

The Blind Assassin Study Guide

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood

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Plot Summary

The Blind Assassin is a tale of the Chase family from World War I through the end of the 1990s. Opening with the death of the main character, Laura Chase, the story is intertwined with the text of Laura's only published novel, also entitled *The Blind Assassin*.

The quirks and eccentricities of the once very well-to-do Chase family is chronicled from the birth in 1916 of Iris, Laura's older sister, to Laura's birth in 1919 to the death of their mother in 1925, and into the Depression and World War II. Iris narrates the lives and times of the Chase sisters. They have an absent father and a maid/nanny who raises them. There is an arranged marriage of Iris to textile tycoon Richard Griffen in exchange for desperately needed money on the part of Iris's father. Iris tells about the extramarital love affair between Iris and a political rabble-rouser and her pregnancy by the same lover. Iris narrates Laura's alleged insanity, not once, but twice, Laura's suicide, Richard's suicide, Iris's daughter's death, the estrangement of Iris and her granddaughter Sabrina, and, finally, the death of Iris in 1999.

The sub-novel follows in the footsteps of two clandestine lovers, simply known as the man and the woman. As time passes, it becomes clear that the events in the sub-novel run parallel to the lives of Iris Chase Griffen and Laura Chase and that, at the end, the two stories intersect and become one.

In the main novel, Iris is now in her 80s and is writing the Chase family history for the benefit of her estranged granddaughter Sabrina. She pines for the comfort of that relationship but blames Richard's evil sister, Winifred, for turning her against Iris. It is not until the end of the novel that readers "meet" Sabrina as an adult at the end of the novel while she travels to Port Ticonderoga to handle her late grandmother's affairs. This journey is an unrealized dream for Iris.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Main Novel

Laura Chase is killed instantly in a car accident. Laura's sister must go to the morgue to identify the body, and readers are given an idea of the woman Laura's sister is. She is careful, deliberate, and knows that she must dress appropriately in case newspaper reporters are nearby. She must do anything fitting her position as the wife of Mr. Richard E. Griffen. Especially since the car in which Laura Chase died belonged to Mrs. Richard E. Griffen.

Laura's sister decides to wear black, of course, and she must also wear gloves, a veil, and should bring a handkerchief. When Laura's sister opens a drawer in her dressing room, she comes across a stack of school examination notebooks that have been bound in kitchen string. When she lifts the notebooks out, the shock of Laura's death hits her.

There is some speculation in town that Laura committed suicide but an article running in the local newspaper quells that thought by calling it an accident due to a tire becoming stuck in a piece of trolley track.

Sub-Novel

In the last portion of this chapter, readers start to see the writer's side of Laura Chase: the first portion of a book that she wrote called *The Blind Assassin* is laid out. In the prologue, the narrator of this tale revisits a photo of a man that she had tucked into a brown envelope, stuck in the pages of a book on rock gardening. The narrator from the main novel is also in this photo with the man. She looks closely at the photo and remarks to herself that everything is drowned now but still shining.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Readers experience their first taste of a novel with a novel when the author weaves in passages from the sub-novel. At the close of Chapter 1, readers know about Laura Chase, her age, the car crash that took her life, even the name of her childhood nanny. However, readers do not know the narrator's name. The narrator is concerned about appearances and, especially, how her husband may be perceived. This starts the story's tension, which will continue until readers discover the narrator's identity.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Sub-Novel

There are two main characters in the sub-novel: the man and woman. Clandestine meetings occur between them and the relationship is in its infancy. The woman is described as "nervous." She is married but he is single.

Details are dropped into the narrative like toppings on an ice cream sundae - the color of the woman's dress, the kind of tree that sits outside her bedroom window - and these things will be clues to the identities of the man and woman later on. Additionally, news clips, interspersed between vignettes, keep readers on a linear time path with the main novel. Also in this chapter are stories within stories. The woman and man meet several times and in varied places: over lunch, in a park, at night under a bridge.

The first time, the man and woman get together over lunch; readers get to peek into the world of this secret relationship and are made privy to a made-up world while the man tells a story to the woman. This story is about life on the planet Zycron.

During the next meeting, the woman waits for the man on a park bench in August. She wears a primrose yellow dress and balls up her gloves in a fit of nervousness. The man continues his tale about a Zycronian city called Sakiel-Norn and its inhabitants. The royal people are called Snilfards and the commoners are called Ygniroids.

During the next meeting in a nearby park, the man guides the woman away from the openness of the grass and takes her around some bushes near an old stone bench. Placing his jacket over her shoulders—surrounding her with the smell of old tweed and old tobacco—he continues the story of Sakiel-Norn. In this installment, the man describes the children of the city. They are used as slaves to manufacture very fine textiles. In fact, the textiles are so fine that children frequently go blind by the ages of eight or nine. The worth of a textile is stated in the number of children who went blind to make it. The more children who were blinded in the making of the product the more worth it had.

The man likes the sense of anticipation that he brings to her. When they part, he asks her to stand by her bedroom window and states that he will wait under the chestnut tree. His knowledge of her home makes her feel instantly uneasy.

Current events about characters from the main novel are woven into the story of the sub-novel by way of news clippings.



Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter 2, a story and current events are woven within the sub-novel adding more texture and tension. Tension is heightened on three levels: the first includes the deaths of Richard Griffen, his daughter Aimee Griffen, and his sister Winifred Griffen Prior. The second level focuses on the adulterous affair being undertaken by the two unnamed people, which is the backdrop of the sub-novel. The third level is the story within the sub-novel of a fictitious city where virgins are sacrificed and children are blinded with hard and tedious work. Death consumes the reader: the deaths of real people, the death of morality and the death of a civilization.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Main Novel

It is June, 1998 and Iris Chase Griffen is about to present the Laura Chase Creative Writing Award to a graduating senior at Port Ticonderoga High School. Readers get to know Iris a bit better throughout the narrative. The death of her sister Laura, which she describes as being as close to a suicide as the word damn is to swearing, is an old wound that still bleeds. Her representation of the Chase family in the presentation of this monetary award is very difficult for her.

Iris reminisces about her sister's life, how the story in the sub-novel created a town furor worthy of book banning, and how Iris has withstood the worst of this upset for the past 50 years. Yet, Laura is also seen as a genius taken in the prime of her life - a genius that Iris wears like a hair shirt.

The thing that irritates Iris the most, though, is the person who put up the money for the scholarship in the first place - her estranged sister-in-law, Winifred Griffen Prior. For if it were not for Winifred and her secrecy, Laura would not have endured what she did in her short life. Iris has guarded anything connected with Laura so completely that she even refused to bury Laura's ashes in its silver box. Instead, Iris scatters Laura's ashes and hides the box to prevent someone from stealing it.

It is high summer and Iris feels it like a wet blanket lying across her shoulders. The morning after a thunderstorm, Iris walks to The Button Factory. The Button Factory, now a maze of boutique shops, once made buttons in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and was owned by her grandfather, Benjamin Chase.

The Button Factory is on the east bank of the Louveteau River and, for the longest time, it stood as a derelict and abandoned reminder of what the mill town of Port Ticonderoga used to be. Now, in modern-day, it is filled with shops and boutiques. Even her friend, Myra, has a shop in The Button Factory called The Gingerbread House. Myra is Reenie's daughter, and Reenie was the nanny who cared for Laura and Iris in their youth.

When she walks into the building, Iris takes the time to look at various pieces of art on the wall that are reminiscent of the time that her grandfather owned the factory. Iris's grandfather, Benjamin Chase, built The Button Factory in the early 1870s when the demand for buttons was quite high as the population of Canada expanded. The materials for buttons were easy to find, and labor was cheap, so it was simple for him to turn a huge profit. Button Factory buttons were made for the working man and considered quite practical. Nevertheless, Iris's grandfather was also a forward thinking man and purchased other mills to make other kinds of textiles.



Readers will begin to see the intricate patchwork of Iris's family. Adelia and Benjamin Chase are her grandparents, Liliana and Norval are her parents, Reenie's mother was brought in to help Adelia toward the end of her life, and then Reenie came on as extra help and stayed on to be nanny to Iris and Laura. Norval and Liliana married in 1914, after he proposed to her at a church sponsored skating outing. There is no mention of love or even lust at this point — just that it seems to have been expected, very much like Iris's own marriage that occurred later.

Iris is born in June of 1916; Laura is born three years later in 1919. Life begins in earnest for Liliana, Norval, and Iris after he returned from the war. However, he returns a broken man, like many did at that time. He came back a physically changed man, having lost an eye and the use of one leg. Nevertheless, he has returned victorious in that he is the heir to the Chase Industry throne.

After Laura's birth, Iris's mother is more tired than she had been in the past. Childbirth simply wore her out. Iris did her best to keep quiet and make her mother happy. Laura was an uneasy child, and Iris was frequently put in charge of her. Later, Reenie became more a 'mother' to the girls than Liliana ever could be. Laura was a literal child: whatever was said to her was taken seriously and followed to the letter.

Mrs. Chase dies in 1925 after the stillborn birth of her third child. At the time this event occurs, Norval Chase cannot be found. Shortly before her death, Liliana begs Iris to watch after Laura and be a good girl. Iris had no idea what those words meant until much later in her life. Iris's father echoed his late wife's request: watch after Laura.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Tension is heightened, not only with Iris's age and infirmity, but also with the soon-to-be uncovered conflict between Iris and her dead sister Laura. Iris clearly feels that Laura killed herself, even though public opinion said differently at the time. Iris may be the only one who knows why Laura committed suicide. Further, Iris has cleaned up Laura's messes all of her life and Laura's death and book publication were just two more messes to take care of.

The tension of previous chapters has been released somewhat with the telling of Iris's family history. Empathy is building for Iris as readers experience the physical infirmities she has to endure as well as some of the emotional difficulties she suffered growing up. Iris and Laura are the granddaughters of the town icon. Benjamin Chase not only provided many jobs for the Port Ticonderoga area but also was quite magnanimous as an employer. Iris barely conceals her contempt for her family.

The end of the chapter allows readers to breathe a sigh of relief - for now. Tension increases slightly with each tidbit, but then is released when Iris explains behavior or attitude. Throughout the history of the Chase family, readers glimpse snippets of Iris's present-day life and her comments upon her state of mind and health.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Sub-Novel

The man and woman continue to meet in secret. At a cafe, she is uncomfortable because of the part of town in which it is located, and he is uncomfortable with the "fancy" way she is dressed. Their togetherness, for him, is about sex; their togetherness, for her, is about what is missing in her marriage: love and respect.

The two of them leave the cafe and go to a room he is borrowing from a friend. It is threadbare, worn, and shabby. The woman is again uncomfortable in this environment but is so needy for what the man can give her that she stays. They make-love and he continues telling her the science-fiction tale about the residents of Sakiel-Norn.

In another instance, at another time, the man and woman meet in a friend's apartment where they again make love, and again, he continues telling the story. The story unfolds in a dark and grizzly way but readers discover who blind assassins are: they are the former children blinded by weaving tapestries for the king and forced to be prostitutes until they are ready to be trained as assassins.

In their last meeting in this chapter, the man and woman are seen after lovemaking talking about the alcohol he buys for them. She does not like it and he claims he is too poor to buy anything else. In fact, she does not like much about this man but she is drawn to him as an arsonist is to a conflagration.

Snippets of historical information continue to be intertwined, anchoring the readers with the main novel. There are three newspaper articles from the 1930s that stand out: the first one details Norval Chase's support of the relief effort for depression victims, the second one introduces the readers to Richard Griffen, the narrator's future husband, who is president of a company called Royal Classic Knitwear (this company seems to be in competition with Chase Industries). The final news item is from 1934, detailing violence in Port Ticonderoga, which leads to looting and destruction at Chase Industry factories.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter pulls readers through not only more of the sub-novel but the happenings in and around Toronto and Ontario, Canada in the mid-1930s. This time period — The Great Depression in America — was also a depression time for Canadians. With news articles, Atwood anchors readers to the main novel like a tether to a float. The two diverse stories — the main novel and sub-novel — are starting to intertwine, and tension is mounting. The provocative question in readers' minds should be what was so

bad that Laura Chase felt she had to kill herself? In addition, is the sub-novel semi-autobiographical?



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Main Novel

This chapter volleys between present-day and the mid-1920s through the late 1930s in the history of the Chase family. Readers are permitted the chance to know Iris as an old woman and also get to know how Iris came to be that old woman.

It is 1925 and Liliana Chase has died after the premature birth of her third child. Iris is saddled with caring for Laura and knows that it is going to be a full-time job. Even though Reenie acts in a motherly fashion toward both girls, it is Iris who tends to Laura's everyday needs. They must be each other's best friend, because they are not permitted to go off the grounds of Avilion alone. It is during this time that Iris tries to figure out why her mother died as well as how to explain to Laura what happened to the "unfinished" baby they had found discarded in a basin outside their mother's room.

Not long after, Iris and Laura's mother dies, and their father takes up with an artist named Callista Fitzsimmons. She was an artist commissioned to sculpt a work named "The Weary Soldier" to commemorate the efforts of the Canadian military during World War I. Callista and her artist friends come and stay at Avilion while the sculpture is being created. Norval Chase, enamored with Callie Fitzsimmons, is a happier man.

One week after this ceremony, Iris saves Laura's life after she steps into the icy water of the Louveteau River in winter. Iris accuses her of going into the water on purpose and she admits that she was trying to exchange her life for their mother's and thought God would approve of that. Laura and Iris concoct the story of Laura "accidentally" slipping into the river - the girls' first conspiracy (and the start of Iris' covering up for Laura) begins.

During the Button Factory Labor Day picnic that year, Laura meets a man who will become instrumental in the future lives of Laura and Iris. His name is Alex Thomas. In the 1930s, he will be accused setting fire to the building and leaving it a charred hulk. At the picnic, Iris has her first glimpse of who will become the Chase family's savior and her future husband, Richard Griffen. Owner of Royal Classic Knitwear, Richard Griffen is Norval Chase's chief competitor.

By December 1934, Norval Chase shuts down the factory to save money. After the announcement of the shutdown, union supporters rise up and rebel. Richard Griffen appears at Avilion with bodyguards to help protect the estate and The Chase family. Laura hides Alex Thomas in the attic at Avilion.

While in hiding, Alex Thomas becomes a dangerous character for Iris. While alone, he kisses her and tries to take her clothes off. This is the true beginning of their relationship. Once Alex had left, the girls found an exercise book he had written in with a



long list of words, including "zycron" (which readers will later recognize as the name of the planet in a story told by the man in the sub-novel).

In January and February of 1935, Iris begins to travel with her father to Toronto and often meets Richard Griffen there. In the Imperial Room of the Royal York Hotel, it is decided between Norval and Richard that Iris would marry Richard Griffen, seventeen years her senior. Although unstated, it appears that there will be an infusion of cash when the two families merged.

Iris and Richard become engaged and his sister, Winifred, hosts many of the requisite teas and showers prior to the wedding. The night before the wedding, Laura visits Iris and tells her that she does not want her to marry Richard. Laura learns Iris was doing it for the good of Laura and good of their father. Iris spends many days with Winifred and is taught the ways of a proper lady in the 1930s. Winifred makes excuses for her brother, explaining away his inadequacies. She is a force to reckon with, and one with whom Iris would have to contend for rest of her life.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Laura and Iris lead a solitary life, having only each other as friends. Because they were forbidden to attend public school, they did not even have school friends as distraction for their meager lives. While the family once had a good deal of money, the Depression evened the playing field for The Chases. Iris cannot control Laura, who is not only getting older but starting to spend her time with unsavory types like Alex Thomas. Likewise, Iris cannot stop her marriage to Richard Griffen, whom she does not know and does not love. By the end of the chapter, it is clear that Iris feels trapped in her own skin. The destruction of The Button Factory is symbolic of the destruction of Iris's life. It is ironic that the very man who rescues the Chase family is the man who robs Iris of a happy existence.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Sub-Novel

The man and woman continue to meet in a variety of borrowed places: a dingy room, an opulent apartment and a janitor's storeroom in the basement of a building. The woman is clearly out of her element and comments so to herself while she goes to meet the man. She feels out of place in body and spirit: her clothes are too fancy, her walk is too refined and her attitude is too uptown for the downtown surroundings.

However, she clearly loves this man, or certainly loves the image of him. He tries to appear nonchalant, but even he grows restless when he thinks she is not coming to meet him. There is a relationship that starts out purely physical but melds into one of need. In addition, as the book continues, readers are left to wonder who this woman is: Laura or Iris?

The man is a writer, that much is clear. Readers get a glimpse into his world when he begins to write his latest science fiction piece. He wrestles with his characters and destinations, tired of writing the same formulaic crap. This insight into his mind and soul lets readers guess who the man is. Could it be Alex Thomas?

The tale of the inhabitants of Sakiel-Norn also continues, only this time, there is an unexpected twist. The blind assassin, the man sent to kill the King, instead decides to rescue the tongueless virgin who was set to be sacrificed to the Gods the next day. Instead of loathing her, he falls in love with her. They escape the stranglehold of the city only to fall into the hands of the People of Desolation and the Servant of Rejoicing.

In the current events of the main novel, a news report about Laura Chase missing from home in 1935 appears, as well as a recounting of the events of a Toronto costume ball for charity hosted by Winifred Griffen Prior.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Atwood skillfully keeps readers on track with events in the main novel even though she is walking a tightrope between the sub-novel and the story within it. This device allows readers to keep one foot firmly anchored in the family's history, as well as reading the book that caused such scandal to the Chase family. Tension is climbing back up with the guesswork of who the man and woman are, together with the wonder of what would make Laura Chase commit suicide.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Main Novel

More of Iris's mystery begins to unravel with the opening of Chapter 7. She possesses a steamer trunk - one from her 1935 honeymoon trip to Europe with Richard Griffen - full of handwritten text and a couple of first edition books. It is hinted that Laura wrote these, but the question does arise: did Iris actually write stories, including the sub-novel? Many have written to Iris in hopes of interviewing her about her dead sister but she has steadfastly refused. She keeps the existence and contents of the steamer trunk a secret from the world.

On a trip into Toronto to see her lawyer, Iris asks Walter to drive her past her old home - the one she shared with Richard as a newly married woman. It is still there, and now has tendrils of ivy fingering up the brickwork. Iris feels nothing when she sees her old home, but she notices that the old chestnut tree still remains and she can just see her old bedroom through its branches.

She and Walter also go to a restaurant called The Fire Pit, because Walter has fond memories of its food. It is closed, but Iris recalls a time when she followed her granddaughter, Sabrina, there, just to see her and breathe her in from afar.

The story then segues back to Iris and Richard's 1930s honeymoon trip to Europe. She dutifully sends happy postcards back home during a time when she is extremely bored and lonely. Richard does not permit Iris to go out by herself, nor does he spend any time with her. It is as though Iris has taken a European trip alone, save for the conjugal responsibilities. He continues to receive multiple telegrams on a daily basis, many of which he folds carefully and stows in his jacket pocket.

Following an eight-week honeymoon, Richard and Iris return to Toronto, to a house Richard has purchased while they were in Europe. There is no discussion between the newlyweds about where to live; Richard simply does it - all with his sister's help, of course. She has had the house redecorated in her own image. Richard tells Iris that she should be grateful to not have the weight of this chore upon her shoulders. In a phone call, Iris learns from Laura that their father had died a week after she and Richard left for Europe and that many telegrams and phone messages were left for her. Iris's ire turns to deep anger and resentment. When she confronts Richard with this information, he begs forgiveness for his selfishness: he had wanted Iris all to himself, without any interruptions.

In one of her trips into town from home, Iris spies Alex Thomas across the street from her. Iris often spends time wandering around Toronto in the guise of "shopping," which is the only thing Richard and Winifred feel she can do well. Alex does not see her.



Because Laura is only fifteen, Richard and Iris become her guardians and move her from Avilion to Toronto to live with them and go to school. On the train ride there, she "runs away" to work at an amusement park called Sunnyside. Iris is beside herself when she does not arrive on the train with her luggage. Laura already distrusts Richard and fears for the safety and security of her sister and herself. She is declared missing, and a reward is offered in the local newspaper. When found, Richard arranges a ruse with the press saying that it was a mix up and that Laura was visiting family friends. Everything is image to Richard (and Winifred).

Chapter 7 Analysis

Subtle hints are dropped suggesting that the woman in the sub-novel is Iris: the same yellow cotton dress worn in the park, the chestnut tree outside the house, the bedroom window near the chestnut tree. Moreover, now that Alex has turned up again, it is more and more likely that he is the man. Tension continues to mount on the issue of the granddaughter Sabrina and why she and Iris are estranged. There is also the lack of a relationship - except for the marital duties - between Iris and Richard. Richard's marriage to Iris clinched his take-over of Chase Industries and led to the death of Norval Chase.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Sub-Novel

The man and woman continue meeting and telling each other stories. They debate over the ending of the story of the blind assassin and the tongueless girl. The woman wants a happy ending, where the two will live out their years together; the man would like to see everyone, including the lovers, annihilated. The storytelling between the man and woman is intellectual foreplay.

At another rendezvous, the man tells a nicer story, at the urging of the woman. It is about the Lizard Men of Xenor and their coupling with women of Earth to create a super race. The woman tells the man that she is going away on the maiden voyage cruise of the Queen Mary. It is becoming clearer that the woman is Iris Griffen.

The man tells the woman that he has sold the story called the *Lizard Men of Xenor* - she is quite proud - and they go out to eat dinner together, which is a first for them. The man will soon leave for Spain to help in the Communization of that country. The woman plans to leave her husband when the man returns, to be with him. He wants to believe her.

In the news, Richard Griffen continues to groom himself for a run for Parliament by making speeches denouncing Communism, the unrest in Spain, and Spanish dictator, Francisco Franco.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The woman in the sub-novel is becoming bolder and more outspoken about what she wants from the man. She also is beginning to compete with him in the storytelling department, which leads the reader to believe that Iris is really the writer in the family and not Laura. The man is most certainly Alex Thomas from Avilion days. Although he says he wants her to leave "him" [presumably her husband] he does not believe that she will actually do it - and does not truly want her to. The excitement for the both of them is the tawdry meetings and joint creativity. Is it love? Only the man and woman know for sure.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Main Novel

The elderly Iris is losing the battle all older people fight: to maintain independence at home. Iris's mind is still sharp but her body is letting her down. She cannot even do her own laundry in the basement without fearing she will fall and be hurt.

Elderly Iris is also fighting off the ministrations of Myra who dotes on her as though she inherited her from her mother, Reenie. Myra means well but smothers Iris all the same. Her latest idea is to hire someone to clean Iris's house and do laundry for her. However, Iris does not want a stranger touching her underwear.

It is the spring of 1936; the Civil War had begun in Spain, King Edward had abdicated the throne for the Duchess of Windsor, and Laura had headed off to school. There were new staff members — hired by Winifred, of course — at the Toronto house. They were people Iris did not like. Iris's wifely duties had begun to repulse her. Richard's sexual tastes had turned kinky, and he had decided that bruising Iris in the throes of passion made him more of a possessor.

Richard sends Laura to attend St. Cecilia where she is promptly dismissed for posing the scandalous question, "Does God lie?" Iris does not believe that Laura was any different from anyone else; she is merely more vocal about her thoughts.

Following her dismissal from school, Laura's behavior began to be noticeably odd. For instance, during a trip on the Queen Mary, Iris notices Laura's puffy and red eyes. When asked why she was upset, Laura says nothing. Similarly, on a summer trip to Avilion with Richard, Winifred and Iris, Laura soundly ignores Richard one day. The next, she is seen going off on a sailboat, the Water Nixie, alone with him. She has also started hiding bits and pieces, like mismatched dishes and silver — things she does not want Richard or Winifred to get their hands on.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Increased conflict between Laura and Richard turns up the heat on the tension. The reader is pulled along through the story as the layers of family history are peeled back like the world's largest onion. Iris and Richard have fallen into a tedium that is not unpleasant for Iris, except for the nighttime obligations. Winifred is worming her way further into the family as the stage is being set for Richard to run for high political office. Winifred's protection of Richard is a disgusting show, and readers, by this time, should be wondering why she is even doing it.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Sub-Novel

The woman misses the man desperately and looks high and low for some sign of him; something to tell her that he is safe. She finds their story, *The Lizard Men of Xenor*, in a newsstand at a train station. She secretly sneaks it home and cherishes it as though he were reaching his hand out to her and her alone.

Waiting for him to return from Spain seems interminable and, to pass the time, she imagines him imagining her. In her mind's eye, she sees him on trains, in stations and in diners. Her salvation is that he is on his way home to her, only her, and that he will soon emerge through the mist of a departing train to save her from her own life.

Laura Chase is institutionalized for the first time in a psychiatric facility at Richard's insistence. Richard has decided that Laura needs "help" and that she will never properly fit into society without it. Iris is powerless against Richard and Winifred to stop them from committing Laura.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The story lines of the sub-novel and the main novel are intertwining together like a noose around a neck. It is not mere coincidence that the story line of the sub-novel and the history line of the two families are growing closer with each chapter. Laura is now a pawn for Richard, someone who needs to be "dealt with" in order to protect his reputation. Nothing Richard does is ever for anyone's good but his own. Readers should feel the tension of wanting to throttle Richard for being an overbearing brute to Iris and Laura, and into this individual in front of Winifred.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Main Novel

As the story progresses, readers are treated to little hints, tiny secrets here and there. Iris likes to visit the middle stall in the washroom of a local doughnut shop. That is where the best graffiti is written (including some about Laura) — and where she would like to add some of her own. She checks into that stall regularly to see what has been written there, as one would get a weekly update to a news item.

Laura was sent to a different school — same temperament, different uniform — and plans were laid by Winifred for Laura's debut the following year when she turned eighteen. Laura grudgingly attended school but hated it. Once Laura started to be a bigger burden than Winifred wanted Richard to bear, it was decided that Laura should be married. It was at this period of time that Iris discovered she was pregnant. Laura does not react when she learns this news.

Two months before Iris was to have the baby, she found out from Winifred and Richard that, once again, Laura had been admitted to a psychiatric facility. According to the story told by Richard and Winifred, Laura had been delusional in thinking that *she* was pregnant, and this delusion endangered her and others.

The institution to which she was committed was called Bella Vista, or "beautiful view." Both Richard and Winifred stopped Iris from communicating with Laura. Laura eventually escaped from Bella Vista.

In the meantime, Richard and Iris's daughter, Aimee, was born. Iris was an absent mother, at best, relying on nursemaids and nannies. In addition, Aimee did not look like either Richard or Iris.

Tragedy struck for Aimee when she was young: Laura dies when Aimee is eight, and she loses her father at the age of 10. After Iris has finally left Richard and taken Aimee with her, Winifred cooks up a story and wrestles Aimee away from Iris. As Aimee grows up, Iris loses track of her until finding her a few years after Aimee gives birth to a daughter, Sabrina.

Iris finds Aimee living in squalid conditions, under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Iris thinks of taking Sabrina with her right then but, as usual, she does not act on impulse. Aimee accuses Iris of not being her mother and of Richard not being her father. Aimee has decided that Laura was her mother, Alex Thomas was her father, and that the Griffens had denied her of her heritage. No amount of reason could get Aimee to understand, and she blamed Iris for killing Laura. Aimee dies in a fall down the stairs three weeks after confronting Iris. Winifred takes possession of Sabrina and, according to Iris, turns her against her grandmother.



Chapter 11 Analysis

The heat is being turned up on the soap opera that is the Griffen house in Toronto. Richard has had Laura sent away again. There is some release of the tension between Iris and Aimee when it is learned that Aimee was deluded into thinking that her "real" mother was Laura and her "real" father was Alex Thomas and that Iris killed Laura. It is easier to understand Aimee's confusion, anger, and estrangement when her view is known. The past and present are starting to collide, and so is the story line for the sub-novel. But the question remains: why would a mother not fight harder for her granddaughter? Iris's lack of communication with Aimee is disturbing.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Sub-Novel

The man returns from the war in Spain and is greeted at the train station by the woman. Because he has not yet rented a room, they go to a seedy hotel to be alone together after such a long time apart. The room in the hotel is the worst place they have ever been together. It smells bad, the furniture is tacky and ripped and there is no fresh air. She tells him that she found The Lizard Men of Xenor and waited, impatiently, for the next episode so that she knew he was all right. She had worried about him dying in the war, and he tells her that nearly happened.

World War II is now in full swing and the woman has decided that she cannot live without the man. She has fantasized over how she will leave her husband and what she will do to survive in the war years. She decides that she will move back to Port Ticonderoga and will live above a grocery store, and the woman owner of the store will be helpful to her. The woman plans the things she will do while waiting for the man to come and be with her.

Then the unthinkable happens. The man, who has gone off to war again, has been killed. The telegram was sent to her, because she was listed as next of kin. She explains to her husband that the telegram's delivery was a mistake. She does everything in her power to hide the depth of her grief.

In the news, it is 1938 going on 1939 and Richard continues his bid for Parliament. He, Iris and Winifred continue making the social circuit rounds.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The story line of the sub-novel and Iris's real life are spiraling inward. Is Aimee Richard's daughter? The tension of the relationship between the man and the woman has been released now that the man has been killed and there is no more story. The plot lines of the main novel and sub-novel are finally intersecting and turned into one. The last seedy and stuffy hotel room for the man and woman is symbolic of Iris's relationship with Richard and Winifred and its desolation represents Iris's grief. By now, readers are speculating that the woman was Iris, the man was Alex Thomas and Aimee may be Alex's daughter.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Main Novel, the 1930s

Just before World War II, Iris' marriage to Richard was getting worse. She had suffered two miscarriages and learned that Richard had enjoyed his share of mistresses. She assumed these dalliances were with his secretaries who were always very young and very pretty. They kept up marital appearances by going to parties and gatherings and Iris was grateful that Richard was no longer bothering her for marital obligations.

Once World War II broke out, Richard and his business were in a bad place. He had been too friendly with the Germans prior to the war and stood to lose a lot of money. Following the end of the war, Iris receives a call from Laura. Back in Toronto, Iris sees Laura at Diana Sweets, one of Iris's favorite shops.

Laura told Iris that she had stayed at Avilion after escaping from Bella Vista, and then, after she had turned 21 and inherited some money from their father, she had gone to Halifax. Laura confirms that Iris had not received the letters Laura had sent her — Richard must have intercepted them the same way he had the telegrams on their honeymoon.

Laura confirmed that the story about her pregnancy was true and that the people at Bella Vista performed an abortion on her. After the abortion, they told her that she had been delusional thinking she was pregnant and then had sequestered her, stating that she was a danger to herself and to others. This story is the one Bella Vista told everyone about their patients.

Laura did not divulge the name of the father of her baby. She had slept with the man in order to save Alex Thomas. She had returned to Toronto to be where Alex Thomas knew to find her and wanted to be there waiting for him when he returned from the war.

Iris then let the ball drop. She told Laura that Alex Thomas had died in the war and that the two of them had been longtime, secret lovers. At this moment, Laura stood up from the booth in which they were sitting, took Iris's purse and left. When Iris went outside to find her, Laura had taken her car.

Iris waited, day after day, to hear from Laura and to talk with her further. After lunch with Winifred one day, the police arrived and advised Iris that Laura had run her car off the road into gorge and had burned to death. This story has now come full circle, back to the point where the book started.



Chapter 13 Analysis

Reader speculation is confirmed: Iris and Alex were lovers and they were the main characters in the sub-novel. Heartbroken, Laura escapes Iris's presence. Latent tension is completely released with this knowledge only to be renewed with Laura's death.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Main Novel, the late 1940s

Iris finds old school exercise books after Laura dies. In the mathematics book, there appears a long column of numbers with words opposite some of them. Iris recognizes the numbers as dates. The first date coincides with Iris's return from Europe and the last day was just a few months before Laura was sent to Bella Vista. Iris concludes that these are the dates Richard raped Laura. Iris was grateful that Laura had never seen Aimee because she would have known right away that Aimee was Alex Thomas's daughter and not Richard's.

Iris keeps all of Laura's notebooks, bound together with string, plus other manuscript pages in the steamer trunk once used in her wedding trousseau. After Laura's funeral, Iris leaves Richard. She sends the steamer trunk out to Port Ticonderoga and then takes Aimee away while Richard is gone on business. The note she leaves for him states that she does not want anything from him —except to be left alone. Further, Iris knows what happened with Laura, that he had fathered Laura's child, and she was not going to let Richard get his hands on Aimee.

Aimee hated living without Richard and became a difficult girl for Iris to manage. Richard continued to buy Aimee's love with material possessions, and Iris lived much more happily in Port Ticonderoga. Richard continued to ready himself for political office while Winifred shot back at Iris for "hurting" her brother. By having a relationship outside of marriage, Winifred proved that Iris was an unfit mother and succeeded in taking Aimee from her. Aimee grew up with Richard, and when Richard died, Winifred raised her.

Iris gathered the manuscript of the sub-novel, put Laura's name on it, and sent it off to publishers. It was subsequently published and the scandal defeated Richard's chances of being elected to high office. Shortly after the book's publication, Richard was found dead aboard the *Water Nixie*. Winifred told the newspapers that he had died from an aneurysm, but Iris knew that a copy of *The Blind Assassin* was found at Richard's elbow.

Post 1940s to Present Day

Iris continued to flourish, creating her own business in antiques and antiquities. She bought a house and made a life for herself after Richard, after Laura, after Aimee. It was Sabrina she missed and Sabrina for whom she wrote the family history.



Chapter 14 Analysis

Readers are now brought full circle to understand what they had begun to suspect. Richard had been a child molester and had impregnated Laura. Laura had done things with him on the pretense of protecting the love of her life, Alex Thomas. Iris had married a man she never knew, loved, or trusted but finally got away from him with some dignity. In the meantime, she not only lost her daughter, Aimee, she also lost any chance of a relationship with her granddaughter, Sabrina. The tension has now been completely released in the story and readers are left with few questions.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Sub-Novel

Iris is seen cherishing the photo of her and Alex Thomas at the Button Factory picnic that hot, humid Labor Day in the mid-1930s. The picture was of happiness, but the ensuing story was not.

Just before her death, Iris has one last daydream. It is of reuniting with Sabrina, one in which Sabrina does not blame her for her fate. Sabrina calls Iris, comes to her house and sits with her. On May 29, 1999, Iris Chase Griffen dies at the age of 83. Shortly thereafter, Sabrina returns from traveling abroad to see to her grandmother's affairs.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Readers are left with a sad taste in their mouths as they learn that Sabrina comes to see her grandmother only after Iris has died. Will she read any of Iris's manuscript? Will she publish it —under Iris's name?



Characters

Laura Chase

Sister of Iris, Laura Chase is killed when she drives her sister's car over an embankment. It catches fire and she is killed instantly. However, the entire story centers on Laura, her relationships and her eccentricities. She is literal as a child and an adult, very speculative about God and His doings, and frequently calls His work into question, which gets her into trouble more than once.

Laura loses her mother at the age of six and she is reared by Iris and the nanny/maid, Reenie. While she may not be well schooled, she is well educated and sophisticated in a way that appears to be improbable, judging her apparent lack of exposure to the outside world. While she is growing up (after the death of her mother), neither she nor Iris are permitted off the grounds of Avilion, the Chase family estate.

Laura and Iris are schooled at home by a series of tutors, but neither stays long enough to make much of a difference. Laura is seen by her father as someone incompetent and frail; a girl to protect and safeguard. That is the last thing Laura wants. She is an innocent and is in love - from afar - with a man she meets at a picnic in the mid-1930s named Alex Thomas. She believes Richard when he tells her that, in order to save Alex's life, she must sleep with him. She does so, on numerous occasions, and becomes pregnant with Richard's child, all in the name of Alex Thomas.

Laura's name appears on the manuscript for *The Blind Assassin* but it is Iris who has written it and had it published in Laura's memory. Laura becomes an icon; someone revered long after her death because she died so tragically and "wrote" so beautifully. The novel is the only real gift Iris could give her sister.

Iris Chase Griffen

Iris is the narrator of this tale and the one upon whom many burdens fall. It seems that she is destined to be blamed for Laura's death and to take the brunt of her family's sordid past. But Iris's waters run far deeper than anyone suspects, and, after a loveless and agonizing marriage, she finally finds the strength to leave her husband after learning that he had raped Laura repeatedly.

Iris has many regrets. She regrets a too-long marriage to Richard, failing to leave for a happier existence before her lover was killed in World War II, and being absent (thanks to Richard's failure to tell her) when her father died. Iris didn't do enough to help Laura through that time, exposing Laura to Richard and his sister, Winifred; she failed to fight harder for custody of her daughter, Aimee, and could not establish a relationship with her granddaughter, Sabrina.



It is Iris, the old woman, who is most appealing and forthright in her commentary. She has been through a lot and seen it all but still yearns for a simpler and younger life. She hangs on to her independence long after she should and fights her friend Myra's attempts to invade her. Her entire life is contained in a steamer trunk - the one from her wedding trousseau - filled with notes, letters and manuscripts. They will be for Sabrina to sort through after her death and for her to learn her true family history.

Richard Griffen

Owner of Royal Classic Knitwear and chief competitor of Norval Chase's Button Factory. Married Iris Chase for convenience and ownership of his rival. Richard is a man who fancies himself a political heavyweight; his ever-present sister, Winifred Griffen Prior, heavily supports him in all his endeavors. He is, however, someone who hides a proclivity for young girls and impregnates his own sister-in-law, Laura, in the guise of saving the man Laura thinks she is in love with.

Richard loves power - or thinks he does - and uses it in manipulative ways. His marriage to Iris, besides being convenient, was a carefully crafted business ploy to take over and destroy his only real rival. Although Norval Chase was not Donald Trump in his business acumen, he had loyal workers. Richard couldn't care less if those workers lost their jobs and could never find work again.

Richard's greed does eventually catch up with him at the start of World War II. His coziness with the Germans lands him in hot water at home, and he soon finds out that the Germans will not keep him going in business either. Richard is finished once the scandal of his dalliance with Laura comes out, but, instead of dealing with the mess he created, he kills himself.

Winifred Griffen Prior

Sister of Richard, Winifred fancies herself the socialite's socialite. She is snooty and haughty, believes she knows best for everyone and is overly protective of her brother and her future benefits when he is elected to a high seat in Parliament. She resents everything about Iris, particularly her close relationship with Laura.

Winifred is greatly concerned about appearance - it is a fatal blow to her if the right hat is not worn with a particular outfit. Guilt by association is something that keeps her up at night. When the scandal broke about Richard and Laura, she found a way to destroy the relationship between Iris and Aimee and managed to have Aimee's custody awarded to Richard.

When Richard died, Winifred was named Aimee's guardian and when Aimee died, Winifred again stepped into the role of guardian for Sabrina. Winifred did this, not out of the interests of the children, but out of spite against Iris for ruining her brother's life and career.



Benjamin Chase

Grandfather to Iris Chase Griffen and Laura Chase; husband of Adelia Montfort Chase; founder of Chase Industries and builder of The Button Factory, part of Chase Industries.

Adelia Montfort Chase

Grandmother to Iris Chase Griffen and Laura Chase; wife of Benjamin Chase; mistress of Avilion, the fancy estate owned by the Chase family.

Norval Chase

Iris and Laura's father; Liliana's husband, and then widowed gentleman. His wife, Liliana, died alone in childbirth after she had experienced a difficult and health-altering birth with Laura. He is the only surviving son of Benjamin and Adelia Chase. He does not care for women, only for status and alcohol. He sells Iris to Richard Griffen because he is out of money and afraid that Avilion will be sold out from under him. He is a philanderer that continued his affairs after marriage as if it was his duty.

Norval drank himself to death when, contrary to the deal struck with Richard Griffen, Chase Industries was folded into the Griffen empire and his businesses were disbanded. Drinking was the only thing he could control.

Liliana Chase

Mother of Iris and Laura, she married Norval Chase in 1914 just before the start of World War I. Her marriage was strikingly similar to Iris's - cold and heartless. Just before she died, she begged Iris to be Laura's eternal caretaker. This is a duty that Iris took to heart.

Aimee Griffen

Aimee is the purported daughter of Iris and Richard Griffen but is actually the product of a love affair between Iris and Alex Thomas. Iris leaves Richard and takes Aimee with her. Aimee is never content with this arrangement, because Richard continues to shower her with gifts and she wants to live with him. Winifred manages to come up with incriminating evidence against Iris that proves Iris is an unfit mother. Aimee is then sent back to Richard and, after Richard's death, is raised by Winifred.

In adulthood, Aimee develops a hatred for Iris, as she believes that Laura is her real mother, Alex Thomas is her real father and that Iris killed Laura. Aimee has developed a drug and alcohol habit, and has given birth to Iris's granddaughter Sabrina before she falls down some steps to her death when Sabrina is a toddler.



Sabrina

The daughter of Aimee and an unknown father, Sabrina is raised by her Aunt Winifred as the ultimate slap in Iris's face. Sabrina is an absent granddaughter until Iris dies. She then travels to Port Ticonderoga to handle Iris's affairs.

Reenie Hincks

Servant at Avilion and caretaker of Iris and Laura Chase in their youth. Reenie is the bellwether by which Iris and Laura judge their actions and intentions and, essentially, Reenie raises Iris and Laura as if she was their mother.

Ron Hincks

Husband of Reenie, killed in World War II.

Mrs. Hillcoate

Friend and confidante of Reenie's who visited her at Avilion

Agnes

Waitress in Betty's Luncheonette

Man

The main character in the sub-novel is Alex Thomas in the main story. A writer and activist, the man adores the woman but does not know how to show her in the traditional ways (other than sex).

Woman

The woman in the sub-novel is Iris in the main story. Readers will learn that she wrote the novel to pass the time while waiting for Alex to return from the Spanish Civil War.

Alex Thomas

Alex is the man Iris loves passionately though that is not immediately clear when the two first meet. He is a writer of some note, and also reputed to be a Communist sympathizer. He never stays in one place long enough to establish anything other than a shadowy past. He feels strongly about certain political issues and even "enlists" to



help the Communists in the Spanish Civil War. When World War II begins, he goes off to fight again and is killed.

Elwood Murray

Publisher, chief writer and photographer of the Port Ticonderoga weekly newspaper, the *Herald and Banner*. It is he who tells Reenie that he has seen Laura about town with Alex Thomas shortly after they had met at the Button Factory's Labor Day picnic - when Laura was only fourteen.

Myra

Myra is allegedly Reenie and Ron Hincks' daughter (there is a question of whether or not Myra is the product of an affair between Reenie and Norval Chase) as well as Iris's caretaker later in life. She owns a boutique, "The Gingerbread House, Gifts and Collectibles" in the old Button Factory which is now a mall. She is married to Walter who performs maintenance and chauffeur services for the elder Iris. Even though Myra is a good bit younger than Iris, Iris reacts to her as though Myra were her keeper. Myra feels a sense of responsibility for Iris as she is the last of her family - the family Reenie rescued.

Walter

Husband of Myra, Walter gladly does things for Iris around her house and even drives her where she needs to go. He is a quiet and thoughtful man with a hearty appetite for junk food.

Callista "Callie" Fitzsimmons

A friend of Alex Thomas's, Callie is commissioned to sculpt a World War I Memorial in Port Ticonderoga and becomes Norval Chase's lover for a time. She lives at Avilion on weekends in the late 1920s and early 1930s and her friends provide ample fodder for Reenie's gossip with Mrs. Hillcoate.

In later years, Callie becomes the pin that pulls Richard's grenade open. Richard has lied to Iris about the whereabouts of Alex Thomas, and Iris, in talking with Callie, discovers the deceit. This leads to Iris's belief of Laura's story about getting pregnant by Richard and the unmasking of his fabrication about Laura's mental illnesses.

King

Ruler of Zycron, he is actually an Ynigrod in disguise - he hides his Ynigrod emotions behind a platinum face mask



Virgins

Young girls who were objects of sacrifice on Zycron.

Blind Assassin

One of the children blinded by weaving fine carpets in Sakiel-Norn. After childhood, the males are trained to become assassins

Snilfards

Aristocrats of Sakiel-Norn

Ygniroids

Workers of Sakiel-Norn

Gods and Goddesses

Those deities prayed to and revered on Zycron

Lord of the Underworld

Wearing rusty armor, he visits the soon-to-be- sacrificed virgin, in the Bed of One Night, the night before her death; every maiden to be sacrificed must endure this ritual

High Priestess

Sells admission to the Bed of One Night

Servant of Rejoicing

Leader of a herd of barbarians set on toppling the King

People of Desolation

Followers of Servant of Rejoicing



X

The blind assassin employed to kill the King

Tongue-less Virgin

The girl X visits before she is ravaged by the King. X falls in love with her and decides to save the girl and run away with her.



Objects/Places

Port Ticonderoga

This town, two hours outside of Toronto, is the setting of the story. It is also the city where Iris and Laura Chase grew up, location of Chase Industries and The Button Factory, and the city where Iris Chase Griffen still resides.

Steamer Trunk

Once an item of Iris's trousseau when she married Richard, it now holds her manuscripts and letters. It is a treasure trove of literary merit and one in which granddaughter Sabrina will find answers to her family questions. It is in this trunk that Iris places her handwritten manuscript of the Chase Family history complete with drunks, philanderers and thieves.

Toronto

Nearest metropolitan area to Port Ticonderoga. It is the city in which Iris and Richard Griffen and Winifred Griffen Prior live, and the place in which Iris has her affair with Alex Thomas.

Louveteau and Jogues Rivers

The two rivers feeding Port Ticonderoga

The Weary Soldier

The sculpture Callie Fitzsimmons was commissioned to create by Norval Chase to commemorate the fallen Canadian soldiers of World War I.

The Arcadian Court

The location of the first of many lunches with Richard's society sister, Winifred

The Fire Pit

Walter's favorite Toronto diner, and the place where Iris spied on Sabrina from afar.



Sunnyside

The amusement park Laura ran away to before being dragged back to Toronto to live with Richard and Iris.

The Bella Vista

The second sanitarium Laura was shipped off to; the place where an abortion was performed on her

Diana Sweets

The shop Iris and Laura went to after Laura's return to Toronto

Colonel Henry Parkman High School

Place where elderly Iris gave out the Laura Chase Creative Writing Award

Avilion

The house where Iris and Laura grew up; the pride and joy of Adelia and Benjamin Chase; scene of many high society parties and balls

Betty's Luncheonette

Where Norval Chase took Iris to break the news that she would be starting to learn the ropes of Chase Industries, since he had no son

The Button Factory

Founded by Benjamin Chase, The Button Factory was the largest employer in Port Ticonderoga from the late 1800s through World War I. Scene of arson attack during the Depression of the 1930s.

Royal York Hotel, Toronto

The hotel where Richard and Norval conducted business, where the two men agreed that Richard would wed Iris, and the site of Iris and Richard's wedding reception and wedding night.



Water Nixie

Norval Chase's sailboat. It is where Laura first gave herself physically to Richard in her mistaken quest to save Alex Thomas.

Aa'A

Location of a story by Alex Thomas

Zycron

The planet that is the location of the science fiction story within the sub-novel

Xenor

Setting of story written by Alex Thomas and published in a paper that Iris purchases in a train station

Sakiel-Norn

The largest city on Zycron; translates to "The Pearl of Destiny"

Bed of One Night

The bedchamber where a soon-to-be sacrificed virgin stays in Sakiel-Norn



Themes

Destiny

Throughout the main novel - and even within the sub-novel - destiny is a thorny and precarious theme. It seemed that every character to a degree had little or no control over his or her destiny. Even Richard the Terrible, who so longed for prestige and power that he would stop at nothing, was destined for the scrap heap.

From the moment of Laura's birth, Iris was destined to care for her, and she takes care of her as though she were a feeble and inadequate person. Laura was never really allowed to be an individual - not without someone watching her carefully, as though she were a two-minute egg. Iris married Richard for Laura - Norval made that clear enough when he sold Iris to Richard.

Laura was destined to die early and tried to complete the task herself by drowning in an icy river, when she was very young, in a bargain with God to send her mother back to Earth. Although Laura understood far more than people gave her credit for, there was something so simple about her that it caused Iris and others to worry incessantly. Laura's physical death was by car accident, but the death of her soul was from disappointment.

Alex Thomas would forever be remembered as the Communist sympathizer who torched The Button Factory and started the downhill slide of the Chase family. He was destined to die in a war, which was the only world he really knew. The books and stories he wrote were science fiction and always had some kind of military conflict in them.

Destiny is far different from fate. Destiny has much more control attached to it than fate does. Fate is almost happenstance; a twist in one's world. Destiny, on the other hand, is believed to be pre-ordained.

Desolation

Desolation is a powerful theme that can sweep a reader away before she knows it - much like being swept away in a current of water. Desolation is the removal of hope, faith and spirit. To be desolate is to have a broken spirit.

Liliana and Iris lived in desolate marriages, devoid of any true emotion. That is not to say that their husbands did not have some feeling for them - even Richard valued Iris for certain things - but there was no real affection in those marriages. Liliana gave birth to her third child and died alone. Norval was nowhere to be found.

Iris's desolation ran deeper. Not only was she in an empty marriage, she was living in a town where she knew no one and up against the belle of the town ball, Richard's sister, Winifred. Even her best friend and sister Laura was taken from her after a time and, so,



she turned to Alex Thomas to fill the void. When Iris finally escaped the clutches of Richard and Winifred to lead her own life with her daughter Aimee, Winifred found a way to plunge Iris back into desolation by trumping up charges of being an unfit mother and wresting Aimee (and later, Aimee's daughter, Sabrina) away from her.

While it may appear that Winifred always had the upper hand, she, too, lived in desolation. She was powerless without Richard and, when he died, so did a large part of her. She spent the rest of her days in Toronto, alone, but still pretending to be the debutante of the 1920s. Although she was married, readers never met her husband and no scene or chapter was ever spent inside her own home, only Richard's.

Laura was the only character who truly had little desolation, save for the deaths of her mother, father, and Alex Thomas. It was not Alex's dying that drove her off the bridge to her death, but more the understanding that she was finished with life.

Family Pride

Family pride is found all through this novel. From grandmother Adelia Chase's need to have the best and biggest parties at Avilion to Norval Chase's embarrassment at having sold out the family to the Griffens to Winifred's yearning to be the biggest "somebody" Toronto has to offer, family pride is at the root of all of that evil.

The theme of family pride was never as prevalent as it was for Winifred Griffen Prior. Keeping up appearances was the most critical aspect of her daily life and getting her brother into position to run for high political office—thereby positioning herself as *the* woman in Toronto society—was uppermost in her mind every day. Winifred would stop at nothing to make her brother (and herself) look good, so she "fixed" things when they got too messy.

Norval Chase kept his family pride intact by jailing his young daughters and not permitting them to have any friends outside the family estate or even go to school. If no one saw them, no one would talk about them. However, Laura made his life difficult by disobeying him and going out into the town to assist in relief efforts with local churches.

Possession

Possession appears in three ways: possession of a person, possession of status, and material possession. More than one character possesses or tries to possess another; status is a commodity for trade and hoarding; and material possessions add an extra dimension to possession of status.

Norval Chase possesses women like trophies - he is not present when his third child is born and his wife dies from that birth. Nevertheless, when his possessions, the Button Factory and Avilion, are threatened, he sells the only human being he has - his daughter Iris. Laura frustrates him because she is elusive.



Winifred Griffen Prior wants to possess status, but it is forever just out of her reach. Through Richard, she possesses Iris and Laura and rules them with faux charm. For her, the appearance of possessions gives her status as she tries to look like something other than "new money." Her clothes, once chic in the 1930s and 1940s, are threadbare later in life.

Richard possesses Norval Chase when he guards Avilion after the Button Factory uprising and subsumes him after marrying Iris. He pretends to care little about material things and status but knows that both are critical for political success. His attempt to possess Laura backfires and leads to his personal and financial destruction.

Iris possesses very little other than manuscripts and notes in a steamer trunk and does not care to. She is happier in the world she has created with Alex Thomas - a world of the run-down and seedy - than in her fancy house with her fancy clothes and apparent status. Iris does possess Laura posthumously, but only for the sake of having Laura be revered in death.

Laura has and wants nothing - except for the blessed possession of being left alone. However, no one can do that - not even Iris.



Style

Point of View

The main novel is a mixture of first person narrative and third person limited omniscient. Much of it is told in the voice and remembrance of Iris Chase Griffen, narrating the Chase family history and leading readers along down her own aging path. It is from this perspective that the audience learns who all of the players are and their connections to the story and to Port Ticonderoga.

By the time Iris dies, readers have experienced, first-hand, how hard it is growing up with wealth and material possessions in a town that has little; how easy it is to lose those possessions; how a human being can become someone else's possession; and how family is all one has.

The sub-novel is told from the woman's point of view but not in first person. She leads readers through seedy parts of town and the seedy parts of her life in her extra-marital affair with the man. There are only the barest of hints as to who she is outside of the affair. It is clear, though, that this relationship is the only one that matters to her and the only one in which she can truly be herself and speak her mind.

Setting

The main novel is set in two locations: Port Ticonderoga and Toronto. Both are in the province of Ontario, Canada. Port Ticonderoga is a town sitting on two main rivers, the Louveteau [or "lovetow"] and the Jogues [or "jogs"]. These rivers are the lifeblood of the town in the beginning of the story, driving traffic and merchandise in and out.

Port Ticonderoga is where the Chase family fortune is made and lost, where Iris and Laura are born and raised, and where many of the key players die. Throughout the main novel, Iris details the changes in Port Ticonderoga over the years. She tells how the Button Factory - once a huge employer - fell on hard times and it was turned into a mall. The downtown area, vibrant and stylish in the early to mid part of the 20th century, is full of closed and boarded up businesses; the Chase name no longer carries the weight it did.

Port Ticonderoga is the location of Avilion - the Chase estate - that is both admired and abhorred by its residents. It is only fitting that, in the end, the property was sold and turned into an old age home, but not a residence for the elderly Iris Chase Griffen.

Toronto is where Iris lived with Richard Griffen, where she had an affair with Alex Thomas, where Richard defiled Laura, and where Laura died. It is also the town Winifred Griffen Prior tries to light up with her philanthropic interests and her push for Richard's political future. Toronto is also the place where Norval Chase sold his



daughter, Iris, to Richard Griffen to try and keep his business afloat. Toronto represents the worst place for the Chase family.

In the sub-novel, the only setting is Toronto. It is usually only the seedier side of the city that readers experience, which symbolizes the act of the affair to a tee. The setting for each assignation is always different - presumably because the man moves around so much - a flat here, a basement room there. Only once did the man and woman meet in a nice apartment. It is the dichotomy of the woman's life. She is married to a very wealthy and well-heeled man who yearns for political acclaim, and yet the only man that makes her happy can barely afford to pay for a pack of cigarettes.

Language and Meaning

The language and meaning in the main novel is simple and straightforward. Readers will find it interesting to see Laura take many catch phrases literally and ask questions like, "Does God lie?" Laura always wants serious answers to serious questions and is quite devout in her own way. However, she distrusts God in part because He took her mother away, but she seems to trust, blindly, what strangers say to her.

The most interesting pieces of language and meaning are found within the sub-novel. A science fiction story unfolds about the people of the planet Zycron. They have their own class system, the Snilfards being higher up the ladder than the common Ynigrods. The exercise of the storytelling unveils who the man (or Alex Thomas) is to readers. For him, it does not matter what language is spoken or what planet is described, people with more will always oppress those with less.

In true science fiction fashion, the locations made up by Alex Thomas are a mixture of exotic and desolate. The characters are believable, because they do things that readers can identify with: slaying the bad guys and saving the good girl, falling in love and finding a new life, making a living. They just do it in silver jumpsuits with platinum faceplates, or the women grow from peach trees.

The man makes a meager living by writing and selling these science fiction stories and it is through their publication that the woman keeps track of him when he is off fighting for Communism in Spain.

Structure

The Blind Assassin is told through the structure of a sub-novel within the main novel and a story within the sub-novel. Through this device, readers get to learn who Laura Chase is perceived to be by others, what Iris Chase does to stay sane in an insane marriage and the truth behind who wrote *The Blind Assassin*. While the main novel uses quotation marks to delineate dialogue, the sub-novel never uses them. The words "he says" and "she says" are the only tools by which readers have to identify pieces of dialogue.



The main story, told from the point of view of Laura's elder sister, Iris, weaves the Chase family history through and amid the chapters of the sub-novel. While the two stories seem to be at odds at first, they carry along on a similar time line until the tales intersect and become one at the time of Laura's death. Laura's death opens the novel, and her death and notification to Iris is repeated at the end.

Interspersed throughout the main and sub-novels are news clippings from local papers that detail the public lives of the characters, particularly Richard Griffen and Laura Chase. A news item about the death of Iris's daughter, Aimee, and husband, Richard, in the first chapter sets the tension for the rest of the story. Some of the clippings are society gossip pieces and some are political, but all involve or touch the lives of the characters.

From the start, readers are led to believe that Laura Chase wrote the sub-novel. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clearer that the writer in the family was not Laura, but Iris, and Iris confirms this in the end. However, the question remains, did Iris use Laura's name as author of the sub-novel in tribute to her sister or was she trying to stay hidden? Posthumously, Laura is remembered fondly and thought of highly by academics and lovers of fiction. Perhaps Iris thought the book would never get published without the push of the author's premature death.



Quotes

"But some people can't tell where it hurts. They can't calm down. They can't ever stop howling." (Chapter 1, page 2)

"□sometimes I see instead the young girl's face I once spent so much time rearranging and deploring, drowned and floating just beneath my present face, which seems - especially in the afternoons, with the light on a slant - so loose and transparent I could peel it off like a stocking." (Chapter 3, page 43)

"Myra will corner the job, no doubt; she thinks she has inherited me from Reenie." (Chapter 3, page 57)

"What virtue was once attached to this notion - of going beyond your strength, of not sparing yourself, of ruining your health!" (Chapter 3, page 73)

"You have a lot of friends, she says. Not a lot, he says. You don't need many if there's no rotten apples." (Chapter 4, page 109)

"I only wished the happy ending would hurry up, because - especially at night when Laura was asleep and I did not have to cheer her up - I felt so desolate." (Chapter 4, page 138)

"This was the only way to talk to Laura when she was in such moods; you had to pretend you knew something about God that she didn't." (Chapter 5, page 151)

"She [Laura] had a heightened capacity for belief. She left herself open, she entrusted herself, she gave herself over, she put herself at the mercy. A little incredulity would have been a first line of defence." (Chapter 5, page 167)

"She was a card player, I discovered later. Bridge, not poker — she would have been good at poker, good at bluffing, but it was too risky, too much of a gamble; she liked to bid on known quantities." (Chapter 5, page 231)

"I considered the word *warn*: was I that dangerous? Only in the way sheep are, I now suppose. So dumb they jeopardize themselves, and get stuck on cliffs or cornered by wolves, and some custodian has to risk his neck to get them out of trouble." (Chapter 5, page 243)

"Nevertheless, blood is thicker than water, as anyone knows who has tasted both." (Chapter 7, page 288)

"I sat there peering at Sabrina from under the brim of my floppy sun hat and eavesdropping on their trivial chatter, which they threw up in front of themselves like camouflage." (Chapter 7, page 294)



"He had never known a woman to bruise so easily. It came from being so young and delicate. He favored thighs, where it wouldn't show. Anything overt might get in the way of his ambitions. I was sand, I was snow — written on, rewritten, smoothed over."
(Chapter 9, page 371)

"Laura likes to have answers," I said. "She likes to have answers on important matters."
(Chapter 9, page 375)

"But I leave myself in your hands. What choice do I have? By the time you read this last page, that — if anywhere — is the only place I will be." (Chapter 15, page 521)



Topics for Discussion

Was Laura a religious fanatic or someone just interested in God?

Why didn't Iris fight Winifred for custody of Aimee?

What caused Iris to not get involved in Sabrina's life?

What attracted Iris to Alex Thomas?

What attracted Laura to Alex Thomas?

Did Winifred get what she wanted while promoting Richard for political office?

Winifred and Richard seemed closer than brother and sister. Was there more to that relationship?

While in a private girls' school, Laura asks the question, "Does God lie?" Explain what she meant.

Laura "ran away" from her life several times. Give examples of this and what caused her to do so.

Did despair kill Norval Chase?

What really killed Richard Griffen?

Did Laura commit suicide or was it an accident?

Were Laura and/or Iris ever happy?

Do arranged marriages still exist today? In the United States and Canada, do daughters allow themselves to be sold to save the family?

What was Richard really after when he married Iris?