

A Complicated Kindness: A Novel Study Guide

A Complicated Kindness: A Novel by Miriam Toews

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Contents

| | |
|--|--------------------|
| A Complicated Kindness: A Novel Study Guide..... | 1 |
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Plot Summary..... | 3 |
| Chapters One and Two..... | 4 |
| Chapters Three and Four..... | 7 |
| Chapters Five and Six..... | 8 |
| Chapters Seven and Eight..... | 10 |
| Chapters Nine and Ten..... | 13 |
| Chapters Eleven and Twelve..... | 15 |
| Thirteen and Fourteen..... | 17 |
| Chapter Fifteen and Sixteen..... | 19 |
| Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen..... | 21 |
| Chapters Nineteen and Twenty..... | 22 |
| Chapters Twenty-one and Twenty-two..... | 24 |
| Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-four..... | 27 |
| Chapters Twenty-five and Twenty-six..... | 29 |
| Chapter Twenty-seven and Twenty-eight..... | 31 |
| Characters..... | 34 |
| Objects/Places..... | 39 |
| Themes..... | 42 |
| Style..... | 44 |
| Quotes..... | 46 |
| Topics for Discussion..... | 49 |



Plot Summary

The novel, *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews, tells the disturbing story of a teenage girl whose family as well as her own life has been torn apart by an overly powerful religion. Nomi struggles through her own crisis of faith as she tries to deal with the disappearance of both her mother and older sister. Eventually Nomi's rebellious behavior causes her to be excommunicated from her church. It is Nomi's father who loves her enough to give her the freedom she needs to leave the town and the religion that she finds so suffocating.

Nomi Nickel is thirteen years old when first her older sister, and then her mother leave her alone with her loving but distant father. Nomi describes herself as being a "pious little Menno kid" who worries about her rebellious older sister's salvation. Three years later, at the time the novel is written, Nomi is a rebellious teenager who is fighting with her own doubts and questions about the beliefs and regulations of her religion. She also struggles to put a context around the departure of her mother and sister as she searches for clues to determine what went wrong. Although Nomi may not have been the Mennonite the leader of the clan would have wanted her to be, Nomi does credit this man with giving her faith to hope that one day her family will be reunited and happy again.

Nomi believes the only thing the future holds for her is a job in the chicken-slaughtering house that is one of the major industries of their town. She struggles with her senior year of high school and falls behind on schoolwork, as she gets deeper into drug use and a boyfriend, Travis, who has quit school to work for his father. It bothers her that she is unable to please Mr. Quiring, a teacher who believes her sister is gifted, by providing a story with a satisfactory ending. Near the end of the novel, Nomi indicates that she has written this story for Mr. Quiring, who she has learned had an affair with her mother then threatened her mother with punishment from the church if she tried to tell anyone what he had done.

At the conclusion of the novel, Nomi is excommunicated from the church because of her lack of attendance as well as the act of setting Travis' truck on fire. After her excommunication, Nomi's father leaves town, leaving her the family car and ownership of the house. Although this action may seem cruel, it gives Nomi the freedom to leave town also and control her own future.



Chapters One and Two

Chapters One and Two Summary

The novel, *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews, tells the disturbing story of a teenage girl whose family as well as her own life has been torn apart by an overly powerful religion. Nomi struggles through her own crisis of faith as she tries to deal with the disappearance of both her mother and older sister. Eventually Nomi's rebellious behavior causes her to be excommunicated from her church. It is Nomi's father who loves her enough to give her the freedom she needs to leave the town and the religion that she finds so suffocating.

In Chapter One, Nomi tells the reader that she lives alone with her father Ray in a house near Highway Number Twelve. Her mother, Trudie, and sister, Tash, have left home. Tash left with Ian while Trudie, apparently, left home alone. Nomi says that her father claims they are "making it" by themselves, but Nomi thinks that life would be better if they could move to another town. Her father won't move because he is waiting for his wife and daughter, who have both been gone for three years, to come back home.

Nomi describes her town as being severe and silent. She says the people seem only to be waiting to die. Nomi and her family are Mennonites. She is embarrassed by their beliefs and lifestyle. Nomi dreams of living in the East Village of New York.

Trudie and Ray, Nomi's parents, are second cousins as well as husband and wife. Trudie puts on her passport that her eyes are hazel but the whole family has the same color smoky green eyes. Nomi indicates that she and her father have no way to know where her mother is. Nomi sometimes imagines her mother is in the Congo planting churches but realizes that isn't very likely. Trudie loved to read romance novels, but hated working in the church basement. Nomi says her mother is a person who was somewhere in the middle of being good and bad in a culture in which a person had to be either one or the other.

In Chapter Two, Trudie hates the fact they live in a backward, non-progressive community that is a tourist draw for Americans. When the Queen visits East Village, Trudie says she will not go, but later does go, on her own terms. Her daughters wonder if she has crossed the line from being crazy in a cool way to being crazy in a demented way. One day, Tash finds one of Trudie's Kris Kristofferson eight-tracks and plays a trick on the leader of the Mennonites with it. Nomi believes that her sister is headed to damnation.

Nomi notes that she believes Menno Simons might have been on a cough syrup binge when he devised the list of rules for Mennonites. She adds that although they are strange and sometimes make little sense, these rules have survived to become important parts of the Mennonite life. She can remember how The Mouth took over the



town when he became leader of the church and closed places such as the bus depot, pool hall and bar.

Nomi admits that as a child, she spent quite a bit of time praying for her older sister's soul. Tash and Trudie fight because of Tash's antics during church. Tash defends herself by saying that Trudie feels the same way but is only faking her good behavior out of respect for Ray. As a child, Nomi had wanted the arguing to stop. She had wanted proof that they'd all live together happily forever. She believed at the time that Tash was trying intentionally to break the family up.

Nomi ends this chapter by sharing some memories of her mother. When she was alone, doing household chores, she talked to herself. She liked a made bed. She drove too fast. She liked the word Montreal. Nomi remembers that her father and mother loved each other very much. She remembers her mother trying to learn to ride a motorcycle. Although she knows her mother wanted to travel and pictures that that is what she is doing, Nomi is disturbed when she finds her mother's passport in a drawer after she disappeared.

Chapters One and Two Analysis

Death is a theme that is quickly begun in this chapter. Nomi indicates that she will soon graduate high school and get a job at a slaughterhouse. Many of the people in town work in this type of business. Nomi says that the town hall has a filing cabinet full of death certificates, and that the people are instructed to live as if they are waiting expectantly to die. She adds that if a Mennonite telephone survey worker were to call and ask you if you would rather die or live, and the response was live, the telephone survey caller would hang up.

Trudie, who is Nomi's mother, is one obvious area of obsession with Nomi. Nomi seems to be concerned with remembering her mother and at the same time trying to figure out why her mother might have left her and her father. Nomi plays the memories of her mother that she still has in her mind over and over in an attempt to remember what her mother was like. Although Nomi likes to believe that her mother is traveling and exploring distant lands, or perhaps even planting churches in unchurched areas, Nomi realizes this can't be when she finds her mother's passport left in a drawer after she has gone from home.

One additional important theme introduced in this first chapter is the Mennonite religion and the beliefs of this sect of people. The Mennonite religion was founded by a man named Menno Simons. Nomi indicates that she believes it is "annoying" that the Mennonites are supposed to believe in complete humility, yet the founder named the religion after himself. She also says that she suspects he was high on cough syrup when he came up with the list of things that the Mennonites could and could not do. Nomi can also remember the time when the current leader of the Mennonites, to whom she refers as "The Mouth," had purged the East Village. The Mouth had closed everything but the movie theater during this purge. Nomi is embarrassed by the way the

people in her village act. She notices that her mother tries to ignore that fact that people come into their town to stare at them.



Chapters Three and Four

Chapters Three and Four Summary

In Chapter Three, Nomi tells about meeting her boyfriend, Travis, at a New Year's Eve party. It is when he mentions the name of Lou Reed that Nomi knows she wants Travis as her boyfriend. At the countdown, Nomi is smoking a hash pipe that is accidentally kicked and cuts the inside of her mouth. She passes out and wakes up a few hours later with Travis next to her. At the conclusion of the chapter, Nomi describes how The Mouth, is actually her mother's brother, her uncle.

In Chapter Four, Ray builds a garbage hutch a few days after Trudie leaves. Trudie had always wanted such a hutch. The garbage men think the hutch is garbage, however, and take it along with the trash in the cans. Nomi indicates the construction of this hutch had been a grief reaction on Ray's part.

Nomi's friend Lydia is in the hospital with an undiagnosed illness. Nomi spends time with her friend in the hospital. She reads books to her and talks to her. Lydia is a straight-laced Christian, but the two still get along. Nomi indicates Lydia lived in her head. Nomi notices that one nurse in particular is not kind to Lydia. Nomi, who feels it is her job to protect Lydia, considers killing the nurse on her way out of the hospital.

Chapters Three and Four Analysis

One recurring theme that continues in these two chapters is the idea of religion, and good and bad Mennonites. It is clear in Chapter Three that Nomi considers herself to be a bad Mennonite. She meets her boyfriend, Travis, at a party. At this party, she smokes and does drugs. She considers all of these things to be things that "good" Mennonites would not do. The differences between good and bad Mennonites are also highlighted in Nomi's relationship with Lydia. Nomi considers Lydia to be a good, straight-laced Mennonite. She is surprised that this girl is willing to be friends with her because she is such a mess. Consider that despite the fact that Lydia is a well-behaved Mennonite girl, she is still suffering with her share of grief since she has an undiagnosed illness.

Nomi's relationships within her religion and family are difficult. Her mother, who does not seem dedicated to her religion, is actually the sister of The Mouth, the man who is the leader of the Mennonites in East Village. Uncle Hans is the same man who purges the city and closes all of the pool halls, swimming pools and bars. Nomi remembers seeing her father torn between his love for his unconventional wife and his own dedication to his religion. In much the same way, Nomi is torn between her desire to be a normal teenager and the beliefs of her people.



Chapters Five and Six

Chapters Five and Six Summary

In Chapter Five, Travis and Nomi spend time hanging out at the gravel pit. Nomi catches up with an old friend, Sheridan Klippenstein, whose family has deviated from the Mennonite ways. Nomi leaves Sheridan when Travis cranks the trunk and starts blowing the horn. She and Sheridan non-committedly agree to meet at the gravel pits every five years to catch up with each other.

In Chapter Six, Nomi remembers listening to obituaries with Tash at their grandmother's house. She also remembers standing in a field as a child and pretending to be a scarecrow. One day while doing this, she sees two dresses flying through the air. One lands next to her, and another lands on the roof of her grandmother's barn. In the present, as Travis and Nomi drive around on the country roads Nomi asks Travis to let her look on top of her grandmother's barn roof. The dress is not there.

Nomi recounts how her parents first date was at a church shunning. Their time together consisted of walking three blocks to the church together, then taking their seats on their required, opposite sides of the church. It is at this point that Nomi also tells how her uncle Hans Rosenfeldt, her mother's brother, is the pastor of their church. Tash called him The Mouth of Darkness, shortened to The Mouth.

Chapters Five and Six Analysis

The activities of the teens that Nomi meets at the gravel pits show that she is not the only Mennonite struggling with her religious beliefs. Teens there are smoking, doing drugs, having sex, dancing, listening to music; basically doing everything that their religious beliefs order them not to do. These teens leave the party area just in time to be in church for morning services. At the church, they are properly dressed and properly behaved.

One boy with whom Nomi grew up is Sheridan Klippenstein. His life and his parents' lives were destroyed by the Mennonite religion as is happening to Nomi and her life. Sheridan's father has been excommunicated from the church. As a result Sheridan's mother kills herself. She does this because when a person has been excommunicated from the church, other church members are ordered to no longer associate with the excommunicated person. Sheridan is also no longer part of the Mennonite church.

Nomi's own opinion of her religion is very sarcastic and skeptical. She shows this in her sacrilegious reference to a triumvirate of Jesus, Menno "Sexy" Simons, and Uncle Hands. This group of three men is very similar to the trinity, a trio of powerful figures in the Christian religion.



Notice also Nomi's description of the time that she and her sister spent with her grandmother. She says that she remembers herself and her sister listening to the obituaries on the radio. She indicates it was believed by the Mennonites that it was better for children to listen to obituaries than to listen to popular music, like the Beatles. Nomi finds this very ironic that the children are encouraged to listen to information about death rather than songs about love.

A final thing to note in this section is the discord between Nomi and Travis in their relationship. He seems to have little respect for her as he leaves her alone in the truck, then blows the horn to signal it is time to leave instead of coming to her personally. Nomi, on the same line, seems to recognize Travis' lack of a strong connection to her but chooses to put up with the treatment she receives.



Chapters Seven and Eight

Chapters Seven and Eight Summary

In Chapter Seven, Nomi describes Main Street as being dead. There is a water tower with a blinding light on one end, a statue of Jesus in the middle and a billboard at the other end that says: "SATAN IS REAL. CHOOSE NOW." The street has two unproductive fields on either side of it. Nomi feels that the Americans who visit the city believe the street is strange. The tourists visit the village to see evidence of a simpler time. The major feature is a museum village that depicts the life of the old Mennonites.

Nomi recalls a conversation that she had had with her typing teacher about what she wants out of life. She indicates to him that she wants to be able to live and be herself and not be judged by the church for everything she does. She suggests that she would rather kill herself than hear another judgmental person telling her not to judge others. Nomi's teacher throws her out of class. On another occasion Nomi suggests that there might not be heaven. Her teacher immediately leads the class in prayer for Nomi's soul.

Nomi turns her attention to The Mouth and she wonders what turned him from a happy child to an iron fisted adult. She suspects that as a young man he tried to break away from his religion but as a result of some bad experiences, including a woman who refused his proposal of marriage, decided to take his frustration out on the town with his purges and iron fist. On the way home from Travis' house one night Nomi watches as her uncle takes a container of ice cream out of the freezer in his house and eats out of the container. When he finishes, he leans his head against the stove, as if he is completely defeated by life. A short time later, Nomi sees her mother leaning against their stove in a similar way. She is watching a dog and envying its freedom.

Nomi writes that she is confused by the Bible verses she is required to memorize. She wonders at the way that all the problems of the world seem to find their way into their town, but no one has any way to deal with them but to pray. Her father is a man who is very dedicated to his church. Nomi tries to understand his dedication but doesn't want to think it is because he wants to be reminded of his powerlessness.

Nomi knows there are ways to leave their town if one wants to do so. Her mother left. Nomi likes to picture her mother travelling around the world, but when she finds her passport in her drawer, she knows that is not the case. Nomi admits that it is her attempt to block out the idea that her mother might be dead that she uses drugs. Nomi likes to believe both her sister and mother are alive and that they will all be together some day. However, Nomi notices that her mother did not take anything with her when she left, not even clothes.

In Chapter Eight, Nomi decides to walk around and say goodbye to people she knows even though she is not going anywhere. She tells her friend Gloria that she is going to the city. Gloria brings up the fact there is a picture of Nomi in the new archival portion of



the museum village. Nomi had been volunteering at the museum, lit up a cigarette and caught her bonnet on fire. The picture is taken while the bonnet is still on fire.

She visits Mrs. Peters, who had a son who was Nomi's age but the boy died when he was four. The lady uses Nomi as a means to imagine what her son would be doing if he were still alive. Nomi cuts Mrs. Peter's hair while she visits. Nomi questions Mrs. Peters about how she will look in Heaven and how her son and husband will recognize her. Mrs. Peters asks Nomi how her father is. She leaves without saying goodbye to Mrs. Peters as she intended.

Nomi next visits Lydia in the hospital. She does not intend to say goodbye to her. The nurse has left a stack of papers from Mr. Quiring on Lydia's stomach. Lydia says she is too weak to move them. The nurse comes in and suggests that Lydia isn't as sick as she thinks she is. Nomi tries to stand up for Lydia because the nurse is being cruel with her, Nomi thinks. When the nurse suggests that Nomi's family is crazy, Nomi throws Lydia's apple juice container at her. On her way out Nomi asks a second nurse to see to it that Lydia gets the special care she needs.

Chapters Seven and Eight Analysis

In this section, Nomi puts her finger on the pulse of the problems with many religions, including her own. She is told not to judge, yet she is surrounded and judged by leaders of the church who believe they have the right to dismiss members from the church for "sins" they have committed. The rigidity of the Mennonite religion is proven when Nomi is prayed for simply because she suggests that there might be no heaven. It is not allowed even to ask questions about the belief of the group. Nomi fittingly calls the Mennonites a "cult." Note that when Nomi tries to talk to her typing teacher about her concerns with her religion, she is thrown out of class. When she dares to question whether or not heaven actually exists, the teacher begins to pray for her soul. The teacher considers it a sin just to question the beliefs of the Mennonite religion.

The flow of time is sometimes difficult to keep track of in this novel. Nomi's train of thought jumps quickly from the past to the present, and back to the past giving the reader the challenge of keeping up. For instance, one interesting quirk in time occurs as Nomi talks about walking home from Travis' house after dark and watching her uncle in his house. She then talks about how about a month later, she sees her mom in the same position. It originally appeared that Nomi's mom had already left by the time she started dating Travis.

Notice also Nomi's comparison between the chickens and the people of the town. She writes that even some chickens escape from the slaughterhouse. Some fly away, she writes, and some are found dead in ditches. Nomi uses this comparison to suggest what might have happened to her mother. Although she doesn't want to admit it, Nomi wonders if her mother is one of these escaped chickens who will later be found dead in a ditch. Nomi says she uses drugs and her imagination to block out the possibility that her mother might be dead.



Another interesting aspect of this novel is Nomi's relationship with Lydia. It is uncertain what is wrong with Lydia, but she requires special care because she is overly sensitive to outside stimuli. Instead of being irritated by her friend, Nomi feels very protective of her. Nomi is angered by the nurse who will not take the time to take special care of Lydia. The kind nurse, who promises to care for Lydia, causes Nomi to be so overwhelmed with her kindness that she has to find a painful stimuli to take her mind off the kindness.

When Nomi describes her town, she writes, "There are no bars or visible exits." This sentence sums up the difficulty that people seem to have when thinking about leaving the town, particularly Nomi. Although there are no "bars" to keep her in town as bars keep prisoners in a jail, there are also no "visible exits." Although it does not appear she is being kept a prisoner in her own village, Nomi also does not see an easy way to escape, especially since she knows she will be leaving her father completely alone.



Chapters Nine and Ten

Chapters Nine and Ten Summary

In Chapter Nine, Nomi remembers how she talked to people in neighboring communities about their opinions of the Mennonites for a school project. She learns how the Mennonites took land away from the families of military men while these men were gone to war. The teacher tells her that the project is not relevant and rejects it. Nomi writes a report about the reasons why Menno Simons would lose his faith if faced with the real world. This report is also rejected.

Travis is teaching Nomi how to drive. He also plays guitar for her. Although she feels honored that he wants to be around her, she feels uncomfortable when he asks her questions as well as when she tries to come up with things to say about his guitar playing.

Nomi says that Tash called a couple of times right after she left home, but then stopped calling. Nomi doesn't think that Tash ended up in a commune or being brainwashed because that was too much like what she left East Village to get away from. Right after Trudie and Tash leave, The Mouth prays with Nomi and her father and tells them they can't live in crisis forever.

In Chapter Ten, Travis suggests there was no love between Nomi's mother and father as they sit in his truck outside The Golden Comb's trailer to buy drugs from him. Nomi watches Bert drive up and down her road in his car. He has been excommunicated from the church for drinking.

Nomi and Travis run around a field with no clothes on then fall asleep. When Nomi wakes up, it is raining. Travis has gotten in the truck and left her laying in the rain. She suggests to him his behavior was wrong by pointing out to him that even the cows bunch together to protect each other when it rains. When she gets home, Nomi's father is cleaning out the gutters in the rain.

As she goes out for a walk, Nomi meets the Mouth and his wife. The Mouth speaks to Nomi in the mother language of the Mennonites. He says English pains him and would prefer the people spoke in this language. She had their one daughter as a Sunday School teacher. She liked arts and crafts and often cried over the children because she was afraid they might end up in hell. The Mouth's wife never speaks. The Mouth asks her how her dad is and she tells him to ask him himself.

As Nomi thinks about her brand of cigarettes, she remembers the order they bring to her life. She has tried to quit smoking before and has not been successful. She decides she will quit smoking when she turns 40 but then says that she doesn't think she will live past 40 anyway.



Chapters Nine and Ten Analysis

In these chapters, Nomi's thoughts become more and more random. She jumps from one topic to another sporadically. She jumps from her relationship with Travis to her questions about her mother and her religion to past experiences, then back to the present in almost confusing rapidity. This may symbolize the rapidly increasing confusion in Nomi's mind. The more she searches for answers, the more confused she becomes.

Included in this section are examples of research projects that Nomi has completed for school but were rejected by her teachers because they were not relevant. In one of the projects, Nomi travels on her bike to neighboring communities to learn their opinions of the Mennonites. During this project she learns how the Mennonites took land from the wives and children of French soldiers while the Mennonites did not go to war because they were conscientious objectors. Nomi also writes a report about the way that Menno Simons might have lost his faith in the real world. These rejections show those who were deeply Mennonite could not tolerate any negative information about the Mennonites. They believe their people are perfect. Any information that does not support this belief is considered to be wrong or irrelevant by Mennonite leaders.



Chapters Eleven and Twelve

Chapters Eleven and Twelve Summary

Nomi's thoughts return to her mother in Chapter Eleven. She remembers that her mother worshipped her father, Nicodemus. Her mother also sang very loudly in church, but would not greet the minister, The Mouth, at the back door. She would instead insist that she and the girls leave through the other exit. Later, at the car, her mother and father would argue because Nomi's father decided to walk home even though they waited in the car for him. Even though her faith in the Mennonite religion is not strong, Nomi said that she did gain from Menno Simons a new faith that one day her family would be reunited and live happily together.

As a child, Trudie remembers having the run of the town. Her mother's family was one of the first to come to East Village from Russia. Although Tash says East Village is not a place, Trudie tries to make her understand it is better than their circumstances were in Russia. Trudie describes how families fled the country at night with only a few possessions.

Nomi believes now that Trudie used Dutch Blitz, a card game, to keep her occupied and up until the entire family was safely in the house each night. Nomi's mother did not worry outwardly and did not like outward signs of emotion. Nomi notes that one day her mother has an outward show of her agony, when The Mouth came to visit their house. He talks to Trudie outside and the girls try to decide what they're talking about. Tash gets angry and says that Hans wants her mother to do something. Nomi senses her mother is upset but doesn't understand why. Tash mutters something about a 150-year-old failed experiment. When she asks, Nomi's mother tells her that he wants her to work in the church library.

In Chapter Twelve, Nomi remembers a time when her mother and sister went to church camp together. Later, Nomi finds a goodbye card to Tash from their mother. Nomi wonders about the implications of this card and wonders why she didn't get a card.

Travis quits school and goes to work for his father. He suggests to Nomi that she start taking birth control pills. Nomi takes a nap after school, she bites her arms while she is sleeping. Later she tries to pray but the feeling for which she is waiting does not come.

Chapters Eleven and Twelve Analysis

Nomi's stress about the disappearance of her mother and sister intensifies as time passes. The more information that Nomi remembers about her mother and sister, the more confused she is about why they left her. She finds a goodbye card from her mother to her sister in a drawer and wonders if her mother knew her sister planned to leave. Nomi also wonders if the card might indicate her mother was thinking about



leaving even before Tash did. Nomi is also hurt because her mother did not leave her a goodbye card.

Some interesting information about Mennonites, particularly the origin of East Village, is given in this chapter. Many of the people who first settled in this village were refugees from Russia. In Russia, these Mennonites had come under severe persecution. Because their lifestyle is unusual, these Mennonites were often killed and their property destroyed. Trudie's mother's family is one of the first families to move to East Village. As a child, Trudie can remember having the run of the town. Although the Mennonites moved to East Village for freedom, their ancestors, like Nomi, are under persecution similar to that suffered by the Mennonites in Russia.

One comment that Tash makes about her mother and Uncle Han's conversation is significant in the scope of the novel. Nomi doesn't know what is going on with her mother and uncle, but Tash makes the comment that their differences are the result of a failed 150-year-old experiment. Since it has been learned in the prior chapter that Hans and Trudie's parents were refugees from Russia it is assumed that the "experiment" to which Tash refers is the movement of the Mennonites from Russia to Canada. The Mennonites fled from Russia to escape from religious persecution. They plan to create their own perfect society in Canada. Here, 150 years later, Hans is persecuting his sister because she does not adhere to the strict regulations of the religion as he does. When Hans takes control of the town, he takes away many of the freedoms the people once enjoyed. Tash indicates by her statement that she believes the Mennonites have escaped from the persecution of the Russians only to create their own form of religious persecution in their own country.



Thirteen and Fourteen

Thirteen and Fourteen Summary

In Chapter Thirteen, Trudie loses her job in the crying room after she is found playing secular music during church services. She and some of the girls in the church do penance by visiting the local nursing home. Trudie then takes a job in the church library. At this point, Tash becomes even more rebellious. She has her ears pierced without permission, and barely speaks to her family. Even though Tash is all the things the Mennonite religion says a person shouldn't be, Nomi still admires her sister greatly.

Nomi believes that her teacher, Mr. Quiring, thinks she is crazy. She knows that he, like the rest of the town, is familiar with her family's problems. For a reason that she can't define, Mr. Quiring's opinion of her bothers her. One day in class, Mr. Quiring tells Nomi to tell her father it is against the law to mow his yard on Sunday.

In Chapter Fourteen, Nomi realizes there has been a change in the atmosphere of the house between her other family members but cannot identify what has changed. She believes she may be the only family member not aware of what is going on. She remembers her father speaking of the painful times they were having. Tash has started staying out late every night. The Mouth and his wife visit them often.

One night Nomi hides in her parents' room after she had a bad dream. She hears her mother say that she thinks they are losing Tash. The next morning, she refuses to go to church saying she is sick. Nomi remembers her father standing outside the bedroom looking at the closed door. When he tries to wake Tash to go to church, she tells him to go to hell. Nomi believes this day was the beginning of the end.

Another instance that Nomi describes in this section is Tash's reaction to her parents' refusal to say the word "party." Tash rolls the window of the car up on her neck and refuses to sit properly. Although her parents try to convince her they were just playing with her, Tash refuses to be comforted. Nomi wonders if things might have been different if her mother and father had humored Tash.

Thirteen and Fourteen Analysis

It is in these chapters, particularly Chapter Fourteen, that Nomi really begins to analyze what it might have been that tore her family apart. She recognizes that there were changes in the family atmosphere that she did not fully understand at the time but that might have had some effect on the way things turned out.

In addition to her confusion about her family, Nomi is also confused about her religion. One reason that Nomi is confused about her religion centers around an accident in which her sister fell from a tree and broke her elbow. Although Tash blames God for allowing the accident to happen, her mother says that it was God who kept Tash from



being killed. Tash wants to drop Nomi from a tree to test God's protection but her mother will not allow it insinuating that God would protect us from accidents, but not necessarily from things done on purpose. Nomi's confusion comes from the teachings that God is all powerful and all knowing. If God knows all things that are going to happen and has pre-ordained the outcomes, Nomi believes, then there can be no accidents. Nomi rationalizes that her mother was at fault for not allowing Tash to act on her impulses and throw Nomi from the tree.



Chapter Fifteen and Sixteen

Chapter Fifteen and Sixteen Summary

In Chapter Fifteen, Nomi remembers the way that some teenagers, especially Tash, were able to pick up information, signals and influences from the outside world. Although their father makes it clear that he doesn't approve of Tash's actions, he isn't confrontational. Through the years, Nomi also realizes that although her mother pretended like Tash's behavior didn't affect her, her mother had a breaking point to the amount of time she could continue to pretend like it didn't bother her. About this same time, Mr. Quiring visits Ray and Trudie to talk about Tash's behavior in the classroom. Nomi notices that both Mr. Quiring and her mother are flustered at the beginning of the visit. Nomi mentions that she doesn't want to talk to Mr. Quiring about the past because she is afraid he will introduce discrepancies in her story.

After Mr. Quiring leaves, Trudie is angry because her husband cannot see how bad the town is for Tash. Nomi believes she wants Ray to offer to move them all to another city. She thinks this move would have saved their family. Trudie continues to bring up to Ray that Mr. Quiring understands Tash better than he does. Meanwhile, Uncle Hans visits and continually tells Trudie that Tash is sneaking rides into the city. At a family dinner, Nomi's grandmother asks where Tash is and The Mouth cuts Trudie off from answering. In the present, Nomi realizes how she was not noticing how irritated her mother was getting with her brother's habit of trying to control her life. Nomi realizes also that her sister had been bringing home pamphlets about communism, the same type of people who originally ran the Mennonites out of Russia. Even at her young age, Nomi knows her older sister has gone too far.

In Chapter Sixteen, Nomi's relationship with Travis seems to be deteriorating as they disagree about more and more things. Nomi is reprimanded in typing class because she has a flippant attitude. She reasons that she was in a bad mood because Travis had called her that morning and told her she was shallow. Later, Nomi is called to the guidance counselor's office. The guidance counselor tries to talk to Nomi about her goals after school and also her late writing assignments. She tries to give Nomi a hug but Nomi won't let her.

After school Nomi has an appointment with a doctor to get her birth control pills. On the way she stops and buys a plastic bird for her father. Nomi sees Dr. Hunter, a man who prescribes birth control and antidepressants for the Mennonites. Although The Mouth has tried to shut down Dr. Hunter's practice, he has not been successful. Nomi concludes this chapter by writing that her desire to live in New York City could be the material for a sitcom.



Chapter Fifteen and Sixteen Analysis

In this section Nomi finally goes to the doctor to get her birth control pills. She has been procrastinating getting these pills so apparently she is not as excited about having sex with Travis as he is. As Nomi discusses her doctor's reputation in town, she brings up an interesting point about the relationship between the doctor and The Mouth. Nomi indicates that The Mouth has tried to close Dr. Hudson's practice because Dr. Hudson prescribed birth control pills and anti-depressants to the Mennonites. Dr. Hudson has written an article for the newspaper about the unusually high numbers of people in East Village who are on antidepressants. Dr. Hudson believes these cases of depression are caused by the church's emphasis on "sin, shame, death, fear, punishment, and silence." The Mouth wants to silence the man because he has brought negative attention to the church, a type of attention that The Mouth does not want centered around his congregation.

Mr. Quiring takes an unusual role in this section of chapters. He is one of the authority figures who approaches Tash's parents about her behavior. Mr. Quiring, however, is one of the people whose advice Trudie takes to heart. Even after Mr. Quiring has left their home, Trudie reminds her husband that a teacher who doesn't even live with Tash has recognized her intelligence and talent. She suggests to Ray that even this teacher realizes that Tash would be better off in the outside world, a world that Ray will not allow the family to move into. Note the emphasis that Trudie puts on Mr. Quiring's opinion of Tash. Note also Nomi's observation that both her mother and Mr. Quiring seemed to be flustered when he first entered their home.



Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen

Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen Summary

In Chapter Seventeen, Nomi describes a pain that she gets in her face on a nightly basis. Although she is hurting, she goes to visit Lydia in the hospital. Lydia and Nomi talk for a while. Nomi describes Lydia's parents as being nice people who don't believe in doctors or medicine. They believe prayer and tomato juice will heal their daughter. Nomi convinces Lydia to let her wash her hair.

When Nomi returns home, her father asks her to go with him to buy a suit. As she waits for her father to be fitted, Nomi looks at the directions on her pack of pills. She learns the pills will trick her body into believing that it is pregnant. On the way home, Ray apologizes to Nomi for not being much of a father. At home, Nomi gives him the bird she bought him as a present.

In Chapter Eighteen, Nomi describes the evening that her sister left home. Nomi says that she had come to the conclusion that her sister was dealing drugs. One night Nomi wakes up to find her sister asleep on the couch. Her mother is at the library and her father out for a drive. Nomi wakes Tash up and tries to talk to her but only upsets her. In the morning, Nomi hears her mother talking to Tash about something not being right and everything being a lie. To Nomi's surprise, Trudie agrees with her daughter. Nomi believes it was at this point that her nightly face aches began.

Later that morning Tash talks to Nomi in her room. Nomi tells her sister that she doesn't want her to go to hell. Tash tells Nomi that hell is a metaphor and she only needs to remember that God is love. It is when Ian comes to pick Tash up that Nomi realizes that her sister has freed herself. Trudie gives Tash and Ian some blankets and pillows, food and cash. Nomi has a brief memory of the Mennonites fleeing from the Russians.

Nomi and Travis talk about what it might be like to go crazy. Although their discussion strikes a painful cord with Nomi, she purposefully does not let Travis know how their conversation is affecting her.

Chapters Seventeen and Eighteen Analysis

In this section, the events of the day that Tash left are described. Although Nomi was present for most of the action, the reasons that Tash left were not explained to her. She only hears her sister telling her mother that every thing was a lie and it was killing her. Nomi does not understand what it is that Tash is saying is a lie. It can be assumed that Tash was referring to the beliefs and teachings of the Mennonite religion. Although Nomi does not know exactly why her sister is leaving, she does realize that Tash is happy because she is finally breaking free from the oppression she has been feeling.



Chapters Nineteen and Twenty

Chapters Nineteen and Twenty Summary

In Chapter Nineteen, Mr. Quiring is upset with Nomi because she cannot come up with a topic for a story that he considers appropriate. He asks her if she enjoys getting papers back with red on them. Nomi makes the comment that Jesus' words are in red. At this point Mr. Quiring tells her to leave and throws her pencil case at her. Nomi goes to the girls' room and throws up. Nomi visits with her cousin Jake, then buys a roast at the supermarket. She visits another set of friends, and then goes home where Ray asks her to go with him to the dump. Ray gets into the dump for free because he helps clean up there.

In Chapter Twenty there is a bullet hole in the front window of the Nickel home when they return home from the dump. Nomi notes that it is when bad things happen in her father's life that he really comes to life.

Nomi remembers that after Tash left home her mother did not sing as loudly in church. Nomi began having nightmares after her sister left. When Nomi pushes her mother to tell her if Tash is going to hell or not, Trudie tells her that she honestly does not know. Nomi feels her family is coming apart. She has quit her job at the library but continues to go to church. She gets a job cleaning the leg wound of Sheridan Klippenstein's grandmother. Trudie spends a lot of time at Mrs. Klippenstein's house. Sometimes Nomi goes with her.

About this same time, The Mouth starts coming by to pray with Ray and Nomi. Ray begins sitting in his lawn chair staring down the road. One day The Mouth says that what they have feared has happened. When Nomi questions her mother, her mother tells her that Tash has become an atheist.

Travis asks Nomi if she will move to Montreal with him. She returns a flippant answer. When she returns home the dining room table is gone. She asks her father why and he says they no longer used it. He has also sold the freezer. When he cleaned out the freezer he found the body of Tash's cat that she was going to bury when the ground thawed. Nomi helps her father bury the cat. She tries to make a wooden cross for the grave. She has taken some of her sister's Valium and is beginning to feel and act drugged. Nomi goes in the house and uses a razor to cut off her bangs. She puts on a hooded jacket and walks to the post office where she imagines having a conversation with her sister. When she returns home, a corner of the garage roof collapses.

Chapters Nineteen and Twenty Analysis

Chapters Nineteen and Twenty cover mainly the span of one day in Nomi's life. This day starts out bad and gets worse as it progresses. Nomi is thrown out of school by Mr. Quiring because he does not approve of her essay topic. He throws her pencil case at



her and hits her in the back. The day takes on a strange air when Ray invites Nomi to come with him to help clean up the dump. They return to find that someone has shot through the front window of their house with a BB gun. By the end of the day Nomi is in a drug-induced state of euphoria and disbelief as she helps her dad bury Tash's cat (that he found in the freezer before he sold it) in the backyard. This state of feeling as the day could not get worse is compounded when the roof of the garage collapses.

In these chapters Nomi also includes memories of the time after Tash left home. Nomi starts to have nightmares about Tash burning in hell. Her mother spends a lot of time taking care of Mrs. Klippenstien, away from the house. Nomi feels as if her family is falling apart.

To top things off, The Mouth learns that Tash has become an atheist. Although Trudie has known about her daughter's change in faith for some time, The Mouth has just learned through rumors about her decision. He tells the family that this is what they had feared would happen.

Also in this chapter Nomi cuts her hair. Actually, she takes a razor and cuts her bangs off. This act of self-mutilation is the first intentional act she has committed. The biting occurred during her sleep and although it is a sign of an inward conflict, she bit herself unconsciously. By cutting her hair in such a drastic way, she shows outwardly that something is wrong. She tries to cover up her hair, as she has tried to cover up her pain from being abandoned by her mother and sister, by wearing Tash's jacket.

In their relationship, Travis and Nomi almost seem to be pushing each other away. Nomi cuts her hair knowing that Travis doesn't like it the way she has cut it. The reader gets the feeling that she has cut her hair partly in retaliation because Travis has told her that he is going to leave East Village and move to Montreal. Although he probably doesn't intend it as such, Nomi sees this as another person who plans to abandon her in her pain and inability to work up the courage to set herself free from the restraints of East Village.



Chapters Twenty-one and Twenty-two

Chapters Twenty-one and Twenty-two Summary

In Chapter Twenty-one Nomi falls asleep in two classes and is sent to the principal's office. Nomi is hopeful that her principal has recognized her suffering when he suggests to her that this is not the best year of her life, but that is as far as he goes. At lunch Nomi makes Travis mad when she berates him for wearing a poncho. In American History, Nomi falls asleep again and dreams of her mother.

Nomi remembers that she had woken up screaming again after Tash left home. Trudie took her in the middle of the night to The Mouth's house. She bangs on the door and demands her brother to tell Nomi that he is sorry. She wants her brother to tell Nomi he is sorry for scaring her and that all of the stories he has told are lies. Trudie tells her brother that she hates him. The Mouth tells his wife to go call Nomi's dad to come and get them. He goes in the house and closes the door. Trudie throws rocks at The Mouth's house and screams profanities until Ray comes to get them.

After school Travis picks Nomi up and apologizes to her but tells her that she could be a little nicer to him as well. He drives them far out into the woods to a log cabin where his parents keep their snowmobile. He says the place has a fireplace. Travis suggests they can come here when they have sex the first time. Travis tries to get Nomi to take off the hood that she has been wearing the whole time but she refuses. Nomi tells him she is on the pill. They drive back into town.

After the episode at her uncle's house, Nomi believes that her mother goes into a period of grieving. She goes for long walks at night. She stops speaking. The kids at school ask Nomi if her mother is crazy.

The Mouth puts up a new sign at the church. Nomi takes it as a threat from The Mouth. She begins to cry. She goes to The Mouth's office and bangs on the door and throws rocks at the window. She gets no answer so she goes back and destroys the sign.

On her way to see Lydia, Nomi passes a tent housing a family from Paraguay who tell her they know that God will provide for them. At the hospital Lydia's parents and doctor are discussing her condition. Lydia looks scared. A nurse tells Nomi that Lydia had decided to go for a walk but had collapsed before getting back to the hospital. She wouldn't let anyone touch her to help her back to the hospital. The nurse tells Nomi the hospital staff honestly doesn't know how to treat Lydia.

Nomi walks to the sewer lagoon, the place where she has been told her father proposed to her mother. Her next stop is the bank where she runs into her father. They walk home together.

In Chapter Twenty-two Nomi remembers Tash's summer job watching their grandmother. Tash tells Nomi that it was The Mouth's fault that his mother drank. Travis



has gotten a job at the museum village. His fake wife at the museum is Adeline Ratzalff whom Nomi remembers because she brought brass knuckles to school to beat up another girl. When Nomi goes to visit Travis at the Museum she discovers him sharing a joint and laughing behind a sod hut with Adeline. Travis takes a walk with Nomi. She asks him if he is really going to Montreal and then requests that he not be happy with Adeline. Nomi buys a stick of candy from a lady in the grocery store. She suggests Nomi start with Matthew.

At the conclusion of the chapter Nomi writes that her favorite book as a child was one that showed the plan of salvation through a series of colored pages. Nomi is distressed because when she scratches a mosquito bite, her blood is not the same color as the page that represents Jesus' blood.

Chapters Twenty-one and Twenty-two Analysis

In the aftermath of Tash leaving, Nomi describes her mother's attitude as one of grief. She may be grieving because she misses her daughter. She may be grieving as a result of the point to which her brother has pushed Tash by the way he has presented religion. Trudie is also stressed by her younger daughter's reaction to Tash leaving. Nomi not only misses her sister but is convinced that her sister is going to burn in hell. One day when Nomi confronts her mother about what might happen to Tash, her mother is not able to calm her fears as she tells Nomi that she honestly doesn't know what might happen to her.

One night Nomi's mother reaches a breaking point when she goes to The Mouth's house and demands that he tell Nomi that he is sorry for scaring her with stories of hell. The Mouth refuses to do so even when Trudie tells him that she hates him. He leaves her screaming on the lawn while he has Ray called to come and get her.

Nomi has learned through Tash that Tash is not the only one who has been affected by The Mouth's drastic religion. Tash has told her that The Mouth's own mother has been driven to drink because of the way her son acts and treats other people. This is significant because this lady is one of the original refugees to East Village. Now she is trapped again with a tyrant of a son making religious rules that make life difficult and unpleasant for the Mennonites, just as it was in Russia.

Just as her mother got mad at her brother for the way he'd represented Tash's future to Nomi, Nomi is angered and shocked by a sign that The Mouth displays in front of the church. The sign indicates that while it may be hot on earth, it is even hotter in hell. The sign indicates this is a warning from God but Nomi sees it as a threat coming straight from The Mouth himself. The sign makes her think of her sister and she is angered because she feels The Mouth is being judgmental when he should be encouraging. She tries to confront him but he either will not open the door or is not in his office.

Nomi walks in on a conference between Lydia's doctor and her parents. She learns that Lydia tried to go for a walk but collapsed and was then in so much pain she would not



allow anyone to touch her. Although Lydia's parents wanted to take her home, she wanted to go back to the hospital. Nomi is angry that Lydia's parents treated her roughly and put her in the back of their car even though she was in pain. Lydia and Nomi are similar in that they are both dealing with a great deal of pain. While Lydia's pain is physical, Nomi's pain is emotional. Their pain makes both of them extremely sensitive and easy to hurt. In both cases, no one seems to know what to do to heal their pain.



Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-four

Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-four Summary

In Chapter Twenty-three Nomi's mother is excommunicated from the church. Nomi is not able to talk to her mother about the excommunication. She only had a dim memory of her mother sitting on her bed the night before smiling at her. Nomi isn't aware then that her mother has left for good. Her father spends the next day standing in his suit in front of the picture window staring at the highway. Trudie's mother's drinking gets worse.

A month or two after her mother leaves, Nomi runs into Mrs. Klippenstein at Rest Haven. Her kids had made her move in there. Nomi wonders where her mother was going nearly every evening if she was not needed at Mrs. Klippenstein's house. Nomi learns to do laundry and uses her mother's drawers to store some of her father's things. It is in these jobs that she finds her mother's passport and letters from Mr. Quiring.

A really bad thunderstorm in East Village makes the sewer caps pop up like champagne corks. The windmill at the museum is damaged, as is the window at Darnell's Bakery. Nomi's father watches the storm. In the morning Ray tells Nomi not to be surprised if things in town are different. Their living room furniture is gone. Ray tells Nomi he likes the empty spaces. Nomi promises not to leave her father. She also promises to fix a nice meal that evening.

Nomi had asked her father why her mother didn't take Nomi with her when she left. Ray writes back to her that it was because she was sleeping. Nomi likes to believe that Trudie knew that Ray needed Nomi more than she did. She also believes that her mother knew that Ray could not choose between her and the church.

In Chapter Twenty-four, Trudie cooks a birthday dinner for Ray. She describes it as simple but elegant. After supper and cake, they take the television outside and watch a Detroit baseball game. Afterwards Travis picks Nomi up and they paint the goat barn red. When she returns home there is a note from her dad asking if she has any plans after high school. She writes back that she wants to be a model of courage and dignity.

Nomi tries to return her rented French horn to school for the \$50 deposit. The secretary says Nomi won't get her deposit back until graduation. Nomi takes her French horn out of retaliation. Nomi wakes up laying on her own couch but it is in The Golden Comb's trailer. The Comb tells her that he bought the couch off her father a couple of days ago. He offers to keep the French horn in exchange for drugs but Nomi refuses.

When Nomi returns home her father reminds her of her driver's test the next day. The two decide to go to the demolition derby together. Afterwards, Ray lets Nomi practice her driving. She doesn't want to go home, so she just keeps driving around and around the same roads.



Chapters Twenty-three and Twenty-four Analysis

The mysteries surrounding Trudie's disappearance become more confusing when Nomi finds letters from her teacher to her mother when she puts laundry away in her mother's drawers. This explains Nomi's references in Chapter Four to the laundry being where the drama starts. Nomi also shares that her mother had been excommunicated from the church. Nomi had no opportunity to talk to her about her feelings about this punishment because she never saw her mother again. She remembers only Trudie sitting on her bed smiling at her in the same way that Tash had smiled at her before she left.

When she runs into Mrs. Klippenstein at Rest Haven and learns the old lady has been living there for quite a while, she wonders what her mother was doing every night when she claimed that she was going to dress the wound on the lady's leg. Despite evidence to the contrary, Nomi still clings to the belief that her mother and father were deeply in love and that she left town because she didn't want to make him choose between her and the church.



Chapters Twenty-five and Twenty-six

Chapters Twenty-five and Twenty-six Summary

During an evening of fun Travis and Nomi use a horse razor to cut each other's hair in Chapter Twenty-five. Later at home Nomi shaves her head and finds her old fish hook scar. She puts in earrings, wears cutoff shorts, a bikini top and lots of makeup to go to school. Mr. Quiring confronts Nomi about her makeup and jewelry, which is against school policy. He grabs her chin and asks her if she is having a nervous breakdown. When she tells him not to touch her, he tells her to get out. Nomi remembers a time when she was nine and became aware of her own existence. She realizes that she was alive and that because she was alive she could also die. She believes the key to her new religion is that there might not be anything else on the other side of death so she should enjoy life on earth because that's all there may be.

Nomi visits her father at school. Then she goes home and takes a nap. When she wakes up, her father has brought an adjudicator from the school home with him. She is lying on the floor. He believes she became disoriented because of the heat. The woman, whose name is Edwina McGillivray, sits with Nomi and Ray in the yard and has tea after she wakes up. Edwina asks them if they know a Trudie Nickel. Edwina remembers hearing her sing in a musical at Pantages Playhouse. Edwina says Trudie was delightful in her role in West Side Story.

After her father has taken Edwina back to school Nomi rides her bike to see Travis at the museum. Travis picks her up that night and they have sex. Nomi says it might have been a better experience if she had not been bald, drunk, depressed and jealous. On the way home she changes the truck into reverse while Travis is driving.

In Chapter Twenty-six Nomi's dad asks Nomi if she wants to spend her whole life in East Village. She avoids the questions. He sees the fish hook scar on her head and remembers the day she got the injury. Nomi asks her father about the musical her mother had been in. He tells her that Hans took her to audition for the part, that things were different then. Before he goes to bed she asks him how his class performed in the festival. He tells her they were flawless but received only a forty nine percent score from Edwina. He says they were devastated.

The next day Nomi's father reminds her that she forgot her driver's test. He has rescheduled it for her. She passes her test and her father is happy. As they are eating dinner, Ray asks Nomi what it is that is blocking her from graduating. She tells him that she needs a story with a triggering point, a climax and a conclusion. After dinner, Nomi tries not to think about the fact that Travis has not called her since the time they had sex.

Nomi calls Travis and his mom tells her that he is doing a job at Lowe Farm. Travis' mom tells Nomi he doesn't need any help and won't give her the address of the house



where he is working. Nomi drives around but can't find Travis. She drives to his house and confronts his parents about lying to her. She tells Travis' parents she thinks she might have left something in his room. She goes home and cries.

Chapters Twenty-five and Twenty-six Analysis

It is in this section of the novel that Travis and Nomi's relationship falls apart. After she finally sleeps with him, she does not hear from him again. She tries to get in touch with Travis but his parents will not tell her where he is. She goes to try to visit Travis at his house. He is not at home and Travis' mom tries to make her feel better about the waning relationship between the two of them.

One interesting story that Nomi remembers is a time when her family took a boat to have a picnic on an island when Nomi was a small child. During the time they are on the island, the boat on which they had traveled floats away. They anticipate the idea that they may be stranded on the island alone with excitement, looking forward to some time away from the other members of their community. Nomi remembers that all of them almost feel disappointed when the boat reappears and they are able to return home.



Chapter Twenty-seven and Twenty-eight

Chapter Twenty-seven and Twenty-eight Summary

After learning her friend, Lydia, has been sent to a mental institution for shock therapy, Nomi spends the rest of the night at the field behind the city dump. Before visiting the hospital and the dump, Nomi set fire to Travis' truck parked outside the Kyro Motor Inn. She indicates Travis and his "wife" from the museum village must have found a sitter for the Cabbage Patch doll.

Nomi then goes to The Golden Comb's trailer. She tells him she is broke. He gives her a cigarette and she sits on the floor. He begins kissing her, then slips something in her pocket. The two go into his bedroom and close the door. After they finish, he takes her back to her car at Mac's. From there, she drives to the dump. She contemplates living there until her father comes and finds her. Nomi tells her father she is dreading tomorrow. He tells her there is a flip side to dreading tomorrow: faith. Nomi believes he is trying to give her a triggering point.

The Mouth and his wife visit Nomi and her father at their house. Nomi has been excommunicated from the church. The Mouth also tells Nomi and her father neighbors have been wondering what has been going on. He notes there is a cross in the backyard, the front window is broken and they have no furniture. The two move on nonchalantly to a ribbon cutting at the windmill. After they leave, Nomi's father repeats a Bible verse about the way that all bad and good deeds will eventually be destroyed, good deeds being no better than any other kind.

Before her father leaves for school that day, his eyes meet with Nomi's for just a moment, and then he leaves. Nomi hides her face in a tablecloth and walks to her room, stopping only when she bumps into her French horn case. She takes the horn with her to Abe's Hill and teaches herself to play "All Through the Night."

In Chapter Twenty-eight, Nomi's father has given her the family car. He has also left a note telling her the house is hers. All he has taken with him is his new suit, the dipping bird Nomi gave him and a Bible. Nomi wonders where he went and how he got there. He leaves a note on the table indicating that Jesus is always with her. He says he will check in on her eventually.

Because she's been excommunicated, Nomi knows that if her father had wanted to stay in town, he would have to not acknowledge her. Instead of doing so, Ray has left town. He is not strong enough to live without faith, and also not strong enough to take down the system of the Mennonite church.

Nomi waits for awhile to see if her father will return, then she begins loading the car. Nomi realizes as she is packing to leave that none of what has happened to her seems so awful now that she knows it is in her past. Her focus then shifts to the assignment



that she will leave on Mr. Quiring's porch. She makes a reference to an attraction between Mr. Quiring and her mother. Nomi tells Mr. Quiring that he gave her family an ending. Nomi has seen letters in which Mr. Quiring has called her mother his sad, sweet Trudie, except in the last letter where he threatens to tell Trudie's brother that she has been having adulterous relationships with various men. He tells her that she has a reputation of being demented and that no one will believe anything she might have to say. Nomi believes that this is his way of trying to get Trudie to take him back as a lover.

Nomi likes the idea best that her mother left because she wanted to spare Ray the pain of having to choose between him and the church. Nomi wonders if the affair was caused because she was angry at Ray for keeping her in a town that would eventually break up her family and not allow her to raise her children to be free and independent, as she would like them to be. Hans has suggested Trudie killed herself out of fear and regret. Nomi also likes to believe that her father has gone to pick garbage off the mountain. These preferred endings open up possibilities that the family could be reunited again.

Chapter Twenty-seven and Twenty-eight Analysis

In these two chapters, Nomi finally puts the remaining pieces of her story together. Apparently Trudie and Mr. Quiring have been having some sort of affair. Along with Trudie's passport, Nomi also finds letters to Trudie from Mr. Quiring in her drawers. It appears that Trudie had been lying to her family about going to care for Mrs. Klippenstein. She had not been going to care for the old woman but was instead meeting Mr. Quiring in secret. In one of the letters that Nomi shares in the novel, Mr. Quiring uses Trudie's past actions as well as the rules of the church to try to keep Trudie from talking about their affair. In the end Trudie is excommunicated, which makes her completely unreliable in the church's eyes.

It is also during these chapters that Nomi is left by the remaining three people who are important to her. She finds out for sure that Travis is messing around on her when she discovers his truck parked outside of a local hotel. When she goes to talk to her friend Lydia, she discovers that Lydia's parents have decided to allow Lydia to be sent to a mental institution for electroshock therapy. Finally, Nomi's father leaves her. Instead of being an act of abandonment, however, Nomi's father leaves so that Nomi will have a chance at a better life. He has finally learned that his insistence on staying in East Village has caused his family to be split up. Tash has left because she can no longer live in the atmosphere where a hypocritical religion rules everything. Trudie seeks comfort from a man whom she believes understands what her older daughter needs. In reality, Trudie has been used by Mr. Quiring since he probably has a great deal of influence in her excommunication after she breaks off their relationship. Had Ray taken his family away from the oppressive atmosphere of their religion, their family might have stayed together. Even though there is no way to help the remainder of his family, Ray realizes that he still has the opportunity to help his younger daughter.

In Chapter Twenty-seven Nomi recalls her evening from the conclusion of her antics as she sits on the hood of her car at the city dump. The first memory that she recalls is her



attempt to find Lydia in the hospital. When she can't find her friend, Nomi first believes the Rapture has taken place. She learns from the orderly that Lydia has been transferred to a mental institution where she is receiving shock therapy. Eden, a place in the Bible that was paradise on earth, is the ironic name of the mental hospital. Nomi also recalls setting fire to Travis' truck parked in the lot at a hotel. She sets the fire in retaliation because he is sleeping with the girl who played his "wife" at the Mennonite museum farm. Because of her exploits, Nomi is excommunicated from the church.

As her father talks to her about her fear of the coming day, and tells her the flip side of her dread is faith, Nomi believes her father is trying to give her a triggering point. This triggering point could be both a triggering point for her story for Mr. Quiring's class as well as for the rest of her life. In a final note, it appears that Nomi has written this novel as her writing assignment for Mr. Quiring. She decides to title her work "The Way Things Could Have Been." She plans to drop it off at Mr. Quiring's house before she leaves town.



Characters

Naomi

Naomi (Nomi) Nickel is the sixteen year-old daughter of Trudie and Ray Nickel. She is the sister of Tash who is four years older than she is. Naomi's name was shortened to Nomi because her sister could not pronounce her name correctly when Nomi was born. Nomi is a senior in high school but is in danger of not graduating because she is having trouble coming up with a story to write for her teacher that has a triggering point, a climax and a conclusion. Nomi believes that she has trouble with endings.

Nomi has lived alone with her father since she was thirteen. Her sister has left because she realized the Mennonite religion practiced in the town was all a lie and could no longer live in that atmosphere. Nomi's mother leaves after she is excommunicated from the church. Nomi and her father do not know where either Tash or Trudie are or if they are even still alive.

As Nomi tries to make sense of the disappearance of her mother and sister, she struggles with her own doubt about her Mennonite religion. She sees the hypocrisy that it involves and it makes her angry when the people who tell her not to judge others judge her. As she tries to sort out her life, she gets involved with a boy who takes away her virginity, and encourages her to engage in taking drugs. Although she believes Travis loves her, it soon becomes obvious that he has been playing around with another girl on the side. Nomi sets fire to Travis' truck when she sees it parked in the lot of a local motel.

At the conclusion of the novel, Nomi feels completely abandoned by everyone whom she once thought loved her. Her mother and sister are gone, even Travis has left. Lydia, her best friend, has been taken to a hospital for shock treatments. However, when her father leaves her, Nomi realizes that he has given her a great gift. While she would never have left her father alone in East Village, his leaving has opened the way to allow her to seek a different life in another city. He has given her the opportunity to break away from the oppressive beliefs of the Mennonites.

Raymond

Raymond (Ray) Nickel is father to Nomi and Tash, and the husband of Trudie. In addition to being husband and wife, Ray and Trudie are also second cousins. Ray is very devoted to his church. He attends every Sunday. He also teaches sixth grade at the local school.

Like Nomi, Ray's life also falls apart when his wife and daughter leave. He seems to move through his life like a person in shock. He teaches during the day and then drives around at night. When he isn't teaching or driving, he sits in the front yard of his house in a yellow lawn chair. Nomi believes he is waiting for Trudie and Tash to come back.



Nomi believes that Ray and her mother loved each other very much. She believes that her mother was the glue that held Ray's life together. Without Trudie, Nomi does not believe that Ray is capable of making decisions. Ray is very against moving his family out of East Village. Even when the troubles with Tash begin and Trudie believes that Mr. Quiring is encouraging them to take Tash somewhere where she is better suited, Ray refuses to move. Nomi believes her mom doesn't force the issue because she doesn't want Ray to have to choose between her and the church.

Ray is a very distant parent. At one point he apologizes to Nomi for not being more active in her life. He asks her if she will bloom even with the "benign neglect" she is receiving. Although he has to realize the trouble that his daughter is in, Ray does not take steps to help her get back on track but instead lets her wallow in her own doubts and fears. Of course, he also is dealing with his own issues of rejection and grief, which may explain why he does not take a more active parenting role. At the conclusion of the novel, Ray shows to Nomi that he has been more aware of her problems than she thought possible when he leaves her. Instead of this being a cruel abandonment, however, Ray has made sure that Nomi can drive and has left her the car so that she can have the freedom to go where she pleases. He has also left her notification that the house belongs to her so she can choose either to live there or sell the house for money and move. He tells her that he will drop in on her in a few years and see how she is doing.

Gertrude

Gertrude (Trudie) Nickel is Nomi and Tash's mother, and Ray's wife. She is also the sister of the man, Hans Rosenfeldt, who is the leader of their Mennonite church. Trudie's parents were some of the first people to move to East Village from Russia where they hoped to escape religious persecution.

Trudie is never an active participant in the novel. She has already left home by the time Nomi starts writing her story. It is unsure what might have happened to Trudie, although Nomi likes to think her mother is traveling and enjoying life, she knows her mother took nothing with her when she left. In the back of her mind, Nomi realizes it is a distinct possibility that her mother has killed herself. Nomi takes drugs because she is afraid her mother is dead.

Nomi describes her mother as being neither good nor bad. She liked to have fun and enjoy life. Trudie is distraught when her daughter begins to stray from the Mennonite faith, but also understands her doubts and need to get away from the hypocrisy. When Trudie's youngest daughter begins to have nightmares about her sister burning in hell, Trudie confronts her brother, the man who has put these fears into her daughter's head.

Trudie connects with Mr. Quiring, one of Tash's teachers. Mr. Quiring recognizes Tash's intelligence and talent. It is assumed from the letters that Nomi finds in her mother's drawers that Mr. Quiring and Trudie began having an affair at this point. Trudie used Mrs. Klippenstein as a cover to see Mr. Quiring. Nomi realizes this after she sees Mrs.



Klippenstein at Rest Haven and realizes that she was there even when her mother was still leaving them to care for her. Before she disappears Trudie is excommunicated from the church.

Natasha

Natasha (Tash) Nickel is the daughter of Ray and Trudie Nickel and sister to Nomi. Her crisis of faith causes her to leave town with Ian, her boyfriend. Tash has realized that the rules and regulations she has been forced to follow under the Mennonite faith are lies. Tash takes an extreme stance on her religion and chooses to become an atheist. Although Nomi realizes that her sister's behavior was not accepted by the church and that by the rules of the church she was bound for hell, Nomi admired her sister greatly. She believes her sister was smarter, stronger and cooler than she because she left, or ran away from, circumstances she did not find pleasant.

Travis

Travis is Nomi's boyfriend. They met up with each other at a New Year's Eve party at the gravel pits. Nomi decides she wants to be Travis' girlfriend when he mentions the name of Lou Reed, a heavy rock musician whom Nomi admires. The two connect over drugs and music. Travis encourages Nomi to start taking the pill so they can sleep together. A day or two after Travis and Nomi sleep together Nomi finds Travis' truck parked outside a local hotel where he is sleeping with a girl with whom he worked at the Mennonite museum. Travis turns 18 when he and Nomi are dating. At this point, he drops out of school and goes to work for his father.

Mr. Almon Quiring

Mr. Almon Quiring is one of Nomi's teachers. He was also Tash's teacher. He has an affair with Trudie and then threatens Trudie with the church to keep quiet about the affair. Mr. Quiring is very cruel with Nomi. Instead of having sympathy with her for the pain that he has caused her family, he seems to push her toward some sort of mental breakdown. By his actions, he seems to show that he believes that Nomi knows about the affair and could be some sort of threat to him and his position in the church. Nomi, however, doesn't seem to have put two and two together yet and does not seem to have accepted what her mother has done. In fact, Nomi seems to be desperately trying to gain Mr. Quiring's approval. It is only at the end of the novel that Nomi places any blame at all on Mr. Quiring.

Lydia Voth

Lydia is Nomi's best friend. Lydia is a straight-laced Mennonite. She and her family moved to East Village from Paraguay. Lydia is in the hospital suffering with a disease that cannot be diagnosed. This disorder causes Lydia to have unexplained pain. The



touch of a hand can cause Lydia unbearable pain. One nurse seems to think that Lydia is faking her condition and insists that Lydia should be out living her life as a normal girl. Lydia's parents believe that they should be able to heal the girl with prayer and tomato juice. Their prayers and juice, however, have not helped Lydia. A nurse confides in Nomi that the medical care that Lydia is receiving in the hospital does not seem to be helping her either since they do not have any idea what is wrong with her or how to help her. At the conclusion of the novel, Lydia's parents agree to allow her to be sent to Eden, a mental institution where she is given electric shock therapy.

Uncle Hans Rosenfeldt

Uncle Hans is Nomi's mother's brother. He is also the preacher at the East Village Mennonite Church. Tash and Nomi call Uncle Hans "The Mouth of Darkness." Even as a child Nomi says he looked like unforgiving granite. Nomi knows Hans had some troubles as a young man in the real world before he came back to rule East Village. She suspects that he once tried to rebel against the religion, but instead of breaking away had come back with an even stronger commitment. Hans is the one who commanded the purges in East Village and had the bus depot, pool halls and swimming pool closed. Tash tells Nomi it is because of Hans that their grandmother has taken up drinking. While the Mennonites fled Russia to escape persecution, Hans seems to be persecuting his own people even worse than the Russians did. Hans also once supported his sister and her talents. He is the one who took her to audition for a part in West Side Story. Since that time, however, The Mouth seems to have become obsessed with his power. He judges his congregation, including his sister, with no love or compassion.

Aunt Gonad

Aunt Gonad is the wife of Hans Rosenfeldt. This lady does not talk much but supports her husband quietly. She is the one who catches Trudie listening to secular music while she is supposed to be listening to Uncle Hans' sermon in the crying room. It is also Aunt Gonad who requests that Tash burn her copy of Jesus Christ, Superstar. Aunt Gonad is the one who calls Ray to come pick up Trudie and Nomi when Trudie tries to confront Hans about the fear that her brother has caused Nomi by his threats of hell. Aunt Gonad also accompanies her husband when he visits Ray and Nomi to tell Nomi that she has been excommunicated from the church.

The Golden Comb

The Golden Comb is an ex-Mennonite who had formerly had a job in the chicken killing plant. He had a crush on Tash at one point and still asks Nomi often if she has heard from her sister. Nomi and Travis buy their drugs from this man. Nomi describes him as one of the few people brave enough to live outside of the structure of the church who didn't care he was outside their structure and who didn't leave. Nomi describes him as having in common with Menno Simons the desire to escape from the world. The Golden



Comb, however, provides this escape through drugs while Menno hoped only to escape from the sin and influence of the outside world. Nomi has sex with The Golden Comb in exchange for drugs.

Edwina McGillivary

Edwina McGillivary is the adjudicator from the city who comes to judge performances given by students in Ray's school. Because she is disoriented by the heat, Ray brings the lady home to rest. He and Nomi serve her tea. Edwina asks if they know Trudie Nickel. She asks about Trudie because she once saw her perform in West Side Story. Edwina gives Ray's students a forty-nine percent for their score even though Ray insists their performance had been flawless.

Menno Simons

Menno Simons is the founder of the Mennonite religion. Nomi feels in a way this man was hypocritical because he named a religion that was supposed to be founded on complete humility after himself. Nomi also wonders what happened to Menno to make him want to lead a group of people into a remote place to wait for the second coming of Christ. Nomi believes that Menno might have been high on cough syrup when he came up with his list of things that Mennonites could do and could not do.

Ian

Ian is Mr. Quiring's nephew. It is with Ian that Tash leaves town. Ian wears motorcycle boots with chains on them and walks with his hand on Tash's rear.



Objects/Places

Happy Family Farms

Happy Family Farms is the chicken-slaughterhouse in Nomi's town. This is where Nomi believes she will work when she graduates high school.

East Village

The East Village in Canada is the place where Nomi and her family lived. The town was created when Mennonites fled persecution in Russia and hoped to create their own utopia.

Kliwer's Machine Shop

It is on the roof of this machine shop that Trudie sits to see the Queen's visit to East Village.

Swiss Family Robinson Movie

Nomi wants to see this movie when it comes to the town's theater, but her mother is afraid that it is not appropriate.

Suicide Hill

Suicide Hill is the place where Nomi meets Travis and the two begin dating.

Garbage Hutch

Ray builds this hutch a few days after his wife, Trudie, leaves. He says that she had always wanted a hutch like the one he made. The trash men, however, think the hutch is garbage and haul it away in their truck.

Museum Village

It is this museum village depicting past Mennonite life that draws tourists to the East Village. Along with the slaughterhouse, it is one of the major sources of revenue for the town.



Kyro Motor Inn

It is at this hotel where Nomi sets Travis' truck on fire after she sees it parked outside.

Eden

Eden is a mental institution where Lydia has been sent for shock therapy.

Dutch Blitz

Dutch Blitz is a card game that Nomi's mother enjoyed.

Sweet Caps

Sweet Caps are Nomi's brand of cigarette.

A Little Card and Envelope

Nomi finds this little card and envelope from her mother to Tash in a drawer after both of them leave.

Rest Haven

Rest Haven is the name of the retirement home in East Village where Nomi, her mother and some other girls are made to go and sing hymns to the elderly.

Deusant

Deusant is Ray's favorite curse word. It means one thousand.

The French Horn

The French horn is the musical instrument that Nomi learned to play.

Nomi's Couch

Nomi wakes up and finds herself lying on her own couch, but it is in The Golden Comb's trailer.

West Side Story

West Side Story is the musical in which Trudie performed as a young adult. Ray tells Nomi that it was Hans who took Trudie to try out for the part that she played.



Themes

Religious Persecution

The idea of religious persecution is a major theme in this novel. There are two facets of religious persecution dealt with by Nomi's story. First, there is the persecution of the Mennonites by the Russians. Second, there is the persecution of the Mennonites by others of their own religion.

It is the first type of religious persecution that causes East Village to come into creation. Trudie's parents are among the first people who had come to Canada to escape from the persecution by the Russians. Basically, because the Mennonites had wanted to live a different style life from everyone else, they had been killed and their possessions destroyed. Even in Nomi's time, Mennonites are still fleeing to East Village from Paraguay to escape religious persecution.

As Tash points out, however, East Village is a failed experiment. It had been created and intended as a haven for the Mennonite people. Since Uncle Hans has taken over leadership of the church, East Village has been more like hell on earth for some than a haven. Even Trudie and Hans' mother realizes what a destructive force her son is on the Mennonites as she begins drinking more and more heavily as he becomes more and more tyrannical. Nomi even points out that the rule of the town requires people to be either entirely good or entirely bad, an extreme that few people can achieve. Hans tries to force the people to live as he wishes by using guilt, shame, doubt and threats of hell as motivators. Instead of the paradise the early refugees to East Village had pictured, East Village has become a place where Mennonites are persecuted by their own religious beliefs.

Nomi's Awakening

The main theme of this novel is the story of Nomi's coming to a realization of what has actually happened to her family. She starts the novel as a rebellious teen who believes that her mother has left home because she could not stand to make her husband choose between her and the church. Nomi seems to have no idea why Tash might have left. At the conclusion of the novel, Nomi realizes her mother had an affair with Mr. Quiring that led to her being excommunicated from the church. Although Nomi wants to believe her mother is still alive somewhere, she is no longer sure. Nomi also realizes that her sister became so disillusioned with the Mennonite faith that she became an atheist.

As Nomi has become older, she has come to a better understanding and respect of the things that her sister and mother did. As a child, she felt her sister was evil for trying to cause problems and split their family up. She describes herself as a pious little Menno kid who just wanted everyone to be happy. As this pious little kid she saw her sister as a



threat to her family's happiness. As Nomi enters her own teenage years, she realizes how suffocating and confusing the Mennonite religion really is. She walks the same path as her sister did by experimenting with drugs and having a relationship with a boy who encourages her to drink, do drugs and have sex.

Nomi also comes to a better understanding of why her mother left as she deals with her own excommunication. Looking back, Nomi believes that her mother had wanted their family to leave East Village for some time. She believes this desire may have started when Mr. Quiring approached Ray and Trudie about Tash. He suggests that she needs to be someplace where she can express her talent. Nomi thinks it is this connection between Trudie and Mr. Quiring that sparked their affair. She believes that it was her mother's guilt over losing control of Tash that pushed her to Mr. Quiring. Even at the conclusion of the novel, she thinks that it was her mother's love for her father that caused her to return to the family.

Irony

With Nomi's sardonic intelligence, she points out the variety of ironies that she finds in her town and her religion. For instance, the museum village is a great source of irony in Nomi's story. The lives that are lived in the town are fake, she points out. The pious Mennonite people who are pictured in the town are just real people with their own sets of problems. She notes that Travis and his fake wife are often high as they perform their jobs at the museum village. Nomi sets her own bonnet on fire trying to smoke a cigarette while volunteering at the museum. One of the greatest ironies that Nomi points out takes place on the evening of the demolition derby while the actual citizens of East Village are watching cars smash into each other in a dirt field. Tourists who think they are experiencing the Mennonite life, meanwhile, are riding in a horse driven cart to a fake church to listen to Uncle Hans read scripture to them.

Another irony that Nomi highlights is the judgmental attitude of the Mennonites. Although they are not supposed to judge others, and it is often preached to Nomi that she is not to judge, she is amazed at how often others in her own religious sect take part in being judgmental. The idea of the shunning is an excellent example of this judging. Those who are "shunned" are not allowed to take part in church activities or even sit at a table or correspond with other Mennonites.



Style

Point of View

This story is told from the viewpoint of a sixteen-year-old Mennonite girl. She shares the story of the destruction of her own family based on her own limited experience and understanding of what has actually happened. The story is told from the first person point of view of Nomi. This point of view is appropriate because it tells the story of a teen who is beginning to realize the shortfalls of a religion in which she has been immersed for all of her life. In addition to her awakening to the cruelties of her religion, Nomi is also beginning to realize what the Mennonite beliefs have done to her family specifically. As the novel progresses, Nomi puts together the clues that tell her exactly what has happened to make both her sister and her mother abandon their family.

Nomi is not necessarily an unreliable narrator but she does tell the story as she remembers it from a child's standpoint. At one point, Nomi indicates that she could ask Mr. Quiring his opinion of her family's troubles but doesn't want any "discrepancies" to creep into her memories of the past. More than anything, it seems that Nomi does not want to know what actually happened before she is ready to accept it on her own. Although Nomi may not be telling the story as it actually happened, she is telling her version of it.

Setting

The novel, *A Complicated Kindness*, is set in the Canadian town of East Village in the 1980s. The main sources of income for the town are the chicken slaughtering house and the Mennonite museum village that draws tourists from America. Although the majority of the population in the East Village is Mennonite, the tourists are surprised to see them smoking, driving motorized vehicles and wearing modern clothes. Nomi, the main character in the novel, wishes she instead lived in East Village, New York, a place she feels is more suited for her personality.

There are a variety of settings in East Village in which the action of the novel takes place. Settings include the Nickel family home, located near Highway Number Twelve. Nomi's father spends much of his time sitting in his yellow lawn chair in the yard waiting for his wife and daughter to return. Nomi's bedroom, as well as the dining room where Nomi learns she has been excommunicated from the church, is also an important setting. Other settings of interest include The Golden Comb's trailer, the town's gravel pits, Travis' bedroom, Lydia's hospital room and Nomi's school.

Language and Meaning

The language of this book is easy to understand and the plot of the novel intriguing so it makes for an interesting read. There are some curse words used in the novel, evidence



of Nomi's rebellion against the church. The novel is told from the viewpoint of the cynical Nomi. Her language and words are full of the sarcasm and cynicism that she feels toward the church. Although she is very cynical, Nomi is also quite naive, a state of mind that is also evidenced by the words she chooses to describe her circumstances.

Nomi shows a great deal of disrespect for the church by the names that she calls different members. "The Mouth of Darkness" is the name that Tash has attached to the leader of the church. Nomi follows her sister's lead and often refers to this man as "The Mouth." Nomi also comes up with a variety of disrespectful names for Menno Simons, the man who is the founder of the Mennonite religion. She refers to him as Menno "I love the nightlife" Simons and Menno "Sexy" Simmons.

Structure

This book is divided into twenty-seven chapters. Nomi begins the book with an introductory chapter (Chapter One) that details the basics of her life. As the book progresses, Nomi begins to fill in details explaining why her life is the way it is. Each chapter gives the reader more clues about the state of religion in her town, the relationships between her family members and her day-to-day life.

With the reader only being given information on what might be considered a "need to know" basis, his understanding of the story is often muddled and confused. This confusion is more profound because the story is not told on a linear time line. Nomi jumps back and forth in time sometimes in the present, sometimes in the past, sometimes even in the future. It is sometimes hard to follow her rapid transitions through time and keep up with where Nomi is on the timeline of her life. Readers must be careful to notice the clues she gives to notate where she is in the timeline of her story. Sometimes the clues she gives are not understood until they are explained later in the novel. For instance, Nomi starts her story by telling her reader a window on their home is shattered. It is not until nearly the end of the book that Nomi tells what happened to the window.

The structure of the novel is also complex because it involves so many different facets. There is the main story of Nomi and her family life in the present. There is also the story of the past that has affected the way that Nomi sees her life. There is Nomi's struggle to come to terms with the way her life is turning out. Other story lines include Nomi's relationship with Travis, the history of the Mennonites, Nomi's friendship with Lydia, Trudie's affair with Mr. Quiring, and Ray's attempt to deal with his new life.



Quotes

"If we could get out of this town things might be better but we can't because we're waiting for Trudie and Tash to come back."

Chapter One, pg. 4

"But that's the thing about this town - there's no room for in between. You're in or you're out. You're good or you're bad. Actually, very good or very bad. Or very good at being very bad without being detected."

Chapter One, pg. 10

"I liked the way she assumed that the two of us could be friends even though she was a good Christian girl and I was a sad, cynical pothead."

Chapter Four, pg. 32

"But there is a kindness here, a complicated kindness. You can see it sometimes in the eyes of people when they look at you and don't know what to say."

Chapter Six, pg. 46

"The idea is that if we can successfully deny ourselves the pleasures of this world, we'll be first in line to enjoy the pleasures of the next world, forever."

Chapter Seven, pg. 48

"I ended up saying stupid stuff like I just want to be myself, I just want to do things without wondering if they're a sin or not. I want to be free. I want to know what it's like to be forgiven by another human being (I was stoned, obviously) and not have to wait around all my life anxiously wondering if I'm an okay person or not and having to die to find out. I wanted to experience goodness and humanity outside of any religious framework."

Chapter Seven, pg. 48

"Somehow all of the problems of the world manage to get into our town but not the strategies to deal with them."

Chapter Seven, pg. 52

"Had Trudie known all along that Tash would one day leave? Or had Trudie been fooling around with the idea of leaving herself and then stashed this card into Tash's dresser? If so, where was my card?"

Chapter Eleven, pg. 97

"The Mouth told her it was nice to see her taking ownership of her job and being an obedient soldier of Christ. My dad was happy to help out whenever he could. He just wanted to be with her. It didn't matter where."

Chapter Thirteen, pg. 103



"If Tash felt like throwing me out of a tree, wasn't that because God was making her feel like throwing me out of a tree, and for her not to follow through on that feeling, wasn't that a sin? Wasn't Satan speaking through my mother when she was preventing Tash from throwing me out of a tree and following God's will? Technically, I should have been thrown from that tree."

Chapter Fourteen, pg. 112

"But I guess if you can die without ever understanding how it happened then you can also live without a complete understanding of how."

Chapter Fourteen, pg. 114

"There's very little turnaround time for a mother to go from careworn to (fake) enthusiastic but Trudie was a pro and I loved her for it and it didn't occur to me then that that sort of bravura could have a shelf life."

Chapter Fifteen, pg. 116

"Sometimes I think that Trudie blamed Ray for Tash leaving town with Ian because if Ray had agreed to leave first, had taken us all off to some other place, Tash wouldn't have had anything to rebel against and would have stuck around."

Chapter Fifteen, pg. 118

"Lid's parents were nice, quiet people. They didn't really believe in medicine or banks or social insurance numbers, just miracles."

Chapter Seventeen, pg. 137

"When negative experiences such as having one's house shot at occur in my dad's life he tends to come alive."

Chapter Twenty, pg. 160

"One day my mother told me that Tash had become an atheist."

Chapter Twenty, pg. 164

"I sat on the curb waiting for my dad while my mom threw rocks at her brother's house and screamed profanities that I'd never heard before."

Chapter Twenty-one, pg. 172

"It's hard to grieve in a town where everything that happens is God's will. It's hard to know what to do with your emptiness when you're not supposed to have emptiness."

Chapter Twenty-one, pg. 173

"It was The Mouth making threats and using God as a dummy. The man was insane."

Chapter Twenty-one, pg. 174

"There's no separation of Church and State, just of reality and understanding, and The Mouth is behind the wheel of it all."

Chapter Twenty-two, pg. 183



"They threw my mother out. Gave her the old heave-ho. The term is excommunicated."
Chapter Twenty-three, pg. 189

"I think I knew another part of the answer which was that she knew he needed me more than she did. I'm pretty sure she left town for his sake. It would have killed him to choose between her and the church."
Chapter Twenty-three, pg. 193

"He was stuck in the middle of a story with no good ending. He had the same disease I had."
Chapter Twenty-three, pg. 194

"On their way to watch The Mouth read Revelations by candlelight in the fake church while the people of the real town sat in a field of dirt cheering on collisions."
Chapter Twenty-four, pg. 206

"I finished eating and then I cleaned up and went outside to stare at the neighbor's wash line while I smoked a Cap and tried not to think about the obvious fact that Travis hadn't called since I'd botched yet another common human activity that even animals seemed to be able to do instinctively."
Chapter Twenty-Six, pg. 225

"You taught me that some people can leave and some can't and those who can will always be infinitely cooler than those who can't and I'm one of the ones who can't because you're one of the ones who did and there's this old guy in a wool suit sitting in an empty house who has no one but me now, thank you very, very, very much."
Chapter Twenty-six, pg. 225

"But before that, before the hospital and the field, sometime, I set a truck on fire in the parking lot of the Kyro Motor Inn, parked hastily outside room number six."
Chapter Twenty-seven, pg. 229

"Lack of attendance, said The Mouth. And other various...we can't have the church members setting fires...and...He glanced at me briefly."
Chapter Twenty-seven, pg. 235

"I thought about Menno Simmons and what kind of childhood he must have had to want to lead people into a barren place to wait out the Rapture and block out the world and make them really believe that looking straight through a person like she wasn't there, a person they'd loved like crazy all their lives, was the right thing to do."
Chapter Twenty-eight, pg. 242

"I meant thank you to Ray for, in the midst of his own multitude of crap and bewilderment, knowing one true thing. That I would never have left him and that if I were ever to get out of that town, he would have to leave first."
Chapter Twenty-eight, pg. 246



Topics for Discussion

What does Nomi mean when she says that she has trouble with endings? Do any other characters in the book have problems with endings?

Discuss Mr. Quiring's role in the novel.

What do you think happened to Nomi's mother?

Describe the relationship between Trudie and her brother.

Why is Nomi's father getting rid of their furniture? What does this symbolize? Why is it significant that their couch winds up in The Golden Comb's trailer?

Discuss the differences between the religious persecution in Russia and that in the East Village.

Compare and contrast Tash's rebellion with that of Nomi's.

What is significant about Ray's obsession with making order out of disorder? Why does he clean up the dump? Why is he obsessed with chemicals that must decay in order to become more stable?

What is the significance of Edwina McGillivray? What is her role in the novel?

Compare and contrast Lydia and Nomi.

Discuss the relationship between Nomi and Travis.

Discuss the relationship between Ray and Trudie.

Discuss the implications of the title of the novel. What is this complicated kindness? How is it shown?