

A Corner of the Universe Study Guide

A Corner of the Universe by Ann Martin

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Plot Summary

Hattie Owen is just about to celebrate her twelfth birthday as the story opens. She says good-bye to her best friend, Betsy, who always leaves their hometown, Millerton, for summer vacation in Maine. Betsy invites Hattie along, but Hattie doesn't want to leave her family and home. Hattie's parents run a boarding house and Hattie is well acquainted with two of the boarders, Mr. Penny and Miss Hagerty. The third, Angel Valentine, is the newest boarder. She is very young and attractive.

As Hattie is settling into her summer routine, she learns that her Uncle Adam is about to return to Millerton. Adam is mentally challenged and has been away at a special school since he was very young. Hattie has never heard of her Uncle Adam. Hattie's Nana is upset that Adam is returning. Nana has definite ideas of what's socially acceptable and hates that Adam is unable to conform to those ideas. Adam remembers Hattie, having been sent away to school when Hattie was just a baby. Hattie soon learns that her mother had sent pictures and letters to Adam every week while he was away.

Hattie is curious as to why she never knew that Adam existed. She also wonders if her parents never had another child for fear that they would have a child with Adam's mental difficulties. She can't bring herself to ask outright. Hattie stands up to two girls who call Adam a "freak". She later says that this is only one of the challenges Adam faced during his life and that it made it difficult to be Adam.

One day a carnival arrives in Millerton. Hattie becomes friends with a carnival kid named Leila. Hattie spends many afternoons at the carnival and the girls ride all the carnival rides for free and eat whatever they want. Adam and Hattie attend the carnival together twice. Hattie feels that her grandparents are unnecessarily restrictive with Adam and helps him sneak out of the house to go to the carnival at night. When Adam loses control on the Ferris wheel, he's taken away by police and Hattie is in serious trouble with her family.

A few days later, Adam returns to Hattie's house. He is as happy as ever before and has flowers for Angel Valentine. Hattie goes to see if Angel is in her room and Adam goes along. He pushes past Hattie and opens Angel's door to discover that Angel is inside but that she and her boyfriend are locked in a passionate embrace. Adam rushes away and disappears. He hangs himself and his body is found late that night.

Hattie asks to speak during the funeral and finds the opportunity to speak out about Adam's good qualities. She especially points out that he was able to find happiness. Hattie soon befriends a girl who moves into the boardinghouse and discovers that her life can go forward and be better for having had Adam in it.



Chapters 1 through 4

Chapters 1 through 4 Summary

As the story opens, Hattie Owen is in her home. Her parents have gone out for the evening, but she isn't alone because the family operates a boarding house and Mr. Penny and Miss Hagerty are both upstairs. Hattie is watching home movies. She's pleased that her father trusted her to do everything, from setting up the screen to feeding the reels of film through the projector. She says that she turned twelve the previous summer and that she will forever look at the summer as a turning point in her life because of Adam. She says that she dates things as "before Adam" or "after Adam".

As the movie begins to play, Hattie sees Angel Valentine, who was also a boarder over the summer when Adam came. Angel is standing on the front porch of the boarding house, waving toward the camera as most people do when Hattie's dad begins filming. In the movie, Angel is joined by Mr. Penny and Miss Hagerty. Then it's another day and Nana and Papa are standing on their front porch, also waving. Papa is wearing a tux and Nana is in a long dress. They are soon joined by Adam, but he refuses to look at the camera or to smile. In the next scene, Hattie and her Mom are at the carnival. Next comes the Fourth of July picnic. While everyone else is smiling for the camera, Adam refuses until Hattie lets a quiet burp, loud enough only for Adam to hear, which makes him laugh. The next is Hattie's birthday party. She says that looking back she remembers that a few moments later, Adam stormed away in anger and the filming stopped.

In chapter one, it's early summer in Millerton. Hattie is the first in the house to wake. She knows that most kids her age are sleeping in on the first day of summer vacation, but she's up early because she wants to get started on the many things she has planned to do. Hattie slips down to the kitchen to get breakfast started. Hattie's first job of the morning is to take a breakfast tray to Miss Hagerty. Miss Hagerty is past eighty but insists that no one see her until she's had time to put on her makeup. Cookie arrives as Hattie is preparing Miss Hagerty's tray. Cookie compliments Hattie for being "industrious", but Mom says Hattie should be "a little less industrious and a little more outgoing".

Hattie knocks at Miss Hagerty's door and waits to be invited in. She notes that there are twelve framed photos on the dresser, one for each year of Hattie's life. Hattie says Miss Hagerty is just like a grandmother, though Hattie has to keep that thought to herself. Her father's mother, Granny, lives in Kentucky, and Hattie seldom sees her. Her mother's mother, Nana, lives nearby. Hattie notes that Miss Hagerty has never married but seems an expert on boyfriends. They talk a little more, with Miss Hagerty reassuring Hattie that it's okay to be shy. Hattie leaves the room and waits for the third of their boarders, a young woman named Angel Valentine who works at a bank, is always watching her figure, and whose clothing Hattie always notes.



Later, Toby diAngeli arrives to help Mom with the cleaning while Dad heads to the attic to begin working on his latest art project. He's an artist - a fact that Nana hates. Hattie follows him, expecting that her father is working on a painting, but finds that there are pieces of paper scattered all over the floor. Hattie recalls that her father had created an animated movie called "Queen for a Day" and asks if he's making another movie. He says that he is, and that this one is called "Abstract". In this movie, he's moving random pieces of colored paper around on the floor, taking a new frame with the movie camera, then moving another. When played, it will look as if the pieces are moving on their own. As he works, Dad tells Hattie that Nana is coming over for lunch. Hattie is obviously not happy about it and Dad says that it will be alright. Hattie decides that she'll go for a walk around Millerton. She calls that out to her dad and leaves without waiting to know for sure that he heard her.

In chapter two, Hattie heads into town. She says that it's not necessary to let her parents know where she's going because people keep an eye on her and will often call her mom to say that Hattie has just gone by. On this particular day, Hattie heads down Grant Avenue to Betsy McGruder's house. Betsy and Hattie are best friends, but Betsy spends every summer in Maine with her family. Betsy says that she wasn't sure Hattie was coming though Hattie says she hasn't missed a single summer of seeing Betsy off since they were five. As Betsy's family finally gets the station wagon loaded, Betsy and Hattie hug goodbye and wave until they can no longer see each other. Hattie then heads down Nassau Street, stopping to see what's playing at the theater. She knows she doesn't have a quarter to see it anyway. She knows that she could ask Nana, and that Nana would take her. But she also knows that Nana would insist that she dress up and wear gloves, which means no candy or popcorn. Hattie decides to wait.

Farther down on Nassau Street, Hattie sees Papa's law office. She goes on farther and Mrs. Winterbotham calls out to her from Clayton's Yarn Shop, asking that Hattie tell Miss Hagerty that the yarn she'd ordered has arrived. Hattie promises to do that and runs on toward home. Hattie arrives home and realizes that Nana is in the parlor talking with Mom. Hattie tries to be quiet and overhears Nana say, "I'm afraid it's going to be the death of Hayden". Hattie tiptoes past the door, but Nana greets her.

In chapter three, Hattie greets Nana and wonders what they were talking about before Hattie arrived. Nana is staying for lunch and Hattie knows this means she's expected to dress up. Her mother, knowing how much Hattie hates this, offers a compromise and sends Hattie upstairs, but only to brush her hair. She meets her dad on the stairs and they go to the dining room together. Hattie is thinking about why Nana has come for lunch - something she rarely does. Hattie knows it must have something to do with the conversation she interrupted but can't guess what it might be.

Just then her thoughts are interrupted by Nana, who mentions the Summer Cotillion. The dance is for eleven and twelve-year-olds and Nana says it will be a good way for Hattie to begin celebrating her birthday. Mom, knowing Hattie doesn't want to go, says that Hattie can have a new dress for the event. Miss Hagerty offers to sew one for her and Hattie accepts though she plans to later tell Miss Hagerty not to bother because



she won't be attending. Hattie says Miss Hagerty "always understands" Hattie's feelings.

In chapter four, the rest of the day passes quickly for Hattie. She spends part of it in the attic with her father and they all gather for dinner. Following the meal, Miss Hagerty suggests lemonade and cookies - a summer evening tradition. Hattie agrees and prepares a tray. Just as Hattie is serving lemonade to Miss Hagerty, Mr. Penny and Angel Valentine, Dad calls to her. She almost objects on the grounds that she's just pouring the lemonade, but the tone of Dad's voice stops her. She goes inside with the idea that her parents are going to tell her she has to go to the Summer Cotillion.

Mom tells Hattie that she has another uncle, that his name is Adam, and that he was born when Mom was sixteen, meaning he's only twenty-one now. Mom says that Adam has been away at a special school but that the school has closed and he's coming home for the summer, until Nana and Papa can find another place for him. Hattie asks why she's never been told about Adam, and Dad says only that they hadn't wanted her to worry. She is forced to accept that explanation, though it doesn't answer the question for her. That night, Hattie slips out of bed and goes down to the parlor where the photo albums are kept. She goes to the older albums and finds a photo of Mom in her cap in gown with Uncle Hayden and a little boy. The caption written on the back of the photo indicates that it's Adam. He is wearing large glasses and is about four. In another picture, Papa and Nana are posed with all three children and Adam is not smiling. Hattie wonders what Adam was like as a child and wonders again why no one has mentioned him to her.

Chapters 1 through 4 Analysis

There is a great deal of information offered up about the family dynamics in chapter one. The reader learns that Hattie isn't overly fond of her "Nana", who is her mother's mother. At least part of that attitude comes from the fact that Nana didn't approve of the marriage between Hattie's parents. Hattie says that Nana believes Mom "married beneath her". Nana obviously expected Mom to marry someone wealthy who would lead the kind of lifestyle Nana leads. She's disappointed that isn't the case. She also disapproves of Owen family's lifestyle. Hattie's parents operate a boarding house in order to make ends meet and Dad is an artist. Hattie sees the lifestyle as perfect and she admires her father's creativity. The fact that Nana is opposed to something Hattie loves so much puts a strain on their relationship. The other source of the strain is that Nana wants to mold Hattie into the kind of young lady who enjoys dances and wears gloves to formal occasions. Hattie isn't interested in either. The reader must also look at the relationship from Nana's point of view. Nana is a wealthy member of the community and is admired by a segment of the area's social circle. She obviously likes the lifestyle she's living, and it must be an incredible disappointment to her that neither her daughter nor her granddaughter enjoys that social lifestyle. Despite this, her intolerance for the wishes of others creates a problem between the families.



Hattie says that there are three rules at the boardinghouse. One of those apparently stems from an accident in which Hattie spilled something on the parlor carpet. The second is that there are no pets allowed, and Hattie says that rule was implemented the day after her cat, Simon, died. The final rule is that no one in the house is allowed to "entertain" guests of the opposite sex. Hattie says that Mom has declared this applies to every boarder and to Hattie. This rule will become important later when Hattie and Adam discover that Angel Valentine has her boyfriend in her room.

Hattie talks about her friendship with Betsy, saying that the two of them have been best friends for many years and that Betsy is "technically" Hattie's only friend. Hattie will later talk about other girls in her grade at school. There are a couple of girls who are especially rude to Hattie, and she makes no secret of the fact that she doesn't like them. Hattie is very shy, which might be part of the problem. Her mother talks about the need for Hattie to get past that. But the reader will see later in the book that these other girls are nasty. Another aspect of Hattie's nature is seen when she says that Betsy's family always invites Hattie to spend the summer with them, but that Hattie never wants to go. Mom doesn't understand and believes that a summer vacation in Maine would be fun for Hattie. Hattie, however, says that she just wants to remain in Millerton, spend her summer visiting her friends and enjoying the break from school. These "friends" Hattie mentions are storekeepers and other adults around town.

When Nana talks about Hayden, Hattie isn't certain whether she's talking about Nana's husband who is Hattie's "Papa", or Nana's son, who is Hattie's uncle. Hattie's Uncle Hayden lives in California and hasn't been back to Millerton in years.



Chapters 5 through 8

Chapters 5 through 8 Summary

In chapter five, Hattie is waiting to meet Adam for the first time. Papa had left on Thursday, headed for Cincinnati to pick up Adam, and is returning today. Hattie, Dad and Mom are now headed to Nana and Papa's for dinner. They arrive at the door and Adam rushes out, talking very quickly. When Dad asks if Adam remembers Hattie, Adam hugs her and says, "My old friend, my old old friend, Hattie Owen, how are you, how are you?" Hattie says that he talks so fast that she becomes breathless just from listening. But Adam is smiling so widely that Hattie finds herself smiling as well, and she notes that Mom and Dad are also smiling. Adam says that Hattie was not yet two years old when he last saw her.

Inside, Hattie looks at Adam. She says he's not much bigger than she but that she can see he has muscled forearms. She notes a resemblance to Papa. Hattie also notices a tenseness about Adam's features that she can't explain. As Papa has the butler bring drinks, Adam whispers to Hattie that he always gets "a Shirley Temple", and Hattie says that's what she's given as well. Papa proposes a toast to the occasion. Adam sticks his hand into his drink to retrieve the cherry. In the process, he splashes ice on Hattie. Nana is on the verge of fussing at Adam, but Hattie says that it cooled her off, which seems to lessen the tension of the situation. Adam recalls that Hattie's birthday is July sixteenth and she confirms that she's going to be twelve. Adam says she must have a party, but she says she doesn't have enough friends for a party. Adam and Hattie fall behind as they go in to dinner and Adam whispers that Hattie should quickly get the cherry out of her own glass, a feat she'd been trying to accomplish without sticking her fingers into the glass. She does.

In the dining room, a servant named Ermaline passes around the food and then they begin to eat. Adam is eating fast without pausing between bites. Nana tells him to slow down then instructs that he use his "party manners". Adam becomes immediately angry, slams his fist onto the table, and mimics Nana. After that he stops talking and slows down his bites. When dessert arrives, Adam picks up the bowl and "slurps" it, which prompts Papa to chastise him. Adam leaves the room, obviously angry.

In chapter six, it's Sunday morning, and Nana and Papa arrive with Adam at the boardinghouse. Nana says that Adam doesn't want to go to church and asks if he can stay with Mom. Mom objects, saying Adam isn't a child and should be able to stay at home alone, but Nana counters, saying that Adam is "still getting used" to being at home. Dad finally enters the conversation, saying Adam can stay with them while Nana and Papa go to church. Hattie is surprised to discover that Adam knows Mr. Penny and Miss Hagerty. Miss Hagerty talks to Adam about his favorite television show, "I Love Lucy". When Mr. Penny arrives, Adam asks about the clock shop and Mr. Penny says that the shop is closed.



Angel Valentine arrives on the porch and has Adam's immediate attention. Adam quickly takes in details, such as the fact that Angel works in a bank. Hattie says she loves Angel for acting as if there's nothing unusual about Adam. Angel goes back upstairs and Adam suddenly turns his attention toward the street. Hattie realizes that two girls from her class, Nancy and Janet, are standing on the sidewalk, staring at Adam. Adam begins talking to them, asking if they'd like to come in for lemonade. The girls begin laughing, barely trying to conceal their laughter, then run away down the street. Adam slumps into a chair and Hattie fears he's about to cry. He doesn't, but it's obvious that he knows that Janet and Nancy were laughing at him.

In chapter seven, Hattie notes that everyone in town knows about Adam's arrival. She spends some time downtown and notes that there are signs all over town advertising the arrival of "Fred Carmel's Funtime Carnival". She's back home on the porch when Adam arrives. Hattie expects to see Nana with him, but he says that he's alone and that he's come to see Angel. Hattie reminds him that Angel works at a bank and that she's gone during the day. The phone rings and Hattie rushes to answer. It's Nana, who is frantic because she can't find Adam. Hattie says that Adam is with her. Adam takes the phone and argues with Nana, saying that he doesn't have to ask permission to leave the house. Hattie takes the phone again and asks if Adam can stay for awhile. Nana agrees and Hattie notes that she sounds relieved.

In chapter eight, Adam arrives early Tuesday morning and Hattie rushes inside to call Nana so that Nana won't be worried about Adam. Hattie says that Nana doesn't ask to talk to Adam this time but seems to be thankful for the phone call. Adam asks for Angel, but Hattie reminds him that Angel is at work. Adam says that he's going home and Hattie follows him, just to be sure he arrives safely and without getting into any problems. She says that she doesn't really feel like Adam's niece but sort of feels like his baby-sitter and is starting to feel like his friend.

The next day, Adam doesn't arrive until shortly after five o'clock, just at the time Angel arrives home. Hattie notes that Adam spends a great deal of time staring at Angel's breasts and that Angel doesn't object. The day after that, Adam arrives, but not at a time Angel is home. Adam says that he has a secret to share with Hattie. He has her give him a month, date and year, then he tells her what day of the week that was. Adam says that Nana calls it a "circus trick" and says it's embarrassing, and so Adam has been instructed to keep this curious ability secret.

That next Saturday, Hattie is about to take up Miss Hagerty's breakfast tray when she sees Adam walking down the street. He's dressed only in his pajama bottoms. Hattie rushes out and catches up with him. Having seen how Adam can be unpredictable, she is a little afraid but convinces him to go back to Nana and Papa's with her. They start down the street but encounter Nancy. Adam recognizes her from the day she'd laughed at him, but he doesn't understand her relationship with Hattie. He refers to her as "Hattie's friend" and invites her to join them for breakfast. Nancy refuses, then calls Adam a "big freak". Hattie tells her to "shut up" and continues home with Adam, and he's crying by the time they reach the house. Nana tells Adam to go upstairs and dress. Hattie tells her about Nancy's insult and says that she can tell Nana is angry about it.



Chapters 5 through 8 Analysis

When Adam greets Hattie, Dad and Mom at the door, he is talking very fast. He continues in this vein for several minutes until Nana arrives at the door and puts a hand on his shoulder, telling him to "slow down". Hattie notes the effect it has on Adam, though he only stops talking for a couple of minutes. This is the reader's first clue as to how little control Adam has of his emotions or himself. It's also the first look at the dynamics between Nana and Adam. Nana has created what she considers a "perfect world" for herself. She is comfortable in that world and Adam's presence is bound to make her unhappy because he can't conform and Nana is incapable of the tolerance Adam needs. An issue that the writer doesn't address is how Adam could have just disappeared from the Mercer family without anyone ever saying anything about him. In all likelihood, the silence on this front can be attributed to the fact that the Mercer family is important and well-respected in the community. The reader should also keep in mind that the story is set in the 1960s. In those days, moving a mentally challenged child to a full-time mental facility was accepted without question.

Hattie is immediately taken with Adam, at least partly because he is technically a grown-up, but he pays her a great deal of attention. Hattie seems to need this in her life. When Adam begins talking to Hattie about her birthday, he dismisses the idea that she doesn't have enough friends for a party. Later, Hattie wants him to return to that conversation, but Adam is soon in trouble for his lack of manners at the table.

Adam tells Hattie that she's the kind of person who can "lift the corner of the universe". Hattie says she doesn't know what that means but will later realize that Adam is talking about pushing the boundaries of her world. Adam and Hattie talk about many things and though Adam's thoughts are often jumbled, he makes Hattie stop and think about her life. At one point she tries to tell him that she feels as if she doesn't belong. Adam understands that and they equate it to being aliens. Adam tells Hattie that in fact, he is the only one who truly doesn't belong. At another point, Hattie says that she sometimes hates her porch. She then tries to retract the statement, saying that she knows she's not supposed to hate it. Hattie's trying to say that she doesn't like to be on display so that other people can stare at her, but she's very aware of the fact that Nana would never let her say something like this. As she tries to change it, Adam says that she can hate her porch if she wants. His tolerance on this point is something Hattie isn't expecting, and it becomes very important to her.



Chapters 9 through 14

Chapters 9 through 14 Summary

In chapter nine, Fred Carmel's Funtime Carnival comes to town in a parade that passes by Hattie's house. Hattie and several others, including Cookie, sit on the porch to watch. Cookie says she wants to see the sideshow performers. When the parade arrives, Hattie reads the signs advertising the sideshow. There's a Pretzel Woman, Man of a Thousand Tattoos and Ape Man. Hattie is mesmerized by the pictures on the trailer and wonders if she would want to be stared at by strangers. They make plans to attend the carnival on opening night. They walk to the carnival grounds, and Hattie realizes that she's somewhat disappointed by the sideshow. She says the people seem as if they are just wearing makeup or have some specific talent. Hattie, Mom and Dad ride the Ferris wheel as their final ride of the night. There's a girl about Hattie's age taking tickets. As they leave the ride, the girl waves, says she hopes they had a good ride and invites them back.

In chapter ten, Hattie goes back to the carnival on another day. She says she soon finds herself in front of the sideshow and she has the money for a ticket. But she thinks about the day Nancy called Adam a freak and doesn't go inside. On Thursday, Hattie heads back to the carnival again. As she passes Nana and Papa's house, she considers that Adam hasn't yet been to the carnival. Hattie considers asking him to go with her but isn't sure if she can manage Adam. Hattie wanders around for awhile and meets up with the girl who'd been taking tickets at the Ferris wheel. The girl introduces herself as Leila and says her uncle owns the carnival, her father works there and her mom is the "Pretzel Woman" in the sideshow. Leila asks Hattie if she'd like to ride the Ferris wheel. Hattie says she hasn't any money left, but Leila says the ride will be free. They take that ride and spend the rest of the day together. The next day Hattie returns for most of the day and they have hot dogs for lunch. Hattie tells Leila about Adam and Leila says she'd like to meet him which makes Hattie realize that Adam hasn't yet been to the carnival.

In chapter eleven, it's the Fourth of July, and Millerton has the annual festival. Hattie's family always attends together with Nana and Papa. Hattie says that while everyone else is eating picnic food off paper plates, her family is eating a full meal off real plates. Despite this, she enjoys the festival, especially the patriotic music. While they are eating, Adam begins to act out and a family nearby begins to stare. Hattie, hoping to make a point, stares back at the mother. When the mother realizes that Hattie is staring, she also realizes that her own family has exhibited bad manners. Adam refuses to smile when Dad begins taking pictures. When they bring out the dessert, Adam refuses to eat it, insisting on ice cream from the ice cream truck. He gets up and runs off and Nana tells Hattie to go with him.

Later, Adam goes very near the bandstand. He begins dancing and yells, "happiness". Though Hattie knows that no one dances at the Fourth of July event, she smiles at Adam's joy. Hattie decides to wait until the song is over to try to get Adam to go sit with



her. Then she notices that Nancy and Janet are watching and laughing. When she's again sitting with the family, Hattie suddenly wonders about Adam's illness and whether it might run in families. She has lots of questions about it but knows that she can't ask her family.

In chapter twelve, Hattie spends the day with Leila. Hattie asks Leila if it bothers her that people pay money to stare at Leila's mother. Leila says most of the people in the sideshow have honed a talent or learned to wear makeup and costumes. She says the only ones she worries about are those who are born with some deformity. Hattie confides that Adam has been called a freak.

On another day, Adam arrives at Hattie's and asks if Angel is at home. Hattie says she isn't but asks Adam to go with her to the carnival. Nana, apparently relieved to have Adam taken care of for the afternoon, agrees that he can go. Leila tells Adam they can ride anything they want but Adam says he only wants to watch the Ferris wheel. Leila says that she doesn't attend a regular school but gets her education through correspondence courses and buys books at flea markets. When Adam arrives home, he shows Nana the knife he'd won. Nana takes it from him, saying that he can look at it but never again touch it.

In chapter thirteen, Hattie spends most days with Leila at the carnival. She arrives home one day to see Angel getting out of a convertible driven by a handsome man. Hattie asks if the man is Angel's boyfriend and she says they haven't know each other long, but agrees that he is her boyfriend. Adam steps out of the bushes and greets Hattie and Angel. Hattie says that there's something about Adam's demeanor that makes her take a step backwards and that Angel does as well. After Angel goes inside, Adam says that he and Leila have made plans for a birthday party for Hattie. Adam says the party will be at the carnival and that it's okay if he and Leila are the only friends who attend. He hands Hattie an invitation, inviting her to her own party. She is thrilled with the thought but notes that it's the same day and time as the Summer Cotillion. She wonders if she'll be allowed to go to the carnival or if she'll be forced to go to the dance. Adam is concerned when Hattie doesn't immediately answer. She then tells him that she wants to talk to Nana, and they set out for Nana's house. Nana objects, but Adam becomes upset and she gives in.

In chapter fourteen, Hattie and Mom go to Nana's for a "girl's lunch". Hattie doesn't like to get dressed up but admits that she doesn't dread it so much on this day because Adam will be there. Hattie watches as Mom puts the finishing touches on her outfit. Hattie works up her nerve and asks why Mom never had any other children. Mom hesitates but then says it's because Hattie was "perfect". Hattie wants to follow the conversation by asking if she were afraid that they might have a child with Adam's illness, but can't find the courage to say it.

When everyone is seated in the dining room, Nana presses a small buzzer with her foot to summon Ermaline. Hattie says that she's always wanted to be able to press the buzzer but knew she couldn't. On this day, Adam lunges for the buzzer and presses it repeatedly, which brings Ermaline running in confusion. Nana chastises Adam for his



action. Adam begins to mimic every sentence Nana says and she orders him out of the dining room. Hattie wants to go after him, but she doesn't dare. She doesn't see him again until after lunch.

It's later that day that they are to have Hattie's birthday party at the carnival, and Hattie arrives without being certain Adam will be allowed to go, but he rushes out and they set off. Adam gives Hattie a small wooden box for carrying change and Leila provides all the food and fun for the day.

Chapters 9 through 14 Analysis

Cookie's name is really Raye Bennett, and it occurs to Hattie that she should refer to Cookie with a title of respect, such as "Miss", but that no one else does and so she doesn't either. It's obvious that Hattie likes Cookie, but Cookies doesn't understand Hattie as well as some of the other adults in Hattie's life. For example, she asks Hattie if she doesn't have a friend to watch the carnival parade with. When Hattie says that Betsy is in Maine for the summer, Cookie asks if there isn't someone else she can be friends with. Hattie doesn't argue the point, but she's obviously disappointed that Cookie would think she needs another friend.

Hattie notes that there's no way to predict when someone might become a friend. She says that she and Betsy became friends in kindergarten because they were in the same class. Adam became her friend when he came "barreling" into her life. She says that her meeting with Leila was a chance encounter and that it ended up with an instant friendship.

Adam makes a point of telling Hattie that one friend is enough for a birthday party and that two is also enough. He is obviously trying to make her feel better because he remembers that she'd said she has no friends in town. Hattie is certainly glad to have a reason to get out of the Summer Cotillion, but she's honestly pleased that Adam and Leila gave thought to making birthday plans, and that Adam went to the trouble to make an invitation for her. When Hattie shows Nana the invitation, Nana is obviously unhappy, pointing out that the time interferes with the dance. Adam begins to cry and asks why his plans aren't important. Adam's tears upset Nana, and Hattie notes that Nana seems near to crying as well. This is the first time the reader sees this side of Nana. She obviously wants to make Adam's life happy and is willing to sacrifice having Hattie at the dance if it makes Adam happy.



Chapters 15 through 22

Chapters 15 through 22 Summary

In chapter fifteen, the day following the party at the carnival is Hattie's real birthday, and there's a party with Mom, Dad, Nana, Papa, Cookie, Miss Hagerty and Mr. Penny. Adam reaches out and grabs the rose off Hattie's cake, which makes Nana chastise him. Hattie says she wants Adam to remain, but he stomps out of the house.

Nana and Papa give a dinner party two times each year. Hattie notes that the invitation is hanging on the kitchen wall. Hattie thinks about the night and knows that she and Adam won't be invited. She considers staying at home to read the books she got for her birthday and knows that Adam will also have to spend the evening in his room. Hattie asks her parents if she can spend the evening at the carnival. She promises that Leila will be there and they agree on the condition that she doesn't walk home alone but waits at the carnival for Dad to pick her up. Hattie and Leila talk about the upcoming evening and the possibility of inviting Adam. Hattie knows that Nana won't allow Adam to go but considers the possibility of having him sneak out. Hattie says that she doesn't know what she will say to Dad when he arrives to pick her up and discovers Adam there as well. She knows she'd get in trouble but comes to the conclusion that it's worth the risk and the potential punishment. Hattie shares her plan with Adam, telling him that he is to sneak out of the house at seven-thirty, that he can't let anyone see him and that he can't tell Nana or Papa. Adam agrees.

They spend the evening having fun and Adam is obviously over-excited. After awhile, he says that he wants to go on the Ferris wheel. Hattie and Leila ask if he's certain, and he assures them he is. They wait in line, and as they get on the ride, Adam seems uncertain. They ask if he wants to get out but he doesn't say he wants out and the ride starts. The ride goes smoothly for a few minutes but then encounters a mechanical problem and comes to a stop with Hattie, Adam and Leila near the top.

In chapter sixteen, Adam becomes hysterical and tries to climb out of the car. Leila and Hattie try to reassure him and then physically hold him in the car. By the time the ride is fixed and they reach the bottom, the police have been called and an ambulance arrives. Adam is put into a straight-jacket and taken away in the ambulance. Just before he's placed in the ambulance, Dad and Papa arrive. As they return to the house, Dad asks Hattie how Adam came to be with her at the carnival. She admits that she'd told him to sneak out of the house. Dad asks why she didn't ask permission and she says she'd know Nana wouldn't allow Adam to go.

In chapter seventeen, that Sunday Hattie knows she is in serious trouble. She says that the night before she'd helped Mom and Ermaline clean up after the party that had broken up early because of Adam. While they were cleaning up, Mom hadn't spoken to Hattie at all. But the following day, Sunday, Mom and Dad had talked to her a great deal. Mom points out that Hattie has no right to make decisions about Adam because Nana



and Papa are his parents and are responsible for him. Mom says that Hattie knew this or she would have asked Nana if Adam could go. Mom says that the carnival at night would be too much excitement for Adam to handle. Later, Nana talks to Hattie. Hattie grows angry and accuses Nana of trying to keep Adam hidden away. Hattie says that Adam simply wants to have some fun. Nana says that Hattie would never have done anything so seriously wrong before meeting Leila. Nana then forbids Hattie from going to the carnival again. Hattie asks to see Adam, but Nana says Adam needs time to calm down.

That Wednesday, a woman with two children arrives, looking for a room. Hattie hasn't spoken to her parents since Sunday but tells them that the family - Barbara Strowsky and her children, Sam and Catherine - are out front. Mom soon announces that the Strowskys will be moving in. She says that Mr. Strowsky died suddenly of a heart attack and that the family has little money and nowhere to go.

In chapter eighteen, Hattie wants to see Adam but knows that she'd have to ask Nana for permission. She refuses to talk to Nana. Hattie is on the porch when Catherine comes down. Neither girl knows what to say. Hattie tells Catherine that she and Sam are welcome to come down to the parlor to watch television or to play in the backyard. The girls discover that they're the same age and will be entering seventh grade in the fall. As they are talking, Adam arrives, dressed in his best suit, though it's made for winter. He has flowers in his hands, roots and all, and asks if Angel is home. Hattie says she'll go upstairs to find out and Adam follows her. When Hattie is about to knock on Angel's door, Adam pushes past her and throws open the door. Angel is inside, but her blouse is unbuttoned and her boyfriend is on the bed without his shirt. Adam stares at Angel for a long minute then rushes from the house. Hattie stares at Angel for a moment longer, then rushes out after Adam.

She can't find Adam, so she goes to Nana's house. She has to explain to Nana what Adam saw. Nana says that Hattie should have known better than to let Adam go upstairs and Hattie, angry, says that Nana should know Adam better. Hattie then turns to leave the house. When Nana asks where Hattie's going, she says she's going to the carnival because Nana is "not my mother".

In chapter nineteen, Hattie arrives at the carnival grounds to discover that Leila and her family have already left and that the carnival is being dismantled. Hattie goes to the park where she finds a secluded place and cries for a long time. She imagines writing a letter to Leila, explaining why she hasn't been back to the carnival and apologizing for not being a very good friend. Hattie eventually heads home but sees a police car in front of Nana and Papa's house. She stops and discovers that everyone is searching for Adam.

At home, she discovers that Dad and Mom are going out to help search. They tell Hattie she has to stay home. Hattie and Catherine spend some of the evening together and Catherine says that her dad went to work one day and died of a heart attack there. Catherine is eventually called in by her mom, and Hattie remains on the porch alone until she finally grows so tired that she goes to bed. Soon after she falls asleep, Mom



and Dad arrive with the news that Adam hanged himself in the shed behind Nana and Papa's house. Hattie is sad but says she is "not very surprised".

In chapter twenty, Mom's brother Hayden arrives. The day of the funeral, Hattie asks Mom some questions. Mom says that Nana and Papa occasionally visited Adam but had asked Mom not to, saying it would make Adam upset. Hattie asks if Mom loved Adam, which makes Mom angry. Hayden asks Mom why Adam was back in Millerton, and Hattie realizes that he hadn't known that Adam's school closed. She says that no one in the family talks to each other. The day before the funeral, Hattie tells Nana she wants to speak at Adam's funeral. Nana seems about to object but agrees. Mom says that Hattie has to wear black to the funeral but Hattie chooses a yellow dress Adam had admired on the day of her family birthday party.

In chapter twenty-one, Hattie sees Janet and Nancy in the crowd and the two girls are barely holding back their giggles. Hattie fears the priest might not signal when it's time for her to speak and prepares to push her way into the service if necessary. She plans to find Miss Hagerty in the crowd and to talk directly to her, but when she is summoned to the pulpit, she finds Janet and Nancy instead. She says that Adam was her uncle and that she wants people to know that Adam wasn't "a freak". She says that being called a freak and other names "made it hard to be Adam". Hattie goes on to say that Adam had "good times and bad times". She is on the verge of saying that Adam's bad times are difficult for anyone to understand, but she sees that Nana is crying and she stops.

Back and Nana and Papa's, Hattie slips away, intending to see Adam's room. She discovers Nana there and offers to leave, but Nana invites her in. There are pictures pasted to the walls and a box filled with paper. Nana says the box holds the letters and pictures Mom had sent to Adam over the years. Hattie learns that Mom had sent Adam something - a letter, pictures of Hattie or something else she thought he might like - every week since he'd been away.

In chapter twenty-two, Hattie's memories come to an end with the reel of film. She replaces everything and thinks back to the days after Adam's death. She says that Angel wasn't supposed to have a boyfriend in her room and that Hattie had wanted to blame Angel for Adam's suicide. Angel moved out and still works at the bank in town. Hattie says that she'll speak to Angel someday but isn't yet ready. One day Nana asks Hattie to help clear out Adam's room. Hattie isn't sure why Nana doesn't ask someone else for help, but complies. But Nana finds she can't do anything with Adam's things and sends Hattie home. Papa stops going to work and days pass before he's able to go back to his normal routine. In August, Mom, Dad and Hattie go on a vacation, leaving Cookie in charge of the boardinghouse. Mrs. Strowsky finds a job and she moves out of the boarding house with Catherine and Sam. Catherine, Hattie and Betsy become inseparable after Betsy returns from summer vacation.



Chapters 15 through 22 Analysis

Hattie is angry after the incident involving Adam at the fair. She says that she didn't ask because Nana would have refused to allow Adam to go. Hattie's motives were kind - she wanted to save Adam from a boring evening stuck in his room while the adults were having a party. She says that she wants to give Adam the chance for some fun without Nana standing over him, trying to make him into a perfect person that he obviously isn't cut out to be. But Hattie's methods were dangerous. She put herself, Leila and Adam in danger by taking Adam to the carnival. While she couldn't have predicted Adam's reaction, she'd seen him in the middle of temper tantrums, behaving erratically. Hattie obviously knew that something could happen or she would have made her plans known to the adults. What's interesting is that when Hattie and Nana are arguing, Hattie begins to realize that she knew taking Adam out at night wasn't a good idea.

Hattie says that she wasn't a good friend to Leila. She's referring to the fact that she never invited Leila over rather than the fact that she didn't return to the carnival after Adam's disastrous ride on the Ferris wheel. Hattie seems to suddenly realize that she was so enamored with visiting the carnival every day that she didn't consider what Leila might have wanted to do.

Adam's reasons for committing suicide are complex. He's obviously very upset about Angel being with a boyfriend, but there's more to it than just that single incident. Hattie touches on this early in the book. She says that Adam seems to constantly forget that Angel will be gone to work every day until after five. Hattie's theory is that Adam purposely forgets. He subconsciously knows that Angel has a job at the bank but also knows that he doesn't have a job. This marks a notable difference between Adam and Angel, and it could be that Adam doesn't want to think about it.

Hattie talks only briefly about her attempts to talk to her parents about Adam and the impact he's had on their lives. After the incident on the Ferris wheel, the entire family makes veiled references that Hattie doesn't understand. She notes that it's as if they're all referring to something that happened years ago, long before she can remember. This is just a theory on Hattie's part and is never explained. Hattie also continues to worry about Adam's illness and whether it might be inherited. While she doesn't really seem concerned that there's something wrong with her, Hattie does worry that her parents didn't have another child for fear that there might be something wrong with it. She talks about this briefly to Miss Hagerty, who also doesn't have answers for Hattie. When Hattie, Mom and Dad go on vacation, Hattie tries to tell them how much it concerns her that they don't talk to each other about important things. Their answers are unsatisfactory but she says it will have to do for a start.

Hattie finishes her story by talking about Adam's thoughts on the "corner of the universe". She says that it's okay to lift up the corner of one's universe, to "poke around" in there to see what can be found, and even to poke at whatever turns up. This is an analogy for exploration of one's world. It could be a physical world, but is more likely

referring to an emotional and intellectual world. The reader has to put his own interpretations on this idea.



Characters

Hattie Owen

The twelve-year-old girl who is at the heart of the story, Hattie is an independent child who doesn't know her uncle Adam exists until just before her twelfth birthday. Hattie thinks a great deal and she has many questions about Adam and about how he has impacted her life, even though she never knew about him. Hattie and her parents run a boarding house and she's happy with her life. When she's invited to spend the summer with her best friend, Hattie declines the offer. She says that she doesn't want to leave her home, her parents and all that's familiar. Hattie has only one friend her own age but considers several adults as friends. She recognizes the family dynamics that drive her parents and grandparents, including that her grandmother doesn't approve of Hattie's father and that her mother will give in to most of her grandmother's demands in an effort to keep the peace. Hattie is very shy but learns over the course of the summer that she sometimes has to stand up for what's right. She cares greatly for her Uncle Adam and is willing to step outside her comfort zone in order to defend him. Hattie wants to blame others for Adam's death, though she realizes there really isn't anyone to blame. She comes to understand that she can't control others but that she can control their effect on her life.

Adam Mercer

Hattie's uncle Adam is twenty-one the summer he comes home to live. Adam has been sent away to a special school since he was a child, and Hattie has never even heard of Adam prior to his arrival at Millerton. Adam has mental challenges. His physical appearance points to those challenges. Adam is unable to control impulsive behavior. He often acts in ways that are childishly inappropriate for social occasions, actions that earn him the anger of his mother. He is very thoughtful and caring but erupts in stressful situations. When Adam learns that Hattie has never had a birthday with children of her own age, he wants to give her that experience. He sends Hattie an invitation to her own party, an action that Hattie finds incredibly thoughtful. While Adam can obviously think through specific situations, he is sometimes incapable of that level of thought. When he finds himself stopped at the top of the Ferris wheel, he screams and tries to climb out of the car. He's hysterical by the time the ride is repaired and the car reaches the ground. Adam is fully aware of the world around him and looks for happiness - a trait that Hattie admires. But he is also prone to bouts of depression and is unable to control himself when faced with any situation that he finds stressful.



Jonathan Owen

Hattie's father is an artist and very much a free spirit compared to Hattie's grandparents. Jonathan teaches Hattie to be creative. He's well educated and is unwilling to change, though it's obvious that Hattie's grandparents don't approve of his lifestyle.

Dorothy Owen

Hattie's mother is a caring woman who loves her family very much. Dorothy is torn between the need to please her mother by giving in to her demands and the need to live as she sees best. Hattie notes that Dorothy almost always gives in to Harriett's demands on the small issues, such as making Hattie wear gloves and dress up for their lunches with Harriett. It's not until after Adam's death that Hattie learns that Dorothy had written Adam every week during his years away at school.

Hayden Mercer

Hattie's grandfather is a recognized pillar of the community of Millerton. Hayden is a strong character and is driven by the need to be accepted socially. It's Hayden who travels to pick up Adam when his school is closed. Though he seems overly demanding of Adam, Hayden is greatly affected by Adam's death.

Harriett Mercer

Hattie's grandmother is a domineering character who refuses to bend. Harriett is demanding of others and expects to get her way. She has a strong belief in what is socially acceptable and demands that others conform to that as well. Adam's actions are a strain on Harriett. She seems overly strict to Hattie, but it seems likely that she's really doing what she believes is right for her family.

Mr. Penny

Mr. Penny is a boarder at the boardinghouse run by the Owen family. He is a former clockmaker and has lived in the boardinghouse for many years. Mr. Penny remembers Adam from his childhood.

Leila

The daughter of carnival performers, Leila arrives in Millerton with the carnival and quickly becomes friends with Hattie. Leila is different from other girls Hattie knows in that she attends school by correspondence course and works at the carnival. Leila accepts Adam as Hattie does, a fact that endears her to Hattie.



Miss Hagerty

Miss Hagerty is a boarder at the boardinghouse run by the Owen family. She has been a resident there for many years, and when Adam returns to Millerton, Miss Hagerty picks up her friendship with him almost as if he'd never been away. Miss Hagerty doesn't come downstairs for breakfast, citing the fact that she can't be seen by anyone until she's had time to apply her makeup. She makes an exception for Hattie, and so it falls to Hattie to bring Miss Hagerty her breakfast each morning. Hattie likes Miss Hagerty, and the two have lemonade on the porch every afternoon.

Angel Valentine

The youngest of the boarders at the Owen house, Angel is very pretty and works at a bank. Hattie is always interested in what Angel is wearing. Adam quickly develops a crush on Angel. When Adam discovers Angel in her room with her boyfriend, he's devastated. Adam commits suicide that day and Hattie wants to blame Angel for it, though she realizes it's not really Angel's fault. Angel moves out shortly after Adam's death and Hattie knows that someday she'll begin talking to Angel again, though not quite yet.

Cookie

Cookie is the name everyone uses for Raye Bennett, as she's the cook at the boardinghouse. Cookie is apparently dedicated to the family and arrives to help on the day after Adam's death even though it's her day off. It's Cookie who tells Hattie that she's anxious to see the sideshow in the carnival.



Objects/Places

Millerton

The town where Hattie lives.

Kentucky

Where Hattie's paternal grandmother lives.

Grant Avenue

Where Hattie's best friend Betsy lives.

Maine

Where Betsy spends every summer.

Nassau Street

Where Papa's law office is located.

Summer Cotillion

The dance that's being held the day before Hattie's birthday.

I Love Lucy

The name of Adam's favorite television show.

Fred Carmel's Funtime Carnival

The name of the carnival that comes to Millerton and where Hattie celebrates her twelfth birthday.

The Farris Wheel

The ride Adam, Hattie and Leila go on while they're celebrating Hattie's birthday.

The Episcopalian Church

Where Nana and Papa attend and where Adam's funeral is held.



Themes

Coming of Age

Hattie has a birthday in July. She ages physically from eleven to twelve. But Hattie also matures dramatically and notes that it can be at least partly attributed to Adam's presence in her life. Hattie doesn't know about Adam until shortly before his arrival, and she is filled with questions about him. Hattie encourages Adam to slip out of the house in order to go to the carnival and he does, but with disastrous consequences. Hattie is later talking to Nana, who says that Hattie should have known better. Hattie is furious and says that everyone keeps saying she should have known better, but that she's still just a child. Despite her words, Hattie realizes that she should have known better. She admits to herself that Nana is right, though she can't yet admit it to others. Hattie asks to speak during Adam's funeral. She talks about the things that made life difficult for Adam. She's on the verge of saying more but suddenly realizes that her words are upsetting to Nana, who is crying. Hattie stops and takes a seat, and as she does so she realizes that she feels as if she had grown up a little while she was speaking. In truth, Hattie has grown up over the past days and has come to realize that other's feelings are as important as her own.

Tolerance

Hattie is a very tolerant person, though she is incredibly shy. She doesn't understand why other people seem so incredibly intolerant. On her first day of summer vacation, Hattie heads downtown. She stops to see what movie is playing. She knows she doesn't have the money to go but also knows that her Nana would take her if Hattie asks. But she says that if Nana goes to the movies, Hattie will have to dress up and wear gloves, which means she can't eat chocolate or popcorn. Nana's lack of tolerance means that Hattie can't just be a kid, wearing old clothes and enjoying the movie. Hattie talks several times about Nana's need to have people fit into her personal ideas. An interesting aspect of this is that Hattie sees some aspects of Nana's rules as intolerance, though they probably have another explanation. Hattie knows that Nana won't let Adam go to the carnival at night. She encourages Adam to sneak out, and when the situation ends with disastrous consequences, she comes to realize that Nana's rules had a purpose. Hattie's concern about intolerance comes out when she's considering the people who work in the sideshow. Hattie thinks how hurt Adam was when Nancy called him a "freak". She wonders how the people in the sideshow feel about being stared at and, after the first visit to the sideshow, doesn't go in again.

Family Dynamics

The family dynamics play a very important role in this story. Hattie is the only daughter in her family and the only granddaughter. Her grandmother, Nana, seems to be a very



formal and unforgiving person. She demands that others fit into her ideals and, for the most part, the members of the family comply. Hattie doesn't understand this. She believes that her mom should stand up to Nana, but Mom seldom does. Hattie says that Mom gives in on almost everything, especially the small things. What Hattie doesn't seem to realize is that Mom is trying to keep peace with Nana. This mother/daughter situation trickles down to Hattie. When Nana arrives for lunch, Hattie knows that Nana would prefer that she go put on a dress. Mom offers a compromise, telling Hattie to go brush her hair but allowing her to leave on her everyday clothes. While Hattie sees this as an ordeal because she's having to do anything at all, Nana probably sees it as giving in to Hattie. An interesting aspect of the family dynamics is seen when Adam wants Hattie to go to the carnival on the Saturday before her birthday. As it happens, that's the day of the Summer Cotillion and Nana wants Hattie to go to Cotillion. Hattie asks Nana if she can go to the carnival with Adam instead, and Nana is obviously upset. But then Adam begins to cry and Nana gives in. Hattie doesn't really understand the significance, but it's evidence that Nana is willing to make concessions that are - to her - incredibly important in an effort to make Adam happy.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in first person from Hattie's perspective. The perspective is completely limited to Hattie's view. Hattie is eleven as the story opens. The reader has to keep in mind that Hattie's perspective is limited to the fact that she's a child. The reader doesn't know anything other than what is revealed to or by Hattie. For example, Hattie comes to realize that there's something in the family history impacting the actions of the adults. She says that it must have happened before her birth and could have happened much earlier than that. Hattie doesn't know what that something is and she doesn't ever figure that out. Another aspect of this limited perspective is that Hattie doesn't know why she wasn't told about Adam. She asks but doesn't get a satisfactory answer. She later wonders if her parents' fear that they might give birth to a child with Adam's challenges prevented them from having another child. She wants to ask this question but can't bring herself to say the words. These limitations to the perspective are important because they keep the reader focused on Hattie's perspective. The story is presented through dialogue and exposition. There is an appropriate amount of exposition and dialogue and both are reasonable to the story.

Setting

The story has several distinct settings. Each is fictional but believable. Millerton, Hattie's hometown, seems reasonable for a town in the 1960s. The author details streets around Hattie's neighborhood, including the street where Hattie lives and the street of her Nana's house. There are also some descriptions of the businesses downtown. All these seem possible for the time period. Another specific setting is the boardinghouse run by Hattie's family. That setting is described in some detail, including that there's a stain on the carpet in the parlor that resulted in Mom declaring that no food is allowed in the parlor. The house has two stories and there are rooms for each of the boarders. Nana's house, by contrast, is fancier. Hattie mentions that there's a buzzer on the floor near the dining room table that Nana uses to summon the servant at mealtimes. Another specific setting is the carnival. Hattie describes the feelings of awe prompted by the lights, sounds and smells of the carnival. She's so caught up in the carnival and an emerging friendship with Leila that she spends a great deal of time there. The time setting is also believable. While the author doesn't mention anything related to world or national events to create a time setting. The time setting is supported by details of the story. For example, there are no cell phones but phones, cars and electricity are commonplace. Hattie says that she heads downtown alone and her parents are obviously not worried about her safety, another fact that supports the time setting.



Language and Meaning

Though the story was set in the 1960s, the modern-day reader should have little trouble understanding. There are a few words that are somewhat dated and a few expressions that may be unfamiliar to the reader. One of these is seen when Hattie meets Adam for the first time. The adults turn their conversation away from Adam soon after Mom, Dad and Hattie arrive. Hattie says it's Nana's way of "ignoring the elephant in the room". She means that Nana is ignoring Adam and the issue of having Adam back at home. Another interesting aspect of the story is Adam's reference to the "a corner of the universe". Adam talks about Hattie's ability to "lift" a corner of the universe. He seems to be referring to her ability to explore emotions and ideas - something no one else in the family is able or willing to do. The tone of the story is somewhat mixed. Adam is either very upbeat or very sad and angry. He has no in-between emotions, and this impacts the tone of the story. In addition, the reader will probably be sad by the scene in which Adam's body is discovered and again when Hattie addresses those gathered for his funeral. The story ends on a somewhat positive note, with Hattie realizing that her life has to go on and that she's better for having known Adam.

Structure

The story is divided into twenty-two chapters. Each of the chapters is titled by number only. The story is structured so that the reader enters at a specific point in Hattie's life, flashes back for most of the book, then returns to that beginning point. As the story opens, Hattie is watching a home movie of the summer's events. She says that the movie doesn't catch all aspects of the summer, but that there were important events that weren't captured on film. Hattie then begins telling about the summer. She begins with the first day of her summer vacation and goes on through Adam's arrival and his death. Hattie's retelling of the story then comes to an end as she replaces the film back in its reel. The majority of the chapters range from seven to ten pages in length. In the first part of the book, Hattie begins telling the story prior to the first chapters. This section of the book is five pages in length and is not titled. Prior to that first section, there's an author's note, "In Memory of Stephen Doyle Matthews, June 6, 1927 - August 14, 1950". At the end of the book, an author's note indicates that Stephen Matthews was the author's uncle, and that just as Hattie didn't know about Adam, the author didn't know about Stephen for many years. The author makes the point that the book is based only on that idea and that the people are not meant to mimic her own family.



Quotes

"Last summer, the summer I turned twelve, was the summer Adam came. And forever after I will think of events as Before Adam or After Adam."

Preface, no page number

"It's just that Granny lives in Kentucky and I hardly ever see her, and Nana ... well, Nana is Nana."

Chap. 1, p. 5

"At our house, Mom helps Cookie with the cooking and Toby with the cleaning, Dad tends the gardens, and when we need to go somewhere we hop in our ancient Ford station wagon and Dad drives. At Nana and Papa's the cooks cook, the maids clean, the gardeners garden, and the chauffeur drives."

Chap. 2, p. 14

"Maybe Nana and Papa think he doesn't fit there. Certainly, he is not part of the perfect world Nana has worked so hard to create."

Chap. 4, p. 34

"I have seen this before. It's Nana's highly effective and very annoying way of not mentioning the elephant in the living room."

Chap. 5, p. 40

"I feel a little like Adam's baby-sitter, a little like his mother, not at all like his niece, and quite a bit like his friend."

Chap. 8, p. 60

"Nana, one of the wealthiest people in Millerton, expected a perfect family, a family who would live up to the high standards set by Nana's father. But her children have failed her, which means Nana has failed."

Chap. 8, p. 67

"I can't stop the questions from coming. And I can't ask a single one of them."

Chap. 11, p. 94

"I want Adam to have one wild, thrilling evening with no one around to tell him to use his party manners. One evening without Nana hovering around trying to make him perfect."

Chap. 15, p. 127

"I did it, I escaped and no one saw me. I am out of the loony bin on a free pass!"

Adam, Chap. 15, p. 128

"It was the kind of terrified look that reminds you that no matter how rational or grown up a person might seem, some part of him is absolutely sure - knows - that an evil other-world exists just outside of our regular everyday world. And that although we don't expect that world to collide with our calm, predictable one ... well, really, at any moment



that is exactly what might happen."
Chap. 16, p. 135

"Funeral days either pour down rain or pour forth sunshine. Nothing in between."
Cookie, Chap. 21, p. 174

"He was called lots of names. And that was one of the things that made it hard to be Adam."
Chap. 21, p. 177

"It's all about changing what's handed to you, about poking around a little, lifting corners, seeing what's underneath, poking that. Sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't, but at least you're exploring."
Chap. 22, p. 189



Topics for Discussion

Describe Hattie Owen. Who are the people she considers friends? What is her life like? What are her strengths and weaknesses? What are her fears?

Describe Adam Mercer. What are the things he likes? What are the things he dislikes? What frightens him? Hattie says during Adam's funeral that there were things that made it "difficult to be Adam". What are some of those things? Does everyone face those same difficulties?

How does Hattie discover she has an uncle named Adam? Why does Adam come home? Do you believe Hattie's family would have told her about Adam if he hadn't come home? Why or why not? Adam's return brings up some questions in Hattie's mind. What are some of those? Does she find answers?

Describe Hattie's family members. Who are the most positive people in her life? Who are the most negative? Which people do you believe are the least tolerant? Which are most tolerant? What impact do those people have on Hattie?

Where does Adam take Hattie for her twelfth birthday party? Who is present? Why is this event important for Hattie? Where would she have been if not for the party?

Hattie's mother wants her to be more outgoing. What does Nana want of Hattie? Are the wishes of Mom and Nana reasonable to Hattie? Do you consider them to be reasonable? If Hattie chooses to do so, is she able to conform to what's expected of her by Mom and Nana? Support your answers with examples from the story.

Who is Miss Hagerty? Angel Valentine? Mr. Penny? Cookie? Ermaline? Catherine? Betsy? Leila? How does each of these characters relate to Hattie? How does each impact her life?

What do you believe Adam means when he talks about "lifting a corner of the universe?" Support your answer. What do you believe it means?