

The Book of Ruth Study Guide

The Book of Ruth by Jane Hamilton

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Plot Summary

The Book of Ruth is the debut novel by celebrated writer Jane Hamilton. Ruth is a small town girl who grew up in the shadow of a controlling mother. Ruth's little brother is highly intelligent and she often falls in comparison, causing her to grow up searching for someone who can see past her shortcomings and love what is left. Ruth finds this in Ruby Dahl. It does not matter to Ruth that Ruby will not get a job, that Ruby spends all his money on beer and drugs, or that he cannot get along with her mother, May. All Ruth can see is that Ruby loves her and that is enough, until the day it is not. The Book of Ruth is a poignant, heartbreaking story of one woman's attempt to understand the tragedies of life and how her simple desire to be loved leads to the loneliest place a person can experience.

Ruth looks back on her life and the one consistent thing there is her mother May. Ruth begins her story with May's, telling how May was the oldest of eight children, forced to take on the bulk of the chores from the time she was old enough to see over the kitchen counter. May lost a brother at a young age which left her with a dark sense of humor, a sense of humor that would often see her threatening suicide in the presence of her younger sisters. All this seemed to change when May met Willard Jenson. Willard was a good looking, gentle man who swept May off her feet; however, May's happiness would not last long. Willard was drafted into the war and died in the Pacific. May eventually married again, to Elmer Grey. With Elmer May had two children, Ruth and Matthew. However, this marriage was doomed to failure as well, with Elmer leaving the family to pick grapefruit in Texas.

From an early age, Ruth can remember May comparing her to Matthew, her younger brother. Matthew was always smart, doing everything faster than Ruth, making good grades and learning complicated math formulas that May could never hope to understand. Ruth remembers torturing Matthew, ruining his belongings and throwing things at him. Ruth despises Matthew because he is the center of May's world. May is cruel to her daughter in other ways as well. When Ruth helps deliver a baby sheep on her own, she asks May about how babies are made. May laughs the question off, telling her daughter confusing things about how people do what animals do, but they like it. Ruth is confused by this, unable to understand how anyone could enjoy such a thing.

Ruth struggles in school and is often placed in the lower academic classes. In elementary school, Ruth is told by a teacher to write a letter to someone. Almost everyone in the class chooses a classmate, but Ruth has no friends in her class. Ruth begins to write to her Aunt Sid, May's youngest sister. Ruth met Sid only once, even though she only lives forty miles away, because May had a falling out with Sid over the contents of their parents' home after their deaths. Sid responds favorably to Ruth's letters, encouraging her to write more. Soon Ruth finds herself writing Sid crazy stories, making her life sound infinitely better than it really is. This pen pal relationship will last throughout Ruth's childhood and into adulthood.



In high school, Ruth begins working for Miss Finch. Miss Finch is blind, so Ruth sets up books on tape for her to listen to in the afternoons. At first Ruth is uncomfortable around Miss Finch and does not want to stay, but she becomes so involved in the books that she begins to look forward to sitting with Miss Finch. Sometimes Miss Finch does not want to listen to books but to talk. Miss Finch tells Ruth all about her marriage and the trips she made with her husband. Ruth shares her letters from Aunt Sid with Miss Finch. They become close friends, sharing their stories as well as the stories of Charles Dickens and Jane Austen.

Miss Finch becomes senile about the time Ruth graduates high school. As Matthew goes off to a new life at MIT, Ruth goes to work at the dry cleaners as a finisher alongside her mother, May. During this time Ruth becomes good friends with Daisy Foote, the daughter of her mother's closest friend. It is Daisy who takes Ruth out to the lake one night and introduces her to Ruby Dahl. Ruth is mesmerized by Ruby's good looks and his ability to seem so completely relaxed. When Ruby shows up at the dry cleaners and asks her out, Ruth jumps at the opportunity. It is an awkward date at first, but slowly they both relax with the help of alcohol. It is a beautiful night, until Ruby takes Ruth to the local make out spot and forces himself on her. Ruth is traumatized by what he has done, but Ruby is the only man to ever show an interest in her, so she accepts his apology and continues to see him.

Ruby and Ruth date for only a few months before they get engaged. They have no plan for the future, no means to move into a home of their own, but they go ahead with wedding plans just the same. Ruby moves in May's house with Ruby after the wedding. It seems an ideal situation at the beginning, a way for Ruby and Ruth to save up for a home of their own while also helping May stay in the home she has lived in for nearly twenty years' however, things begin to go downhill almost immediately. May dislikes Ruby and thinks Ruby is lazy because he will not get a job and works on mediocre birdhouses all day long. Ruth does not mind Ruby's lack of gainful employment, however, and often finds herself playing mediator between her mother and husband.

After six months of marriage, Ruth finds herself pregnant. At first May is upset, but with time she becomes excited at the thought of having a new life in her home. The pregnancy seems to bring the family together, giving them a united goal to work toward. After the baby, Justin, is born, this unity continues for a few months. The first few months are heaven to Ruth who has been able to stay home with both her baby and her husband; however, the bills must be paid and Ruth must go back to work. Artie, their boss at the dry cleaners, works out a schedule where May, Ruth, and Ruby can work part time, but one will always be home with the baby.

May is a wonderful grandmother, but from the very beginning she takes over the role of parent to such a degree that she often will not allow Ruby to take his own child for a ride in the car or to play with him in the style that he prefers. May sets rules, including not allowing the baby to eat sweets, with which Ruby and Ruth do not always agree. However, it is May's house and they need her help babysitting Justin. They have little choice but to follow May's rules, but the tension continues to build between her and Ruby.



When Justin is nearly three, Ruby and Ruth learn of an apartment they can rent cheaply. At the same time, Ruth learns that she is pregnant again. Ruby and Ruth tell May their wonderful news, but May is not happy. May knows that without Ruth's paycheck she will never be able to stay in the house alone. They argue, but Ruth's mind is made up and May backs down. Then one Sunday a few weeks before the big move, the family sets down to dinner together after a lovely day spent at church. In the middle of the meal, Justin asks for cookies. Justin knows May has put a bunch of cookies in the freezer in the basement because Ruby showed them to him. May says no, but Ruby insists Justin should be allowed a simple cookie. May and Ruby shout at one another for a moment, but Ruby still encourages Justin to get a bag of cookies.

Justin takes two bags of cookies and joins his father on the couch with them. May becomes angry and grabs Ruth's arm, tearing her dress, to drag her into the living room. Ruth becomes angry and claws out at both May and Ruby, demanding they stop fighting because it has been such a nice day and this was such a trivial thing. Ruth's reaction causes Ruby to snap. Ruby beats Ruth over the head and back with a poker from the fireplace. When May interferes, Ruby chases her first into the kitchen and then the basement. Ruth steps out the front door but realizes she must go back for Justin and May. Ruth finds Justin on the steps in the basement, watching as his father beats and stabs his grandmother.

Ruth pulls Ruby off May, but not until she has seen him strangle her to death. Ruby turns on Ruth again. Ruth manages to get outside where Ruby follows, beating her until she remembers the baby she still carries in her womb. Ruby stops and goes back into the house. Somehow Ruth makes it to a neighbor's house where they call the police. Ruby is arrested and Ruth is taken to the hospital where she will remain for nearly a month. Ruby moves into Aunt Sid's house when she is released from the hospital where she must remain lying on her left side for the remainder of her pregnancy in order to keep her blood pressure under control.

As Ruth recovers, she struggles to figure out what went wrong and why. Ruth speaks with counselors; she sits with her preacher, and she receives visits from family and friends. None of this helps her understand or move past the overwhelming anger. Ruth knows Ruby was sick and there must have been warning signs, but she could not see that. Now Ruth must get used to a life without May to tell her what to do and without the man she loves, a man she can no longer see even though he is still alive and still her husband.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Ruth is a young woman from a small town and a farm girl, who has just experienced a horrible tragedy. Ruth is writing her story as she recovers from her experience in the hopes that she can learn from it or help someone else learn from it.

In chapter 1, Ruby begins her story by describing the town in which she grew up. Honey Creek is a small farm town in the northernmost part of Illinois. The town is so small that everyone knows everyone's business. Ruth realizes now that people in town must have felt sorry for her and her family. Ruth's father left when she was ten, just drove away and went to Texas to pick grapefruit and never returns. Ruth recalls how her mother often told her her father's leaving was her fault because of the fighting. Ruth also recalls how her mother told her once about sex, how it was like the animals did, only people did it for fun. The one happy memory Ruth has of her family is one afternoon when her father accidentally spilled ice cream on her head. Everyone laughed together at that. It is the only time Ruth can recall her family being happy all at once, together.

In chapter 2, Matt is Ruth's younger brother, but he always did everything faster and better than she did. As children they often played house together, but Matt had to be the bride. As they grew older and Matt's intelligence continued to shine, Ruth began to torture him. Ruth would often catch bees and leave them in his bed. It was a sort of revenge on Matt for May's clear pride in him. Ruth does not have many memories of her father, but she can recall one afternoon when she helped a sheep deliver its baby how her father patted her on the head and told her she was a good farmer. It was a rare bit of praise for a child overshadowed by her little brother. Ruth recalls how in school she began with the impression she was dumb and how that caused her to fail over and over again. Matt, on the other hand, often shone in school, actually skipping a grade to join Ruth's class. This did not improve things for Ruth, however, because she had no friends, was often bullied, and even the teachers could not help comparing her to Matt.

Ruth remembers her first meeting with her Aunt Sid. Sid came to make amends with May over an argument dealing with the distribution of their parents' things upon their death. May refused to even see Sid, but when May discovered Sid had given Ruth a musical jewelry box, she quickly confiscated the gift. In third grade, Ruth was instructed to write a letter to someone, so she chose Aunt Sid. Sid was impressed with the first letter and encouraged Ruth to continue. Ruth would often use these letters to tell wild stories about her life, all made up, that masked the real story of life in May's house. Ruth never talked about how Matt's teachers all befriended him and took him on amazing field trips, or how May often sent her to school in used dresses from Goodwill or spoke to her using language best kept to sailors and their ships.



Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The setting is described in detail in the first chapter. The town in which Ruth lives is small, a rural setting in which the people are often hardworking farmers. The setting is very important to the book, which is most likely why the author chose to introduce it in these first pages. The setting dictates the kind of person the characters are going to be and the atmosphere in which they have grown up and continue to live.

Ruth Grey Dahl is also introduced in these first chapters. Ruth is a quiet farm girl who lives in a small town where everyone knows everyone's business. Ruth feels as though everyone knew her story, the fact that her father left when she was ten and that she was never going to be nearly as smart as her brother. Ruth is so overshadowed by her brother even before school begins that she feels stupid and unteachable. Ruth begins school with this brand on her forehead and spends the rest of her education unable to shake it. Her brother, on the other hand, is highly intelligent, and this fact is often rubbed into Ruth's nose. As a result, Ruth resents her brother and often tortures him, suggesting these two siblings will not have a close relationship as they grow older.

May Grey is also introduced in these early chapters. May is a hard woman who appears to have little love for her oldest child. May focuses all her attention on her son, the star of the family, and belittles the oldest as she makes comparisons between the two. The mother may or may not be aware of the impact of her callous remarks toward her daughter. It appears May is simply a hardworking, single mother who wants at least one of her children to succeed in a way she never had the chance to do.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, Ruth relates the story of her mother's life as it was told to her by her Aunt Sid. May was the oldest of eight children and therefore had the burden of the chores placed on her shoulders. One of May's brothers was deaf and moved to a deaf school when he was only six. As a child, May would often tell her sisters she was going to kill herself. May's main chore as a teenager was the laundry. Sid tells Ruby that May would often have her boyfriend, Willard Jenson, over while she did the laundry and they would dance among the piles of dirty clothes. Everyone liked Willard Jenson; he was a good looking and charming young man. When they finally married, most people thought it was because May was pregnant from all the time they spent alone together. The marriage was a happy one, until World War II began. Willard was drafted and was killed in the Pacific. May learned the tragic news the day her sister Marion got married, but May refused to believe it.

In chapter 4, May wore the same dress from her sister's wedding to her husband's memorial service. May always thought Willard would come back to her because the military was never able to supply a body. For ten years, May lived with her parents, doing the chores with the younger children. When Elmer Grey began coming around, a widower with a farm of his own, May accepted his attentions and they were married a short time later. Three years later Ruth was born and Matthew the following year.

At this point, Ruth remembers the early letters Aunt Sid sent to her, filled with stories of growing up in Honey Creek. Ruth had to pay special attention in school so she could read these letters, and still she often had trouble with some of the bigger words. However, Ruth treasured these letters and treasures them still. Ruth also remembers one Christmas when the Reverend at her church announced the coming of Jesus and how he was going to change the world. Ruth never understood that this was a metaphor and was disappointed when Jesus did not really make an appearance. Ruth believes now her lack of faith in Jesus began at this point in her life.

Chapters 3-4 Analysis

In flashbacks and simple story telling, Ruth tells the story of her mother's life. The fact that Ruth feels the need to talk about her mother's childhood and the tragedy that shaped her mother's adulthood, suggests to the reader not only that May will play a major role in the unfolding of the plot, but that Ruth is attempting to understand and help the reader understand, how May's personal history shaped her into the woman she is. May is a bitter woman by the time Ruth is born, but her bitterness comes from the loss of the only man she ever loved. May has lived a difficult life, a life full of loss, and this perhaps goes a long way to explain her terrible treatment of her only daughter.



Ruth has developed a friendship with her aunt over this time period in which her aunt shares stories of her own childhood and Ruth tells lies about her life. This relationship is very important to Ruth because it is a friendship that provides the type of unconditional love Ruth should have received from her mother but did not. On a distant, emotional level, Sid has become Ruth's only adult ally, her only source of affection and understanding. It is also at this point that Ruth realizes she does not believe in Jesus, a momentous moment for someone so young and reportedly so dumb. Ruth is actually a very insightful person with a quiet intelligence that is unnoticeable by her lack of confidence in her own intelligence.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

In chapter 5, Ruth begins working for Miss Finch. Miss Finch lives down the road from the Grey's and lost her sight in her old age. Ruth is hired to set up books on tape for Miss Finch to listen to while her son is at work in the evenings. Ruth does not intend to stay the first few times she goes to Miss Finch's, but she finds herself becoming interested in the books to which Miss Finch listens. Some of the books are non-fiction, but many of them are classic literature, such as Charles Dickens' Bleak House and Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. After a while, Miss Finch becomes a friend to Ruth. They often share personal stories, and sometimes Miss Finch talks about her husband and their travels together. At other times, Ruth reads snippets of the letters she receives from Aunt Sid. During this time, Ruth reads a letter from Aunt Sid in which her aunt expresses how difficult it must be to be a teenager. Ruth remembers mistaking tulip bulbs for onions one night and is afraid to tell this story and May's reaction in fear Aunt Sid will think her too stupid to be her pen pal.

While Ruth is working for Miss Finch, she begins to blossom into adulthood. May, either intentionally or unintentionally, does not notice Ruth's changing body and does not buy her bras. Due to the amount of teasing Ruth receives at school, she asks Aunt Sid for money to buy bras but lies and says the money is for a gift for May's birthday. May eventually finds the bras and teases her about growing up suddenly. At this point, Ruth recalls how unpredictable May could be. Ruth remembers one birthday when May baked her a special birthday cake. Ruth also recalls when she got into the spelling bee and May allowed her to wear an heirloom pin. Unfortunately Ruth lost the pin during a fire drill and lost out on the spelling bee. May was cruel about the loss and Ruth was left devastated by her own stupidity, despite advancing to the final five.

In chapter 6, Ruth talks about her brother Matt. Matt is a handsome man by the time they reach high school. May is desperate to be his best friend, but Matt lives in an entirely different world that does not include May and Ruth. Ruth believes May is very lonely at this point in her life. Ruth recalls a time when May suggested Ruth go to a school dance. Ruth refused, but May still insisted one day a boy would ask her. May shows Ruth how to dance but stops abruptly when Matt walks in and sees them. Ruth is moved up to a normal English class briefly in high school because of all the books she has been listening to with Miss Finch. However, the writing lessons in this class prove too difficult and she is moved down again. Ruth never tells Aunt Sid this, afraid of revealing her stupidity once again. In Ruth's final years at high school, May gets a girlfriend. Dee Dee Foote lives across the street with her three children and sick husband. May consoles Dee Dee like she is a lost child, in a voice Ruth has never heard her mother use with her children. The night Dee Dee's daughter Daisy disappears, May is the hero, promising to make everything work out alright. Somehow it does, Daisy returns unharmed, having gone to Kentucky with some truck driver.



Chapters 5-6 Analysis

When Ruth relates how she worked for Miss Finch, listening to books on tape, the reader gets insight into Ruth's quiet intelligence once again. Ruth becomes a huge fan of writers such as Dickens and Austen. What is truly amazing about this is that even a highly-educated person often struggles with these books. They are often long and full of beautiful phrases whose meaning are hidden in the beauty of the words. Ruth can see this and comprehend the beauty intended by the words. Ruth is much more intelligent than she gives herself credit.

May is a complicated woman. May can be nice to Ruth in ways that are astounding, giving her a special cake or dancing lessons, while at the same time she can be blinded by her daughter's changing figure and her everyday needs. May is cruel but clearly loves both her children. May has difficulty showing her emotions to those closest to her, to those who need to see it the most. It is because of this failing that Ruth believes her mother does not love her. It is also because of the way May can be with other people, such as her new friend Mrs. Foote, that Ruth believes May could not possibly love her.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

In chapter 7, Miss Finch is taken to a nursing home because she has become senile, cutting off Ruth's exposure to great literature. Ruth graduates from high school soon after. Ruth feels like an afterthought because Matt graduates the same day and all the attention is placed on him. Immediately after graduation, Matt goes off to an academic camp before starting classes at MIT in the fall. Matt never really comes home again. Ruth takes a job at the Trim 'N Tidy, the dry cleaners where May works. Together they work as finishers. May often has to remind Ruth to be polite to the customers. May and Ruth fall into a routine at home. May cooks dinner while Ruth tends to the chickens and collects the eggs. On payday, Ruth hands her check over to May except for ten dollars which she puts away in a piggy bank. Artie, from the dry cleaners, talks Ruth into joining the Trim 'N Tidy bowling team. Ruth discovers she is good at bowling and she actually helps the team win a trophy that Artie proudly displays in the store. Mrs. Foote's husband dies from his kidney disease. After the funeral, Ruth asks May to dance, but May remembers Matt walking in on them before and falls into a depression over her lost son.

In chapter 8, Randall, Dee Dee's son, makes a pass on Ruth, but she tells him they will never be romantically linked. About this same time, Ruth and Daisy become good friends. Daisy is a wild child who likes to drink and drive as well as indulge in promiscuous behavior. Daisy wants to be a makeup artist and move to Hollywood or New York. Ruth admires Daisy's ability to dream. One evening around the fourth of July, Daisy takes Ruth to the lake. They steal a boat and paddle out to the middle of the lake where they run into Ruby, a guy Ruth knows through her parole officer. Ruby is floating along in an inner tub with a beer in his hand. Ruth admires his ability to become so completely relaxed. A few nights later, Ruth sees Ruby watching her bowl at the Town Lanes. More than a week passes, then Ruby shows up at the Trim 'N Tidy. Ruby asks Ruth to go for drinks after work. The date is awkward at first, but alcohol helps to loosen their tongues. Eventually Ruby takes Ruth out to the local make-out point. Ruby asks a question that Ruth misunderstands and forces himself on her. Ruth is embarrassed and sore, angry that someone would do something so unpleasant to her. To add to the insult, May jokes about her wholeness when she returns home, causing Ruth immeasurable grief.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

For the final time, Ruth is overshadowed by her brother. This time is at her high school graduation, a time to be celebrated, but Ruth is ignored and pushed to the back. Ruth is filled with hurt and resentment at this, but she manages to keep quiet and take the hurt inward, blaming her own stupidity and inability to be a star like Matt. Ruth's reaction to this clear disrespect is typical of her character. Ruth is strong, a person who would



never lash out at those around her, but takes hurt to herself where she can hide it and keep it from harming someone else. This is shown again when Ruby rapes Ruth and her mother is less than sympathetic. Again Ruth blames herself, believing she did something wrong and that somehow all this pain is just a big joke to the rest of the world. Ruth feels as though she is simply too stupid to understand the complexities of human relations; therefore, there is no one to blame for her pain but herself.

Ruth becomes good friends with Dee Dee's promiscuous, wild daughter. This friendship is as unlikely as it is important to both girls. Daisy needs a calming influence and Ruth needs someone who will understand her. In each other Daisy and Ruth each get what they need. At the same time, Ruth begins to come to a place in her life where she is interested in men. Randall, Dee Dee's son, seems like a good candidate and he clearly believes himself to be one, but Ruth is not attracted to him. In fact, Ruth finds Randall annoying and a nuisance. What Ruth does not see is that she and Randall are a lot alike. Instead Ruth chooses Ruby, a troubled young man who takes advantage of her innocence on their first date. Ruth is hurt by Ruby, but her past shows that she rarely holds hurt against a person, suggesting that Ruby will become an important part of Ruth's life.



Chapters 9-11

Chapters 9-11 Summary

In chapter 9, Daisy comes to Ruth and tells her Ruby really likes her. When Ruth explains what happened and how it made her feel, Daisy promises to talk to Ruby about it. A short time later, Ruby comes to Ruth and apologizes, promising to never force himself on her again. Ruth accepts the apology and they begin to date. May does not approve of Ruby from the start, claiming he appears to be stupid and once vandalized some cars. Ruth stands up to May for the first time and insists it is her right to date him if she wants. Within a few months, Ruth and Ruby are engaged to be married.

In chapter 10, May is not happy when she learns of the upcoming wedding, telling Ruth that Ruby is lazy and she cannot afford another mouth to feed. However, when Matt agrees to come for the wedding, May is appeased. Ruth picks Daisy to be her bride's maid and invites Sid to come to the wedding, despite May's displeasure. Ruth becomes wrapped up in the wedding preparations, thrilled to see her name on the wedding registry at the local department store. On her wedding day, Ruth wears the same dress May wore to marry Willard Jenson. Matt walks her down the aisle, looking completely out of place in his dark suit. Sid is there and congratulates Ruth, but Ruth gets the impression Sid is not happy with her choices in life.

In chapter 11, Ruby and Ruth have a long weekend to celebrate their marriage. They sleep in late the first morning and spend the day watching television and cleaning up the house. It is not until after breakfast on Monday morning that they consummate the marriage. Later, they prepare dinner for May, joking and playing in the kitchen until she comes home. The first few months of marriage are like this, easy going, with May and Ruth working and Ruby trying to find a job. Ruby works on a neighbor's farm for a while but oversleeps so often he chooses to end that association. Ruby instead spends most of his time making birdhouses in the basement. When May calls him lazy, Ruth defends him, explaining that he was sensitive and could not handle having people tell him what to do. Ruth loves coming home to Ruby. They spend all their free time together, going to bars and drinking in dark, secluded places.

Tension begins when May makes fun of Ruby's birdhouses. Sometime later, Ruby and May clash over the meals May makes for dinner. After Ruby walks out of the house after a particularly grueling meal, May hands the dinner chores to Ruth and Ruby. Ruby makes junk food, like pizza and hot dogs. Ruth grows unhappy as the fights deteriorate into sabotage. Things only grow worse for Ruth as Dee Dee gets in on the drama and lectures Ruth about treating May poorly.



Chapters 9-11 Analysis

May dislikes Ruby and makes her unhappiness with him clear from the beginning. The reader is unsure if May really dislikes Ruby or if she is just jealous of Ruth's youth and the life she has unfolding before her. In either case, Ruth stands up to May for the first time in her life and announces that she intends to be with Ruby no matter what. Perhaps this is the main reason Ruth becomes engaged to Ruby so quickly. Ruth clearly loves the idea of getting married and being the center of attention for the first time. However, the reader is unclear whether Ruth is really getting married because she is in love or because it is a way of strutting her independence and finally getting some of the attention she has missed out on her whole life.

The marriage begins well, despite the fact that Aunt Sid clearly does not approve of Ruth's choice in husbands. Ruth is happy even though Ruby does not find work and spends all his time making birdhouses. May is not happy and makes her unhappiness clear to Ruth. Ruth suddenly becomes a mediator, standing between her husband and mother in a terrible test of loyalties. When Ruby begins to complain about May's cooking, things only deteriorate. It is clear this household is headed for an explosion, the only question is who will be hurt the most when it does explode. At this point, the reader's money is on Ruth because she is once again the innocent child in the middle.



Chapters 12-13

Chapters 12-13 Summary

In chapter 12, Ruth tells Ruby's story as his counselor Sherry told it to her. Ruby was a surprise baby, born prematurely in a time when his parents had believed they were done with childbearing. Ruby's mother was an alcoholic and fell asleep with him in the bathtub one night, weeks after he was released from the hospital, and the father found his son drowning in the water. When Ruby was revived, his mother promised to never allow harm to come to him again. This set up a situation in which Ruby's mother was constantly making excuses for him, treating him like a baby even as he became an adult. Ruby's father was abusive, often beating Ruby for his shortcomings. It was a family dynamic that caused Ruby to grow up with a violent temper and a lack of direction. Ruby could not handle having someone boss him around, like his father, and therefore could not hold a job. Ruby remained at home long past high school. Eventually Ruby's mother, who suffered asthma, had to move to Florida for her health, leaving Ruby on his own in Illinois. When Ruby learns of his mother's death a few years later, he becomes violent and damages several cars. This is why Ruby must see a counselor in the parole office even though he was never charged. It is shortly after this that Ruby meets Ruth.

In chapter 13, May takes Ruby and Ruth to pick apples from a local orchard. May becomes upset when Ruby insists on a certain type of apple because she has to pay for them, but she does it anyway. May then spends the entire night complaining about how her apple pies did not come out right because Ruby insisted on the wrong apples. Ruby leaves the house and Ruth learns hours later that he jumped into the river. May rushes Ruth to the hospital, trying to calm her the whole way, and even pays for the hospital bill. That Christmas Eve Ruth remembers as one of the best times in her marriage. Everyone came over and they all got drunk. May even danced with Ruby.

The following January, Ruby gets a job running the recycling truck that parks in the grocery store parking lot twice a month. Ruth wants to buy him a winter suit, but May gets him one from Goodwill. One Saturday, later in that winter, Ruby brings home a coon's tail he found and he and Ruth use it in their sexual play. When Ruth goes downstairs for dinner, May makes a comment that makes it clear she heard their play. Ruth is mortified. A few weeks later, May and Ruby fight about the birdhouses. Ruby destroys his latest creations and storms from the house. Ruth goes with him and they end up at the home of Ruby's old girlfriends. Ruth is upset that Ruby would take her there, but more upset that her mother created the situation in the first place. Shortly after that, Ruth learns she is pregnant. Ruby is thrilled, but May is distant at first; however, the idea of a grandson brings May around.



Chapters 12-13 Analysis

Ruth tells Ruby's story, suggesting he is no longer around to tell it himself. Ruby nearly died twice as a child and was sheltered by an overprotective mother even as his father was physically abusive with him. This family dynamic is worse than what Ruth experienced but suggests to the reader some of the reasons Ruth thought she found a kindred spirit in Ruby. This childhood also suggests possible reasons why Ruby is lazy, unable to keep a job, and has a quick temper. In fact, the reader almost expects that Ruby has hit Ruth at some point, suggesting that Ruth may not be a completely reliable narrator.

May and Ruby begin to fight over every little thing, down to the type of apples they buy. Ruth likes to think the majority of the blame lies with May, but the reader can see that some of it also lies with Ruby. If Ruby would back down on occasion or get a job May might like him better and the pressure on Ruth to keep the peace might be reduced. However, Ruby continues to live his life as he has always done, seeing no reason to change. Then Ruth learns she is pregnant. The reader wants to scream at her not to bring a child into this relationship, but Ruth seems to think it will change things. Perhaps it will.



Chapters 14-16

Chapters 14-16 Summary

In chapter 14, May's attitude toward Ruth begins to change. May is excited about the baby and the prospect of a new life brings this odd family back together. May talks about her babies and shares stories with Ruth and her friend, Dee Dee. Ruth is terribly sick in the beginning, often missing work to deal with morning sickness. During this time, Randall is caught in an embarrassing situation. Ruth goes to him and offers him words of encouragement as well as a few kisses. As the pregnancy continues, Ruth and Ruby attend birthing classes. Unfortunately, they feel like outcasts among the professionals also attending the class. They all discuss baby names, but Ruth keeps her choice to herself. Ruth goes into labor New Year's Eve. May and Ruby both go to the hospital with her. May is forced to wait in the father's waiting room, but Ruby goes with her to the labor room. Ruby eats while Ruth labors. Finally the baby comes after sixteen hours of labor. Ruth names the baby Justin.

In chapter 15, Ruth and Ruby spend the first three months of Justin's life at home. Ruth recalls this as the best time of her life. When the bills get tight, May insists they all go back to work. Artie gives Ruby a job at the dry cleaners and they organize their shifts so that at least one person is home with the baby at all times. Ruby does a terrible job at the dry cleaners, but Artie keeps him on for Ruth. May enjoys being a grandmother and occasionally steps on Ruth's toes by keeping the baby from her or insisting on doing more than her role calls for. In chapter 16, tensions begin to grow again as Justin ages. May is unhappy with Ruby's parenting skills although Ruth sees him as a good father. May thinks she is the expert on babies. May begins feeding Justin solids at eight weeks, even though Ruth disagrees. During this time Ruby begins staying up late at night, watching reruns on television. Ruby continues to see his counselor who pushes him to get a home of his own for his family. Unfortunately, Ruby continues to spend all his money on drugs and beer. One bright spot that summer is when Daisy comes home and does Ruth's hair, making her feel like a princess.

Chapters 14-16 Analysis

Ruth's pregnancy brings this odd family together for the first time. Everyone is excited about the baby, including May. However, when the baby comes, May's excitement spills over into her controlling behaviors. May tries to take over the raising of the baby, causing tension once more when she steps on Ruby's toes as a father, suggesting he is too stupid to raise a baby. May even pushes Ruth out of the way, insisting on feeding the baby solids when Ruth believes he is too young. This time the blame is clearly on May as she belittles her son-in-law in an attempt to control baby Justin's life.

Ruth is happy the first few months of her baby's life as she is left to care for him on her own with her husband. However, this happiness quickly disappears when the tensions



begin to build again. Ruth is feeling trapped in the middle and the stress is taking away her enjoyment of the situation. Not only this, but Ruby fails to help his wife, to keep her from being trapped in this way, and prefers to spend his time doing drugs. Ruth blames the drugs for Ruby's personality faults, but the reader is beginning to think the drugs are just a symptom of something bigger, something darker within Ruby.



Chapters 17-19

Chapters 17-19 Summary

In chapter 17, Ruth decides she and Ruby should take a trip by themselves. Ruth plans the whole thing and pays for it out of the money she has been saving in her piggy bank. May is unhappy with the idea, but Ruth stands up to her and insists this is something she and her husband need. However, Ruby gets hit by a car and messes up his leg. Ruth is disappointed that the vacation has to be called off. Daisy, who has miraculously just gotten married, tells Ruth that she should still go, at least spend a few days at her Aunt Sid's even if she does not go to Chicago like she planned. Ruth likes the idea, but again May is unhappy. This time Ruby fights the idea as well. Aunt Sid meets Ruth at the bus station and takes her on a tour of the city. They have lunch on her front porch, just like Ruth has always imagined and look through some of Ruth's old letters. Ruth tells Aunt Sid how many of those stories were lies and Sid says that she pretty much knew that already. Ruth finally takes this opportunity to tell Aunt Sid how much she loves her and how the letters Sid sent to her all those years ago saved her life.

In chapter 18, Ruth returns to an increase in tensions at home. No one wants to hear about Ruth's trip, so she tells Justin. Ruth soon learns that Ruby strangled one of May's chickens out of anger when May refused to let him take Justin into town in the car. Ruth allows the subject to drop and life goes back to normal. May continues to be overprotective of Justin while Ruby continues to nurse his bad leg and refuses to work. In chapter 19, May learns in April that Matt was mentioned in Time magazine but did not tell her. In July, Ruth and Ruby spend a week on the beach. As May continues to harp on Ruth and Ruby for the way they are raising Justin, Ruth begins to imagine what it would be like to run away. Ruth wants to take Justin and disappear somewhere, just like her father did. That summer and fall, Ruth, May, Ruby, and Justin begin to go to church regularly, the only time in which the four of them could sit together peacefully.

Chapters 17-19 Analysis

Ruth wants to go on a vacation alone with her husband. Ruth is becoming unhappy and she thinks it is because of the tension between Ruby and May. Ruth blames her mother for everything, missing the signs in her own husband that spell disaster. Ruby is doing so many illegal drugs that he is beginning to zone out, placing himself in danger, like when he is hit by the car. Ruth is angry about this because she does not want to miss out on her vacation, but it does not occur to her that Ruby has a drug problem. Ruth wishes Ruby would stop with the drugs, but it does not seem like a problem to her at this point. Ruth goes to see her aunt on her own, leaving Ruby and May home alone, finally giving her the opportunity to say to her aunt in person all the things she has never been able to say in real life or in her letters. This opportunity takes Ruth's relationship with her aunt to a new level, helping her to feel safe in her aunt's care, even if she knows that most of her thoughts about her aunt are based in fantasy.



Ruby and May continue to fight, most often about Justin. The reader can see that May is interfering, which is what Ruth sees as well. However, the reader can also see that May's interference is in the best interest of the child who could honestly be at some risk of danger in his father's care when his father is a known drug user. This tension is heading to a climax; the reader can clearly see this. However, Ruth chooses to ignore the obvious and fantasize about running away, something that will most likely never happen. Ruth is an honest, responsible young woman. There is no way she would ever run out on Ruby or May, no matter the circumstances.



Chapters 20-22

Chapters 20-22 Summary

In chapter 20, tensions continue to build in the Grey-Dahl household. Sherry tells Ruby and Ruth about an apartment they can rent cheaply if they agree to care for the elderly couple living there. Ruth jumps at the opportunity, thinking it will be a chance to live their own lives without May's interference. Ruth also tells Ruby that she is pregnant again; therefore, this looks like the perfect opportunity to begin anew. Ruby agrees. However, May is not pleased because she is afraid of what will happen without Ruth's income to pay the bills. In late November, a month before Ruth plans to move her family out, they attend church together. It is a good day during which they had a nice family breakfast and enjoyed the sermon.

At home, tension returns when Justin asks for a cookie. May always bakes and freezes cookies for the church Christmas baskets and Ruby has shown these to Justin. May says no, that Justin should not eat sweets. Ruby contradicts her, saying he is the man of the house and should be allowed to say what his child eats. Ruby sends Justin down to the basement to get the cookies. As Justin and Ruby begin to eat the cookies, May drags Ruth into the living room. Ruth, angry at being pulled into the middle of the fight, strikes out at both May and Ruby. Ruby loses his temper and begins to beat Ruth with the poker from the fireplace. May interferes, dragging Ruby off Ruth. Ruby turns on May, chasing her into the kitchen and then into the basement. Ruth leaves the house, but returns for Justin. Ruth finds Ruby stabbing and beating May in the basement. Ruth pulls him off of her, but not before she sees her mother die. Ruby turns on Ruth again, chasing her out of the house and beating her until he remembers the baby.

In chapter 21, Ruth then goes to a neighbor's house where they call for help. Ruby is taken away while Ruth is taken to the hospital. Justin is unharmed. Ruth is in the hospital for a long time, recovering from her extensive injuries. Sid comes to see her every day and Matthew comes a few times. The Reverend visits a few times, attempting to help Ruth with the Bible. Ruth is filled with anger and takes it out on everyone around her. It is a long time before she can ask what happened to May. Sid tells her how beautiful the funeral was and how they buried her beside Willard Jenson. Shortly before Ruth is discharged, she learns she is carrying another boy. Ruth feels this is a second chance for her and somehow she has to take that chance.

In chapter 22, Ruth is released from the hospital. Aunt Sid buys a hospital bed and sets it up in her living room. Sid has Justin and lets Ruth spend time with him at night. However, Ruth has pregnancy induced high blood pressure and must remain calm and lying down, so Justin stays with a sitter during the day. Sid gives Ruth a typewriter to hopefully interest her in a career in business. One day, while alone, Ruth finds a letter to Sid from Matthew written at the time of her marriage to Ruby. The letter clearly implies that neither Matthew or Sid approved of Ruby as a husband for Ruth, but Matthew felt that his sister was so cruel to him as a child that he does not care enough to do



anything about it and does not see how Sid could do anything about it. Ruth is angry about this letter and her view of Sid has changed. Ruth struggles with her new reality, grieving a husband who is still alive and missing a mother who controlled her every movement, her every thought.

Chapters 20-22 Analysis

Ruth suggests that there were no warning signs, but the reader has seen the signs since the moment May first voiced her opinion of Ruby. Ruby snaps, killing May and nearly killing Ruth. Ruby was not a well person, and Ruth's inability to deal with the arguing anymore has caused him to snap. It is not Ruth's fault, though it is her habit to blame herself, and it is not May's fault. The fault lies with Ruby and his mental health issues, as well as his drug habit. It seems clear to the reader, but to Ruth, whose life has just completely fallen apart around her, nothing is clear.

Ironically, Ruth realizes that she misses her mother. May shaped Ruth, controlled her actions and told her that she was stupid so often she believed it. May was Ruth's world, for better or for worse. Ruth misses that world. However, Ruth also grieves for her husband. Ruby killed Ruth's mother and nearly killed Ruth herself, but still she loves the goodness she thought she saw in him and the connection to another human being that she craved all her life. Ruby snapping like he did just seems to say to Ruth that she screwed up again. That she cannot do anything right, again. Ruth is angry, hurt and sad, all things that come out of her narration so clearly the reader can touch it like a solid thing. However, the spirit that has gotten Ruth so far shines through all this and the reader knows Ruth will rise up and fight another day.



Characters

Ruth Grey Dahl

Ruth is a small town, farm girl with a bitter, verbally abusive mother. Ruth grows up believing she is stupid because she has a highly intelligent younger brother who is moved into her grade when they are both small children. Ruth finds herself constantly compared to her younger brother and coming up short, leaving her feeling unloved and lonesome. Ruth begins a pen pal relationship with her aunt when she is young that will continue into her adulthood. This letter writing campaign is the only source of love and support Ruth gets from a family member.

When Ruth is in high school, she begins working for a neighbor who has gone blind. Ruth listens to books on tapes with this woman, becoming familiar with many of the great literary masters, including Charles Dickens. Ruth has always believed herself to be stupid, but she understands and appreciates many of these books. Ruth also gets support from this blind woman that she cannot get from her own mother. Unfortunately, this woman, Miss Finch, becomes senile and must be moved to a nursing home, leaving Ruth alone once again.

After high school, Ruth begins working at the same dry cleaner as her mother. Soon after, Ruth meets Ruby and falls in love. Ruby is strange, lazy, and often abusive in ways Ruth hesitates to tell her readers. However, he loves Ruth unconditionally, something Ruth has never known before. Ruth watches as Ruby and her mother fight constantly, the arguments only growing after the birth of Ruth's first child. Eventually tragedy takes place and Ruth is left with her shattered life, unable to stop loving the man she shared her life with or to forget the controlling mother who overshadowed her world.

Ruben

Ruby was a surprise child who was born prematurely. When Ruby was three months old, his mother passed out in the bathtub and he nearly drowned. As a result, Ruby's mother was overprotective and overly indulgent, allowing Ruby to get away with almost anything. Ruby grows up lazy, unwilling to work for anything because he felt as though he did not have to. Ruby's father was physically abusive and Ruby inherited his temper. Therefore, Ruby often turns to violence when he is angry or frustrated.

When Ruby and Ruth go on their first date, Ruth misunderstands Ruby's suggestion that they have sex and he forces himself on her. However, Ruby's shyness and lack of self confidence present a façade Ruth can relate to and a person she feels she can trust. Ruth begins dating Ruby, making him promise that he will not force himself on her again. Within months they are engaged and soon married. Ruth becomes aware of Ruby's laziness almost from the beginning, but she makes excuses for him because she



is afraid if she pushes him too hard he will leave. Ruby's laziness begins to cause problems between Ruth and her mother, as well as between Ruby and May. Arguments rule the day at the Grey home. With the birth of Justin and the complicated roles of each adult in the house, tensions begin to increase. Eventually Ruby breaks mentally, beating both Ruth and May, ending in the death of May and Ruby's incarceration.

May Jenson Grey

May, like Ruth, grew up on a farm in Honey Creek. May was the oldest of eight children, so she had to take on the majority of chores around the house. May's brother died when they were still children, apparently sending May into a depression that often found her threatening suicide to her younger sisters. When May was in her late teens, she met Willard Jenson. May was in love and when they married, she was deeply happy. Unfortunately, Willard Jenson dies in World War II. May later married another man, but he was not a man she could love as passionately as Willard Jenson; this marriage ended when her new husband ran away.

May is a hard woman who does not know how to show emotion. May clearly adores her youngest child, Matthew, because he is intelligent and does well in school. However, May's adoration for Matthew does not include her eldest child, Ruth. May treats Ruth with disdain, making the child feel as though she is stupid and can never do anything right. Eventually, Matt goes off to college, never to return, but Ruth remains. When Ruth marries and has a child, May sees her grandson as a second chance, an opportunity to bring to the world a perfect human being. May has already dismissed Ruth as a person of value.

May does not get along with her new son-in-law. May thinks Ruby is lazy and a drug addict. May criticizes everything Ruby does and often makes him feel as stupid and useless as she made Ruth feel all through her childhood. May also takes such an active role in raising Justin, Ruth and Ruby's child, that Ruby feels pushed out by her. When Ruby finally snaps, it is over a bag of cookies Justin wants to eat and Ruby has allowed despite May's objections.

Aunt Sid

Aunt Sid is May's baby sister, Sidney. Sid is a single woman who lives in De Kalb, forty miles from Honey Creek, and is the director of the local high school choir. Sid had many advantages that May did not have because she was the youngest and therefore her parents had more time and money when she was ready to go to college. May resents Sid's advantages in life and they have a quarrel at the time of their mother's death that leaves them estranged for the remainder of May's life.

Sid befriends Ruth when she comes to visit shortly before her feud with May comes to a head. Shortly afterward, Ruth begins writing to Sid as a school project. This pen pal relationship continues throughout Ruth's childhood and into her adulthood. Sid is the only person who ever expresses affection for Ruth or tries to tell Ruth what an



intelligent, beautiful person she really is. However, Sid never makes an attempt to visit Ruth or to change Ruth's circumstances even though she is the only one who knows the truth about what goes on in Ruth's life. Sid comes to Ruth's rescue after Ruby's breakdown, however, taking her and her child in until they can start a new life on their own.

Dee Dee Foote

Dee Dee Foote is a neighbor who lives across the road from the Grey's. Dee Dee and May become close friends; Ruby often hears Dee Dee complaining about her husband. Dee Dee's husband has kidney disease and he lies dying in her house for the first few years May and Ruth know her. However, Dee Dee never seems overly concerned for her husband's circumstances.

Dee Dee has three children, two girls and a boy. The two girls are promiscuous and wild, one of whom often disappears for days on end and another who becomes pregnant at sixteen. The boy is very close to his mother and goes everywhere she goes. Dee Dee is May's constant companion and drinking buddy, often the voice of support when May needs a helping hand. It is with Dee Dee that Ruth finally sees May's softer side and through Dee Dee that Ruth comes to learn some of May's deepest thoughts.

Daisy Foote

Daisy is Dee Dee's oldest daughter. Daisy and Ruth are in the same class at school. Daisy is wild, often going off with truck drivers and disappearing for days at a time. Daisy is highly promiscuous, often sharing her bed with older men. Daisy is into makeup and hair and imagines she will one day run off to Los Angeles or New York to be a makeup artist in the entertainment industry. It is through Daisy that Ruth meets Ruby. Ruth and Daisy are good friends after high school and remain so throughout Ruth's marriage to Ruby. Daisy shocks everyone when she marries a successful man and settles down to a conventional marriage.

Matthew Grey

Matthew Grey is May's youngest child. Matthew is highly intelligent and is moved up a grade in elementary school, placing him in the same class as his older sister. Matthew is uncomfortable with the affection his mother gives him, so he buries his head in his books and becomes friendly with the local high school principal. As a result of May's adoration of Matthew and her habit of comparing her two children, Ruth tortures Matthew in order to draw attention to herself. Matthew resents both his mother's affections and his sister's torment. When Matthew goes off to MIT, he refuses to have contact with either his mother or his sister.



Justin

Justin, or Justy, is Ruth's son. Justin is born a year after Ruth's marriage. Justin brings Ruth and Ruby closer together, cementing their relationship in a way that makes Ruth feel secure in her love for both her husband and son. Justin is also the highlight of his grandmother's life. However, raising Justin creates an atmosphere in the Grey-Dahl household that eventually leads to tragedy. May attempts to take a strong position on Justin's upbringing, demanding he not be allowed to have sweets and criticizing Ruby for the way he plays with the baby. All this comes to a head when Justin asks for a cookie and May refuses him, but Ruby allows it.

Artie

Artie is Ruth and May's boss at the Trim 'N Tidy. Artie is a kindly, older gentleman who is always attempting to console Ruth and help her through some of the more difficult aspects of adulthood. Artie goes out of his way to make Ruth's life simpler, first by giving her a job, then by adjusting her schedule when Justin is born, and giving Ruby a job to help with the family finances. Artie even drives Ruth back and forth to work in the years after Justin is born to help her out. Artie is a good man and one of a few in Ruth's life who sees the true beauty inside her.

Randall Foote

Randall is Dee Dee's son. Randall is a fat boy who hides behind his excess weight to keep from having to have a relationship with someone other than a family member. Randall goes everywhere his mother goes and his presence is often a nuisance to the people around him. Randall has a crush on Ruth all the years they know one another and is deeply disappointed when she marries Ruby. Ruth puts up with Randall, seeing him as just an appendage of his mother. However, Ruth goes out of her way to console him when Randall is depressed by his lack of love options.



Objects/Places

Heirloom Pin

May gives Ruth an heirloom pin to wear when she gets into the spelling bee. Ruth believes this pin gives her good luck and helps her survive till near the end of the competition. However, when a fire alarm goes off, Ruth loses the pin. May yells at her, claiming she would never trust her with another priceless object again. Ruth gets the pin back after May's murder when a schoolmate who took the pin reads about her story in the paper.

Blind Books

In high school, Ruth works for a woman who has gone blind. Ruth sets up and plays books on tape for this woman and often stays to listen to the stories. Charles Dickens becomes Ruth's favorite author. Esther from Bleak House becomes Ruth's favorite character.

Tulip Bulbs

Ruth mistakes tulip bulbs for onions one night when it is her turn to cook. Ruth makes scalloped onions, but after a single bite May accuses her of trying to kill them all.

Cookies

May often cooked huge batches of cookies over several months to be placed in Christmas baskets through the church. Justin had a sweet tooth, but May and Ruth thought he should not eat too many sweets. Ruby disagreed. One night Justin wants a cookie and May refuses, but Ruby says he can. This leads to the fight that ends in May's murder.

Fireplace Poker

Ruby uses a fireplace poker to first attack Ruth and then May.

Matthew's Letter

Ruth finds a letter to her Aunt Sid from her brother Matthew in which they discuss Ruth's marriage to Ruby. Aunt Sid clearly feels that the marriage is not a good one for Ruth, but Matthew refuses to do anything to help because he feels that his sister tortured him as a child.



Winter Suit

Ruth asks for some of her pay to buy Ruby a winter suit for his job in the recycling truck. Instead, May goes and buys a suit for Ruby at Goodwill.

Texas Grapefruit

Ruth is told that her father, Elmer Grey, has moved to Texas to pick grapefruits. Ruth often fantasizes about taking her child and moving to Texas to pick grapefruits with her father.

Recycling Truck

Ruby gets a job manning the recycling truck that parks at the local grocery store twice a month. Ruby jokes about his job, calling himself the Can Man.

Town Lanes

Ruth joins the Trim 'N Tidy bowling team and discovers she has a talent for bowling. However, after marrying Ruby, Ruth quits the team and rarely goes to the Town Lanes.

Trim 'N Tidy

Trim 'N Tidy is the name of the dry cleaners where both Ruth and May work. May and Ruth start out as finishers together, but Ruth is promoted to spot remover. Ruby also gets a job at the dry cleaners after the birth of Justin.

Honey Creek, Illinois

Ruth has lived her entire life on her mother's farm in Honey Creek, Illinois. Before Ruth was born, her mother May lived on her family's farm and moved to her husband's farm upon their marriage. Honey Creek is a small town that everyone dreams of leaving, but May never did.

De Kalb, Illinois

Aunt Sid, May's youngest sister, lives in DeKalb where she is a choir leader. Although DeKalb is only forty miles from Honey Creek, Ruth only visits Sid once. However, they are pen pals for nearly twenty years.



Themes

Verbal Abuse and Mother-daughter Relationship

May Grey was once married to the man she loved. May's life was perfect, filled with long hours with the man she loved. However, a war disrupted May's life, taking her husband from her. May spends the next ten years in denial, refusing to admit to herself that her husband will never return to her. Eventually May accepts this turn in her life and commits herself to another relationship. May does not love her new husband like she did the first, but she makes a life with him anyway. May gives birth to two children, Ruth and Matthew. May devotes herself to Matthew, loving him almost to the point of smothering, while ignoring poor Ruth.

Ruth grows up believing she is stupid because her mother often holds her highly intelligent brother up as an example. Ruth resents Matthew and often torments him because of her mother's often cruel words, telling Ruth outright how dumb she is. Ruth begins to think she can never do anything right because she cannot get the grades Matthew does and she can rarely make May proud. This leads to Ruth's feeling as though she does not deserve to be loved. As Ruth grows older, she watches her mother grieve Matthew's absence. This only increases Ruth's sense that she is not good enough. Finally, when Ruth has a son, she overhears May expressing the thought that this child is her last chance to bring something good into the world.

Ruth is a quiet, timid young woman who feels as though her mother does not love her. Yet Ruth continues to live at home and to attempt a relationship with her mother. When Ruth is married, she finds herself caught between her husband and mother. Ruby and May get along like oil and water; therefore, Ruth is constantly having to mediate between them. Ruth feels secure enough in her relationship with her mother to attempt to soothe her ruffled feathers whenever these arguments take place. Despite all her mother's efforts to destroy Ruth's self esteem and to ruin her marriage, Ruth recognizes that she needs her mother and is therefore dependent on her. Not only this, but Ruth comes to realize that she does not know how to behave or to live her life without her mother there to tell her what to do. It is an odd relationship based on verbal abuse and neglect, but it is a relationship that worked for Ruth and one she discovers she misses when it is gone.

A Need to be Loved

Ruth grew up neglected, always feeling left out and overshadowed by her brother. Ruth's mother, May, often told Ruth how stupid she was and how she could never do anything right. While May never outright abused Ruth physically, she often lashed out against her verbally, causing Ruth to suffer from a lack of self esteem. Ruth hid in May's shadow, afraid to live her life on her own terms and rarely defied May. However, Ruth begins a pen pal relationship with her Aunt Sid, May's youngest sister and one with



whom May had a long term feud. Ruth reached out to her Aunt Sid because she needed someone who would tell her how smart and beautiful she was.

As an adult, Ruth found herself following her mother's footsteps, working the same job and living basically the same life. Ruth had never had a boyfriend or fallen in love. When Ruth meets Ruby, she is embarrassed, but excited by the attention he shows her. Ruth needed to be loved; therefore, even though Ruby basically raped Ruth on their first date, she continues to see him. Ruth was so desperate to be loved that she put all her capacity to love into Ruby, blinding herself to his laziness and dark temper. Ruth justified all of Ruby's odd behaviors to herself, often blaming her verbally abusive mother for his actions; therefore, it was a shock to Ruth when Ruby snapped and killed May.

Ruth is an emotional child who still craves what every child should be able to take for granted, the unconditional love of a parent. Ruth's father left the family when she was a small child, leaving her and her brother alone with their miserable mother. Ruth reached out where she could for the love she needed, but it was never enough. Ruby came along at a time when Ruth needed to be independent of her mother and needed someone to love her on her own terms. It is this need that leads to the tragedy that would alter the course of Ruth's life forever, making a need to be loved a theme of the novel.

Loss

Loss is a theme of May's life, making it a theme of this novel. May grew up in a large family, the oldest of nearly a dozen children. As the oldest, May was expected to take on a large percentage of the chores. May worked hard and often kept to herself until she met a beautiful man who wanted to make her the center of his world. May was in love and happier than most woman. This all came to an end when May's husband died in the pacific during World War II. For ten years May lived in denial, hoping her husband would come back to her. Finally May put that part of her life behind her and remarried.

May's second marriage results in two children. These children are Ruth and Matthew. May's second marriage is not as happy as her first and is filled with dark arguments and tension. Eventually, May's second husband runs away and leaves the family to be supported by May. May struggles but manages to provide for her two children. Matthew, May's youngest and brightest child, is the light of her life. May bestows all her attention on this boy who often amazes her with his intelligence. However, Matthew eventually leaves as well, going off to college never to return.

May is devastated by the losses in her life; they overwhelm her to the point where she cannot see past them. May cannot see that her daughter Ruth is still there and will always be there. In May's mind, Ruth is too dumb to be of much use and Ruth's decision to stay is simply a result of her inability to care for herself elsewhere. It never occurs to May to be grateful that Ruth willingly hands over her paycheck each week to make it possible for May to remain in her home. May is in a perpetual state of grief and

cannot see past her own pain and becomes a bitter woman who often showers her daughter with her own hurt.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first person point of view in the voice of Ruth Dahl, a young farm girl who has recently suffered a terrible tragedy. Ruth is looking back on her life, telling the reader everything from her life that she feels led to this tragedy. The format of the novel is a cross between a diary and an intimate conversation between good friends. Ruth's story is dark and tragic, filled with a tone of sadness that is present at the beginning and continues on, growing even sadder, as the plot develops.

The point of view of this novel is unique in that it is more of a cross between the first person and a more omniscient point of view with a clear authorial voice. The point of view of this novel is perfect for this novel because it becomes a tool that brings intimacy between the reader and the writer that makes the readers feel as though they are reading a letter from a good friend. Letters are an important element to Ruth's life, and it is fitting that her novel should seem like a letter or a confession. The point of view is that of a grieving woman attempting to understand what led her to this place in her life. The point of view is not unique but seems unique to the readers as they come to know and grieve with Ruth Dahl.

Setting

The novel is set in Illinois. The majority of the novel takes place in a tiny farm town of Honey Creek, Illinois. Honey Creek is one of those little towns where everyone knows everyone else, and all the young people dream of getting out. Ruth has never minded Honey Creek, but she can understand why her peers would prefer to move to the big city. Ruth's Aunt Sid lives in De Kalb, a larger city forty miles from Honey Creek. While De Kalb is not a large city, to Ruth it seems as big as Chicago. Ruth goes to visit Aunt Sid once during the novel, taking a break from the tensions in her home to spend some time feeling like a real person, like an intelligent person. At the end of the novel, Ruth comes to live with Aunt Sid on a more permanent basis. However, at this point in her life, De Kalb has lost its magic and Ruth could be living anywhere in the world but not really notice her surroundings.

The setting of this novel works with the plot because it is a small town full of people with small town values. Ruth grows up with an abusive mother, but no one seems to notice the effect this relationship has on Ruth because they are all too busy admiring her more intelligent brother. It is this inability to see Ruth and her small town values that influences Ruth's personality as she grows older. Ruth is naive, innocent, and unaware of the tragedy building all around her. If Ruth had grown up in a larger town or perhaps in another section of the country, she more than likely would not have been quite so naive and unaware of her husband's failings. This fact makes the setting ideal to this novel and especially this character.



Language and Meaning

Ruth is a simple, small town girl; therefore, the language in the novel is simple, down to earth. Ruth uses some slang in her narrative, but most of the words are clear, simple English that readers of all ages should be able to understand. Ruth refers to sheep and chickens on the farm but does not use any words that the reader would not understand.

The language of the book is appropriate to its characters and subject. Ruth grew up on a farm in a small town, and most of her language is simple, direct. Language in a novel should reflect its characters and refer to anything special or unusual in the plot. This novel uses language that a person might expect a small town girl to use, refraining from large words or complicated grammar. The only time complicated language is used in this novel is in a letter Matthew, Ruth's highly educated brother, uses in a letter.

Structure

The novel is written in a style that is similar to a diary or letter. The novel is written in twenty-two chapters, each chapter serving as a way for the writer to organize her thoughts and her story. The novel is written mostly in exposition as the narrator simply tells a story rather than showing it. There are scenes in the novel, but they are brief and tend to be somewhat random as far as a time line is concerned. The novel is told in somewhat of a linear time line, but the narrator makes it clear that all the events being described have taken place in the past. The narrator begins with comments on her own life but then goes back to describe her mother's childhood and young adulthood. The narrator (Ruth) tells stories that took place at different times throughout her childhood as though they were recently remembered.

The novel is written mostly in flashbacks. The story begins with Ruth describing her affection for her husband and child and the dreams she has for the future. The story then moves into the past as Ruth discusses her mother and the impact she had on her life. The story progresses through Ruth's childhood and young adulthood, describing her first meeting with her husband, their courtship, and the short duration of their marriage. All this takes the reader toward the tragedy that has reshaped her young life. The final few chapters describe a more current phase of her life as she draws conclusions about the things that have happened in her life and what she sees happening for her in the future.



Quotes

"What it begins with, I know finally, is the kernel of meanness in people's hearts. I don't know exactly how or why it gets inside us; that's one of the mysteries I haven't solved yet."

Chapter 1, pg. 1

"When I was small my favorite time of day came at the sight of Wendell Kate driving the cows past our farm into Honey Creek to his barn. It's a gift he gave me." Chapter 1, pg.

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"It came to me, as a revelation, that May lived through all the history I learned about from Miss Daken." Chapter 4, pg. 41

"May was thirty-eight when I was born. She probably thought I was going to be retarded since she was over the hill. I wonder if she enjoyed carrying me. I wonder if she ate liver and spinach and drank a quart of milk a day, like they tell you you must. Sometimes, the way I get so tired, I suspect May never ate the right food. I feel like I don't have all the ingredients a person is supposed to have." Chapter 4, pgs. 45-46

"People were always saying May's first husband, the one she truly loved, got killed, and how sad it made her. There wasn't a single person in the area who didn't know her story. Maybe she couldn't be happy even if she tried, because folks wouldn't know her then. They might think she was haywire." Chapter 4, pg. 53

"She put her fingers on my face, and she said that she knew I was beautiful. I felt something far down inside me, the size of a pin point, flicker and then glow for a minute." Chapter 5, pg. 72

"I wondered if there were someone just like me on another planet, if they had dry cleaners up there, and winters coming on, and the symbol and myth of Jesus Christ. I wanted to find out what she did when her heart grew so heavy not even lying smack on the ground relieved the terrible ache." Chapter 7, pg. 97

"Each time I looked up at him I had a jolt. I had to connect the person talking to me with the one my mind created." Chapter 8, pg. 113

"He took a ring out of his pocket. He said he bought it with Green Stamps once, and couldn't figure out why he did it, but now he knew he had been saving it for me. It had been for me all along." Chapter 9, pg. 130

"I stood on the curb all by myself, waving at her as the car moved down the street, and I knew, standing there, although I was just married, that I was the loneliest girl in the U.S. Aunt Sid was the only person who knew me, and I had the feeling just by looking at the



back of her head, and the rear end of her car pulling away, that she didn't want my acquaintance any more."

Chapter 10, pg. 145

"I kept saying our baby's name time and time again—we were meeting for the first time in our lives." Chapter 14, pg. 213

"She petted his cheek. She didn't say anything except 'Bless you' to him, in a thin wavering voice, one I had never heard her use before. She couldn't believe that here in the flesh was another chance for her; here was a baby coming to live and grow at her house. She was listening, already, to the stories Justy was going to tell about his grandmother, how she leaped up on the roof when the house was burning and pulled him from the fire." Chapter 14, pg. 213

"Sometimes I have to pity May a little, because her Matt went off and she's got nothing, only Justy and her job at Trim 'N tidy and me. Plus God and her trip to heaven. All that doesn't stack up to much. There is no one who loves her except Justy, and he doesn't actually love her. He's only used to her." Chapter 20, pg. 283

"But the strangest part—it always makes me stop crying, as if someone's come and slapped me—is the fact that I don't have May. I stare at Aunt Sid's white walls, dumbstruck by a vision: I'm walking down the street and May isn't telling me where to go. I won't come home to her shelling five million peas. It's the craziest notion that ever came to me, that someday May would actually die. Sometimes I hear her on the porch fiddling with the lock. I'm waiting for her to yell at me. She's going to tell me to stop looking so sad." Chapter 22, pg. 327



Topics for Discussion

Discuss Ruth. Who is Ruth? What is her purpose in writing down this story? Would you consider Ruth naïve? Why? What impact does Ruth's mother have on her life? How did having an intelligent brother affect Ruth's emotional health? What impact did her letters to her Aunt Sid have on Ruth's childhood? Her adulthood? Why?

Discuss Ruby. Who is Ruby? What affect did nearly drowning as an infant have on Ruby's life? Was Ruby damaged by this event in a physical way? In an emotional way? Explain. What was Ruby's relationship like with his mother? How does this compare to Ruth's relationship with her own mother?

Discuss May. Who is May? What was May like before her first marriage? Was she different from the woman Ruth would know? What happened to May's first husband? How did this change the course of her life? How did it change her personality? Why did May marry for a second time? Did May want children? Did she love both her children? Explain.

Why does Ruth marry Ruby? Does Ruth love Ruby? Is Ruth trying to be more like an adult? Why does Ruby marry Ruth? Does Ruby love Ruth? Why does Ruby not get a job right away? Why does Ruth allow Ruby to sit around the house all day? Why does Ruby build birdhouses? Why does Ruth believe it is important for Ruby to have his birdhouses?

Why do May and Ruby not get along? What comes between them the most often? Why does this tension get worse when Justin is born? What role does May see herself playing in Justin's life? How does Ruth feel about this? How does Ruby feel about it? How does May's controlling behavior lead to her death? Is it justified?

Discuss abuse. What defines abuse? Is May abusive toward Ruth? Toward Ruby? How? Why? Is Ruby abusive? Why does Ruby throw things in anger? Is this a form of abuse? Has Ruby ever hit Ruth? Is Ruth a reliable narrator when it comes to Ruby's behaviors? Explain. Why does Ruby beat Ruth with a fireplace poker? Why does Ruby turn his fury on May? Is Ruby's behavior justified in any way? Explain.

Discuss Aunt Sid. Who is Aunt Sid? Why does she spend nearly twenty years corresponding with a niece who lives only forty miles away? Why does Aunt Sid never take a more active role in Ruth's life? How could Aunt Sid have taken a more active role in Ruth's life? How might Ruth's life have been different if Aunt Sid had been a larger part of her life? Did Aunt Sid do all she could for Ruth?