

# **The Book Shop Study Guide**

## **The Book Shop by Penelope Fitzgerald**

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# Plot Summary

*The Bookshop* tells the story of the Old House Bookshop, Hardborough, East Anglia.

The Old House was a 500 year old house left derelict for years before widow Florence Green considers investing her inheritance in 1959 to buy it and renovate it into a bookstore for inhabitants of the seaside town.

Change comes slowly to places like Hardborough, and something as ambitious as a woman starting a business sets tongues wagging and minds racing. As soon as Florence has converted the Old House she discovers that the influential town socialite and patron of the arts, Mrs Violet Gamart, had plans to turn it into a cultural center.

Benefactors and detractors line up behind the two women as Florence goes about her business. Behind the scenes, Mrs. Gamart is whittling away at Florence's hold on the Old House. Inside the Old House, a demonstrative 'rapper' or poltergeist makes itself known.

Kind hearted and courageous Florence is tested by a number of underhanded ploys suggested, if not manipulated, by Violet Gamart. Other business owners are both suspicious and jealous of Florence's small successes and strange array of allegiances.

Among Florence's supporters are eleven-year-old Christine Gipping who comes to 'help out' in the shop, Mr. Raven, the wise marshman and leader of the Sea Scouts, and the reclusive local squire, Mr. Edmund Brundish. Mr Brundish is the only one to go head-to-head with Violet Gamart, but he suffers a heart attack and dies after leaving her house where he has gone to ask her to leave Florence Green alone.

Violet Gamart, on the other hand, enlists the help of an inspector from the Education Authority, who questions if Florence is breaking child labor laws by employing Christine. She also receives help from Florence's own solicitor, when Violet complains that the window display of 250 copies of *Lolita* causes obstruction on the highway; Violet's nephew, a member of parliament, who puts forward a private bill to allow councils to acquire properties for the use of the community in cultural and entertainment purposes also helps Violet in her schemes.

An odd character, Milo North, is Violet's chosen one to manage the Cultural Center. He assists Florence to make a profit by suggesting she stock *Lolita*, offers to assist Florence in the shop when Christine leaves but doesn't really work when she is not there, and is also assisting Violet in her quest to have the Old House.

Naively, Florence Green does not recognize the underhanded ways in which Violet Gamart is setting about to secure the Old House. The Bill put up by Violet's nephew allows the council to take over the Old House with almost no compensation and Florence is left with no choice but to leave Hardborough with nothing.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 introduces widow Florence Green and some of the inhabitants of Hardborough, East Anglia in 1959. Hardborough is an isolated, English, seaside town described as being like an island between sea and river. Its people are used to the isolation and lack of facilities. Listed as the towns' lonely are the bank manager; naturalists; the reed cutter; the postman; Mr. Raven, the marshman; Mr. Brundish, a recluse from a long line of old Suffolk families; and Florence Green herself.

Florence struggles with the notion of using the inheritance from her husband's death to open a bookshop in the abandoned 500 year old building known as the 'Old House.' She likens her struggle to those of a heron and an eel in mid-flight. The heron is trying to devour the eel while still flying, and the eel is trying to struggle free. She surmises they have taken on too much.

The staid nature of Hardborough and its inhabitants are cautious but interested in the comings and goings of each other. Florence Green visits Mr. Keble, the bank manager, to organize a loan to open a bookshop in the Old House, and knows that when she leaves the bank everyone would know that she had been there.

During the discussion with the bank manager we learn that Florence has some experience with books from a position in a shop called Müller's in Wigmore, and that in 1934 she had been fortunate to be paired for stocktaking with the poetry buyer and her future husband, Charlie Green.

The bank manager discusses the rundown nature of the Old House and the likelihood of a bookshop being a concern in Hardborough.

On her way home from the bank, Florence assists Mr. Raven, the marshman, while he files teeth on a horse so that it can ground down the grass it is eating. He entrusts her with the job of holding the horse's tongue while he files, because he equates her plan to open a bookshop with the ability to chance some 'unlikely' things.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The opening of this book sets the tone of a dour, introverted village, isolated and left behind by the world about to enter the exciting 60s, and one middle-aged woman's plan to open a bookshop.

Florence likens her struggle make a decision with a battle between a heron and an eel. Not only is this a slippery decision for her to make, but it also raises the notion of survival of the fittest.



There is an undercurrent of tensions understandable at the end of the 1950s in a small town in England. Gender issues, class structure, and alternating fear and excitement for the unknown future overlap as we are introduced to the characters. Florence wonders if she has a duty to create an existence in her own right after eight years of surviving on a small inheritance from her late husband. The bank manager, who would control her ability to receive a loan to start up her bookshop, displays a patriarchal and snobbish demeanor towards her application.

The spark of hope ignited by Mr. Raven trusting her to assist him in helping the horse creates a sense of faith in her abilities outside of those that might be given to her from others.

While the description of Florence Green is as kind-hearted but physically insignificant, you sense from her thoughts during her interview with the bank manager that she will be able to handle the trials and tribulations that are sure to come to her as she embarks on a new enterprise in a place where Raven says 'they have lost the wish for anything of a rarity.'



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Florence prepares to move into the Old House and while the plumber is working she is told the resident 'rapper,' or poltergeist is upsetting the plumber's tools. Florence wanted to create a storage facility at the Oyster Shed that is part of the sale of the Old House. The population warms to her, feeling less intellectually threatened, when they realize she did not know the storage shed walls never dry and therefore it would be too damp to store books there.

Florence is invited to a society party hosted by the socially well-placed General and Mrs. Violet Gamart at The Stead. She orders a new dress to be made for the occasion, in red.

Her choice is considered too confident for the folks of Hardborough. At the fitting of the dress she wishes that she had not chosen red and that she was not going to the party.

At the party, Florence meets General Gamart first. The General is seen to be opening drawers and cupboards in the manner of an extra in a London stage play. Florence guesses correctly that the invitation to the party was because of her plans for the bookshop. She meets Milo North, a young man who works in London, something in television with the respectability of the BBC. He is described as very modern and lives three nights a week with a girl called Kattie who wears red stockings, or more likely, new-fashioned tights.

The hostess, Violet Gamart, tells Florence she had plans for the Old House to become an arts center. She suggests other locations for the book store, including the wet fish shop that is about to become vacant. Her flattery of Florence and mention that they now, finally, have someone who could run such a center, has Florence pondering the suggestion, in light of what she would have to study in order to be able to manage such a center. While she is leaving the party, we see the other guests reform into more comfortable circles, just as the cows did when Raven removed the horse from a herd of cows in the previous chapter.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

We are learning more about the thinking of the people of Hardborough. Florence was considered a threat to the 'intellectual balance,' and her 'confidence was not respected.' They term poltergeists as 'rappers' and talk freely about them inhabiting the older buildings. The real estate agent uses the term 'usual period atmosphere' instead of haunted. They also use the terms 'not quite right' for mad, and 'moderate' for very ill.

The upper members of the society frequent London for entertainment, business, and cultural pursuits; the others frequent adjoining towns. The party guests are a selection

of influential relatives and acquaintances. The sort of local identities that Florence would expect to see there - bank manager, lawyers, etc. are not on the invitation list, showing the difference in social class between the Gamart's and Florence.

The color red is emerging as a warning - choosing red for her new dress for the party denoted Florence's confidence, it was discussed as not suitable by the locals and she regretted choosing it when her confidence ebbed. The young woman, Kattie, who lives with Milo North on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights, wears red stockings or tights, and he noted that taking her to the society party at The Stead would 'be more trouble than it was worth.'

Violet Gamart is presented as a woman of influence, both in the way that Florence felt she would 'willingly devote her life to the service of Mrs. Gamart' and in the way that her guests were 'all kind to their hostess, because it made life easier.'



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Florence hears a storm warning on the radio and spies the warning on the Coastguard sign, but the sky turned bright by mid-day. She takes a short-cut past the school and finds a young girl crying. She tells Florence her name is Melody Gipping. After Florence wipes the girl's nose with a clean handkerchief, her older sister, Christine, steps forward to claim her and announce that they had 'Kleenex' that are more hygienic.

Mr. Deben, the fishmonger, directly approaches Florence to inform her he would rather negotiate the sale of his wet fish shop privately, intimating she would be leaving the Old House. This makes her realize Mrs. Gamart had thought that she would be willing to move the bookshop to make way for the arts center.

Florence tells Mr. Deben that there has been a misunderstanding but that Mrs. Gamart would be looking for a site for her arts center. She then visits Milo North at his cottage to confirm that he was the 'right person' Mrs. Gamart had meant to manage the arts center. While she is there, Milo offers her some 'Nescafe' instant coffee that she had never tried before.

Florence falters slightly. With her ego bruised, she considers walking away from the Old House. But, when her 'rapper' prevents her from opening her door and makes a public spectacle of her when she fights back and falls, splayed into her own kitchen, she resolves to finalize the sale. No poltergeist or society lady is going to stop her from building the bookshop.

Her lawyer, Mr. Thornton, tries to place Florence in the social scale - she had fallen in the street, she had been helping Mr. Raven, whom he considered a scoundrel, and she had visited Milo North, of whom he disapproved. But, she had also been invited to the Gamart's party at the Stead. He suggested alternative sites for the bookshop, both in and out of Hardborough, which only hardened her resolve to stay.

On the return from a neighboring town, Florence finds a group of Sea Scouts inside the Old House. Mr. Raven had gotten the key from her plumber to let them in to help her set up the shop.

The boys set up shelves and white painted the walls. She stocked the shop and organized a local girl to do the bookwork once a month to satisfy her lawyer and the bank manager.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The brewing storm in the beginning of this chapter never eventuated, except as minor trials for Florence to overcome. Florence finds her resolve when the poltergeist pushes





against her door, trying to keep her out of the Old House. It summoned in her the courage to fight back against it, Mrs. Gamart, who had other plans for the Old House, and anyone in the town who did not believe in her ability to open a bookshop.

There are references to new, modern products emerging - Kleenex tissues, Nescafe coffee, and paperback books, that herald a new world beginning for Florence. There is tension between what is old and understood, and new and possibly threatening.

Mr. Raven is emerging as Florence's behind the scenes supporter. Thought of as a scoundrel by her lawyer, he organized the Sea Scouts to help her with the setting up of the shop without her even asking. While the bank manager was doubtful of her abilities, Mr. Raven trusted her to help with the horse. While her lawyer sought ways to move her out of the Old House, Mr Raven sent in the Sea Scouts to help establish the shop.

The storm, while not eventuating, may still be brewing. Mentions of Florence leaving the Old House, so that Mrs. Gamart can have her arts center, are markers of the atmospheric pressures surrounding her plans.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The day before the opening of the bookstore, Mr. Raven paid a visit - ostensibly to check the job the scouts had made. He is followed by Wally, one of the scouts, with a handwritten note of congratulations from the influential Edmund Brundish, the town patron who came from a long line of Suffolk families, but was now the town recluse. He noted that, while he did not go out anymore, he would be happy to subscribe to her circulating library, which she had not even considered starting.

Mr. Raven suggests Florence take on a youngster to give her a hand after school. He suggests one of the Gipping girls, whose father is a plasterer and mother cleaned for both Milo North and Edmund Brundish. After Mr. Raven leaves, Florence considers the idea of a library.

The poltergeist marks out each of the screws that the scouts had driven in to the wall, giving them a sharp, delicate tap. The Bookshop customers remark about the noise coming through the wall and Florence installs a cash register with a bell to mask the sounds.

Business is better than expected with the local school, doctor, bank manager, lawyer, fishmonger, and even General Gamart becoming customers. Florence establishes a lending library, serviced from London by a red and cream Brompton's book store van.

Thirty inhabitants of Hardborough sign up for the library on the first day, but it becomes unmanageable in the small premises, with customers being unhappy with the division of ordered books. The lending library closes, with notice given that it would reopen in a month. A formal note was sent to Mr. Brundish to advise him.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

We are getting down to the nitty gritty of actually running the business. Florence considers whether the battle for the bookshop has been won, or was not even an issue in the first place. The poltergeist is still making itself known by tapping on the new screws in the wall. The fishmonger comes to purchase a vocal score of the *Messiah* and prickles that it would have to be ordered. The local women jostle for the first lending library copy of the *Life of Queen Mary*, and each, in their way, tell Florence how she should be running her business.

The support from the influential Mr. Brundish sets in such a way that she now has influential locals both for and against her, adding to the underlying tensions.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Ten year old, but 'well-prepared,' Christine Gipping comes to help out at the bookshop after school and all day Saturday for no less than 'twelve and six' a week. A letter arrives from a Mr Gill, an artist, using Violet Gamart as a reference and asking to display his paintings in the Old House bookshop. With little space to spare, Florence consigns the letter to a drawer to join others from artists and authors asking the same thing.

A fish and chip shop has opened in town and further threatens the livelihood of the fishmonger who still has not been able to sell his shop. The summer holidays arrive and on Thursday Florence closes early and goes to the beach for a swim. She notices that she now recognizes many of the beachgoers as occasional customers.

Mr. Raven bought a new van and takes some of the Sea Scouts to London to visit Baden-Powell House, and then to Liverpool Street Station to watch the trains.

Christine makes the mistake of selling 150 Chinese silk book markers that had been bought for five shillings each, for five pence each, creating a loss on each item. This, and other book-keeping irregularities, irk the once a month bookkeeper, Ivy Welford.

Milo North buys a coloring book of Bible Lands for Kattie as a birthday present. He raises the point that Violet Gamart had not been in the shop yet, and it had been open for six months. He suggests Florence stock the book he has under his arm '*Lolita*' by Nabokov, telling her it would make her a fortune.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Readers are aware that Violet Gamart is still quietly working behind the scenes. With the small but continuing mentions of Violet Gamart, the battle appears to be suspended but possibly not over yet.

Florence is avoiding the less appealing parts of the bookshop. She dislikes the bookkeeping, she has been refunding customers when they have bought a book and, reportedly, do not like it and is dragging her feet on reopening the lending library.

While she thanks Milo for his advice on the *Lolita* book, and says he is kind, he rebuts her saying, 'You always make that mistake.' Florence is aware that stocking the controversial *Lolita* presents her with a dilemma. It is interesting that, while Milo North contributes the idea with the notion that she would make a bundle of money from it, you have to wonder at his real motives.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

The Old House rapper stirs up a ruckus on night when Christine stays behind, locking up the bookshop. She makes tea while Florence lights the paraffin fire. The fire reacts strangely. Although there was no draft, the flames shot up and sank. While the young girl and the woman comfortably talk together, 'two stages of the same woman's life,' Christine becomes ill at ease and goes to the back door to check it.

Noises start upstairs, whispering, scratching, and tapping, as if something were being dragged. Florence reaches out to hold Christine's cold hand and the noise upstairs grows louder. The noise moves downstairs, and then grows to battering and animal screams outside the window.

Christine says that she knew it was the rapper and that it wanted them to stay and be tormented. The 'siege' lasted just over ten minutes. Ten minutes after that, the girl was asleep.

The next day, when Christine returns, she says they should just say the Lord's Prayer together if the rapper did that again. She said her mother had said the church can help with ghosts, but not with rappers.

Florence regrets the reference to the church and wishes that, when she speaks to the vicar, it was not always about money and donations. Then she went out to the early church service and noticed that it was her turn to do the flowers next week. She notes that Mrs., Gamart is expected to provide the flowers for two weeks, as she has a bigger garden.

On her way home from church, Florence joins Mrs. Gipping for a drink of marrow wine, with a wooden spigot driven directly into the marrow.

Milo visits her in the shop and asks again if she is going to stock *Lolita*. She tells him she has not decided yet, and that she will stock it only if it is a good book, and that she will take sound advice before making a decision. He mentions that the money she could make from it could be helpful if 'the worst came to the worst.' Florence realizes that, a few days before, Raven had shown her a patch of weeds that were considered a delicacy in London. He had mentioned that they fetch a high price, which might help her, if things did not work out.

Milo also adds that General Gamart had mentioned that his wife 'didn't expect *Lolita* would be sold in a dear, sleepy little place called Hardborough.'

She reviews her financial status after telling Milo things were going respectably. As we read of the outgoings, it is noted that her only advertising was through the parish magazine.



## Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter centers on philosophical and moral reasoning. It discusses the strong interference of the rapper and ways to combat its influence. It holds the first mention of Florence's dealings with the church. It appears the relationship is more of her giving financial support and seeming to get less comfort than she would like in return. Milo asks what Florence thinks of his morals, and she tells him he should marry Kattie, think less about himself, and work harder.

These issues are laid as a background for Florence's quandary over whether to stock the highly debated *Lolita*. Her responses are structured within very working class sensibilities. Violet Gamart, however, is portrayed with more genteel sensibilities with her remarks about the book not being sold in such a 'dear, sleepy place.'



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Violet Gamart finally calls at the Old House Bookshop after the reopening of the library. Young Christine now has the library customers organized and orderly. The artist, Theodore Gill, arrives at the same time with his local artwork. While Florence is distracted by Mr. Gill, Mrs. Gamart falls afoul of Christine's system. To the horror of other customers, Mrs. Gamart receives a rap over the knuckles with a school ruler for picking up books ordered by others.

Mrs. Gamart, face reddened and clasping her hand, leaves the shop without a word. Locals are affronted, and claim Christine has been given too much authority for one so young. Florence asks the distraught Christine to deliver the order for Mr. Brundish. She also sends a note asking him to advise her on the suitability of stocking *Lolita* and a copy of it for him to read and review.

Mr. Gill and his artworks are removed from the Old House and installed next door in Rhoda's dressmakers.

Christine's mother, Mrs. Gipping, tells Florence that Mr. Brundish is inviting her to tea on Sunday. This rare invitation is delivered to Florence in full ear of customers and staff at the grocery store. The invitation came in early November. By the time the town gathers for Bonfire Night, everyone knows of the invitation.

The meeting between the reclusive, but still powerful, Mr. Brundish and Florence is to discuss the suitability of stocking *Lolita*. He expresses that Florence paid him a compliment in asking him a serious question. He discusses the opposition of Violet Gamart. He warns Florence that she might be confusing force and power that, because of her connections, Violet is a powerful woman.

He gives her his opinion of *Lolita* - that it is a good book, and that she should try to sell it to the inhabitants of Hardborough. He also discusses that he admires courage, and that she has an abundance of that quality.

Florence orders 250 copies of the book. They arrange a display of the books in pyramids in the window space. Christine thinks that Florence has lost her head in ordering so many copies of the one book.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter brings the battle briefly into the open. The first meeting of Violet Gamart and Florence Green in the bookstore is set almost like a dance with other partners. While Mrs. Green is contending with the pushy artist, Mr. Gill, Mrs., Gamart is facing Christine Gipping. It is evident that Mr. Gill support Mrs. Gamart's plan, and his letter of



introduction used her as a reference. Christine Gipping, on the other hand, is an ally of Florence Green and the book store.

When Christine goes too far in rapping Mrs. Gamart over the knuckles with a ruler, Florence brings in another ally, Mr. Brundish. But he is also socially inept.

The heron is mentioned again - this time it is used in describing the bonfire fuel waiting for Bonfire night - *'The pile of fuel had stood there for days, like a giant heron's nest.'* The catching of the fire is coaxed by residents applying diesel fuel and watched by all. It sends 'otters and water-rats fleeing up the dykes.' It gives the children potatoes to eat, but they are tinged with the taste of diesel fuel.

The bonfire setting also brings in the headmaster of the Technical, the schoolteacher Mrs. Traill, and the fishmonger's wife, Mrs. Deben. They are all watching the fire, and all aware of Florence's impending meeting with Mr. Brundish.

Mr. Brundish makes the comment that he admires courage most. He calls it the one virtue that humans share with gods and animals. He also says that Florence Green possesses the quality in abundance.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Florence and her own solicitor, Thomas Thornton, communicate through a series of letters. He advises her of a letter of complaint from Mrs. Violet Gamart through her solicitors, John Drury and Co. The complaint outlines that the distraction of her window display is causing undesirable attention and obstructing traffic. Mr. Thornton warns Florence there may be considerable damages awarded against them.

Florence replies, asking her lawyer to come and see the display for himself and reminds him he is supposed to be representing her interests. Mr. Thornton replies that he has been unable to reach her store because of the crowds coming from as far away as Flintmarket.

He later suggests she abate the obstruction and further cease to offer *Lolita* for sale in her store. He also suggests she make a formal apology to Mrs. Gamart. Her final reply is simply, 'Coward!' No more was heard and the complaint was dropped.

In the first week of December she made over 82 pounds in profit on *Lolita* alone. She was feeling prosperous.

A list of her alliances show her neighbor, Jessie Welford; the artist, Mr. Gill; and the fishmonger, Mr. Deben as hostile towards her, because the crowds to her store had not benefited their businesses. Florence also removes her legal business from Mr. Thornton to a firm of solicitors in Flintmarket.

Christine uses promotional material, given to her by Florence, to create a fancy dress costume called Good-bye 1959 for a charity ball. Mrs., Gamart is the patroness and Milo North is the judge of the fancy dress. Christine's entry was an easy winner of the Most Original costume.

A week later, Christine danced as Salome in her eldest sister's bikini at the school's Nativity Play. Mrs. Traill said she was not shocked after so many years at the school, but Mrs. Gamart did not look as though she approved.

In a discussion about available theatre opportunities, the scout, Wally, mentions he had been to see a traveling company put on a production of Hansel and Gretel. He said the boy and girl were covered with leaves and got fresh with each other. Florence explains that he must be confused, that Hansel and Gretel are brother and sister. He replies that it does not make any difference.

Florence takes a walk to the ruins of an estate that had been built five years earlier without calculating the erosion caused by the sea. The house had begun to slide to the cliff's edge before anyone had even come to live there. She pauses and relaxes on a doorstep until she see Milo North and his girlfriend Kattie returning from a walk.





This is the first time Florence has met Kattie. She is wearing the bright red tights, but she has been crying. When Kattie sits next to Florence, Milo steps inside to see if the water is still connected. Blood red, rusty water pours out of the taps. Milo tells Florence that Kattie could live there perfectly well.

He tells Florence they have been to lunch with Violet Gamart as an opportunity for her not to disapprove of them. Florence asks whether Mrs. Gamart still wants him to run an Arts Center in Hardborough, and he tells her that is seasonal, reaching a crisis every summer when other towns are holding their Arts Festivals.

Kattie tries very hard to befriend Florence, asking her advice on things from wrapping books to plants that she picks.

An Inspector comes to the school to question Christine about her work and hours at the book shop. A series of letters between the Education Authority and Florence detail the legal standing of having Christine work in the bookshop. Florence argued that the Act in question did not apply to Christine as she was younger than 14 years old. She was not working, but 'helping out' in an odd job category, which many young children do in Suffolk. This complaint also fizzles away to nothing. Mr. Brundish sends Florence a note of congratulations in winning this small battle.

Sales at the bookshop are now slower. Florence was in the process of having the oyster warehouse demolished in order to sell the site. The bank manager calls her in for a meeting and advises her that the site was waterlogged. He mentions that the quieter time at her shop was preferable to the rush before Christmas when he thought she was going to 'jolt us out of our old ways altogether.'

Later that spring, Mrs. Gamart's nephew successfully got a Private Members Bill through the first and second readings in Parliament. The Bill empowers local councils to buy compulsorily, with compensation, buildings wholly or partly erected before 1549 and not used for residential purposes, as long as there were no other buildings of similar date, to be used for the cultural recreation of the public.

Florence dismisses this as not being relevant to her because the local councils could not afford to take on such a project, and she was still living in the Old House. Mrs. Gamart was pleased that her nephew had come upon the idea while attending a party at her house the previous spring.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

The battles in this chapter follow a line of influence, either directly or indirectly, between Mrs. Gamart and the Old House bookshop. She had been aware of *Lolita* and opposed the attention it created in Hardborough. She knew, from her rap across the knuckles, that young Christine worked at the Bookshop, and she would have come to her attention again by winning at the Fancy Dress Ball. The inspiration for the Access to Places of Educational Value and Interest Bill, while not directly credited to Violet Gamart, certainly had her hand of influence.

Meanwhile, Florence's fortunes are dwindling, sales are slow, the Old House is in need of repair, and the clearing of the Oyster shed site is taking much longer than expected.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Christine receives her results from the eleven-plus exam, which determines if students follow a technical or academic education. Christine is invited to the Technical. Mrs. Gipping calls in to the Bookshop to let Florence know that Christine would no longer be working for her.

Over a glass of sickly sweet, red Cherry Brandy Mrs. Gipping tells Florence that they had not expected Christine to be invited to the Grammar school, even though all of their other children had gone that way, and that it was the equivalent to a 'death sentence' dictating the station of the child's future life.

Mrs. Gipping also advises that Christine is likely to try for a Saturday job at the new bookshop at Saxford Tye. Florence drives to Saxford Tye to have a look at the new shop. Florence does not know that the new shop is an investment of Lord Gosfield, who had also attended the party hosted by Violet Gamart.

Florence offers Christine a parting present and she replies she would prefer money. Everything in the shop, and the people involved with it, remind her of her failure to successfully complete the essays and questions on the eleven-plus exam.

The County Council opens a Public Library in Hardborough, resulting in the closing of the lending library at the Old House. The Library is sited in the former fishmonger's shop. The rapper makes its presence known less frequently, and the part-time bookkeeper has accepted a promotion at work and is unavailable to check the books any more.

Milo North tells Florence she is working too hard and offers to help out in the shop now that Christine is not available. He confides that Kattie had left him, giving him more spare time.

The Private Bill went through to the House of Lords and was amended to read that even if buildings were occupied at the moment, they would still be eligible if they had stood vacant at any time for a period of more than five years.

While Florence is out checking new orders in Flintmarket, Milo closes the shop and sits in a chair reading. Christine walks in on him and he tells her Florence is unlikely to be able to keep the shop for much longer.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Competition for business, for work, for status, and existence are alluded to in this chapter.



Christine is handed her station in life. Entry to the Grammar School that could have raised her above her birth was not handed to her in a square, white envelope. Instead her future was sealed in a long, buff-colored envelope from the Technical School.

Mrs. Gipping describes it as a death sentence. She states that Christine would not likely even meet or marry a white-collar chap. Her station would involve marrying a laboring or even unemployed man and 'pegging out her own washing until the day she dies.'

The red of the Cherry Brandy brings back the underlying sense of danger. This is sickly sweet, probably as much as Milo North's offer to help out after Christine leaves and Violet Gamart's barely visible influence on those around her who can assist her to have her wish for an Arts Center.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Raven pessimistically speaks about the cows coughing in the early morning mist and the cold weather of October. In the mist that does not lift until midday and closes down again at four o'clock, Mr. Brundish makes an unexpected visit to Mrs. Gamart at the Stead.

Sickly, fainting, and without all the appropriate protocols and manners, he had called to ask Mrs. Gamart to leave Florence Green alone. At the end of the discussion in which Violet refused to join forces with him, she asks if he thinks her outrageous. 'By outrageous I take it that you mean unexpectedly offensive. You have been offensive, Mrs. Gamart, but you have been exactly as I expected,' he replied.

Half way across the street on his way home, Mr. Brundish falls over and dies. He is buried on market day and Florence has the urge to be by herself. There is a large, cold lunch at the Stead. But General Gamart comes into the Bookshop. He tells Florence he just came in to say, 'A good man gone.' He said his wife had told him the purpose of Mr., Brundish visiting the Stead on that day was to congratulate her for her idea about the Arts Center. Although he did not think Art would be quite in line with Mr. Brundish.

The Old House is requisitioned under the new Act. Having demolished the oyster warehouse, there are no other uninhabited buildings of the same era. An undisclosed benefactor had made it possible for the council to buy out Mrs. Green. Assessments decide that the business did not need compensating, and, as a dwelling, the building was unfit for human habitation, so no claim for compensation could be made.

Florence found that these assessments had been made while she was absent from the premises, admitted by her 'servant,' Mr. Milo North. When Florence asks him why he had done it, had anybody asked him to, he replied, 'They did ask me rather often, and it seemed the easiest thing to do.'

While he, no longer working in the bookshop, informs Florence that Christine might be available again, because she had been suspended by the headmaster from the Technical after only half a term.

In order to repay the loan, Florence sold the remainder of her stock, leaving her two Everymans books that did not sell, Ruskin's '*Unto this last*' and Bunyan's '*Grace Abounding*,' both with their bookmarks '*Everyman I will be thy guide, in thy most need to go by thy side.*'

Wally, the scout, carries her suitcases to the bus-stop and she leaves Hardborough, head bowed and ashamed.



## Chapter 10 Analysis

In one last, ditch effort to save the bookshop and Florence Green, Edmond Brundish faced Violet Gamart in person. His death was the last nail in the coffin of the Old House Bookshop.

Milo North hammered in those nails and left Florence Green with nothing to show for her time at the Old House. The knocker was quiet and the townsfolk had already started to think the shop was closed. Raven returned to being concerned for his animals, although he did note that the council could not afford to drain their own marshes, let alone fund an Arts Center.

Florence Green's new solicitors were, at first, excited that they might be able to fight the administrative decision on natural justice grounds, but when they realized Florence did not have the money to fund such a challenge, they lost interest, and Florence lost all entitlements to compensation.

Christine Gipping had been suspended by the headmaster who had been in charge of the bonfire the previous November, but no explanation was given to enlighten the reader.

Grammar schoolboy and scout Wally assisted Florence to the bus with her luggage. She left with her head bowed in shame, 'because the town in which she had lived for nearly ten years had not wanted a bookshop.'



# Characters

## Florence Green

Florence is a widow of eight years when she decides to open a bookshop in an old, abandoned house in Hardborough. She has a kind heart, deemed not much use when it comes to self-preservation. She is described as small, wispy, and wiry, but she has an abundance of courage and confidence. These qualities are admired by two men, Edmond Brundish, a recluse of note, and Mr. Raven, the marshman. These are the same qualities that cause concern to the more traditional inhabitants of Hardborough.

Florence is intelligent and thoughtful, but not wise to the efficiency of underhandedness. She finds fine details irksome, like the petty cash balance in the business, and she tends to overlook the smaller details.

## Violet Gamart

Violet is an influential woman in the sense that people would rather comply with her wishes than put up with the trouble it would cause if they did not. She is used to getting her own way and will use any means to do so. She likes to maintain a veneer of power without force and will use others to whittle away at her opponents rather than directly being involved in a battle.

Violet has a desire for the Old House to be turned into the Hardborough Arts Center. This passion lifts and wanes as the art circles of surrounding towns hold their Art Festivals. Not having an Arts Center lessens Hardborough, and therefore Violet's sense of artistic importance.

Violet is upper-class and knows her station well. She is on influential boards and a patron of charity events. She desperately wanted to be accepted by the town patriarch Mr. Brundish, who calls her offensive, powerful and dangerous.

## Christine Gipping

Christine is a young, working class girl, smart in a practical sense and a good worker. She has a maturity beyond her years and oversteps her place in society when given authority over the library at the bookshop. The impact of working class distinction in Britain at this time is most characterized by Christine and her family.

## Edmond Brundish

Mr. Brundish is an influential, old family recluse, who refuses to allow the world onto his earth. He is of failing health, and his moods are often dark. He becomes a champion of



the bookshop and it is his idea for Florence to start a lending library. He is aware of Violet Gamart's opposition to the bookshop. At every opportunity, he seeks to balance his support for Florence against Violet Gamart's opposition. In the end, he appeals directly to her, fails, and then dies.

## **Milo North**

Milo is a young, creative, and works for the BBC. He is Violet Gamart's high profile choice to run the Hardborough Arts Center once it is established. He is self-deprecating and self absorbed at the same time. He warns Florence he is never kind and not to be trusted, and he is honest about that. He has a relationship with a young woman from the BBC named Kattie. After a visit to lunch with Violet Gamart, Kattie is seen crying and soon leaves him for another man. Milo takes the easiest way out of anything, as long as it entails no cost to him.

## **Kattie**

Milo North's girlfriend Kattie wears red tights and stays with him on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights. The only time we see her is after they have had lunch with Violet Gamart in an effort for her to find them respectable. Kattie has been crying. She tries desperately to be close to Florence, but then disappears, her relationship with Milo over.

## **Mr Raven**

Raven is the marshman at Hardborough and tends the animals. He is known as the person to call if a vet is not available. He is independent and never asks for anything from anyone unless it is absolutely necessary. He admires Florence's courage and becomes a supporter. He organizes his scout troop to assist in setting up the bookshop and to help with odd jobs when needed. He is on the lower levels of Hardborough's society and considered uncouth by some of its more conservative residents.

## **General Gamart**

General Gamart is an old school services officer. He is described like an extra in a theatrical production in a party at his own house. He is one of the bookshop's first customers and also comes to the shop to offer a sense of condolences after the death of Florence's protector, Mr. Brundish. He obviously does these things without consulting his wife, but he has no influence over her.





# Objects/Places

## Access to Places of Educational Value and Interest Bill

This Bill, put up in Parliament by Mrs. Gamart's nephew, allowed councils to acquire buildings built before 1549 to be used for the cultural recreation of the public. The Old House was acquired under this legislation

## Eleven Plus Exam

The Eleven plus exam was sat by British students before entering high school. The results determined if the student was academically suited to study at a Grammar School or if they were more suited to manual, technical, or administrative studies at a Technical College. Grammar School acceptance allowed students to enter a university and a profession and therefore, acceptance to a Technical College may have been considered a failure by some.

## Flintmarket

Flintmarket is a larger neighboring town to Hardborough.

## Hardborough

Hardborough is a small seaside town in Suffolk, England.

## The Heron

A heron is a long necked bird with a pointed bill with sharp cutting edges. It often inhabits marshes and eats fish, frogs, crustaceans, and other aquatic animals.

## Holt House

Holt House is the ancestral home of Mr. Brundish.

## Lolita

*Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov, was a novel first published in Paris in 1955. It detailed the infatuation of a middle-aged academic with an American twelve year old girl. It was controversial for its time, and its merit was hotly debated in society circles.



## **The Old House**

The Old House is a house of some historical merit that has been left derelict for seven years. Florence Green buys and converts it into a bookshop, while Violet Gamart dreams of it housing a cultural center.

## **The rapper**

A rapper is the local name for a poltergeist. One inhabits and occasionally haunts the Old House.

## **The Stead**

The Stead is the stately home of General and Violet Gamart.

## **Technical College**

A technical college is a high school that teaches manual arts, domestic, and commercial studies to students who did not qualify for an education at a more academic Grammar School.

# Themes

## Survival of the Fittest

To defy those who have the power is to court danger, no matter how seemingly civilized your actions may appear.

If Florence Green had sought the permission and patronage of Violet Gamart before she bought the Old House and converted it into a bookshop, or if she had agreed to move to other premises once she was told Mrs. Gamart had other plans for the Old House, she may have been allowed to make a success of her business. The bookshop relied on the support of one powerful, upper-class figure, against the attacks of another.

The people of Hardborough find it hard to categorize Florence Green's place in their society. She had been invited to The Stead, where many respected citizens had not. She had been invited to tea with Mr. Brundish, an event even Mrs. Gamart was unable to achieve. Yet, she maintains friendly conversations with Mr. Raven and visits controversial Milo North at his home. The bank manager knows her financial affairs and treats her with some disdain. Her lawyer knows her legal affairs and sides with her opposition.

Small, defiant successes, such as the profits and attention by stocking the topical *Lolita*, are both allowed, and then held as an example of lack of good judgment and taste. These traits can only be exercised by those of higher social standing and breeding.

Violet Gamart has, at her disposal, links to power in the form of a legislating Member of Parliament, the Education Board, Solicitors, and petitions to ensure her success.

*The Bookshop* reinforces the notion that you cannot fight the ruling class and expect to win. Florence Green fights it and loses. Christine Gipping fights it by teaching Violet Gamart a lesson in manners with the cold end of her school ruler, and loses. Kattie fights it by trying to be accepted by society in her relationship with Milo North, and loses.

It could be argued that in rural England, in the 1950s, the ruling class was the most fit to survive. While the working class was trying to make some progress *The Bookshop* portrays that it could only be successful with the patronage of the ruling classes.

## Red

Florence Green chose a red dress for her first meeting with Violet Gamart and the higher society of Hardborough. Before she even makes her way to the party, she knows she has made a mistake. At the party, it signals to Violet Gamart that she may actually be in danger of not getting what she wants this time. For Florence, it signifies that she may have thought she had more confidence and strength than she really did.



Kattie's modern red tights signal danger to traditional society. Here is a woman living with a man on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights and expecting to be admitted to the society circle of Hardborough.

Rusty red water flows from the abandoned new estate houses that are subsiding down a cliff. Milo notes that Kattie would be more at home here than in his house.

After Christine fails her eleven-plus exam, Florence and Mrs. Gipping drink sickly sweet, deep red, cherry brandy and discuss the limitations of Christine's future.

All of these descriptions pertain to women or their lives. Red is often used to signify the 'scarlet' woman. A woman stepping out of her class or station in life would have been as threatening to a staid society in the late 1950s as a 'red rag to a bull.'

## Fear of change

The 1960s were a time of change for women and the class system. The changes and some of the struggles are noted in *The Bookshop*.

At the very beginning, Florence wonders whether she was taking on too much while she watched the heron battle the eel for survival. The notion of a widow becoming a business owner is considered brave. The bank manager, Mr. Keble, both warns her of the uncertainties to be brought by the 1960s and later muses that he had feared she might jolt them out of their old ways altogether.

New products and emerging technologies are mentioned in the book. Kleenex tissues were replacing handkerchiefs, colorful tights replacing stockings, and instant coffee replacing tea.

These new products and the emerging future do not sit comfortably enough yet with the population. A tension is created as they are noted as much for what they are replacing, as for what they are themselves.



# Style

## Point of View

*The Bookshop* is written in the third person with a narrator looking mostly over Florence Green's shoulder, but also able to see things that may impact on her, either from within Hardborough or even in far distances like the Parliament in London.

Florence's day-to-day thoughts, actions, and conversations are reliably told. Some of her conversations are delivered by letters and notes. Correspondence between Florence and the reclusive Mr. Brundish is only revealed by their notes until they meet. Once they have met Mr. Brundish becomes visible to the reader and is taken with him to his meeting with Violet Gamart.

The involvement of Mrs. Gamart in the downfall of the Old House Bookshop is understated, as it would have been if she herself were retelling it at one of her parties. It highlights her behind the scenes wiles. Her husband, Colonel Gamart, relays obvious deceptions to which he is blind. He is treated kindly by the narrator, which allows the reader to empathize with him.

## Setting

The setting of Hardborough, a small seaside town in England, takes the emergence of widespread changes at the beginning of the 1960s away from the typical city and youth oriented stories and places it firmly in traditionalism.

Small town Hardborough has few amenities apart from those needed for survival. Luxuries, such as cinemas, Laundromats, pre-prepared food outlets, and certainly a bookshop seem frivolous when local folk have been used to doing it hard.

The engineers of the new estate that would have energized Hardborough and increased its population, failed to take into account the subsiding cliffs upon which it was built. Similarly, Florence Green failed to take into account the power behind society matriarch Violet Gamart.

At the end of the story, while Florence leaves with her head bent in failure, you feel that Hardborough has, once again, reclaimed its attachment to the past and its reserve against breaking new ground. The rapper is quiet. Violet Gamart has her way. All is well in sleepy Hardborough.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in *The Bookshop* is grammar school English, properly executed, and held with typical English restraint. There is full use of traditional manners and a tight



constraint on emotions. This enforces the setting of a community in subservience to the ways of the past, while a few characters introduce new products by their brand names forewarning the commercialism that will eventually change small towns like Hardborough forever.

Letters between Mr. Brundish and Florence Green contain a formality of both prose and their social levels. Correspondence between Florence and her solicitor, Mr. Thornton, are more abrupt, but none the less formally produced. There is hardly any direct conflict within the story, even though conflict is underlying and ever present. This tight reign on physicality and language perfectly matches the social constraints of the middle and upper classes at that time. Only suitably tested and confirmed working class girl Christine Gipping shows any physicality or crudity.

As well as suiting the setting and time illustrated in *The Bookshop*, the language demonstrates author Penelope Fitzgerald's own upbringing, education, and experiences she would have likely encountered during times when she worked in a bookshop.

## Structure

*The Bookshop* contains ten chapters and moves in a linear fashion from the consideration of opening a bookshop, through the setting up and running, and eventual closing of the business. The story starts in the mind of widow Florence Green and is added to by those who influence the outcome along the way. We meet her supporters and her detractors. We meet those who serve her and whom she serves.

The story is primarily moved by conversations and the thoughts and activities of some of the characters. It is occasionally punctuated with letters that highlight requests or difficulties not foreseen by Florence.

Without the bookshop, there is no story and so our defeated heroine, Florence Green, leaves on a train with no mention of where she is going, and the fate of Hardborough only to be imagined.



## Quotes

'She was in appearance small, wispy and wiry, somewhat insignificant from the front view, and totally so from the back.' Chapter 1, pgs 7-8

'As soon as she had gone, the groups of guests re-formed themselves, as the cattle had done when Raven took the old horse aside.' Chapter 2, pgs 27-28

'That's all right, Miss. I'm Christine Gipping, I'll take her. We've got Kleenex at ours - they're more hygienic.' Chapter 3 pg 31

'Among these the popular war reminiscences, in jackets of khaki and blood-red, faced each other as rivals with bristling hostility.' Chapter 3 pgs 38-39

'The wet sand and shingle sank as though unwilling to bear her slight weight, and then oozed up again, filling her footprints with glittering water. To leave a mark of any kind was exhilarating.' Chapter 5, pg 60

'The truth was that Florence Green had not been brought up to understand nature's such as Milo's.' Chapter 5, pg 63

'She was still holding her school ruler, ornamented with a series of Donald Ducks.' Chapter 7 pg 73

'A good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life, and as such it must surely be a necessary commodity.' Chapter 8, p 87

'Dear Mr Thornton,

Coward!

Yours sincerely,

Florence Green.'

Chapter 8, pg 88

'Old age is not the same thing as historical interest,' he said. 'Otherwise we should both of us be more interesting than we are.' Chapter 10, pg 114

'He was buried in the flinty soil of the churchyard among the Suffolk sea dead, midshipmen drowned at eleven years old, fishermen lost with all hands. The northeast corner of the acre was the family plot of the earth-loving Brundishes.' Chapter 10 pg 117

'It was defeat, but defeat is less unwelcome when you are tired.'







## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the notion of the survival of the fittest or the eel. Which characters do you think they represented?

Discuss why Violet Gamart was so successful at getting people to do as she wished.

Why do you think Mr. Brundish became a recluse?

Discuss why the Old House Cultural Center was so important to Violet Gamart

Discuss what you imagine to have happened at Milo and Kattie's lunch with Violet Gamart.

Christine Gipping was 10 years old in 1959. Discuss how her life might have developed differently than her mother may have thought. What developments might have made it different?

The eleven-plus exams have been abolished now. What do you think are the positives and negatives of such a system?

The customers showed a liking for books on royalty for women, and books on warfare for men, discuss why this would be and if it has changed.

Discuss how the Old House Rapper influenced the story. Why do you think it settled down?

What would you have done differently if you were Florence Green?