and sees photos of him with kids. She realizes she has just done something terrible. Jase, who is not at home, suddenly returns, saying she passed out before anything happened. Jase explains he and his wife are in the process of divorcing, which causes Reba to lash out in rage, saying she deserves better. She also tells Jase to stop tying up Shrimp outside. She then returns to her own apartment. She receives a call from Jane, who reports Elise is hospitalized from a stroke, and the doctors do not think she will make it. Heartbroken, Reba then calls her own mother. She then writes to Deedee, letting her know what is going on and asking for prayers.

In Chapter 43, it is August 13, 1945, at the American Armed Forces R&R Center at 19 Gernackerstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie returns to work, and walks home with her bike. Along the way, she accidentally bumps into Doctor Albert "Al" Meriwether while she is looking up at the stars. She finds Meriwether very handsome. He explains he was coming to check up on her, to see how she was doing. Elsie says she is doing better, and finds her heart is racing. Meriwether offers Elsie a ride home. She immediately accepts. She is amazed to learn he is from Texas, as she has seen Texas meals advertised in magazines. Elsie feels freedom while she is with Al. Al asks if he can come to visit her again, and she readily agrees to this.

In Chapter 44, it is February 10, 1947, at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. Elsie writes to Mutti, saying that Texas is beautiful, though she misses home. She says everyone is friendly and kind, but there are no bakeries. Elsie is thrilled to be married to Al, and they are building a home together. Mutti writes back, saying they still have not heard from



Hazel or her twin boy, but that they have tracked down the twin girl, Lillian, to an orphanage in Waisenhaus. They secure her release. She also reveals that while Papa still clings to dreams of the Fatherland, Mutti herself feels ashamed and foolish for having ever supported such things.

In Chapter 45, it is December 23, 1955, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Lillian is reading *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien. She is being lovingly raised by Papa and Mutti. Lillian believes both her parents are dead due to the war, and it upsets her sometimes. Still, she is happy to have Mutti and Papa, and asks about Elsie's life in America. Lillian always looks forward to Elsie's letters.

In Chapter 46, it is October 5, 1967, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Lillian writes to Elsie, thanking her for the Beatles album, and the McCall's dress pattern. She says BBC Radio has set up in the area, and plays good American music. Lillian also notes that lately, Mutti has been sleeping more and more. She explains the bakery is thriving, and that Papa is doing well. Lillian hopes to attend college, and wants to come to America. In a letter two weeks later, she reveals that Mutti is dying. She asks Elsie to come back.

In Chapter 47, it is November 2, 1967, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie has returned. She feels proud of being a wife, new mother, and an American. Elsie and Lillian are thrilled to see one another despite the circumstances. Papa is happy to see Elsie, but concerned for Mutti. Mutti is also delighted to see Elsie, despite her condition. She urges Elsie to make peace with Papa, who originally did not approve of the marriage to Albert. Mutti confirms that Hazel and her twin boy are both dead. Mutti explains Hazel committed suicide. She asks that Hazel's name be added to her unmarked tombstone. She also reveals two letters she says she is ashamed to have withheld from Elsie many years ago. They are from Frau Rattelmuller. The letters say that she has found the escaped Tobias and smuggled him to safety in Switzerland. They both now live in Zurich. The letters also reveal that Cecile died in the camps before liberation, but that because of the ring, smuggling out some women and girls was possible. The letters reveal that Tobias is to travel to America with the Zuckermann family, as one of the girls saved was a Zuckermann niece. Mutti apologizes here for everything, and says she is proud of Elsie for sheltering Tobias.

In Chapter 48, it is May 11, 2008, at Sunset Funerals parlor at 9400 North Loop in El Paso, Texas. Reba has come home for Elsie's funeral. Despite the sadness of the occasion, she is thrilled to see Riki. It is also at the funeral that Reba meets Lillian. Lillian explains she is happily married with children. She reveals that Elsie had the family bakery sold so Lillian could come to America to study, and that was how she met her husband. Reba and Riki later admit to making mistakes, but wanting to do things over again with each other. They decide to recommit to one another again. Reba says she hates her new job, while Riki says he has quit his.

In Chapter 49, it is November 6, 1967, at the Schmidt Bakery on 56 Ludwigstrasse in Garmisch, Germany. Elsie and her father make peace with one another for the past as



Mutti is buried. Elsie is saddened by Mutti's death, thinking death should not be so unremarkable. A finch takes flight from a nearby tree. She thinks of Josef when she sees his tombstone, and hopes Josef has found forgiveness and peace. She says a prayer for him.

In Chapter 50, it is November 2, 2008, in Panteon San Rafael Cemetery in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. It is the Day of the Dead. Riki brings Reba to the graves of his parents to introduce her. Reba leaves a gift offering of homemade churros for them. Riki and Reba then go and visit Jane at Elsie's Bakery. Jane has inherited her mother's knack for baking, and Reba and Riki confirm her baking is as good as Elsie's. Jane reveals she has received a copy of a Robert Frost book, one kept by her mother in Germany, in turn taken by Tobias, and returned by Tobias at the funeral through Lillian. Jane reveals her mother sheltered Tobias, but never told her about it. Riki now works for Citizenship and Immigration Services, and is set to meet Reba's family at Thanksgiving. Reba has returned to work at Sun City Magazine.

In Chapter 51, Tobias Zuckermann writes a letter to Elsie on May 8, 2007, from 124 Eden Valley Lane in Escondido, California. He thanks Elsie for what she did, and knows God was watching over them both. He reveals he arrived in America in the summer of 1945, went on to college, earned a PhD in Music Composition, married, had children, and now has grandchildren. He reveals he named his daughter Elsie, after Elsie. He reveals he was reading the Robert Frost book, *A Boy's Will*, when the Gestapo showed up. He hid the book in his pants when Elsie called for him. Tobias passes on his love and thanks in closing.

In the Epilogue, it is December 2008. Jane sends a dozen of Elsie's recipes to Reba. The gesture is a way of honoring Reba and Riki for setting a wedding date. Jane confirms she will bake the wedding cake. Twelve recipes then follow the epilogue.

Analysis

Even in the darkest places, love is still possible. Nearly killed by her abortion, Elsie is saved by Doctor Albert Meriwether. Although he is much older, Elsie and Al fall for one another quickly. While youthful passion may have existed between Elsie and Robby, real love develops between Elsie and Meriwether. Ultimately, Elsie comes to marry Meriwether, although Elsie's father forbids the marriage. Papa is one of the unrepentant Nazis still in Germany at the time. While Mutti awakens to her foolishness, Papa remains retrenched until many years later. He and Elsie ultimately make peace over the past and the marriage, which brings renewed peace and love into Elsie's own life. This is especially important as Elsie herself is now not only a wife, but a mother.

Elsie, as a mother, proves surprising and wonderful to Jane. Jane is surprised to learn that her mother did such good things during the war by saving Tobias –things which Elsie never talked about. While speaking with Reba about things like the past and truth, Deedee previously noted that the truth can become muddled with time, or even lost. Fortunately, the good things Elsie did during wartime speak for her. Elsie, like most



other Germans during the era of Nazism, was caught up in a web of strands that ran the gamut from militant support to complicity to disinterest to direct opposition. The Germans, McCoy argues, did what they needed to do in order to survive.

As Reba and Jane reflect on the past, they come to the conclusion that this is so. Even Elsie, as the reader becomes aware, came to reconsider her position on Josef. She comes to pray for his soul in the end, rather than hating him. As readers will remember, Josef believed no one would ever remember or mourn for him, but he was completely wrong. Not only did Elsie remember him, but she went further and prayed for him. She realizes the truth, that wartime and Nazism corrupted people, and that Josef was someone unlike Kremer.

Only in time does the truth become apparent to Elsie. Josef became a victim of the very barbarism he supported, but struggled to deny. Only in time does the truth about Nazism itself become apparent to Papa and Mutti. Additionally, Mutti emerges as the mysterious woman from the beginning of the novel who hid two crucial letters from Elsie attesting to the safety of Tobias, the saving of a number of girls because of the ring, Rattelmuller's own safety, and the move to America. These are things that, only with time, does Mutti recognize the truth and goodness of.

As McCoy ends her novel, she ensures that all things are concluded well. Love, she argues, can blossom in the darkest places. Dissatisfied with work, Reba quits and returns to El Paso. Riki also quits his work. Both in a dark place, they cling to one another in love and plan their future together. The death of Elsie is dark and tragic, but she leaves behind a legacy of love through her good deeds and through Jane's marriage to Sergio. Jane and Sergio themselves have a chance for happiness because of the efforts of Riki. Tobias is happy, healthy, and has his own family, having found love and new life in America despite the darkness of the Holocaust in Germany. It is the same for Lillian, who finds new life and love in America because of Elsie's generosity.

Discussion Question 1

How does Elsie come to make peace with her past during her 1967 visit home? Specifically, how does she make peace with her parents and with Josef? Why does this matter so much to her?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you believe that Elsie did not speak much about her wartime experience, including the good things she did? How do these things finally come to light?

Discussion Question 3

What finally allows Riki and Reba to truly reconnect and finally set a date for marriage? Why was this not possible before?

Vocabulary

doldrums, semisomber, lilt, trivial, cumbersome, customary, decadent, labyrinth, undulations



Characters

Elsie

Elsie Meriwether Schmidt is a seventeen year-old girl living in Nazi Germany during World War II at the beginning of the novel. By the end of the story, she is an eighty year-old mother, widow, and baker living in Texas in the present day. Elsie is the daughter of Papa and Mutti, the sister of Hazel, the widow of Al Meriwether, and the mother of Jane.

As a girl, Elsie is an unenthusiastic Nazi who harbors a secret love of America. Engaged to Josef, Elsie hides the Jewish Tobias in her room. It is through Tobias that Elsie discovers her moral conscience and turns totally against Nazism and Josef. After the war, Elsie has a love affair with an American soldier that leads to an abortion which nearly kills Elsie. Elsie is saved by Albert Meriwether. She falls in love and later marries Meriwether.

In the United States, Elsie opens up a bakery and raises a family. In the late 1960s. Then, she returns home when Mutti dies and makes peace with her father. In the present day, Elsie befriends and counsels Reba while celebrating Jane's marriage to Sergio. Elsie suffers a stroke and dies by the end of the novel.

Mutti

Mutti (Luana) is the wife of Papa, the mother of Elsie and Hazel, and the grandmother of Lillian and Julian. Mutti is a supportive Nazi, but she is not overly political. Despite this, she has a good heart and a kind soul that are warped by living under the Nazis. She prevents crucial letters from reaching Elsie, only to apologize for this on her deathbed years later after she has rejected Nazism.

Papa

Papa (Max) is the husband of Mutti, the father of Elsie and Hazel, and the grandfather of Lillian and Julian. A baker by trade, Papa is an avowed and passionate Nazi. Sometime after the end of the war, he finally rejects Nazism.

When Elsie marries an American, she has a falling out with Papa who opposes the marriage. When Mutti dies, Papa and Elsie make peace as Papa seeks her forgiveness.

Hazel

Hazel is the older sister of Elsie. Though not overtly political, Hazel is a faithful Nazi who is briefly engaged to Peter. Upon Peter's death, she gives herself to the Lebensborn Program. She enthusiastically endorses and participates in the Lebensborn Program



until the birth of her twins. When her twin boy is judged inferior and murdered, Hazel becomes disillusioned and commits suicide.

Jane

Jane Meriwether is the daughter of Elsie and Al Meriwether. Having taken up the family baking trade, Jane believes her life is set. She is in a long-term relationship with Sergio, content with work, and happy to befriend Reba. When Sergio is due to be deported, Jane turns to Reba and Riki for help in buying Sergio a few extra days, during which time Jane finally marries Sergio. When Elsie dies, Jane is heartbroken. She is also amazed to learn of the good things Elsie did during the war. Out of her love of baking and in honor of her mother, Jane keeps on with the bakery.

Reba

Reba Adams is the sister of Deedee and a journalist for Sun City Magazine. A native of Richmond, Virginia, Reba dreams of a classy editing job in California. However, for the time being she feels stuck in El Paso, Texas. She is engaged to Riki, but she has not set a wedding date because she is afraid her marriage will be bad like that of her parents. Also, she does not want to stay in El Paso. Through the novel, Reba breaks up and then reunites with Riki. Eventually, she gives up the job she gets in California because it bores her. She decides on a new life in El Paso with Riki. By the end of the novel, they have finally set a wedding date.

Josef

Josef Hub is an SS officer who is briefly engaged to Elsie. Josef is torn between his moral conscience, his political faith in Nazism, and what Nazism commands of him. Josef is never able to reconcile or redeem himself for the killing of Peter when Peter kills the wife of Josef's old professor during a raid prior to the war. Josef is torn apart by guilt. He becomes addicted to meth-amphetamines, and his wasted physical state reflects his inner turmoil. Having had enough of Nazism and seeking to flee to South America, Josef deserts his post. When Elsie rejects him, Josef decides to commit suicide.

Frau Rattelmuller

Frau Rattelmuller is a neighbor and regular customer of the Schmidt Bakery in Germany. Rattelmuller seems like an annoying and unkind woman until it is revealed she has been secretly shepherding Jews to safety in Switzerland since the rise of the Nazis. She works with Elsie to free even more Jews from Dachau, and she ensures that Tobias reaches safety in Switzerland.

Tobias

Tobias is the son of a Jewish mother and a Polish father who is musically inclined. Tobias is used by the Nazis to entertain at their Christmas Party, where his screams prevent Elsie from being raped. In turn, Tobias is saved by Elsie, who keeps him hidden away through the end of the war. When Tobias is found out, he successfully escapes. He is taken to safety in Switzerland by Frau Rattelmuller. He goes on to America with the Zuckermann family, where he earns a PhD in Music Composition, marries, and has a large family. He names his daughter Elsie in honor of Elsie.

Riki

Riki Chavez is the fiancé of Reba and a U.S. Border Patrol agent. Riki is a proud and patriotic American whose parents legally came to America before he was born. Riki is conflicted morally by his job. While he does not begrudge immigration laws, he feels bad about having to deport families. Riki ultimately comes to break up with Reba when Reba is unable to commit and Riki realizes he needs change in his own life. Ultimately, Riki leaves the Border Patrol after one of the kids he has deported is killed in Mexico by a stray bullet fired by another Border Patrol agent. Riki later reconciles with Reba, and the two finally set a date.

Albert

Albert Meriwether is the deceased husband of Elsie and the father of Jane. A native of El Paso, Texas, Albert Meriwether is a doctor with the U.S. Army who serves in Europe during World War II. After the war, he comes to save Elsie's life, following her self-induced abortion. The encounter leads to a mutual romantic attraction which blossoms quickly into love and marriage. Albert is a good, kind, and moral man who marries Elsie and takes her to America. He supports her dream of opening a bakery.



Symbols and Symbolism

Letters

Letters are exchanged between Elsie and Hazel while Elsie is at home and Hazel is away with the Lebensborn Program. While Hazel encourages Elsie toward Nazism and marriage with Josef, Elsie speaks about her uncertainty and unenthusiastic regard for Nazism. The letters demonstrate that not all Germans are enthusiastic Nazis.

Elsie and Josef's engagement ring

Elsie and Josef's engagement ring symbolizes deception and irony. The ring reads in Hebrew, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine," a quote from the Torah. The ring was stolen from a Jewish couple who gave their love and lives freely to one another. In turn, they had their lives and love stolen by the Nazis. The ring is given to Elsie by Josef, though Elsie does not envision love or life with Josef. The stolen ring also symbolizes the absolute cruelty of Nazism.

Giving up Josef's engagement ring

Giving up Josef's engagement ring is a symbolic rejection of evil and a move for atonement by Elsie. Elsie gives the ring to Frau Rattelmuller to bribe a Nazi guard to help free some Jewish children from Dachau. Doing so is a symbolic rejection of evil, for the ring was stolen from a Jewish couple by the Nazis, and repudiates the evil and cruelty of Nazism. The ring, stolen from the lives of others, is given to save the lives of others. It allows Elsie to atone for her unenthusiastic support of Nazism by doing what small part she can.

Riki and Reba's engagement ring

Riki and Reba's engagement ring symbolizes marriage and commitment. Early in the novel, Reba wears the ring like a necklace, hanging around her neck and her head like a millstone, with the idea that it is something dragging or weighting her down as though it was a burden. Reba fears that a marriage to Riki would be rocky like her parents' marriage. She also has fears that she will never be leaving El Paso. As such, she wears the ring around her neck rather than on her finger.

Oven

An oven symbolizes irony. Nazis cruelly and barbarically murdered and burned the bodies of Jews using ovens. Early in the novel, Elsie uses the family's kitchen oven to



save the life of Tobias by hiding him inside the oven as the Gestapo are searching for him.

Peter's grave

Peter's grave and the daisy chain symbolize the reflection that Josef believes no one will remember or mourn for him when he is dead. The daisy chain means that someone was thinking of Peter and loved him enough to drape his grave with the daisy chain. Josef believes no one will do such a thing for him. This turns out not to be the case. Years later, Elsie remembers him and prays for him.

Josef's departure for Dachau

Josef's departure for Dachau represents an omen of doom. Dachau is known by many to be an extermination camp. Josef's being ordered to oversee the movement of Jews from Dachau elsewhere denotes the rapid advance of the Americans. It means the Nazi order is quickly crumbling and Nazis are facing moral judgment. Josef's departure for Dachau also serves as a catalyst which brings about his abandoning the Nazis as his guilt and conscience become too much to bear, leads to his desire to flee Germany, and ultimately leads to his suicide after being rejected by Elsie.

Job offer

A job offer symbolizes fear. Reba receives a job offer from San Francisco Monthly through Leigh Goldman. She leaps at the chance to work in California, less from the standpoint of fulfilling a dream than of running away from marriage. Deedee even cautions Reba against this, but Reba does not listen. As a result, Reba comes to quickly find she does not like her new job, which prompts her to return to her old life in El Paso.

Abortion

Abortion symbolizes tragic irony. Elsie becomes pregnant by an American soldier. She decides with her mother that an abortion is the best choice for her. Despite being surrounded by death and the horrors of the Holocaust, as well as having lost a sister and a nephew, Elsie adds more death to her life by having an abortion. Rather than celebrating new life in the midst of destruction, Elsie commits to an abortion.

Finch

A finch symbolizes freedom in Heaven and freedom from the past. A finch flies away from a tree when Mutti is buried in 1967, and the bird is seen by Elsie. Birds symbolize flight and freedom traditionally, and the flight of the finch is to be seen as Mutti's soul now being free and ascending to peace in Heaven. Additionally, Mutti's death effects

peace being made among Elsie, her father, and the family, freeing them from the guilt and horrors of the past. The flight of the finch means freedom from that past.



Settings

Garmisch

Garmisch is a town in Germany not far from Dachau which serves as the main setting for the novel. Garmisch is a major center for Nazi power and control, as it appears to be a headquarters for Nazi activity by way of the SS and the Gestapo, both of which Josef serves. It is in Garmisch that Elsie and her family live and work in their bakery, and it is in Garmisch that Elsie comes to hide Tobias.

Garmisch is hit hard by the war through the late winter and very early spring of 1945 as Nazi Germany collapses under the American and Allied advance. Families are without adequate food, and the SS turn on their own, such as when Kremer rapes Elsie. When the Americans arrive, residents are at first worried about reprisals. Through the kindness and moral example of the Americans, they relax and follow suit. Indeed, many Nazi supporters now shun Nazism, while the American arrival vindicates all those who have long opposed Nazism.

It is in Garmisch that Elsie ends up meeting Al Meriwether. She falls in love with him and decides to marry him. Elsie moves to the United States. She only returns to Garmisch in 1967 for her mother's death and burial.

El Paso

El Paso is a border town in Texas. It is located on the Rio Grande across from Mexico. El Paso is loved by its residents and protected by the Border Patrol. It is the destination of illegal immigrants and the cruel handlers who charge them a fortune to smuggle them into the United States.

Reba and Riki make their home and work in El Paso. Elsie and Al also make their home there until Al dies, and Elsie continues to live and work with her daughter at the family bakery in El Paso. Reba is afraid of being stuck in El Paso due to marriage, and so she flees for California. Ultimately, Reba returns to El Paso to take her old job back and to marry Riki.

The border along the Rio Grande

The border along the Rio Grande is where Riki works. The border area is a place of strange contrasts –between American suburbs and hovels, trailers, and cars used by human traffickers and smugglers of illegal aliens. Riki, though a patriotic American, finds deporting families across the border to be difficult. In many ways, Riki himself straddles a border between his conscience and the law, both of which he believes are right.



Schmidt Bakery

The Schmidt Bakery is located in Garmisch, Germany. It is where Elsie Schmidt and her family work during World War II. The bakery is well-loved for its delicious foods and baked goods. The family lives above the bakery, and the bakery is where Elsie first hides Tobias before moving him up to her bedroom. The bakery is visited by Josef through the war, and it is visited by the Americans after they occupy the area during and after the war.

Elsie's German Bakery

Elsie's German Bakery is located in El Paso, Texas. It is owned and operated by Elsie and Jane. It is a throwback to the family's heritage and Elsie's family's roots in baking. The Germany Bakery is well-loved and very popular among locals who often flood the shops. Reba is given the assignment of writing about the shop, and so she journeys there to meet with Elsie. It is through speaking with Elsie and Jane at the Bakery that Reba comes to learn about Elsie's past and to realize important things about her own future, such as her engagement to Riki.



Themes and Motifs

In Nazi Germany, many Germans did what they had to do to survive.

In Nazi Germany, many Germans did what they had to do to survive. This is especially true of Elsie's family and those that surrounded the family, as McCoy demonstrates through Elsie herself.

When Reba asks about the past, particularly about Germans and their adherence to Nazism, Elsie responds that surviving was on the minds of most and that was enough for them. In other words, Germans had to rely on their consciences and situations as they believed right. Frau Rattelmuller adopted a brusque and rough exterior in order to keep people distant, so that she could secretly help Jews escape to Switzerland. After Peter's death, Hazel went into the Lebensborn Program to help birth Aryan babies for Germany, believing it was her best option since her beloved was dead.

Mutti and Papa both became enthusiastic Nazis, believing it was the wave of the future. Though Mutti awakened to her conscience around the end of the war, Papa bitterly clung to Nazism for years afterward until his own moral awakening. Elsie herself was a Nazi in name only. She did not support the regime and dating Josef because it helped to protect her family and supply the bakery with ingredients like flour. Elsie had to make the decision to out Tobias in order to protect her family –something for which she had no choice otherwise, but nevertheless regretted.

Josef's character demonstrates the hopelessness faced by many in the face of Nazism. Already older when Nazism came along, Josef's upbringing and traditional morality clashed horribly with the barbarism of Nazism. Josef's guilt and conscience tore him apart following the death of Frau Hochschild and the killing of Peter, with his wracked physical state coming to reflect his soul. Josef did not break with Nazism until the tail-end of the war because he believed he had no choice but to be a Nazi in order to survive.

Conscience awakens in people at different times for different reasons.

Conscience awakens in people at different times for different reasons. In the novel, *The Baker's Daughter*, many of the characters face moral dilemmas. Each character makes choices and faces situations that either awakens or challenges their morality.

Elsie has her political assumptions challenged by Tobias. Tobias saves her and reminds her of her nephew. Tobias, despite propaganda, is not an inferior or evil human being. Elsie realizes how wrong she has been to believe such a thing. She takes Tobias in and protects him through the end of the war, having had her moral awakening. Hazel, in



turn, has her own moral awakening when her faith in Nazism and the Lebensborn Program are shattered by the killing of her baby boy because he is judged inferior. Hazel is so distraught she commits suicide.

The consciences of Elsie's parents awake belatedly. Mutti comes to her senses at the end of the war when the Americans arrive and provide a moral objective and moral clarity to what preceded them by way of Nazism. Papa awakens late in the novel, bitterly clinging to Nazism until he at last is also able to see how wrong he has been to have supported such evil. Riki, though he knows the laws of America are moral and though he knows the Border Patrol treats illegal immigrants with respect and kindness, does not feel happy about having to deport families. When one child he has deported is killed in Mexico, Riki has had a kind of moral awakening and leaves the Patrol.

Only Josef emerges as a tragic figure who, despite repeated moral challenges and awakenings, is never able to get ahead and make things right even after he vows to atone. Josef's traditional and religious morality is directly challenged and shredded by the tenets of godless Nazism. His killing of Peter after Peter kills Frau Hochschild also morally taxes Josef. Through the end of the war, Josef struggles to remain a Nazi despite his conscience and soul being destroyed. Not even drugs and promotions can still his conscience. In the end, Josef's loss of morality in large part leads to his committing suicide.

Truth can be difficult to determine, because it is muddled by time, humanity, and experiences.

Truth can be difficult to determine, because it is muddled by time, humanity, and experiences. Many Germans did what they had to do to survive in *The Baker's Daughter*. Deedee explains this to Reba, who is struggling to make sense of her past.

Reba and Deedee remember their father and their childhoods differently. Deedee remembers a loving but struggling father whose soul was torn apart by war. Reba remembers an abusive and distant father whom she feared as much as loved. The truth, it seems, was somewhere in the middle of what the girls remembered. Since Deedee was older and knew their father before Reba, her experiences with him were different than Reba's, accounting for the difference.

When Reba asks Elsie about the past, Elsie does not wish to speak much of it, but does say Germans did what they had to do. Many look at history and paint things as black and white, when reality, this was not always so. To outsiders, Germans who did not stand against Nazism were complicit at best. To Germans who may not have agreed with Nazism, but did not want to fall victim to it, going along to get along was the best option. Still others, like Frau Rattelmuller and Elsie, actually defied Nazism in secret by protecting Jews.

The events that occur in the present in the story make truth hard to discern, too. Riki has a difficult time finding truth himself as a Border Patrol Agent. He is a patriotic



American who believes America's immigration laws are just, but he has difficulty morally enforcing them when he has to deport women and children. He has difficulty reconciling the two and finding the truth between them. He never quite figures it out. Only after the death of Victor does Riki leave the Patrol.

Few things are morally absolute.

Few things are morally absolute. Often situations may appear to be one way or another, right or wrong. The author of *The Baker's Daughter* argues this is rarely true. As such, she presents a number of moral dilemmas and a few, clear-cut cases of good and evil to make the point.

For example, the author contends that not all Germans were evil, though Nazism itself was an embodiment of evil. Elsie is an unenthusiastic Nazi who comes to shelter a Jew, and makes it possible for others to escape through the engagement ring. Elsie's parents, though Nazi supporters, are not cruel and heartless people. Hazel, a faithful Nazi, enters Lebensborn because she believes it is her best possible future –only to kill herself when she becomes disillusioned. Josef's guilt and moral inability to reconcile his values and Nazism ultimately lead to his suicide.

In America, illegal immigration is seen from two vantage points. There are those who believe in open borders and unfettered immigration. There are also those who believe borders are important and immigration must be regulated. Oftentimes, both sides hold the other as villains. Into this debate walks Riki, who is a proud and patriotic American who believes the laws are morally just. However, he has a difficult time morally enforcing them when he must deport families. Riki reasons that it is true that families must be deported when they break the law. Yet, he has a difficult time morally doing so, especially when women and children are involved.

Elsewhere, however, McCoy presents clear cases of right and wrong. The absolute moral goodness of the Americans when they arrive stands in stark contrast to the absolute evil of the Nazis as they slink away. Whereas the Americans treat all with respect and dignity, the Nazis turn against their own. The moral goodness of Elsie stands in stark contrast to the absolute evil of Kremer. Kremer, the embodiment of Nazi evil, brutally rapes Elsie, who becomes the model of human goodness through the novel.

Love can be found in even the darkest places.

Love can be found in even the darkest places. Despite the darkness which prevails through much of the novel, McCoy always holds out hope for love.

With the Nazis in power and evil reigning in Germany, Elsie still looks forward to the future. Though she does not love Josef, she imagines she will have a good future with him. She may even come to love him. Josef, in turn, loves Elsie –but his own moral corruption corrupts his soul and his love for her. At the same time, Elsie turns to her



family for love and comfort in the darkness –especially her sister, Hazel, through their letters. When Elsie takes in Tobias, it is an act of love that blossoms into familial love between the two.

As the war ends, Elsie seems to have a chance for love with Robby despite the extensive darkness of the Nazis revealed by the Americans at the end of the war –but this ends up being only sexual passion. Elsie does fall in love with the much older, but much more stable Al Meriwether. This leads to marriage, family, and a new life in America.

Despite the darkness of her own childhood because of her father, Reba is able to find love with Riki. Although her fear nearly ruins her chance at love, marriage, and happiness, Reba realizes the love she and Riki share is stronger than anything else that confronts them. Riki, who himself is experiencing moral uncertainty because of the darkness in his life brought on by work, clings to his love of Reba to help him get through.



Styles

Point of View

Sarah McCoy tells her novel *The Baker's Daughter* from the third person point of view of an unnamed narrator. The narrator has a limited-bird's eye view of events both past and present. The narrator is able to reveal stories, subplots, and pieces of the plot known only to the narrator and the reader –things which the characters themselves may not be aware of as the event is occurring. For example, readers know Elsie saved Tobias, but Jane does not know this until decades later. In some instances, the character is never aware of what has happened. Elsie does not know –and never learns –the depth of Josef's moral strife).

The third person point of view from a narrator's perspective allows the reader to leap back and forth through time as the author constructs her plot and gives her characters a complex depth. Josef, for example, emerges as a tormented man rather than an evil one. Reba emerges as emotionally confused rather than merely self-interested. The third-person narrator also acts as a unifying voice that threads together the separate, distinct lives, times, and stories of all of the characters involved into one single story arc.

Language and Meaning

Sarah McCoy tells her novel *The Baker's Daughter* in language that is descriptive, formal, and tightly constructed. This reflects both the more formal way of speaking in decades past (specifically, the 1940s) and reflects the educated nature of journalists in the present day (specifically, 2007-2008). The writing gives the book a realistic atmosphere and ensures that McCoy says exactly what she wishes to say with her writing, leaving little (if any) room for interpretation.

For example, consider "Unspoken anxiety swayed the room like a ship's deck. Elsie wondered if the Gestapo had intercepted her letters to Hazel and she was being charged for some flippant remark made therein" (108). Here, readers have no doubt about the fact that Elsie is panicked, thinking the unguarded content of her letters has been found out. Nervousness is likened to the swaying of a ship at sea. The language used –words and phrases like unspoken anxiety, and flippant remark–reflect the educated and formal nature of the writing. McCoy upholds this process of writing through the course of the novel, ensuring that her messages and thematic arguments are clearly understood.

Structure

Sarah McCoy divides her novel *The Baker's Daughter* into fifty-one linear, consecutive chapters, prefaced by a Prologue and succeeded by an Epilogue. The fifty-one chapters, numbered 1 to 51, vary in length and usually alternate between the past and

the present. In some cases, a few chapters will remain in one specific time period. The majority, however, shift back and forth between the 1930s, the 1940s, and the latter half of the first decade of the 2000s.

The leapfrogging back and forth through time is made possible by a constant third-person narrator. The author is able to give the characters backstories and backgrounds. For example, readers become fully aware, in detail, of Elsie's life in Germany, while Reba receives only limited information. Riki and Josef prove to be much more than mere cardboard cutouts as hesitant Border Patrol agent and regretful Nazi, respectively to each. This gives a greater sense of realism to her novel and gives the plot itself a greater breadth and depth.



Quotes

Dreaming doesn't do me a bit of good.

-- Jane (Chapter 1)

Importance: When speaking to Jane prior to interviewing Elsie, Reba learns that Jane wants to get out of El Paso and do something else with her life. However, Jane remains stuck in the same place, doing the same thing. She explains that dreaming does not help her –and by extension, never helps anyone. Jane's story about being stuck because of circumstances becomes reflective of her mother's own experiences as a teen girl, stuck in Nazi Germany.

He's only half-Jewish... and that voice... Doesn't seem to belong with the rest.

-- Elsie (Chapter 3)

Importance: At the Nazi Christmas party, Elsie worries about the Jewish boy (Tobias) who sings so well for all those assembled. She compares him to her nephew, Julius, and emotionally connects with the boy even though Nazi ideology considers the boy inferior. Elsie's heart struggles against what she has been taught, attempting to reason why she should connect with the boy as opposed to other Jews.

We were trying to live. That was hard enough.

-- Elsie (Chapter Eight)

Importance: Here, Elsie reflects on the German people at the time of World War II. She reveals that not all Germans were Nazis, and that even then, not everyone embraced the party line. She explains that she and her family were just trying to live however they could. For her sister, that meant being a part of the baby program. For her parents, it meant voting for Nazis. For her, it meant dating a Nazi officer.

Everybody needs somebody.

-- Riki (Chapter 13)

Importance: Here, Riki talks about how he struggles with his border security work. He has sworn to uphold the law, but finds it difficult when families are involved. Reba encourages him to distance himself from his work, but Riki says building fences around people does not do anyone any good. He argues for a human connection between people, saying that everybody needs somebody.

As I've told you, those years were... traumatic.

-- Elsie (Chapter 20)

Importance: Here, Elsie admits that despite Christmas being a joyous time of year, it was not joyous during the war years. She explains that the war was constantly affecting their lives, and she herself was terrified in her hiding of Tobias while being engaged to a



Nazi. Additionally, her sister went missing, one of her sister's children was believed dead, and Josef had to go to Dachau.

...the truth can be an awfully hard thing to get a hold on. It's muddled by time and humanity and how each of us experiences those.

-- Deedee (Chapter 26)

Importance: When Deedee visits Reba in El Paso, they talk about the past and growing up. Deedee reflects on how truth can become difficult to find not only because of time that passes, making memories foggy, but because people bring their own experiences to bear on memory. Some people are more forgiving than others, some have better understandings of what is being remembered, and so on. While Deedee is more forgiving of their father, Reba is not.

The ring was never truly mine.

-- Elsie (Chapter 27)

Importance: Here, Elsie reflects on giving up her engagement ring from Josef in order to save some Jewish children through Frau Rattelmuller. Elsie explains the ring was never hers to begin with –that it belonged to a Jewish couple from whom it was stolen. The stealing of their lives and their love, representing through the stealing of the ring, is now made right through the ring being used as a way to save the lives and love of others now in danger.

Even more, he wished Reba were there now... He missed her.

-- Narrator (Chapter 39)

Importance: As Riki and Reba fall apart, Riki quickly comes to realize how much he misses Reba. His sense of loss over Reba is especially acute given his moral dilemma regarding his confusion about his work. This demonstrates, however, that Riki does still love Reba and wants to be with her.

Would it be all right if I came by tomorrow –to grab a bite to eat and visit a spell?

-- Al Meriwether (Chapter 43)

Importance: Although Al Meriwether is much older, Elsie is immediately taken with him. He is kind, gentle, and stable –all things which she finds attractive. Al is taken with Elsie. After her gives her a ride home, he asks to see her again, and she readily agrees. This simple request will pave the way for marriage.

Death shouldn't be so unremarkable, she thought.

-- Elsie (Chapter 49)

Importance: Elsie returns home to Germany in 1967 when her mother dies. The funeral is simple but beautiful; yet Elsie does not believe it is enough. Death is a major event in life, and it seems as if there should be more to it than merely disappearing. This speaks



to how important life is and how much Elsie herself values life that death seems anticlimactic.

Mom, Dad... meet Reba.
-- Riki (Chapter 50)

Importance: When Reba and Riki get back together, they demonstrate how serious they are this time by introducing one another to their parents. Riki takes Reba to meet his parents, though his parents are dead. That Riki would do so represents just how important Reba is to him that he would share something so personal and important with her as wanting to bring her to the place his parents were laid to rest.

In honor of your and Riki finally setting a wedding date, I'm sending you a dozen of Mom's recipes.
-- Jane (Epilogue)

Importance: As the novel ends, Jane celebrates the fact that Riki and Reba will be getting married. She does so by sending along her mother's recipes, which comprise most of the Epilogue. The recipes are a light and positive end to the novel.