

Calling Me Home Study Guide

Calling Me Home by Julie Kibler

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Plot Summary

"Calling Me Home" tells two stories, that of Isabelle McAllister and of Dorrie Curtis. Isabelle, a 90-year-old white woman from Kentucky, asks Dorrie, a 40-something black woman from Texas, to bring her from where they live, Arlington, Texas, up to Cincinnati, Ohio. Dorrie calls Isabelle Miss Isabelle, but she is mostly referred to as Isabelle by the other people in her life. Isabelle asks on short notice, but Dorrie, feeling honored and intrigued at the request, rearranges her salon appointments and agrees to take Isabelle about a thousand miles Northeast. Dorrie leaves her two children with her elderly mother, and the two start out on their journey in Isabelle's vehicle.

During their road trip, Isabelle tells Dorrie the story of her life when she was just 17 years old. At the time, Isabelle was living with her parents and two brothers in Shalerville, Kentucky, a small town just a little across the Ohio river from Cincinnati. Isabelle is in quiet rebellion of the life her parents lead, and therefore lands in a potentially dangerous situation with a man she meets at a nightclub she sneaks out to. Robert, a young black man who is also the son and brother of Isabelle's housemaids, Cora and Nell, interferes with the situation and saves Isabelle from harm.

Robert walks Isabelle home, but must do so very carefully and while walking a few paces behind her, since black people aren't allowed in Shalerville after sundown. Isabelle is grateful for his protection, but is also intrigued by him. The two are tutored together by Isabelle's father, as she completes her regular schoolwork and he is working toward being a medic in the Army. She begins to find every excuse she can to see and/or talk to Robert.

In the meantime, Dorrie is trying to figure out if she should trust the man she just started dating, Teague. He proves his truth worthiness by calling when he says he'll call, texting her to see if she's doing okay, and helping her with a theft situation at the salon she owns. As Dorrie listens to Isabelle's story, she wonders if she can trust Teague since her own father wasn't present and her ex-husband is lazy and untrustworthy. Isabelle coaches Dorrie on what makes a good man.

Dorrie is also dealing with her 17-year-old son, Stevie Junior. He tells her that Bailey, his girlfriend, is pregnant, and that he is the one who stole the cash from the filing cabinet at her salon. Dorrie is beyond embarrassed that Teague is helping her with the theft, and it was her own son who did the stealing. She avoids Teague's calls and text messages.

Cora, Nell, and Isabelle's mother pick up on Isabelle's feelings for Robert. Cora and Nell discreetly try to ward off any interactions between Isabelle and Robert, while Isabelle's mother tells Isabelle to be less friendly with the Prewitt family, as they need to know their place and she, hers. Yet, Isabelle manages to follow Robert out of town and out to an arbor where he works to clear the debris for his home church. Isabelle begins going to the arbor every Wednesday under the guise of going to the library.



At this point in Isabelle's story, she and Dorrie have come to Memphis, Tennessee, for their first stop on their two-day road trip. They experience a slight instance of racism by the hotel clerk, but Isabelle isn't afraid to tell him what's on her mind. Outside of Memphis the next day, Dorrie stops at a university at Isabelle's request. It is the university where Robert went to school, and where his name is engraved on a War memorial.

Isabelle describes how she and Robert developed a strong courtship over the course of a year. They share a kiss after being caught in a rainstorm, and Robert calls Isabelle, Isa, after she tells him not to call her Miss Isabelle because it's too formal. Robert is uncomfortable with that at first, since blacks must refer to whites with respect, but eventually comes to calling her by the nickname he's chosen for her.

Isabelle and Robert share conversations about their hopes for the future. They work very hard - Robert more than Isabelle - to not discuss their feelings for one another, since interracial relationships were highly frowned upon in 1939. Eventually, though, Isabelle tells Robert that she might love him. Robert resists a relationship with Isabelle for a long time, saying it's too risky, since interracial relationships are considered a grave offense. Isabelle feels put off, and the two don't see each other for two weeks.

Nell approaches Isabelle and tells her that ever since an interaction she saw of Isabelle and Robert's, the two of them have been moping around their respective homes and Nell can't take it anymore. She offers to be a carrier for letters back and forth between Isabelle and Robert.

As the two write letters, Isabelle's have more emotion from the start. Robert's letters are full of rote facts that give nothing away as to how he feels, until the late fall when he refers to Isabelle as "you"; before that letter, he had never specifically referenced Isabelle. On Robert's breaks from school the two see each other at the arbor. Isabelle wants to marry, but Robert says they can never marry. He remains afraid of the social consequences should their relationship ever become public. Plus, he tells her, it's illegal.

Isabelle so wants to marry Robert that she goes to the Hamilton County Courthouse in Cincinnati, Ohio, across the river from where she lives, to see if interracial marriage is legal in Ohio. It is legal, and she lets Robert know.

Isabelle and Robert continue writing letters, and in a letter that same winter, Robert proposes marriage to Isabelle. He works hard to secure a job in Cincinnati, as well as a place for them to live. Isabelle reveals their plans to Nell for two reasons: she is bursting to tell someone, and she needs help. Nell helps Isabelle press her best dress, and get together a small bag of things Isabelle will need. She is planning to leave home for good to marry Robert, so she needs help gathering the right supplies.

In January 1940, Robert and Isabelle meet outside of Shalerville and go across the river to Cincinnati. The two get their marriage license on a Monday. The following Saturday, Isabelle leaves home to marry Robert. The two marry in a ceremony that is just the two of them aside from Reverend Day and his wife, Sarah; they give Isabelle and Robert a



thimble to act as a wedding ring. The thimble has the phrase, "FAITH. HOPE. LOVE." printed on the side. Isabelle and Robert stay in a room at a rooming house for their first home, timidly practicing marital intimacy.

The next day, Robert is out getting breakfast when Isabelle's brothers and father burst into her room. They are furious with her and with Robert, and force Isabelle to return home without Robert. Her family tells her the marriage is annulled since Isabelle is only 17 years old and lied to obtain the certificate. Isabelle is kept under a tight watch.

Mrs. McAllister fires Cora and Nell as soon as Isabelle's pregnant stomach starts showing; Mrs. Gray becomes the McAllister's housekeeper. As Isabelle is stuck inside with her condition of being pregnant, she is miserable. She is followed to and from the bathroom, and anywhere else in the house she wants to go. When she and her mother eventually have an argument, Isabelle gets so worked up that she doesn't watch her step and ends up falling down the stairs.

As Dorrie listens to Isabelle's story, she contemplates her own history as she grieves for Isabelle's losses. She wonders if she should change things in her life while she still can, before it's too late and she loses people she cares about.

Dorrie is pulled over for speeding just as her son is telling her what a terrible mother she is, one who never properly showed him love, which he claims is why he's acted out by having sex with his girlfriend. Dorrie gives the phone to Isabelle so she can concentrate on pulling to the side of the road. Isabelle promptly tells Stevie Junior to think about what he's saying and to call back when he's calmed down. Dorrie doesn't receive a speeding ticket, but she's sure that's just because she is sitting next to Isabelle, who is white.

Dorrie's car breaks down just thirty miles after getting pulled over. Teague calls her and she accidentally answers, so she gets off the phone with him as soon as she can, as she's not yet ready to decide if she's going to trust him or not. She's also still embarrassed about her son being the thief.

Back to Isabelle's story, falling down the stairs causes Isabelle's baby to be born prematurely. Her mother and the midwife make it appear to Isabelle as though the infant has died. Isabelle becomes more despondent than ever. When she gets her strength back, her mother tells her that she's free to come and go as long as she does not admit that she's been in Shalerville during the time Mrs. McAllister told everyone she'd been away.

When her body recovers after the pregnancy, Isabelle visits Cincinnati. She goes to the rooming house where she and Robert spent their first night as a married couple. She sees Nell at the supermarket, which is an awkward interaction. Nell tells Isabelle that Robert is joining the Army to be a medic. In Cincinnati, Isabelle also secures a job and a place to live so that she can leave home once and for all. Isabelle needs \$7 to secure the room she's found to stay in, a large sum especially since she doesn't have a job. She asks her father for the money, and he gives her \$15. Their interaction is hesitant



and awkward, due to him betraying their close relationship and letting Isabelle's brothers control his decision to force Isabelle away from Robert.

After some time of being alone, Isabelle is encouraged by a friend in Cincinnati to attend a public weekend dance in the community. She reluctantly agrees, but meets a man named Max, who asks her three times to dance with him before she says yes. Max is predictable, reliable, and persistent in his pursuit of Isabelle.

After a short courtship, Isabelle marries Max. She is complacent in the life she doesn't want to be living, but knows it's better than living one by herself. One afternoon while Isabelle is gardening, Robert visits her at her home while Max is at work. Robert tells her of her brothers' visit to Robert soon after the two were forced apart; Jack and Patrick almost killed Robert, which is why Robert didn't go looking for Isabelle. The two are intimate in Isabelle and Max's bed, and Robert promises to come back for her with a safe place she can stay until he's back from overseas, where he's going to serve for World War II.

Soon after Robert's visit, Isabelle realizes she's pregnant. However, she doesn't know whose child it is, since she was intimate with Max just the night before she was intimate with Robert. Isabelle decides that, for the safety of her child, she is going to stay with Max. She figures even if he is darker skinned, it'll be better to be raised by an all-white couple than an interracial one. Robert is upset with her decision, yet he still promises to come back. But he never does, which Dorrie learns when the two visit a memorial on his college campus with his name on it.

When Dorrie and Isabelle get to Cincinnati, they visit Robert's grave site after going to the bed and breakfast but before going to the funeral home. At the funeral home, Isabelle sees pictures of the person whose funeral it is and the reader learns that it's her daughter she thought had died back in 1940; her name was Pearl.

Isabelle and Nell reunite at the funeral home, showing no signs of anger toward each other as they embrace. It is after the funeral the following day that Nell fills Isabelle in on what happened surrounding Pearl's birth, as well as some bits and pieces about the Prewitt family since then. Isabelle listens to the entire story but shows little affect.

The night of the wake, Dorrie leaves a voicemail for Teague telling him she really likes him, she's sorry for how she's been acting, and she hopes they can work out a relationship. She's nervous as she leaves the message, but knows it's necessary.

When Isabelle and Dorrie arrive back in Arlington, it's a Saturday. Dorrie and Teague remain a couple, as she decides to trust him and he is patient with her as she tells him things going on in her life. Dorrie is happy that Teague waited for her while she traveled to and from Cincinnati, and that the two can continue dating. Dorrie also has a sit-down talk with Stevie Junior. Bailey miscarried the baby, and Dorrie and her son bond over the loss. Dorrie reminds him that he's still not yet a full-grown adult, and that she can help him make big decisions if he'll involve her.



Dorrie promises to be at Isabelle's house on the upcoming Monday to do her hair. However, the reader learns in the last chapter that Miss Isabelle passed within forty-eight hours of coming home from Cincinnati. She has her hands clasped at her waist, clutching the thimble given to her by Reverend Day and his wife, and Dorrie sets her hair one last time.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

The first section contains the first two chapters of “Calling Me Home.” The entire novel alternates chapters between modern day and 1939 through the early 1940s, but the first two chapters introduce Dorrie Curtis and Isabelle McAllister as the main characters in modern day.

Isabelle, or Miss Isabelle as she is called in each chapter she narrates, is an 89-year-old white woman. She admits that Dorrie thought Isabelle didn't like her because of the color of Dorrie's skin. In fact, Isabelle was mad that her regular hairdresser, or beauty operator as Isabelle calls her, had up and quit, abandoning Isabelle when she needed her hair done. Isabelle explains how over the years of Dorrie doing her hair, the two got to know each other better and share stories about life in general, though Dorrie always shared more than Isabelle. Isabelle also makes it clear that she has something in Cincinnati, Ohio, that she must do, and therefore needs Dorrie – and only Dorrie – to drive her from their hometown of Arlington, Texas.

Dorrie talks about how she did not think Isabelle disliked her because of the color of Dorrie's skin; rather, she knew Isabelle “carried more troubles” than just the color of Dorrie's skin (page 5). Dorrie narrates how Isabelle has become something of a mother over the ten years she's been doing Isabelle's hair, and how because of that she is willing to shift her entire life so she can escort Isabelle up to Cincinnati. Dorrie has no idea what is in Cincinnati, just that it's important to Isabelle.

The author makes it clear that Dorrie and Isabelle have known each other for ten years, but still know little about each other. For example, Dorrie doesn't know Isabelle's reasoning for needing to go to Cincinnati on such short notice, and Isabelle asks Dorrie if she even owns a dress, since all she's ever seen Dorrie in is her salon work clothes.

Teague, Dorrie's boyfriend, is introduced. He and Dorrie speak on the phone briefly as Dorrie is driving between Arlington and Memphis. Dorrie explains how out of her league she thinks Teague is, even as they have an enjoyable phone conversation.

Dorrie and Isabelle begin work on a crossword puzzle, an activity they do intermittently on their way to Cincinnati.

Analysis

The first two chapters are essential to understanding the rest of the novel, as they set the tone for both Dorrie and Isabelle's personality and for the stories they're going to tell each other and the reader. Each acknowledges that they didn't particularly care for each other right off the bat, which is quite the change from their current relationship, since



Isabelle admits that Dorrie is the only one she wants to escort her to Cincinnati for what she's got to face once she gets there.

In her introduction chapter, Isabelle is explaining how she met Dorrie and why she acted hateful toward her upon their first meeting. Her tone suggests that Isabelle is an elderly woman who still has her wits about her, but is not afraid to say what she is thinking or feeling. In her story about meeting Dorrie, the reader can tell that Isabelle has experienced a good amount of loss in her life, since she seems angry not that she has to get a new hairstylist, but that her former one just up and left without any warning. The reader might also note how Isabelle gives people a second chance, since she wasn't excited about knowing Dorrie at first but now treats Dorrie like a daughter, admitting that she trusts Dorrie more than anyone in the world. To go from feeling hateful toward a person to loving her like a daughter indicates a heart that is willing to change.

Dorrie, on the other hand, seems to be more open to Isabelle right off the bat. Though Dorrie's trust issues are incredibly apparent when she is talking about Teague, she doesn't seem to feel that way about Isabelle. In fact, Dorrie seems flattered and someone honored that Isabelle has entrusted such an important task to her. Almost as if she doesn't believe someone who is not family could love her enough to ask her along on such an important journey. Dorrie's trust issues seem to be mostly with men, though, as she sings to herself, "Teague, Teague, out of your league!" The reader can also pick up on that fact by the way she and Isabelle reference her ex-husband.

Teague's introduction is short and seemingly inconsequential based on his dialogue, but the way Dorrie dwells on him and their conversation lets the reader know that his presence is anything but inconsequential. At this point, it is unclear to the reader if Teague will let Dorrie down or if he will exceed her expectations. The author doesn't foreshadow or indicate one way or another, since his kindness could be construed as either genuine or untrustworthy based on the reader's general perspective.

A strong story is forecasted for Isabelle, since Dorrie indicates her hunch that Isabelle has seen great troubles, and the fact that Isabelle narrates that she thinks it's time to tell her story; there are things nobody knows and it seems that she would like to release it in order to do a bit of healing. It is clear that whatever healing she has to do and whatever story she has to tell is related to whatever event awaits her in Cincinnati.

The themes of race relations, home, family, isolation, and unlikely friendships are present in these first two chapters. Isabelle and Dorrie make it clear that they are an unlikely pair, not only because of their age but because of their differing races. Yet, they see each other as mother-like and daughter-like. Since Isabelle intends to share things about her life that nobody else knows, the reader might pick up on how isolated Isabelle has felt. Though the timeline of that isolation and her grief will not be presented until later in the story, it is still evident in her speech and in her demeanor.



Discussion Question 1

What kind of relationship do Dorrie and Isabelle seem to share?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Dorrie picks up on the fact that Isabelle "carried more troubles" than caring about the color of Dorrie's skin?

Discussion Question 3

Why might Dorrie and Isabelle not know each too well, even though they've had a hairdresser/customer relationship for a decade?

Vocabulary

stylist, keepsake, whittles, rigged, speculate, ornery, mired, berated, piecemeal



Chapters 3-6

Summary

In chapters 3 and 5, Isabelle is telling her story to Dorrie. In chapter 3, She tells of Nell fixing her hair for a party, though Isabelle's true plans were to go to her friend's party but then to ditch it and go to a nightclub in downtown Newport, Kentucky, called Rendezvous. Isabelle notes a moment when she inadvertently insults Nell, creating a divide in their relationship that was never there before yet never ends up going away. As Isabelle is walking out of the house for the party, her father wishes her a good evening and her mother is slightly suspicious that the Jones family will be bringing Isabelle to and from the party. Still, she lets Isabelle know her curfew of 11:30 and drops the subject.

Isabelle makes her way to the party, then after a short while makes her way out to Rendezvous by telling the party hostess that her family's housemaid will be walking her home. Isabelle's friend Trudie met her at a chili parlor so they could go to the club together, yet Isabelle notes how Trudie looks so much older than she really is. At Rendezvous, Trudie disappears onto the dance floor, leaving Isabelle to fend for herself. She flirts with a handsome man named Louie who asks her to step outside with him.

Outside, Louie becomes fairly aggressive. Isabelle tries to get away but is physically unable to, which is when Robert, Nell and Cora's brother, steps in from around a corner. Louie punches Robert for interfering, especially since Robert is a black man. Robert stands his ground and intimidates Louie enough that Louis walks away; Robert uses Isabelle's last name and the fact that her brothers and father would injure him should he hurt Isabelle to encourage Louis' departure.

Robert walks Isabelle home, though he walks a step behind her in accordance with proper social behavior. Isabelle understands, though she doesn't like it, and she knows Robert cannot walk her all the way home, lest her brothers see and think Robert was taking advantage of being alone with Isabelle. As the two walk toward Isabelle's home, Isabelle contemplates Robert's place in her life, which is, at this point, on a peripheral basis, since he is Nell's brother and Cora's other child. Because of Robert's kindness, she becomes interested and intrigued in the man behind the heroic act that saves her from Louie.

In chapter 5, Isabelle makes it home. The next day, she converses with Robert as he's at a table in the parlor studying. She expresses gratitude for his help the night before, and he expresses amusement at her nervousness and chosen vocabulary of kismet to describe their interaction the night before.

At Isabelle's house, she witnesses her brother Patrick take advantage of Nell by inappropriately touching her breast. Isabelle also hears her mother speak of how the



signs excluding black people from Shalerville after sundown makes the most sense for the safety of the white people and the quality of the town.

That same year in late Spring, Robert showed up to the McAllister's house to wash Mr. McAllister's 1936 Buick Special. Isabelle instantly schemes a way to get near him to talk with him, even though Robert does not outwardly reciprocate her desire. Her mother eventually calls her inside, claiming she's been in the sun for too long. Yet, inside, Marg McAllister scolds her daughter for being too friendly with the Prewitt family.

The following Autumn, Isabelle and Robert are being tutored by her father. Their sessions are cut short, however, when Robert must get home before sundown. Isabelle asks about the signs excluding black people from Shalerville after sundown, and her father says the signs have not always been there. Doc McAllister sends Isabelle home with some medicine for her mother, then tells her to take the afternoon off. He tells Isabelle he will make sure her mother knows it was his idea.

On her afternoon off, Isabelle goes to a creek. She laments about not being able to regularly wear trousers because her mother doesn't think they're appropriate, but that in this instance she's glad to be wearing a light cotton dress. At the creek, Isabelle runs into Robert. He teaches her how to fish, and she insists he stop putting 'Miss' in front of her name. Robert resists, but Isabelle is adamant that he not call her Miss Isabelle. A rainstorm begins and the two are stuck under a tree. Robert is hesitant, Isabelle is not. He even apologizes for holding her against himself so she would remain dry during the downpour.

When Isabelle returns home, Cora scolds Isabelle for being soaking wet. As Isabelle rushes to change, she thinks about how she wouldn't trade her afternoon with Robert for anything.

In chapter 4, Dorrie begins telling her story in present day. She is irritated right off the back because Isabelle chooses Dorrie's hometown to stop in for lunch. The two run into a former classmate of Dorrie's, one whom Dorrie didn't like in high school and seems to still not prefer. Susan tells Dorrie what's happened in her life since high school, and Dorrie shares some of what has happened in hers. Isabelle tells Susan that she and Dorrie are headed to Cincinnati for a family funeral, which leaves Susan confused since the two are clearly not blood related.

Dorrie spends most of her time in chapter 4 telling Isabelle more about her parents and her ex-husband. Isabelle listens closely as Dorrie tells of Stevie Senior's lackadaisical attitude toward getting a job and how frustrating it was being married to him because of his laziness and entitlement. Isabelle tells Dorrie she doesn't have to call her Miss Isabelle, just Isabelle is fine.

In chapter 6, Dorrie ponders on how much she enjoys being with Isabelle. Dorrie continues to share stories from her life, this time about her mother and how her mother always preferred more to be alone with her boyfriends than with Dorrie. Dorrie also expresses how her daughter makes her proud but her son worries her, especially since



he seems to be a ladies man with no father figure teaching him how to act like a real man. Isabelle tries to encourage Dorrie, saying that babies can be blessings even if they seem to come at the wrong time. Isabelle also hints at the loss in her life, telling Dorrie that one would think the pain of losing someone goes away after awhile, but it doesn't really.

Analysis

In the first two portions of Isabelle's story, she lets the reader know the materially advantaged - yet emotionally disadvantaged - home from which she comes. Isabelle comes from a prominent family, since her father is the town's physician. This puts her in a certain position, not only financially and socially, but also with a certain set of behavior expectations. Those expectations are clearly unappealing to Isabelle, since as she begins talking about her 17-year-old self one of her first stories is of her sneaking away from a friend's party so she can go to a nightclub in a neighboring town. Not only that, but she risks flirting with an older man and letting Robert, a black man, walk her home even though blacks weren't allowed in her town after sundown. Isabelle is clearly unafraid to break the rules, and even though she is influenced by a friend of hers to go to the nightclub, everything from then on is her choice alone.

The author makes it clear that Robert will be an important figure throughout Isabelle's story, since he risks his own safety to help Isabelle and she doesn't let go of her intrigue once their interaction is complete. Black men in the South in the 1930s weren't generally given to risking their own safety for white folks, since white folks were the ones controlling them, i.e., the sign at the entrance to Shalerville excluding African Americans from town after sundown.

As Isabelle tells her story, Robert is a central figure. The reader can tell that her life experience is centered around him, and everything she experiences is through a lens of her feelings toward Robert. Otherwise, he wouldn't be such a central figure in her narration. It is important to note Robert's reaction to her pursuant nature. Isabelle is in a position, as a wealthy white young woman, to pursue Robert, but since as a black man he is far more limited if he desired a relationship - whether romantic or platonic - with Isabelle. The author makes it clear, though, that Robert reciprocates Isabelle's growing feelings, he is just extremely hesitant in expressing it. Again, the idea of unlikely friendships comes up as Isabelle and Robert don't make a typical friendship pair. Though it is clear that their feelings begin to go beyond friendship.

Isabelle's relationship with her mom is introduced, and their interactions fit into the themes of family, home, and social status. The fact that they don't speak about things might be as much about the time period in which the story takes place as it is about Mrs. McAllister's desire to uphold a certain amount of control over her family. The way their interaction is written makes it clear that Isabelle feels as though she has no choice but to lie in order to do what she wants to do; the McAllister household is not an open and honest place where feelings are expressed and welcomed; rather, it seems to be the opposite.



Dorrie's narration is shorter than Isabelle's, a trend that carries through the entire novel, indicating that she is there for Isabelle, and any lessons she learns about her life are a byproduct of Isabelle's presence and story. The reader knows from her introduction chapter that Dorrie is untrusting of people, but she also seems to be fairly untrusting of herself. She's not embarrassed to be with Isabelle, but she does cringe when she runs into a former high school classmate of hers.

Dorrie's reflection on the people in her life, both past and present, is much of what Dorrie does during their road trip. As Isabelle tells her story, Dorrie thinks about what Isabelle's story can mean for her own life and her own relationships. She wants so badly to be able to trust people and to have good, solid relationships.

Discussion Question 1

What does Robert's walking Isabelle home tell the reader of his personality?

Discussion Question 2

What relationship do Patrick and Isabelle seem to hold based on their interactions?

Discussion Question 3

What gives Isabelle the authority to speak encouragement and advice to Dorrie?

Vocabulary

rickrack, confines, flabbergasted, brooch, burg, clink, swanky, parquet, naivete, extraneous, sequestered, futile, dinky, minced, jangled, splayed, kismet, sully, confound, platonic, menial, impertinence, flanked, complicity, fissure, derision, downy



Chapters 7-10

Summary

In chapter 7, Isabelle helps her mom clean up after the rain and hail storm from the night before. She offers to her mother that they give their worn linens to Cora, but Mrs. McAllister refuses, saying Cora's family has enough. When Isabelle goes to the kitchen to retrieve glasses of milk for her and her mother, she overhears Cora and Nell talking about Robert; they express concern for Robert's potential foolishness. Specifically, Cora says that Robert needs to make sure he knows his place. Nell reassures Cora that Robert does in fact know his place, but Cora is still afraid of losing her job.

Isabelle follows Robert out of her house that day, though she does so secretly. After dropping off her books at the library – the guise she gives her mother for the mid-day outing – Isabelle follows Robert out of town to the arbor he is clearing for his church to use that weekend. Robert insists to Isabelle that her family wouldn't be too happy with her talking to a black boy, even if that black boy is him – someone her family knows well. Isabelle tries greatly to convince him that it both doesn't matter and she doesn't care what's socially proper and what's not.

Isabelle tells Robert she's jealous of his ability to go to college, and Robert is incredulous of her being jealous of him. She expresses how she wants the ability to do something truly important, despite being a girl. She also expresses how much she appreciates Robert taking her seriously when she says what she wants to do with her life.

In chapter 9, Isabelle laments how her mother pushes her to interact with boys at her family's church. Instead, she wants to continue her running conversation with Robert at the arbor where he works to clear the space for his church each week. The two discuss war and whether or not Robert would join the fight, to which Robert responds that he would in a heartbeat if he felt it was worthwhile cause. The two also discuss trust, and the fact that Robert trusts Isabelle – whom he now calls Isa – because she trusts him. Isabelle asks if Robert wishes she were more like him, but he doesn't answer. Instead, Isabelle tells him she wishes he would be invited over for lunch and dinner instead of the boys her mother invites from their church.

The chapter concludes with Isabelle being caught in a lie for not having been where she said she'd be, which her mother found out when she sent Nell to look for Isabelle at the library. Miss Pearce, the librarian, had told Nell that Isabelle had been there for only a moment and Nell, afraid for her job and for her family, told Mrs. McAllister the truth about Isabelle's unknown whereabouts.

In chapter 8, Dorrie believes she experiences racism when the hotel clerk won't accept Isabelle's identification from Dorrie, only from Isabelle, even though the clerk can see Isabelle from his place at the desk. She is frustrated, but Isabelle is more frustrated, and



neither holds back on their opinion of the matter. The two share a room, and to cool down Dorrie heads downstairs to smoke a cigarette. Isabelle makes sure to tell Dorrie she knows that Dorrie smokes, which embarrasses Dorrie, just not enough that Dorrie doesn't smoke the cigarette. However, Dorrie does ponder the waste of money and energy that smoking cigarettes is; yet, she doesn't throw away the two unopened packs she has in her possession.

In chapter 10, Dorrie laments her oldest son answering every question with one word, especially "How are you?" with "Fine." She suspects something is wrong but doesn't have the energy to pry. Dorrie has a chance to talk to Teague, but during the conversation realizes that she left cash in the filing cabinet in her salon, something she rarely – if ever – does. Teague offers to go to the salon and get the cash so it can be kept in a safe place, since her salon isn't in the safest neighborhood. Teague speaks in a trustworthy tone, and one that indicates he is happy to help Dorrie. Still, Dorrie hesitates to let him help her, giving in only because she feels like he is her only choice.

Analysis

The advancement of Robert and Isabelle's relationship happens over a small number of pages, but the author spans it over a period of time. It has been about six months since he rescued her from Louis in Newport. Their weekly meeting at Robert's church at the arbor is another indicator of how Isabelle feels about breaking the rules, which is that she doesn't mind, seems to feel that it's necessary, and isn't afraid to do so. Her disregard for her mother's rules is written with the tone of it being a jail-break, since Isabelle seems to feel incredibly confined in her childhood home.

A detail to note is Isabelle's jealousy of Robert at the fact that she's able to express her sentiment to Robert. Similar to her ability to pursue Robert without fear of personal harm being a result of her white privilege, the fact that she can openly state that she's jealous of a black man is an action he couldn't reverse, meaning he couldn't be open about being jealous of a white man or woman without fear of being physically harmed. Isabelle's naivete seems to play into her conversations with Robert, as her language and expressions exude a kind of innocence.

Isabelle is clearly not fond of her mother's ways and desires to be nothing like her, since Isabelle rejects any boys her mother has over for dinner in an attempt to set her up with a boy of whom she approves. In fact, just that her mother approves of the boy is likely enough to drive Isabelle away from him. When Mrs. McAllister catches Isabelle in a lie, it is clear to the reader that she's not happy to have lost control of her daughter, since she immediately demands upon Isabelle's return to the house to know where Isabelle has been spending her Wednesday afternoons. Mrs. McAllister's cold and controlling attitude toward Isabelle is a foreshadow of what is to come, since the control only increases when Robert comes into the picture.

Again, Isabelle feels like she is forced to lie if she wants to do what she wants to do. She full-well knows that spending time with and falling in love with a Negroe man is



something that could cause strife, but her innocence and adamant pursuit of what she wants blinds her to any kind of potentially horrible consequence.

Dorrie's chapters are again short. This fact does not mean that her story doesn't mean as much as Isabelle's, only that Dorrie's telling is dependent on Isabelle's telling, since Isabelle is the one who has to go to the funeral. Even though Dorrie is the one driving, she's also the one just along for the ride as Isabelle reveals more and more of her history and the reason for the sudden favor.

The idea of race relations and racism is present at various points throughout the novel. The author seems intent on showing that even though Isabelle's story would have gone a very different way had racism not been present, it might not have mattered if they became romantically involved in another era because Dorrie, as a middle-age black woman, experiences racism in modern day.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Isabelle jealous of Robert, and why is that such a shock to Robert?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Robert calling Isabelle Isa, both in their relationship and in the grand scheme of their lives in Shalerville?

Discussion Question 3

How does Teague seem to prove his trustworthiness to Dorrie?

Vocabulary

ambivalence, sweltering, vigorous, arbor, sensibilities, pomposity, venture, tacit, lethargy, gentility, atrocities, eluded, clambered, impudent



Chapters 11-14

Summary

In chapter 11, Isabelle's mother begins keeping Isabelle under a very tight watch, knowing Isabelle had been doing something each Wednesday afternoon that she would disapprove of, even if Marg couldn't pinpoint what it was. Isabelle strained to hear Nell and Cora's conversations to see if they discussed Robert, but they didn't, at least within earshot of Isabelle.

One afternoon, Isabelle is on her porch and Nell begins to sing. Isabelle has heard Nell sing plenty of times, but this is the first time she notices how angelic Nell's voice is. Isabelle expresses a desire to see Nell sing at Nell's church's revival, though she admits to herself it's a silly suggestion.

On the Sunday of Nell's church performance, Isabelle feigns illness, which she thinks is only possible because her mother is sick with headaches so often; Isabelle figures that if her mother is frequently ill, she will believe it if Isabelle is also burdened with a strong headache. When she knows she will be left alone for the evening, Isabelle sets up her room to make it look as though a body is under the covers and she sneaks out to the Prewitt's church's revival. She dresses as a man with clothes she had previously hidden in a bush, in an effort to hide her identity.

Upon arriving at the revival, Isabelle scares a young black mother sitting on a tree stump, feeding her child, when the mother realizes that she is white. Isabelle works to ease the mother's fear by letting her know she's a woman, and also that she's not there to harm anyone, only to hear Nell sing. Eventually, Isabelle asks the young woman to carry a message to Robert that she's present. The young mother tells Isabelle to be careful, but also passes the message along to Robert.

Robert does come to meet her, but is displeased at her for coming to his church, simply for the risk of both of their safety. They listen together to Nell sing, and Isabelle is moved to tears as Nell and Brother James, their pastor, sing together. Afterwards, Isabelle dares Robert to tell her how he really feels. Robert hesitates, but ends up engaging her in their first kiss. He tells her to get home, and also that what just happened can't happen again. Isabelle tells Robert she might love him, and Robert tells her that she's just a child and doesn't know what she's saying. Yet, he also says he might love her, but that there's nothing either of them could do about their feelings for each other.

In chapter 13, Robert and Isabelle go two weeks without seeing or talking to each other. Isabelle works hard to see Robert, even when Cora works hard to make sure she doesn't, though each attempts to be subtle about their attempts. Isabelle forces a conversation with Robert; he tries to hold back, and she forges ahead and tells him how much she's missed him. Robert tries to convince Isabelle that it's a bad idea to even consider a relationship.



Isabelle accompanies her father on a house call. She wants to tell him of her feelings for Robert, but knows that she cannot, for fear of her father's reaction to her and especially to Robert.

At the end of summer, Nell tells Isabelle she's noticed how Isabelle and Robert have both been moping since the day Isabelle brought Robert the lemonade. Nell asks to be involved in their relationship, asking to hear the details of their relationship so far.

In chapter 12, Dorrie worries about the cash she left in her salon. She and Isabelle hit the road from Memphis up to Cincinnati as Dorrie waits to hear from Teague. Dorrie contemplates her simple hairstyle and how her own mother complains of its simplicity. She and Isabelle talk about what makes a good man, with Isabelle explaining to Dorrie that a good man is one who treats everyone around him with respect. She also tries subtly to encourage Dorrie to give Teague a chance, as Dorrie makes comments indicating her lack of trust in men.

Teague calls Dorrie to tell her that her shop has, in fact, been broken into, and the cash is missing. He offers to file a police report, board up the broken door, and check in at the shop every day to make sure it's not messed with any further. Dorrie feels guilty having Teague involved, but she is also grateful for his help. When she informs Isabelle of what happened, Isabelle expresses regret for the break-in. Dorrie remains silent as they drive, and Isabelle tries to tell Dorrie the money and the man will work out in the end, and then she goes back to working on her crossword puzzle.

In chapter 14, Isabelle asks Dorrie to pull off the highway to a college in Nashville. Dorrie receives a slew of text messages from Stevie Junior, all indicating a sense of urgency. When she does call, Stevie Junior admits that his girlfriend Bailey is pregnant and that they've made an appointment to get an abortion. Dorrie asks Stevie to hold off on the abortion so they can all talk about it once she gets back home. However, Stevie tells Dorrie that he's the one who broke in and took the cash from her salon. He berates himself for being stupid and says he hates himself. Dorrie is silent for a few minutes until she tells Stevie to put her money in a safe place, that if Bailey wants to argue about not having the money she could do so with Dorrie, and that she would have Teague call off the police investigation.

Analysis

Isabelle's sense of powerlessness as well as her sense of hope, while opposing emotions, are significantly present in these chapters. Isabelle's sense of powerlessness begins as her mother keeps her under a tight watch. There is nothing Isabelle can do to counter her mother's direction, especially considering the way Isabelle's father is controlled by her, as well. Marg has an explicitly clear way she wants her family run, and Isabelle is to abide, no matter what.

Isabelle's desire to preserve her friendship with Nell and continue developing her relationship with Robert can be seen when she attends their church. Isabelle's



determination is shown in that she dresses like a boy, and boldly approaches a young mother, hoping to be immediately welcomed into the scene. Her motive is two-fold: one, to see Nell sing, especially after hearing her angelic voice on the porch; and two, to see Robert. Though it may seem that Isabelle's loyalty is divided, it can also be seen as being directed toward the Prewitt family, rather than split between Robert and Nell. At this point, Isabelle is hoping for any little opening into Robert's world that she can slip through, no matter how unwise her choice may seem.

Robert's displeasure with Isabelle for coming to his family's church is no reflection on his feelings for her. Instead, it is fear of her getting hurt, fear of him getting hurt, fear of one or both of them being ostracized from their respective communities, fear of their families finding out they've been lying about their relationship, and likely so much more. For a young white girl to be in love with a young black man in Kentucky in 1939 was against the social norm, and for it to be public was dangerous. Hence Robert's displeasure in Isabelle's undercover visit.

However, despite the danger and taboo of their feelings for one another, both Isabelle and Robert are miserable without each other. They love each other despite the fact that the odds are stacked against them. They continue doing nothing about it, yet their lives are consumed by it. Nell reports to Isabelle that Robert has been moping around the same time period she's seen Isabelle moping around. Isabelle goes on a house call with her father, but makes little-to-no conversation because all she can think about is Robert, which is a life event she doesn't feel she can share with him.

As Dorrie listens to Isabelle's story, she ponders what makes a good man. Since Dorrie's father wasn't present, her husband was lazy, and she's had a string of untrustworthy men, it is quite possible that Dorrie really doesn't know what makes a good man. It seems she doesn't trust that there are even any good men left in the world, that Isabelle's Robert might have been the last one.

Dorrie finds out within a short period of time that her salon has been broken into, then that it was her son who committed the crime, and that his girlfriend is pregnant and wants the money Stevie Junior stole for an abortion. Dorrie takes it fairly well, considering the gravity of the information she receives. Her silence, however, is likely an unhealthy coping mechanism she has developed over decades of being disappointed and upset by people in her life. It's almost as if she doesn't know how to appropriately deal with it when it's handed to her, so she has to stew in silence while the information processes, until she comes to a point where she can rationally discuss how she's feeling and where she wants to go from where she's at.

Stevie Junior obviously regrets more than one of his recent choices. He has clearly learned from his mother about reflecting on poor choices, since it seems his dad is not quite that way. A further indication of the influence Dorrie has had on her son is that he obeys her by giving his younger sister the cash he stole from Dorrie's salon, and Bailey doesn't get the abortion right away.



Discussion Question 1

What indication does Mrs. McAllister give that she knows what Isabelle is up to on Wednesday afternoons? Why aren't her suspicions spoken aloud?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Isabelle's dressing as a white man beneficial for her until she gets to the revival, when it's better for her to reveal that she's a woman?

Discussion Question 3

What part of Stevie Junior's situation seems to impact Dorrie the most? How can you tell?

Vocabulary

scrutinized, permeated, tendril, shinny, latticework, enchantment, clapboard, gooseflesh, pert, emanating, trowel, dubiously, courted, wraith



Chapters 15-18

Summary

In chapter 15, Nell suggests carrying a note from Isabelle to Robert. Isabelle thought carefully through the letter she wrote Robert, hoping it would suffice. Isabelle and Nell created a hand signal system that would let Nell know when Isabelle had a letter for her, and vice versa.

In Robert's reply to her, he tells her only of his daily activities. It's not addressed personally to Isabelle, but it is dated and signed with Robert's first and last name. Throughout the fall, Isabelle and Robert exchange letters through Nell. Isabelle's letters are generally more personal than Robert's, but over time Robert's become more personalized; Isabelle is overjoyed when Robert addresses Isabelle as 'you', which causes Isabelle to put even more feeling into her letters. On Robert's long weekends home, the two meet at the arbor and share conversation, silly grins, and "chaste but passionate" kisses (page 145).

Robert continues to insist that they can't be together as a public couple, but Isabelle insists that there has to be a way. An attorney from Cincinnati visits her school, and Isabelle – much to her teacher's displeasure – inquires on how to become an attorney. She asks about the law and how to find out what the laws are in different places. Though she doesn't say it out loud to the visiting lawyer, Isabelle is trying to find out how she can find a place where it is legal for blacks and whites to marry. The following day, Isabelle forges a note to her school so she can skip class and go to the courthouse in Cincinnati; she wants to find out if she can legally marry Robert in the city of Cincinnati.

In chapter 17, Isabelle finds out that Ohio has no law against interracial marriage, called intermarriage; it has been legal in Ohio since 1887. Isabelle decides she can lie about her being 17 and say she's 18, and she and Robert can marry. Robert vehemently disagrees, telling Isabelle she's lost her mind and there's no way for that to work. The two write back and forth about the topic until in one letter Isabelle receives during the Christmas holiday, Robert proposes marriage. She immediately accepts with a heart full of joy.

Isabelle tells Nell of their plans, and Nell is immediately nervous and scared for both Robert and Isabelle. She tells Isabelle of the dangers of blacks and whites being together, and how there are mean folks who only want to tear down interracial relationships. Isabelle insists that Nell is like a sister to her, and that everything will be okay. Nell continues to express her worries to Isabelle, but also agrees to help Isabelle prepare to marry Robert.

In chapter 16, Dorrie is embarrassed that her son is the one who broke into her salon, so instead of calling Teague to ask him to call off the police report, she sends him a text message. Teague responds with a slew of text messages asking what happened, if



everything is okay, and for Dorrie to please call him. Dorrie is too embarrassed and untrusting of Teague, so she doesn't respond to his outreach. Instead, she cries silently as Isabelle walks down the sidewalk at the college.

Isabelle comes to a stop at a stone marker with a list of names on it, and she runs her finger down the memorial until she reaches Robert's name. Isabelle has tears in her eyes as Dorrie realizes who that Robert is.

Back in the car, Isabelle tells Dorrie that her situation is too much for Dorrie to handle on her own, and that they should head back home. Dorrie refuses to do so, since this funeral means so much to Isabelle. Dorrie insists that everybody at home can take care of themselves, and that even though she doesn't know exactly whose funeral they are headed to, the two women are going to continue on to Cincinnati.

In chapter 18, Dorrie ponders Isabelle's situation from long ago with Robert and how the two of them were trying to change the world for the better while her own son was breaking-and-entering, as well as stealing. She ponders on her childhood in East Texas, remembering how the racial divide was obvious back then, and also about ten years earlier when she took Stevie Junior there for a visit. Dorrie remembers taking Stevie to a Vacation Bible School where Stevie had a great time, but is unwelcome the second day because he's black. Dorrie remembers how Stevie Junior asked why he couldn't go back to VBS the second day, and Dorrie ends up explaining to him that some people don't like people with different colored skin.

Dorrie continues to remember various instances in her hometown and in Arlington when the racial divide interrupted the flow of things, including when Dorrie's own mother fussed at her for doing white people's hair. Dorrie continues to stew over Stevie Junior's mess, as well as ignore Teague's text messages and his phone calls.

Analysis

Nell's character is shown in chapter 15, as she is the one to suggest Isabelle write Robert a note. She knows her entire family's welfare is on the line: she and Cora could lose their jobs, and Robert could lose his life. This would suggest to the reader that Nell believes not only in love against all odds, but that she cares very much for her brother and for her friend.

Even Isabelle was hesitant to allow Nell to get involved, which lets the reader know how much Nell believes in Isabelle and Robert's relationship. Still, Nell is scared for Isabelle and Robert in chapter 17 when she learns they plan to marry. Either she didn't think their relationship would go that far, or she just hoped for the best from the beginning and this fear is just a blip in that hope.

The way Robert's early letters are merely rote fact tells the reader - and Dorrie - just how unsure he was of entering into a relationship with Isabelle. He continued to fear for his life should their relationship escalate, and the way he processed that fear was to respond to Isabelle's advances with the blandest, most uninteresting facts about his life.



Either he is being extremely careful, or he is trying to dissuade Isabelle from pursuing a relationship with him. It is likely a combination of both, since he has done both during his and Isabelle's courtship thus far.

When the topic of marriage comes up, Isabelle is again in the position of convincing Robert that pushing their relationship further is a good idea while Robert is adamantly against the notion. His resistance can certainly be taken as a protective measure for himself, his family, and Isabelle, since his feelings for her are certainly strong enough. Robert is looking out for the people he loves, putting their safety before his own desires.

Robert's character is evident throughout the entire novel, but it is most evident when he resists Isabelle's advances, since this is when his humility, loyalty, and protective nature can be seen the most.

Dorrie's biggest events in the novel occur in chapters 16 and 18, right around when Isabelle's most significant events in her story are told. Dorrie's embarrassment turns to avoidance of Teague, since she has no clue how to break it to him that it was her son who broke into her salon. She's worked hard as a single mother and likely feels as though she's failed as a mom, she's failed her children, and that she's failed at being a desirable woman that a handsome, intelligent man might like to date.

Dorrie's method of handling her current life situation shows the reader that she's tried for a very long time to carry every burden of hers and her family's on her own, and that it's difficult for her to let anyone else help. Isabelle encourages Dorrie to let down her guard, but for someone who has felt and/or been alone for most of her life, that's not so easy, hence Dorrie's silent tears she was likely unable to control.

Dorrie's remembering of Stevie Junior's VBS experience about a decade ago lets the reader know that Dorrie finds it easy to remember her hard times, and less so to remember the good. The reader might also see that Dorrie seems to hold a grudge, since she still expresses bitterness and anger at her ex-husband, and incredulity at her and her son's VBS experience. Isabelle's story of great pain and loss seems meant to help Dorrie let go of some of that hurt; Isabelle had a hard time moving forward emotionally, and remains hurt 70 years after the events she's describing in her story. If Dorrie wants a different ending to her own story, she'll take a lesson from Isabelle and work harder to process through what's happening.

Discussion Question 1

What is different about Robert and Isabelle's life experiences that makes Robert more hesitant to continue a relationship and Isabelle more bold?

Discussion Question 2

What might have caused the change in Robert when he goes from adamantly insisting he and Isabelle will not marry, to proposing to her in a letter?



Discussion Question 3

What seems to be Dorrie's main reaction to everything happening with her family and Teague back in Arlington, and why is she reacting the way she is?

Vocabulary

epistle, cavalier, cotillion, scoff, conjure, precedents, piqued, detritus, pungence, foibles, mesmerized



Chapters 19-22

Summary

In chapter 19, Isabelle and Robert marry. Isabelle carries out the plan she's been concocting for weeks. Nell has helped her prepare by getting ready Isabelle's dresses and other essentials for leaving home. Isabelle sneaks away from home on a Saturday. As she's carrying out her plan she thinks of the previous Monday when she and Robert met at the Hamilton County Courthouse to purchase their marriage license. The clerk is worried for them, but issues the license nonetheless.

On the Saturday, Isabelle and Robert attempt first to marry at a church where the pastor refuses to marry them, since they are an interracial couple. Though the pastor is gruff at first, he offers St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church as a place that might marry Isabelle and Robert with no problem.

At St. Paul's, Isabelle and Robert meet Reverend Day and his wife Sarah. Rev. Day is happy to marry Robert and Isabelle, but not without first giving what he considers a warning about how difficult their life together will be, given that they are an interracial couple. Isabelle tries to back out of the marriage, suddenly afraid for Robert's life. Robert, however, tells Isabelle that maybe they can change the world by being an example of an interracial couple.

Reverend and Sarah Day offer Isabelle and Robert a thimble with the words 'Faith. Hope. Love.' inscribed on the side; the thimble acts as their wedding ring.

In chapter 21, Robert and Isabelle spend their first night together as husband and wife. Reverend Day and his wife Sarah put on a small celebration for Robert and Isabelle since they have no family with them. The Days also escort the newlyweds to their first home, since their neighborhood would likely become rowdy after sundown.

The woman who runs the house Isabelle and Robert stay in gives them the rundown of the most important rules for living in her house, such as no fire, no candles, laundry on Wednesdays, and she doesn't cook meals on Sundays.

Isabelle thinks about how she misses Cora and Nell already, but then is pleased with the situation because legally, they are now all family. Isabelle explores her first home with Robert as Robert expresses apprehension as to whether or not she'll like it. The two are intimate for the first time, consummating their marriage in the physical sense.

In chapter 20, Dorrie contemplates Miss Isabelle's story as she's told it so far. Mostly, Dorrie thinks about marriage and how Isabelle and Robert married for all the right reasons; she has seen and heard of plenty of women who marry for all sorts of reasons, only to regret it soon after the marriage is official.



Dorrie's position as a hairdresser makes her privy to private information her clients don't tend to tell anyone else. Yet, it's the women who are afraid they have cancer after discovering a lump in their breast or a dark patch on their skin. Dorrie relished in being the one whom her customers shared their good and bad news, and that she could help cover patches of bald spots when needed.

Dorrie compares herself to a therapist, but laments that even as an uncertified therapist she can't keep her family together and can't find it in her to trust another man. She admits to herself that she's terrified to do so, and begins drawing on Isabelle's story for strength.

In chapter 22, Dorrie is enjoying Isabelle's story and is trying to predict what went wrong and when, since she recalls seeing no photographs of a black man or any mixed offspring in the years Dorrie has been going to Isabelle's home to cut Isabelle's hair. She asks Isabelle to continue the story, but the two sit in silence for a little while. Isabelle doesn't feel like stopping for lunch where they are, but states that the two women will stop in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.

Dorrie observes as the scenery passes, and she notes that the terrain of their trip looks nothing like she thought it would this far from home. Isabelle starts up her story again, but tells Dorrie that some of the next part is hearsay, since Isabelle wasn't present for all parts of the tale.

Analysis

Robert and Isabelle's entire dynamic shifts in these two chapters. Not only do the two become husband and wife, but Isabelle is the one who loses her confidence for marrying. Suddenly faced with the likelihood of a difficult union, Isabelle is afraid for Robert's life, which ironically used to be Robert's reasoning for not wanting to advance his relationship with Isabelle. Her sudden change in attitude is likely the result of the warning from Reverend Day; he is a black man who is warning her of the same life Robert had already warned her of. To hear the potential dangers a second time from a man who lives in a city where interracial marriage is legal seems to jolt Isabelle into reality.

Isabelle's quick shift from fear to joy is the result of several factors. For one, she is no longer under her mother's purview; she is a married woman. She's been under her mother's control for 17 years, and now feels free. Second, she is married to the love of her life. Third, she is someone not afraid to rock the boat, and she's rocked a huge societal boat by marrying a black man; in essence, she's done something that in 1939 very few people had done.

The fact that the Day's walk Robert and Isabelle back to their rooming house is significant. It lets the reader know that Reverend Day's warning was not made out of obligation or exaggeration; Reverend Day knows what can happen in his town late at night, especially to an interracial couple. Robert and Isabelle's first night together is met



with some trepidation, but it is not because they feel like they're doing something wrong. Instead, there is so much feeling and passion between the two of them, that their union is almost electric.

On Dorrie's side, she takes the focus off of herself for a short time and is pondering Isabelle's story, its impact on Isabelle's life, and what it might mean for her life. Dorrie's reflections allow her to think about what is good in her life, which is a shift from the most recent chapters where she's had to worry about Stevie Junior's decisions and her relationship with Teague. While her relationship with Teague is not a negative part of her life, it's stressful for her to think about because she's still learning how to trust in general as well as deciding whether or not she should trust him.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the three words inscribed on the side of the thimble?

Discussion Question 2

Reverend and Sarah Day escort Robert and Isabelle to their home because they say the newlyweds' neighborhood could get rowdy. What is another reason the Day's may have escorted Robert and Isabelle?

Discussion Question 3

Why might Isabelle pause as she's telling her story to Dorrie, even when Dorrie asks her to continue?

Vocabulary

temerity, flutter, settee, relish, parsonage, finery, solemnized, thimble, doling, valise, coverlet



Chapters 23-26

Summary

In chapter 23, Isabelle tells of how her parents reacted when she did not return home the night she married; her father wanted to call the police, but her mother suspected the truth. Isabelle found out later that her mother ransacked her room looking for clues, and then Nell confessed to Isabelle's mother what Isabelle and Robert had been planning to do. She even handed to Mrs. McAllister a note Robert had left Cora and Nell telling them of where he and Isabelle would likely marry.

Isabelle's father and brother show up at Reverend Day's house, demanding answers. Sarah ran ahead to Isabelle and Robert to warn them of Isabelle's family's pending visit, while her brothers intimidated Reverend Day to the point of him feeling forced to tell them where Isabelle and Robert were living.

Isabelle is alone in the room when her brothers and father show up. She is relieved when all three show up to the rooming house, because she figures that means Robert is safe. Still, Jack pulled a handgun out of his coat pocket, scaring Isabelle.

Isabelle refuses to leave, but her father insists that since she is a minor of only 17 years old, their marriage is illegal, so she has to go home with her father and brothers. Isabelle is furious that her father stands up to her and not her brothers, even though it is she who has done nothing wrong.

In chapter 25, Isabelle tells of being kept hostage in her own home. Her mother brought meal trays three times each day, and even waited by the bathroom door while Isabelle bathed or used the restroom. Isabelle ate most of her meals in her room, since she was treated with disgust at the dinner table by her brothers.

In the weeks she is kept in her room, Isabelle writes letters to Robert in an attempt to stay sane and retain some hope. She also shies away from her relationship with her father, since she blames him for letting her brothers get away with their threats and violence.

Isabelle tries to talk to Cora about Robert, but Cora tells her to leave them all alone on account of Isabelle's brothers. Cora tells Isabelle of how her brothers went to the Prewitt's home looking for Robert the day after they brought Isabelle home, but they didn't just threaten Robert; they threatened Cora, Nell, their house, their church, and anything or anyone who matters to them.

Isabelle's mother is nervous because Isabelle has not yet asked for sanitation supplies; she is afraid Isabelle might be pregnant. Isabelle asks her mother for the supplies, inciting a large sigh of relief from Mrs. McAllister.



In chapter 24, Dorrie is listening to Isabelle tell her story and she drives right past Elizabethtown. They stop to eat in another small town, facing other patrons who were noticeably uncomfortable with Dorrie and Isabelle as a duo, since Dorrie is black and Isabelle is white. Isabelle tells one of the young men staring at her and Isabelle if he has anything better to do than stare. The same man made a comment about Dorrie possibly being Isabelle's maid, and Isabelle cut him off again and told him that Dorrie is her granddaughter.

Isabelle orders their food to go, stating that she doesn't want to be in that building for another minute. The waiter gives them their to-go boxes and insists their meal is on the house. Outside, Dorrie and Isabelle sat down to eat in a town square. Isabelle asks Dorrie what she's going to do about Stevie Junior and about Teague. Dorrie isn't sure what she's going to do, but she does know that she's trying to take her time with her decisions and not react; she'd rather respond wisely.

In chapter 26, Stevie Junior and Dorrie speak again. Stevie Junior tells Dorrie that his girlfriend is freaking out and they need to go get the abortion as soon as possible. Dorrie speeds up during their conversation as she gets more and more upset with her son. Stevie Junior begins yelling at Dorrie, but since Dorrie has to pull over for a cop, Isabelle takes the phone and tells Stevie Junior to cool down and treat his mother with respect, though she hangs up before Stevie Junior can respond.

Dorrie receives a warning about her speed and about her license, since it is three weeks' expired. Dorrie tells Isabelle the only reasons she doesn't get a ticket is because Isabelle is white and she's in the car with Dorrie. Isabelle gives Dorrie an indecipherable look, and Dorrie feels like her insides are going to explode. She pulls the car over into the breakdown lane, lights up a cigarette, and walks up and down the shoulder of the road as she remembers a situation from her childhood.

Dorrie thinks about when she was a kid and there was a white police officer named Kevin; she called him Officer Kevin. The officer would ask Dorrie about school, what she liked to study, and if she had any homework. Dorrie trusted Officer Kevin until he arrested her mom for possession of an illegal substance. Her mother had yelled at her, "See what happens when you trust white people?" Dorrie realizes she's projecting anger from the situation with Officer Kevin onto Isabelle.

Dorrie apologizes to Isabelle, but Isabelle lets Dorrie know she is sad that the world is still racially divided. Just thirty miles later, the car makes a clunking noise and the two are stuck on the side of the road.

Analysis

One of the smallest details, yet one of the most significant, is that Isabelle's mother suspected the truth about where Isabelle was and what she had done the night she didn't return home. Nowhere in Isabelle's story do her and her mother discuss Isabelle and Robert's relationship. The only sentence uttered in regards to the subject is when



Mrs. McAllister tells Isabelle to be careful and to leave the Prewitt family alone, as she should know her place and them, theirs. Marg's feelings about black people are clear: she appreciates Cora and Nell as her housemaids, but does not believe they are even close to being of equal worth.

The entire debacle of Isabelle being forced to go home and leave Robert leaves Isabelle with no kind of closure with Robert, which is one of the reasons she has such a hard time moving past their relationship. Not only is she forced against her will because of her family dynamic, but also because of her age; the marriage can be annulled - and later is by her mother - and for the sake of Robert's life, she must go home with her brothers and her father. However, it is here that she loses all respect for her father. When he stands up to Isabelle in defense of her brothers' and mother's force, Isabelle sees her father's greatest weakness and doesn't understand why it has to negatively impact her when she's the one who has held a special relationship with him her entire life.

Isabelle's sense of hope has almost completely dwindled, and her sense of powerlessness has skyrocketed. She's hoping for information about Robert through Nell and/or Cora, but her family is treating her like a leper and a prisoner. The idea that she might be pregnant seems to be both a worry and a blessing in Isabelle's eyes: a worry because it's an unfamiliar situation and she knows her mother will tighten her reigns, but a blessing because now she can leave home with a little piece of Robert carried with her, and maybe even reunite with him.

Dorrie's story takes a turn when she and Stevie Junior argue about his situation. As a single mother who has raised two children almost on her own, she will not be pressured into giving her son cash that she earned to cover up a mistake he made. Stevie Junior probably knows that very well, but he feels desperate. His attitude is that of a typical teenager, since he has not yet matured enough to think rationally through his situation before reacting and expecting his mother to fix the situation.

Dorrie's recollection of Officer Kevin is significant because even as she is driving Isabelle to Cincinnati, and has been friends with Isabelle for about a decade, Dorrie continues to hold concrete ideas about blacks and whites, even though she doesn't admit it out loud. When she finally does admit it, it's out of anger for not getting a speeding ticket, thinking the reason she didn't get a ticket is because Isabelle is white and she's black. Dorrie's prejudice is standing in the way of her trusting Teague; even though he's an African American too, prejudice breeds an untrusting nature in general, not just toward the population of which one is prejudice.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Cora have Nell hand over Robert's note to the McAllisters, knowing there would be grave consequences for doing so?



Discussion Question 2

What infuriates Isabelle the most about her father not standing up to her brothers during their tirade?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Dorrie's mother yelling, "See what happens when you trust white people?" when Dorrie was a child?

Vocabulary

louts, gawking, quaint, receding, lopping, conspicuously, guise, splotches, congealing, exponential



Chapters 27-30

Summary

In chapter 27, the reader learns that Isabelle is pregnant. She had been lying to her mother about needing the sanitary supplies, but can't hide her growing stomach or her daily nausea. Isabelle's mother doesn't talk to Isabelle about her being pregnant; instead, Marg tried to convince her husband to help keep Isabelle's pregnancy quiet. He refuses to get Isabelle an abortion.

Isabelle ponders her mother's upbringing. Isabelle knows little, but she knows her mother was poor growing up, and that her mother was likely a prostitute in addition to being a washwoman. Marg left town as soon as she could and remade herself, meeting John in Louisville, Kentucky.

One morning, Isabelle discovers Cora is gone; she and Nell have been fired and Mrs. Gray has been hired as the McAllister's maid. Isabelle realizes her mother did away with Cora as soon as Isabelle began to show; this way, there would be less chance for Robert to find out that Isabelle was pregnant with his child.

Isabelle and her mother have an argument, which mainly consists of Isabelle blaming her mother for the place they're in, and threatening to share all of her mother's secrets. At the end of their argument, Isabelle falls down the stairs and begins bleeding significantly from between her legs.

In chapter 29, Isabelle's mother calls a Negro midwife to help deliver Isabelle's baby. Isabelle is in a great deal of pain during the birth, and does not hear a peep from the baby once it is born. Isabelle's mother gives the impression that the baby isn't alive because of being delivered so early. Isabelle is desperate to see her daughter, but her mother won't let her. The midwife tries to encourage Isabelle that the baby will be in a good place, and they'll see each other again. Her words do nothing to console Isabelle.

In chapter 28, Dorrie goes to call Triple A but accidentally answers when Teague calls. He is relieved to hear her voice, but Dorrie is still wary of entering a relationship with him. She asks him about her salon, but quickly gets off the phone so as to avoid a deeper conversation. Dorrie and Isabelle have to stay in a hotel because the car can't be fixed until the next day.

In chapter 30, Dorrie and Isabelle are back on the road mid-morning after the mechanic fixes their car. Dorrie asks Isabelle what made her mother so hard and mean, but Isabelle had no answer. She only told Dorrie that all Dorrie could do for her own kids was to set the best example she could.

Dorrie thinks about how she aches for Isabelle and all the pain she felt and likely still feels. She is contemplating Isabelle's jumble of emotions as the two see Cincinnati on the horizon.



Analysis

Isabelle experiences feelings for her parents she doesn't usually feel, or hasn't felt in a long time. Toward her father, she feels grateful, as he stands up to his wife and refuses to abort Isabelle's baby. Toward her mother, she feels something akin to sympathy, though it's not very deep given the amount of anger and bitterness she also feels toward her mother. However, knowing what her mother endured as a child seems to soften Isabelle just a touch.

That sympathy, however, wanes completely when Cora and Nell are fired from the McAllister household. Everyone in Isabelle's life who means a great deal to her has been taken away because her mother is afraid of how it will make the McAllister family look. Isabelle's understanding of how her mother's childhood impacts her parenting only goes so far; now that Mrs. McAllister is negatively impacting Isabelle's life to an extreme degree, Isabelle wants nothing to do with her mother. The family she wants is the Prewitt family, but she is powerless to make that happen.

When Isabelle has the apparent miscarriage, the reader can tell that life has drained from Isabelle along with the baby's premature birth. Her tone is resigned, her words are matter-of-fact with no feeling at all, and she is inconsolable. What the reader might pay attention to is that neither the Negro nor Isabelle's mother uses any wording that explicitly states the infant has died. The author is hinting at the actual state of the baby, but the reader would have to pay attention to the wording in order to understand. No matter the baby's vital state, Isabelle's grief and loss are obvious.

Dorrie's storyline lines up with Isabelle's in that as Isabelle gets farther and farther away from the people she loves, Dorrie is being drawn closer and closer to the people who mean the most to her. Even though she's argued with Stevie Junior the last couple times he's called, Dorrie is being forced to reflect on motherhood and what she can change for Stevie Junior when she gets home. With Teague, she's being challenged to face her trust issues as she learns to give him a chance. Though she avoids him fairly well by getting off the phone as quickly as she can, he and his kindness are constantly on her mind.

Isabelle's story is deeply impacting Dorrie the more of it she tells. Dorrie doesn't seem to know what it means for her own life, only that she can learn a thing or two about how hurt affects one's life, and how people deal with great pain even when they never show any sign of it.

Discussion Question 1

How might Isabelle's mother's childhood have impacted the way she treats Isabelle?



Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Mrs. McAllister using a Negro midwife to help deliver Isabelle's baby?

Discussion Question 3

What clues does Dorrie give the reader that she's trying to trust Teague, despite her natural tendency not to?

Vocabulary

perilous, annulled, sired, absolved, millinery, dour, perversion, curios, insolence, fodder, bodice, querulous, bungled



Chapters 31-34

Summary

In chapter 31, Isabelle tells Dorrie how her body went back to normal in almost no time, since she was so young. Isabelle's mother told her she could come and go as she pleased, as long as she didn't claim to anyone that she had been in Shalerville during the time Marg had told everyone she was gone.

Isabelle went to Cincinnati to visit the rooming house where she and Robert stayed; the boarder said that Robert took everything that day and hadn't been back since. Isabelle visits Sarah Day, too. She tries to go by Nell and Robert's house, but doesn't have the courage. She resigns herself to being alone.

Isabelle applies for a job assembling picture slides with a photographer named Mr. Bartel. She gets the job, finds a place to live nearby, and asks her father for ten dollars so she might pay the deposit. Mr. McAllister doesn't ask what the money is for, he only slips across his desk fifteen dollars for his only daughter.

Before Isabelle leaves her father's office, he tells her that the signs keeping the blacks out of Shalerville after sundown aren't just in Shalerville. He tells Isabelle that the blacks were run out of Shalerville out of fear; the town leaders wanted an exclusively white population to attract high-class residents. Mr. McAllister tells Isabelle that Cora's family served Shalerville's physicians for generations. Cora's grandparents were slaves, but chose to stay even after being freed. The physician before Dr. McAllister purchased Cora's house in Shalerville when they were run out of town, and he helped her find a home in a safe neighborhood.

Isabelle leaves her childhood home with no trouble. She lives with the Clincke family, and goes straight there after work each day. She quickly catches on to her job, though is terrified of losing it after making one mistake she's thankful Mr. Bartel doesn't catch.

One afternoon, Isabelle is strolling through a market in Cincinnati when she runs into Nell. Isabelle learns that Nell is married to Brother James and is expecting a child, and that Cora got a job there in Cincinnati. Nell begrudgingly tells Isabelle that Robert has joined the Army and is hoping to serve as a medic.

In chapter 33, Isabelle is depressed, but her friend convinces her to go to a public weekend dance. There, Isabelle meets Max after he is persistent enough to ask her to dance three times. He is up front with her, that he is not going anywhere but wants to keep getting to know her. Isabelle insists that he wouldn't want to be with her in the state that she's in, but Max remains.

It is now 1941, a year since Isabelle married and was immediately taken away from Robert. Max tells Isabelle he's been patient, and would she please think about marriage; he promises to take the best care of her. In February, Isabelle sees two



couples at a diner, one of which was passionate about each other, the other best friends with one another. Isabelle sees herself and Max in the couple that appear to be best friends, and so makes her decision to marry him.

In chapter 32, Dorrie and Isabelle make their way into Cincinnati. Dorrie drives Isabelle by the Clincke's house, as well as another house she lived in for about five or six years before she moved to Texas.

Dorrie and Isabelle go to Skyline Chili for lunch, a popular eatery in Cincinnati. The two make it to their bed and breakfast, where Dorrie insists on touching up Isabelle's hair. Isabelle tells Dorrie that she kept the picture slide she accidentally ruined with her ring; it is of a Negro family, and Isabelle said that throughout the years, she would study it whenever she was lonely for Robert or their baby.

In chapter 34, Isabelle admits to Dorrie that Isabelle will likely be the only white woman at the funeral. Dorrie isn't upset at the admission, only curious. Dorrie encourages Isabelle that everything will be okay, and that nobody will get the wrong impression of her attending the funeral.

Before Dorrie and Isabelle leave for the funeral, Dorrie calls Teague and leaves a message telling him how much she appreciates him, and that she hopes he isn't freaking out. She tells him how sorry she is that she hasn't given him a full chance as her boyfriend because of her baggage, but she hopes they can work it out.

Analysis

Isabelle's description of herself, her body, and her life post-pregnancy is full of grief. She seems to remain as dead inside as she tells the story presently as she did in 1940 when everything was happening. As Isabelle tells her story, the reader can see that Isabelle's home has nothing to do with the house she grew up in. As she revisits Cincinnati, the rooming house, applies for a job across the river, apathetically asks her father for money, and leaves her childhood home with no sentiment whatsoever, the reader can see that Isabelle has no sense of home at the moment. She has lost everything she had come to want over the course of the previous two years, and now she doesn't care if leaving hurts her family of origin; to her, they are dead.

Isabelle's acceptance of Max's dance invitation can be seen a couple different ways. For one, she is being courteous, as he has asked several times. Second, he is kind, and Isabelle has likely been desperate for kindness in her life after her family treated her with such malice. Third, Max stays. He has staying power, and his reliability cannot be overstated. Isabelle has been let down so often, that Max's ability to be absolutely reliable means a great deal to her. Hence, her decision to marry him.

Isabelle's admission that she'll likely be the only white person at the funeral shows the reader that race relations remains a theme for Isabelle's life, even all these years after she and Robert were a taboo couple. Isabelle doesn't seem worried about being the only white person, only about facing the people who will be there. She doesn't want



people to have the wrong impression of why she's there, and what she's been doing all these years she's been away. The people she's going to see were either like family to her more than 60 years prior, or she wishes they were her family.

Isabelle's story has finally gotten to Dorrie; she is acquiescing to the challenge of trusting Teague. The message she leaves him on his voicemail is significant because Dorrie is finally deciding to stop being afraid and to move forward with Teague, a notion that just two days prior seemed almost impossible. Yet, hearing Isabelle's story of love lost and grief held on to, Dorrie seems itching to make sure that doesn't happen to her.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Mrs. McAllister tell her friends - and subsequently the town - that Isabelle was out of town during the time of Isabelle's pregnancy?

Discussion Question 2

What seems to bother Isabelle most after running into Nell? How can you tell?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Dorrie insist on touching up Isabelle's hair when the two arrive at the inn?

Vocabulary

slides, pressboard, nimble, bereft, trepidation, exclusivity, tarry, consternation, sinew, hordes, preened, conscriptees, esplanade, ostensibly, petulant, pensive



Chapters 35-37

Summary

In chapter 35, the author tells Isabelle's story in the years of 1941-1943. Isabelle tries to dissuade Max from marrying her, but he is persistent. The two marry in a simple, quiet ceremony in the Spring of 1941, though Isabelle admits she felt almost nothing as she wed Max.

Isabelle and Max delay in starting a family, but Isabelle states she came to enjoy the mind-numbing pleasure of being intimate with Max.

The war starts in December 1941, and Isabelle states that it changes everyone. She weeps for Robert, knowing he will be in the violence. Time goes on and Isabelle and Max live a simple life in the home Max works to purchase for them. Isabelle sees Max as a fairly shallow person, and feels that in the first two years of their marriage she learned all she could of the man.

On a Spring day in 1943, Isabelle is gardening when Robert walks up to her. Isabelle knows she is still in love with Robert, though she also knows she can't do anything about it. Isabelle asks Robert what he's been up to, and tells him that she waited for him but since he never came around, she is now married to a man she doesn't love and lives in a place she doesn't want to live. Robert tells Isabelle why he stayed away: her brothers beat him almost to the point of death.

Robert asks Isabelle to come with him, and says that he can find a place she can stay that will keep her safe until Robert comes back from war. The two are intimate with one another, and Robert promises to return once he's for sure found a place she can wait that is safe.

In chapter 37, Isabelle is pregnant again. This time, she is unsure of whether the child is Robert's or Max's, since she was intimate with each man within one night of each other. Robert sends word that he had a place for Isabelle to be safe, but Isabelle now faces deciding whether she could leave Max, especially if she was pregnant with his child.

Isabelle decides to stay with Max for the safety and future of their child. She knows that staying with Max is the right and best thing to do. Robert pleads with her to change her mind, but she doesn't. Robert still promises to come back for her.

In chapter 36, Dorrie is confused when Isabelle asks her to pick up a dozen red roses at the grocery store. Isabelle then asks Dorrie to take her to the cemetery before the two go to the funeral home, where Isabelle walks up to Robert's grave and lays down the flowers on the gravestone.



Analysis

Isabelle's life is anything but what she wants it to be. She marries Max because he treats her well and she knows he'll remain dependable. However, there is no passion. In fact, she compares the two weddings as being in opposite seasons and having opposite feelings associated with each: at her wedding to Robert, she was full of life; at her wedding to Max, she was devoid of joy. Max's actions of dependability should do more than passively please Isabelle, but she keeps a stronghold on the life she wish she had and the people with whom she wishes she could live it.

When Robert visits Isabelle the first and second time, it seems all she can do to not run away with him. Her feelings for him are as strong as ever, and all she wants is to be with him, marry him, and have his children. However, since she has married Max and Robert is the one who is going off to war, she is reserved in her expression of that sentiment.

Robert and Isabelle's roles have flipped; Robert is trying to convince Isabelle that it's a good idea for them to be together, and Isabelle is resisting. It's not that Isabelle doesn't want to go with Robert, it's that she has made a promise to Max and can't risk losing everything a second time. Losing Robert and her baby just three years prior just about killed her, both physically with the miscarriage and emotionally with the grief, loss, and anger she experienced.

When Robert comes back and Isabelle is pregnant, he remains steadfast in his insistence that he will be back for Isabelle, even though Isabelle says that for her child's sake, she has to stay with Max. Isabelle's decision didn't come easy, but as she has experienced some of the hatred of being part of biracial couple, she knows she doesn't want to put that on her child should her child come out white. It's unclear as to how she'll handle the situation if the child is Robert's, but it's a chance Isabelle is willing to take, betting that the child will be white.

Robert's promise that he would love and raise the child as his own no matter who it belongs to is something the reader can believe. To come back to Isabelle after being beaten almost to the point of death, and to secure a safe place for her before he goes off to war, lets Isabelle and the reader know that he is serious about wanting to spend his life with her. He, like Isabelle, wants his family to be with Isabelle. Again, Isabelle feels powerless to change her life to make it what she wants it to be.

Dorrie's role in this section is completely in support of Isabelle. She doesn't reflect on her children, her mother, or her boyfriend. She only does what Isabelle needs, and the fact that she picks up flowers for Isabelle even though she doesn't understand why they're necessary shows the reader that the unlikely pair are true friends.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Robert ask Isabelle to come with him, even though he'll be going off to war?



Discussion Question 2

What is Isabelle's thought process as she decides to stay with Max once she finds out that she's pregnant, even though she doesn't know who the father is?

Discussion Question 3

Dorrie doesn't question many of Isabelle's requests; why does she seem concerned about the dozen roses?

Vocabulary

prolific, lichen, exquisite, plateaus, agony, discordant, vernix, squalling, docile



Chapters 38-43

Summary

In chapter 38, Dorrie learns that Robert never made it back from war. She reads a letter Robert had left for Isabelle with Nell, in the event that he died overseas. The letter spoke of his love for Isabelle, as well as the love Nell and Cora still have for Isabelle. He tells her that they will welcome Isabelle should she ever need a home.

Dorrie is affected by Robert's death, feeling a sense of wanting to get home to her family as soon as she could. Robert and Isabelle's hurts also made hers and Stevie Junior's pale in comparison.

Isabelle tells Dorrie that the child she birthed was clearly Max's. Isabelle had become depressed after Robert had left, though Max assumed it was because she wasn't ready for a baby. Max held Isabelle up when she felt like she didn't have the strength to give birth; Isabelle recognizes him as a good man.

Max had found Isabelle and Robert's thimble in their mailbox the day after Robert's visit. Isabelle kept it as the only keepsake from her first wedding night.

Now that Dorrie knows Robert died many years ago, she is curious as to whose funeral they are attending. The name Pearl Prewitt is listed at the funeral home.

In chapter 39, Isabelle looks at the pictures around the funeral home and sees her daughter. Pearl looked like Robert and like Isabelle. The reader learns that Pearl was their daughter.

In chapter 40, Dorrie is indignant about who hid Pearl from Isabelle all these years. Yet, Isabelle and Nell reunite in a hug, erasing all bitterness and anger between the two of them. Nell was the only one Isabelle knew at the calling hours, but Nell introduced Pearl's son to Isabelle toward the end of the evening.

Dorrie and Isabelle return to the inn, with Isabelle too tired to even eat dinner. She thanks Dorrie for bringing her to Cincinnati. The two go to Pearl's funeral the next morning; it was a quiet, formal ceremony. During the reading of the obituary, Isabelle is named as the birth mother and Cora as the foster mother.

After the service, Dorrie and Isabelle go to Nell's home. People from the funeral come with covered dishes as the crowd celebrates Pearl's life. When the crowd dissipates, Nell, Isabelle, Dorrie, and Pearl's daughter-in-law Felicia sit down for coffee. Nell tells Isabelle of when the Negro midwife showed up with Pearl, and how Isabelle's father provided money for them to help raise her. Nell recognizes Mr. McAllister's one big flaw as not being able to stand up to his wife.



Nell tells Isabelle of how Pearl came with a note, which the Prewitt women had assumed was from Isabelle. It stated, "I do not want this child. Please do not try to contact me." Isabelle's mother had written the note, and Isabelle let Nell and Felicia know that. Isabelle asks if Robert knew Pearl was his. Nell responds that he likely did, but they never spoke openly about the situation.

Nell makes sure to tell Isabelle that she never told Pearl that Isabelle didn't want her, only that the circumstances were complicated. Nell tells Isabelle that for about a year, Pearl tried to contact Isabelle in Texas, but lost her nerve every time the phone rang.

Upon parting, Nell and Isabelle hug each other tightly. Dorrie asks Isabelle why she didn't tell Dorrie the story before they left for Cincinnati, and Isabelle insists that she just couldn't talk about it at first. Then, when stuff started happening in Dorrie's life, she didn't want Dorrie to feel pressured to continue on to the funeral.

In chapter 41, Dorrie and Isabelle leave Cincinnati. Before they are back on the road to Texas, Isabelle asks Dorrie to stop at her Aunt Bertie's gravesite. She recounts the time she followed her mother there and saw her mother cry for the first and only time in her life. The women also stop at Isabelle's father's gravesite, and Isabelle thanks him for helping her daughter live.

When the two are driving through Tennessee, Isabelle tells Dorrie the story of her and Max. They lived a simple life. Max cheated on her once in an attempt to get her attention, but it didn't change anything for Isabelle and so Max let the affair fizzle. Isabelle tried her best to be a good wife and mother, not doing any of the big things she had told Robert she wanted to do.

Max had died peacefully in his sleep when he was 80 years old, and their son Dane died soon after, leaving behind a wife and a couple grandkids Isabelle rarely, if ever, saw. Isabelle tells Dorrie that after Robert had died, she had little hope, even through her life with Max and Dane. Isabelle tells Dorrie that when they met, Dorrie began to fill a hole left in her heart by Robert and Pearl's absence.

When Dorrie drops off Isabelle at Isabelle's home, Isabelle fires Dorrie and says she should be coming over to do her hair for free since Dorrie is like a daughter to Isabelle. The women share a laugh, and Dorrie promises to be there every Monday to continue doing her hair.

In chapter 42, Dorrie straightens everything out with Stevie Junior and with Teague. Stevie's girlfriend lost the baby to a miscarriage, and the mother and son share a heartfelt moment where they each feel sorry for the situation. She has him promise that he'll try to include her in some of his grown-up decisions, and that maybe she can help him make good ones.

When Dorrie talks to Teague, she first admits that she's a smoker, and he admits that he already knew. Dorrie lists all the people in her life that she's responsible for, trying to convey that she's a handful to take on. Teague comes back with the same argument,



that he's a lot to take on because of all of his responsibilities. He then asks Dorrie if she's ready to trust him.

In chapter 43, Dorrie is doing Isabelle's hair. She is telling Isabelle all about Teague and Stevie Junior, this time good things and the decision she's made to trust Teague. The reader finds out that she is setting Isabelle's hair for Isabelle's funeral; she passed peacefully in her sleep the night they returned from Cincinnati. Isabelle is laid to rest in a beautiful dress with her thimble wrapped in her hand.

Analysis

The last six chapters all take place in the present day and wrap up both main characters' stories.

Isabelle and Dorrie make it to Pearl's funeral, and the reader learns that Pearl was Isabelle's daughter that her mother made her think had died during childbirth. The grief and loss for Isabelle is intense, as Nell fills Isabelle in on how Pearl came to the Prewitt's, and how Isabelle's father gave the Prewitt's money to help take care of Pearl as she grew up.

The reader can tell Nell's simultaneous hesitancy and urgency in telling Isabelle the details of what she missed; hesitant because Nell knows it must hurt Isabelle deeply, but also urgent because Isabelle wants to know what she's missed. Some solace is found in how the Prewitt's cared for Pearl, and that Pearl got to grow up with her blood family, but still a deep sense of loss overshadows the solace, as Isabelle got to witness none of it.

The fact that Nell and Isabelle's hug erases the years of bitterness and disappointment lets the reader know that the two women, again an unlikely pairing of friends due to their differing skin colors, care deeply for one another despite their years of separation.

Isabelle's processing of the information provided to her by Nell is expected. She takes it all in with a mature sense of acceptance, since she knows there is nothing she can do to change anything. What's even more telling of Isabelle's processing of the information is what happens within 48 hours of returning home from a five-day trip in which she tells her life's most significant story, learns about the life of the daughter she never knew she had, and shares a kind of bond with Dorrie she hasn't shared with anyone in about seven decades: she passes away. Isabelle has come to peace with what's happened in her life, and she has purged stories and emotions she's held in for her entire adult life. There is nothing left for her on Earth.

Dorrie's response to Isabelle's story is to move forward in her own life. She has a significant talk with Stevie Junior about choices and about her presence in his life, and she has a talk with Teague about their relationship. These two conversations are ones that Dorrie would have either fled from or been extremely uncomfortable with before her road trip with Isabelle. However, Isabelle's story seems to have been enough to propel Dorrie into choices that encourage life, love, and joy.



Discussion Question 1

How does the information Nell provides to Isabelle affect Isabelle?

Discussion Question 2

What emotion does Isabelle most seem to evoke when discussing Max? How can you tell?

Discussion Question 3

How might Dorrie be feeling as she prepares Isabelle for her funeral?

Vocabulary

throttle, puckered, listless, pram, scalpel, surrogate, blight, hangdog



Characters

Isabelle McAllister

Isabelle McAllister is one of the main characters in "Calling Me Home." She is a 90-year-old white woman as she tells the story of when she was 17 years old and fell in love with a young black man. Isabelle's disposition can be divided into two time periods: before and after her marriage to Robert.

Before Isabelle and Robert marry, Isabelle is a spunky, vivacious young woman who loves to play with her friends and longs to be free from her mother's strictly imposed rules. She tells big and small lies to get out from under her mother's thumb, and always does so in the name of independence.

During her relationship with Robert, the reader can see Isabelle's passionate nature. She feels things all the way throughout her body, and doesn't hold anything back when she feels free to express herself. Isabelle is one who works hard to shun social norms of her time. Not only does she believe blacks and white should be able to be friends and lovers, but she acts on her belief by befriending Nell and proactively pursuing a relationship with Robert.

Isabelle goes forward with her desires, regardless of what the expected consequences are. She goes to a nightclub in downtown Newport, lying to her mother but not caring if she'd get in trouble; she pursues Robert when she knew it could cause a rift between their families; she leaves home, knowing it could once and for all sever the ties with her family; and she is intimate with Robert even though she is married at the time, knowingly avoiding any kind of birth control. Isabelle makes it clear from the beginning that she is control of her life, no one else.

After Isabelle and Robert are forced to separate at the hand of Isabelle's brothers, her disposition changes significantly and permanently. Her vivaciousness turns to indifference toward life in general; her joy turns to ice-cold anger; and where she once had hope, she seems to have no more. Isabelle is scarred by her family's actions, and she seems to let herself stay in that place for the remainder of her days. Though she makes somewhat of a peace with everything that happened when she was 17 years old upon attending Pearl's funeral, Isabelle's overall disposition for her adult years is described as being subdued and simple.

Dorrie Curtis

Dorrie is one of the other main characters in "Calling Me Home," since she is the one riding with Isabelle from Arlington, Texas, to Cincinnati, Ohio. Dorrie is an African American hair dresser who has been doing Isabelle's hair for about a decade at the start of the story. She is divorced with two children, a son and a daughter.



Dorrie speaks as though she only doesn't trust men. Yet, Dorrie's thoughts and actions indicate that she doesn't trust very many people in general, especially if their skin is a different color. Dorrie admits to her wrong way of thinking, saying she wished she wasn't immediately like that. Yet, the experiences she describes helps the reader be sympathetic to her way of thinking.

Dorrie is, by nature, a cynical person. She blames some of her disposition on her mother and some on her ex-husband, Stevie and Bebe's father. Dorrie also blames some on a string of bad men she's dated, noting that there may be no good man left for her to companion with. Dorrie spends most of the road trip with Isabelle fretting over her son having gotten his girlfriend pregnant, as well as trying to learn to trust her current boyfriend, Teague. To herself, Dorrie lists every reason why she shouldn't trust Teague, yet something - and sometimes someone (Isabelle) - tells her to keep trying to trust him. Dorrie is challenged to let go of the hurt and anger caused her by her her mother, her ex-husband, and other men who have not been kind to her.

Ironically, Dorrie learns this best after hearing Isabelle's story and of how Isabelle was never really able to release her hurt and anger. Though Dorrie sees Isabelle as beautiful and respectable, she does not want Isabelle's story of loneliness and isolation to be her own.

Robert Prewitt

Robert Prewitt is one of the strongest support characters in "Calling Me Home." He is the main love interest of Isabelle McAllister, even though she is white and he is black. Robert's sister Nell and his mother Cora work for the McAllister family as housekeepers.

Robert is a respectful young man who does not like to rock the boat. He and Isabelle see each other several times - in secret - before he admits his feelings to her. He also takes weeks to write her back after she sends her first letter to him through Nell. Robert cares very much for his family, as that is the main reason he doesn't want to chance anyone finding out about him and Isabelle. He works hard to contribute to his family, and he doesn't want their lives ruined because of his feelings toward a white girl. In fact, it is Nell who encourages Robert and Isabelle to take their relationship further; if it were up to him, they wouldn't have gotten any closer than being acquaintances.

Robert is also a driven young man. He studies hard with Isabelle's father and takes Doc McAllister's directions and tutoring quite seriously. Robert has a dream of being a doctor, which manifests itself in his role as a medic in the Army. Before he deploys, Robert makes a plea to Isabelle to come with him so that she can stay with Cora and Nell, and then they could be together after he got back from war. He is passionate and serious, hesitating to cross any significant social boundary unless forced by either someone he loves or his own, unrelenting desires.



Nell Prewitt

Nell is one of the McAllister's housekeepers, along with her mom, Cora. When Nell was a child, she and Isabelle played together as peers, whether in Isabelle's bedroom, on their porch, or in town. When Nell became of age, however, she was required to become a housekeeper like her mother. Though Isabelle didn't want their relationship to change, it did.

Nell's feelings are detectable through subtle facial movements. Isabelle describes how she sees Nell slightly flinch here or there when she is feeling something strong. The first taste of that for the reader is when Isabelle accidentally insults Nell regarding getting her hair done properly, since that's what the other girls do. From then on, Nell's coolness toward Isabelle is clear.

Nell is a spiritual woman and is known in her church community for having the singing voice of an angel. Isabelle catches Nell singing on the porch one afternoon, and it is so beautiful Isabelle attends a special church service where Nell is to sing. Nell marries her pastor, Brother James.

Nell is a loyal person, and will express that loyalty even when she is hurt. For example, even though Isabelle has hurt Nell's feelings by saying she'd be getting her hair done at a salon, Nell knows how much Isabelle cares for Robert and so she willingly exchanges letters between the two of them. Also, it is revealed at Pearl's funeral that Nell and Cora raised Isabelle and Robert's daughter, despite having thought that Isabelle voluntarily cast the baby aside. Nell explains how her hurt was deep, but that she just had to trust that a greater force was at work and that they didn't have the whole story.

Isabelle's mother, Marg McAllister

Marg McAllister is Isabelle's mother. Though she plays a small part for the reader, she plays a significant part in Isabelle's life and in the direction Isabelle's life follows.

Marg McAllister is a woman bound by social convention. She believes that her status as the town's physician has placed her on a pedestal, and she clings to her place in society as though it is her only identity. As such, she is furious with Isabelle for not being truthful about where she is spending her Wednesday afternoons, afraid her daughter is participating in something with which Marg would not agree. She is also horrified to learn of her daughter's nuptials to a black man, forcing her sons and husband to promptly bring Isabelle back from Cincinnati. Marg then keeps Isabelle under lock-and-key, not allowing her to leave the house or even to roam about the house - including the bathroom - unaccompanied.

Marg presents as a stereotypical high-society Southern woman, caring more about the appearance of things than the reality of a situation. She did not care about her daughter's feelings or wishes, only what her daughter's actions would look like to other



people. She very much desired to control her husband, and was successful in that John only stood up to her - that Isabelle and the reader knows of - one time.

Isabelle's father, John McAllister

John McAllister, known in Shalerville as Doc McAllister, is Isabelle's father and Shalerville's physician. He is a kind, gentle, forgiving man who clearly wants the best for his daughter. He tutors her, encouraging her toward any profession she should choose. He takes her on house calls the country, trusting her disposition and enjoying the special time with his daughter. John McAllister seems to have found the relationship with his daughter that he couldn't find with his sons, one of reciprocity and respect.

John McAllister is a progressive man for his time, seeing past the color of others' skin and seeing them for who they are. He openly and gladly tutors Robert, encouraging Robert's ambition to become a doctor. Again, he seems to have found a relationship with Robert that he did not and could not find with his disrespectful, rowdy sons.

John McAllister's kind and progressive demeanor continues after he sorely disappoints Isabelle by not standing up for her, but it continues in secret. Isabelle finds out at Pearl's funeral that Doc McAllister regularly gave the Prewitt's money to help with raising Pearl until well after his death. His actions indicate a man who wants to do the right thing, but is afraid of the social and familial consequences for doing so.

Isabelle's brothers, Jack and Patrick McAllister

Isabelle's brothers, Jack and Patrick McAllister, are not as present in the story as some of the other supporting characters, but their role in Isabelle's life is one of the most significant.

Jack and Patrick are known in their family and around town for being rowdy, unruly, and rambunctious. They are given free reign by their mother, and their father is powerless to stop them. It is their discussion of the Rendezvous club that Isabelle overhears, inspiring her to go there herself, which is where she encounters Robert for the first time past acquaintance. It is Jack and Patrick who come to Cincinnati to retrieve Isabelle after she and Robert have married, forcing Isabelle back home, though they'd never shown an interest in any of Isabelle's life before that. And it is Jack and Patrick who beat up Robert almost to the point of death, to show him what they're capable of if he ever goes near their sister again.

Jack and Patrick don't carry out their hatred toward Robert because Isabelle cares for him; they do so because he's black. They don't want a black man tainting their sister simply because she's family, and they don't want their family shamed. They act as though they couldn't care any less about what Isabelle really wants. They are entitled and elitist, especially when it comes to racial relations.



Cora Prewitt

Cora is Nell and Robert's mother. She plays a fairly small role in "Calling Me Home" but still significant to the overall narrative of "Calling Me Home." Isabelle says on more than one occasion that Cora was more like a mother to her than her own, especially when Isabelle and Nell would spend most of their days playing together as girls. Isabelle so cares for Cora that it tears her apart to hurt Cora on account of her relationship with Robert, more than it bothers her to upset her own mother.

Cora is a quiet, diligent worker who doesn't want any trouble. She is angry when she finds out about Robert and Isabelle, but she also raises Pearl without question. Cora wants to follow the rules, not rock the boat, and do what's right so that she can continue providing for her family. Cora, like Nell, is a spiritual woman.

Cora had never attended school, having been set for housekeeping since she was a child. She takes her job seriously, only letting her true feelings be known to certain people and in certain ways, for example giving Isabelle a smirk when mentioning Isabelle's mother. She is a lifelong housekeeper, and as such as earned the trust of the McAllisters.

Teague

Teague is the man Dorrie is currently dating. He is important to the story because he is the guy Dorrie is trying to trust. He has done nothing wrong, but he is the latest in a string of guys Dorrie has tried to date. She is waiting to be disappointed, but Teague does nothing of the sort.

Teague is divorced with three children of whom he has main custody. He works from home to support himself and his children. He is kind and reliable for Dorrie, two qualities she's not used to experiencing with the men she's dating. Teague is helpful and sacrificial, as he checks on Dorrie's salon after he drops off the kids at school. When he discovers that the shop was broken into and money taken, he tries to tell Dorrie in a gentle way, then doesn't hesitate to call the police, board up the broken part of the door, and to check the shop every day to make sure nothing else happens.

Teague is a patient man, dealing with Dorrie's evasiveness and the few times she cuts him off when he's trying to talk to her. He cares for Dorrie and is intent on showing it.

Stevie Curtis, Jr.

Stevie Curtis, Jr., is Dorrie's son. Stevie is back at home while Dorrie is on her road trip, and on their way from Memphis up to Cincinnati, Dorrie finds out that Stevie has gotten his girlfriend pregnant. Stevie is 17 years old, and so he informs his mom that he and Bailey made an appointment to get an abortion. Not only that, but they got the money they need for the abortion by breaking into Dorrie's salon and stealing her cash.



Stevie comes across as a typical 17-year-old boy. He tries to be honest with his mom, but reacts strongly when he doesn't like her response. He pushes his limits by yelling at Dorrie over the phone, only to be put in his place by Isabelle. He also comes across as truly sorry for his actions, and scared of the future without his mom's help.

The Day's

Reverend Day is a pastor in Cincinnati, and he is the one who marries Robert and Isabelle. He and his wife Sarah are known for marrying blacks and whites, a rare action in their time.

Reverend Day and his wife Sarah are kind, compassionate, but brutally honest. Before Reverend Day performs the ceremony, he is sure to tell Robert and Isabelle of the dangers they face in marrying. He believes in doing his due diligence in letting them know the troubles they will likely face as a biracial couple, almost as a disclaimer in case anything does happen, he knows he did what he could to warn them.

Sarah Day is the one who runs over to the rooming house where Robert and Isabelle rented a room in order to warn Isabelle that her brothers are on their way. Sarah then finds Robert in order to warn him. It seems the Day's would be advocates for civil rights, but in a peaceful manner.

Max

Max is the man Isabelle marries and with whom she spends most of her adult life. Max is described as being likable, pleasant, reliable, calm, and predictable. Though there is nothing extraordinary about him or his love for Isabelle, she marries him because she knows he will care for her steadily and faithfully.

Max carries himself calmly and patiently, knowing Isabelle will never give herself to him fully yet trying to win her over nonetheless. He spends time courting her, loving her for a long while before asking for her hand in marriage. Max does not seem like he thinks he could do better, just that Isabelle is the best woman he could possibly find, so even though she does not return his affection the way he'd like, he desires to marry her.

Max shows his wariness in Isabelle's lack of affection once by having an affair, trying to get Isabelle's attention. When it doesn't work to make Isabelle mad or jealous, he ends the affair and continues as he was.



Symbols and Symbolism

Thimble

Robert and Isabelle are given a thimble to use as their wedding ring by Reverend Day and his wife Sarah, since Robert and Isabelle show up to marry without a ring. In sewing, a thimble is used to protect one's finger so they are not hurt by the sharp needle. In "Calling Me Home," Isabelle's thimble is used as their wedding ring, an object typically representing never-ending and reciprocal love. One aspect of a marriage relationship/romantic love is the desire to protect the other person. Though Robert and Isabelle ultimately are unable to protect one another, their fierce love wants to protect the other person. And in fact, Robert believes he is protecting Isabelle when he does not pursue her, since her brothers threatened harm if he did.

What's more, the phrase 'Faith. Hope. Love.' is inscribed on the ring, hoping to provide Isabelle and Robert with faith in God for their union, hope for their future, and unconditional love between the two of them.

Shalerville signs excluding African Americans

Isabelle asks her father about the signs at the perimeter of Shalerville which exclude African Americans from the town after sundown. They represent the social order of the time (1939) and also the difficulty with which Isabelle and Robert start their relationship. The vulgarity with which the sign is written also symbolizes the right Caucasians felt they had in making their town exclusive of whites - with the exception of black maids/butlers - especially after sundown.

Robert and Isabelle's courtship letters

Robert and Isabelle's courtship letters, while apparently never saved, were their main mode of communication during their courtship. They saw each other when Robert was home on breaks, but most of their conversations happened through their letters.

Written correspondence is something that takes time, energy, and effort, and tends to hold significant meaning because of what the writer has put into that letter. The same can be said for Isabelle and Robert's relationship. It took time to develop, a lot of energy to keep up since they were a taboo couple, and significant effort, as they had to be exceptionally determined and intentional about their decision to be together.

Isabelle's picture slide

Isabelle keeps a picture slide she accidentally scratches while working for Mr. Bartel. The photograph is of an African American family, and since there are a total of six that



look exactly the same, Isabelle hopes the customer and Mr. Bartel won't notice it's missing.

Isabelle admits that she keeps the slide not only because she's afraid of losing her job, but also because the African American family reminded her of Robert and the baby girl she lost. It represents what Isabelle could have had, had she been able to stay married to Robert and keep her daughter.

Robert's final letter to Isabelle

Robert had written a final letter to Isabelle that Nell was supposed to send to her should he not make it back from war. The letter is the final installment of all the letters the two wrote to each other during their courtship, which is fitting since it would be the final word she ever heard from Robert once he went overseas as a medic during World War II.

Ohio river

The Ohio river is a wide, dirty river referenced a handful of times throughout "Calling Me Home." It divides Kentucky and Ohio. For Isabelle, the Ohio river represents the bridge between captivity and freedom, since in Kentucky not only can she and Robert not be together, but she is kept on a tight leash by her mother, and in Ohio, Isabelle and Robert can legally marry.

In Kentucky, Isabelle is treated like a child. Across the river in Ohio is where Isabelle makes her adult life. The wide river represents the wide gap between her two lives.

Isabelle's rosebush

When Isabelle is married to Max, she keeps a garden. She tells Dorrie that it was mostly for the war effort, foods like lettuce and beans. However, there was a rosebush that she carefully tended to. Isabelle had learned that by pruning the bush, beautiful blooms should come out in the springtime. The rosebush for Isabelle represents the possibility of hope and growth, despite unfavorable conditions.

Isabelle's crossword puzzle books

Isabelle works on crossword puzzle books most of the ride from Texas to Ohio. As she works on her puzzle, Dorrie is trying to figure out the puzzle of Isabelle's story. Not only that, but there are pieces of Isabelle's story that even she doesn't know because of not having been in contact with Pearl, Nell, and Cora since she and Robert were torn apart.



Isabelle's car breaking down

Isabelle's car breaks down just a little bit outside of Memphis, which is just shortly after Stevie Junior riles her up about his situation, and it's at the tail-end of her memory of Officer Kevin arresting her mother when Dorrie was in middle school.

As reliable and safe as Isabelle thought her car was, the noise is indecipherable and stops them from going anywhere over night. As a parallel, Dorrie thought her Officer Kevin was reliable and safe, until he arrests her mother, hurting Dorrie deeply. His act represents to Dorrie her notion that people seem like they can be trusted, but in reality, cannot be trusted at all.

Dorrie's mother getting arrested

Dorrie's mother was arrested when Dorrie was in middle school by Officer Kevin, a police officer Dorrie thought she could trust. When she came home to find her mother in the back of the police car, that event seemed to be the final straw for Dorrie thinking she could trust people only to find out she really couldn't. Officer Kevin was a white man, and Dorrie's mother focused her accusation on white people, but Dorrie doesn't trust very many people no matter the color of their skin and she seems to use the incident with her mother and Officer Kevin as proof that people can't be trusted.



Settings

Shalerville, Kentucky

Shalerville, Kentucky is where most of Isabelle's story takes place. She grew up in Shalerville with her two brothers, her mother, and her father, the main physician in town. Being considered the South, blacks - called Negroes through most of the novel - were housekeepers for prominent white families in Shalerville, but were not allowed outside in town after dark.

Descriptions of the town give it an old Southern feel: plantation homes on the outskirts, small, main street/small town-like in the center. Isabelle favors the library in town, going there each week as a child.

Car ride from Arlington, Texas, to Cincinnati, Ohio

The car ride from Arlington to Cincinnati is where most of Dorrie's story is told. Though Isabelle tells her story to Dorrie from the car, too, Dorrie tells her story to the reader more by thinking about it through her emotions rather than describing what happened. During the car ride, Dorrie and Isabelle become closer as friends, bonding over similar emotions for very different experiences. They experience one car trouble, a busted belt, and one speeding ticket. Other than that, the car ride is where Dorrie and Isabelle do most of their storytelling.

Newport, Kentucky

Newport, Kentucky, is where the Rendezvous nightclub is, where Isabelle gets harassed by a man who comes close to sexually assaulting her. It is outside of this nightclub where Isabelle and Robert have their first non-employer/employee moment, as Robert rescues her and subsequently walks her home.

Robert's church/arbor

Robert's church meets at an arbor, a clearing in the trees near a river not far outside of town. At its entrance are twisted and overgrown vines. Inside are benches that lined the arbor. Each week, Robert works to prepare the area for his church to meet there. The reader experiences one of Robert's church services at the arbor, where guests are sitting on the benches and tree stumps, or standing.



Isabelle's childhood home

Isabelle's childhood home is where about a third of her story takes place, other than at the arbor with Robert and in Cincinnati. Cora Prewitt and her daughter Nell, Robert's mother and sister respectively, are the housekeepers for the McAllister's. It is at Isabelle's home where her friendship with Nell starts, where Isabelle is kept under strict supervision after any time her mother feels Isabelle's behavior is spinning out of control. Isabelle feels like a prisoner in her house most of the time she spends there, and she dreams of the day she can leave it behind.

Cincinnati, Ohio

Cincinnati, Ohio, is where Isabelle and Robert obtain their marriage license (Hamilton County Courthouse) and subsequently marry at a local church. It's also where Isabelle goes to live after she leaves home for good once she is strong enough after her pregnancy. Cincinnati is where the Reverend Day and his wife live, where Isabelle and Robert have their first home in a rooming house, and it's where Isabelle meets Max.

Dorrie's hair salon

Dorrie owns her hair salon in Arlington, Texas. She is proud of her storefront, small as it is. The importance of the hair salon as a setting is because it is broken into while she is away with Isabelle.

Arlington, Texas

Arlington, Texas is Dorrie's and Isabelle's current hometown. Dorrie talks more about Texas than Isabelle does, noting the racism present during her childhood as well as in modern day. The mortuary where Dorrie sets Isabelle's hair before she is laid to rest is in Arlington, as well.

Memphis, Tennessee

Memphis, Tennessee is Dorrie and Isabelle's first stop on their road trip. Dorrie and Isabelle believe they are subject to racism by the manager at their hotel. Memphis is where Dorrie is when she finds out about her shop being broken into, challenging her to trust Teague. Though the city of Memphis has nothing to do with Dorrie's journey, it's her physical location when she has two significant experiences that lend themselves to the narrative of the novel.



Themes and Motifs

Love against all odds

Love is the prominent theme in "Calling Me Home," as the main character, Isabelle, tells the story of the love of her life and how he was snatched from her via social convention and a controlling family. Isabelle is 90 years old as she tells the story of when she was 17 years old in 1939 and falling in love with a black man just a year older than her. Isabelle and Robert began their courtship in secret, as it was improper for whites and blacks to socialize; they were really only allowed to interact with one another as employer (white) and employee (black). Yet, they were determined, all in the name of love.

Isabelle and Robert first interacted as more than acquaintances when Robert saved Isabelle from a potential sexual assault outside of a nightclub. After that, Isabelle became progressively more intrigued with Robert the more she saw him and the more his name was mentioned by his sister and mother, who were both housekeepers for Isabelle's family. Isabelle carefully worked her way to see Robert in his natural environment, even though doing so meant following him out of town. She was daring every social convention regarding blacks and whites, but she didn't care; her feelings for him were growing at a rapid enough rate that she seemed unable to use common sense against. It was Isabelle who encouraged the pursuit of romance between the two of them, telling Robert their feelings shouldn't be ignored, especially since she didn't agree with the laws anyway.

Robert's hand had to be forced, however, since he took very seriously the sanctions taken against black people who broke both the law and social convention of leisurely interacting with whites.

Family

One of the strongest themes in "Calling Me Home" is the concept of one's family, both by birth and by marriage. For the main characters Isabelle and Dorrie, the idea of family means something different to each woman.

Isabelle wanted a family with Robert, but that was not allowed. She wanted the kind of family that she could love, fully engage in, and one that would bust through racial barriers. However, her birth family caused her much strife. Her mother and two brothers actively worked against her union with Robert by forcing her to come home the night after they married, beating up Robert almost to the point of death, and keeping her under strict supervision until well after she gave birth.

For Isabelle, family is synonymous with pain, suffering, anger, and betrayal. She had a good relationship with her father, but since he did not stand up against Isabelle's mother or brothers, Isabelle could not rely on him for support, either. Though Isabelle married



Max and gave birth to a son, she acted as though she had no real family to speak of. Which in essence was true, since Isabelle made it clear that she was really only physically present for her marriage and for her son; emotional presence was something else entirely.

For Dorrie, her blood family consists of her mother and her children. Since she is a single parent and cares for her mother, family for Dorrie means great responsibility. Beyond her responsibilities, the only other thoughts on family Dorrie expresses is disappointment in her ex-husband for not participating in the family she tried to build with him. She is unsure if she'll ever be able to trust a man enough again to marry, but when she thinks about that, she doesn't think about it in terms of family, only in a sense of companionship.

The unexpected presence of family comes in the friendship between Dorrie and Isabelle. Isabelle, a 90-year-old white woman, treats Dorrie, a 30-something black woman, like a daughter. The unlikely pair have fostered their friendship for a decade, showing the reader that family does not always come in a blood relative. Isabelle and Dorrie have taken their lonely, family-less selves, and created a family-like relationship between the two of them.

Independence

The loss of one's innocence and gaining one's independence is a theme present in "Calling Me Home," seen mostly through Isabelle's character. Though she grew up with her mother's cool attitude toward her, which can sometimes age a person before their time, Isabelle describes goings on of her childhood, such as playing child games with Nell and crossing her fingers when telling a fib. As a teenager, Isabelle longed to break free of her mother's rules and be her own grown-up person.

First, Isabelle lied to her parents so she could go to a nightclub. She went to Rendezvous so she could feel more grown-up and more independent, but she ended up flirting with a young man who she didn't realize was drunk until he was almost sexually assaulting her. She admits her naiveté, but at no point in the novel does Isabelle return to being a young girl with girl-only thoughts; she seems changed from that moment into a young woman who works hard to grow up and to prove her independence.

Isabelle's most significant assertion of independence was when she marries Robert. Though she was only 17 years old, Isabelle knew she loved Robert and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Yet, not only did Isabelle have to sneak away from home because she was under the age of 18, but she was marrying a black man. It was here that her remaining innocence showed itself: it is 1939 when Isabelle and Robert fell in love and, living in Kentucky as they do, it was not looked well upon for whites and blacks to marry, yet Isabelle absolutely insisted that she and Robert could and would marry. She was told of the troubles they'd likely face, but she was adamant in her insistence that the two marry. Isabelle's attitude may have been more hopeful than



innocence, but at times it seems Isabelle was unwilling to even consider the trouble that could come to her and Robert as a biracial couple.

Dorrie's son, Stevie Jr., is another character who carries out the theme of loss of innocence/independence. He is 17 years old, and Dorrie finds out about halfway through her road trip with Isabell that he has gotten his girlfriend pregnant. Any remaining innocence Stevie Jr. might have had at 17 years old is likely gone after finding out that he will be a father. Moreover, their decision to abort the baby pushes his innocence further away, and even still, the fact that Bailey loses the baby very well might rid Stevie Jr. of any remaining innocence, as dealing with a pending birth and then a sudden loss are not innocent experiences.

Unlikely friendships

Unlikely friendships, aside from love against the odds, is the most prominent theme in "Calling Me Home." The story of the main characters is told through a road-trip of friends Dorrie and Isabelle. They are an unlikely pair of friends, being off different races and generations, yet their friendship proves that companionship can be found anywhere if it is fostered.

Dorrie and Isabelle's friendship began by default, since Isabelle's normal hairdresser was unavailable when she needed her hair done; Isabelle was put with Dorrie by pure chance. Since Isabelle doesn't like change, she stuck with Dorrie, and over a decade the two shared information about their lives. They become so close that the term 'friendship' doesn't even suffice how they feel about each other and their relationship, but the author makes it clear to the reader that each is the other's best friend.

Another unlikely friendship present in the novel is that of Isabelle and Nell, one of her housekeepers. Isabelle describes, through her storytelling to Dorrie, that when she and Nell were children they played together all the time, even though it was the 1930s and blacks and whites were not encouraged to socialize. Isabelle would have liked to keep Nell as a close friend, but Nell was required to become a housekeeper and so a natural divide was created between the two. Isabelle also pursued a friendship with Robert before their romance began, an even more unlikely friendship than she and Nell since cross-gender and cross-racial relationships were even more frowned up than simply cross-gender.

One of the friendships more in the background of the story is that of Robert and John McAllister, Isabelle's father. Mr. McAllister gladly tutored Robert so Robert would have a better chance to make it to medical school. Mr. McAllister seemed to have a unique respect for Robert, and vice versa. The two conversed naturally, and it seemed that Mr. McAllister treated Robert the way he could not treat his own sons, since Jack and Patrick were rambunctious and showed no interest in studying for good grades.



Racial relations

Since “Calling Me Home” tells the story of a white girl falling in love with a black boy in the 1930s, race relations is an obvious theme. The novel takes place between Texas and Kentucky, two Southern states known for having favorable laws and attitudes toward white people and against black people. Since the story is told from a 90-year-old white woman to a 30-something black woman, the race relations span the decades and hold different meanings for the different characters.

The author is clear to show the unfavorable conditions for black people in the South in the 1930s and 1940s. For example, Cora and Nell were housekeepers, completely dependent on a white family for their income. Also, there was a sign at Shalerville’s entrance that let its occupants know that blacks were not welcome outside after dark. Most importantly for the reader to note is the way black and white characters related to each other depending on where in town they were: in Isabelle’s house, she and Nell could speak as friends; on Isabelle’s porch, however, the two had to be a little more formal since it was never sure who may be watching; walking home from Rendezvous, Robert had to walk behind Isabelle even though they were walking together; and Robert expressed nervousness and fear every time Isabelle mentioned meeting him somewhere and especially when she pursued a romantic relationship with him.

Isabelle’s experience with race relations is on the side of being able to not care what people would say or think of her dating a black man or being friends with a black woman. When she visited the Prewitts’ church, she approached a black woman sitting on a tree stump without thinking of any kind of repercussion; a black person would not dare to approach a white person like that in public, for fear of grave repercussions. Isabelle did not care about racial differences, and was extremely frustrated that she lived in a society that cared greatly. The racial divide of her time worked to discourage and anger Isabelle, as that is the foundational reason she and Robert were torn apart by Isabelle’s brothers.

Dorrie’s racial baggage is on the opposite side as Isabelle: she grew up having to care about racial relations because of the way she was treated and the experiences she’s had and continues to have. As a child, she experienced a white cop who acted interested in her as a friend. However, his attitude flipped when he accused her mother of dealing and doing drugs. From that point on, Dorrie’s view of the racial divide is tainted with anger and a feeling of betrayal. Dorrie’s road-trip with Isabelle is a couple decades after her experience with the police officer, but she still sees through the lens of discrimination when she is spared a speeding ticket, believing it is because of Isabelle’s white skin rather than the officer’s leniency, that lets her off.

The reader can see the difference in race relations between Isabelle’s story in 1939 and her and Dorrie’s interactions in modern-day. The racial divide morphs from being a set of laws and deeply embedded societal attitudes, to leftover racism from a social conditioning that has been slowly chipped away at over time.



Home

The idea of home in “Calling Me Home” is one with multiple dimensions. Typically, when a person’s home is considered it means one’s physical home. Yet, there is the idea of a person feeling like home.

For Isabelle, her physical home was like a prison to her; it was where her mother kept her from the outside world lest Isabelle embarrass the good McAllister name. Isabelle was quite proactive in her attempt to escape from her physical home, since the only member of her family she genuinely liked was her father. The physical home Isabelle and Robert shared for one night after they married is the only physical home Isabelle ever seems to have very positive feelings toward. Though she appreciates the life Max built for her and the home they shared, Isabelle is fairly passive and subdued regarding her life with Max.

For Dorrie, her physical home is not much more than a structure that she’s worked hard to maintain, since she’s a single parent who owns her own hair salon. She is proud of the life she’s built, simply because she’s built it almost all by herself. Home, to her, is one that came with a lot of blood, sweat, and tears.

The other dimension of the concept of home is the person with whom one feels most at home. For Isabelle, this was with Robert. With Robert, Isabelle felt passion and love with all she had to give; he was home to her. She felt as though she could be herself and that with Robert, she could live a full and happy life. Though that home was snatched from her just the morning after the two married. Yet, Isabelle never forgets the feeling of being home with the love of her life.

For Dorrie, her kids seem to represent home to her. She is learning to trust men, as she has just started dating Teague, so there is not yet a male companion/romantic interest that Dorrie feels at home with. It is the way she converses with and talks about her children that make the reader know they are home for her. She is a single mom, so her two children and her mother, all of whom she cares for, are who she considers home.

Max is the man Isabelle marries when she thinks Robert is gone forever. He works hard to build a life for him and Isabelle, no matter how indifferent Isabelle may seem. Max is insistent that Isabelle is home for him, even if she doesn’t return all of his affection.

Isolation

Each of the characters in “Calling Me Home” seems to experience isolation to one degree or another throughout the course of the novel.

Isabelle and Robert’s isolation is the most obvious to reader, as their isolation came from not being able to comfortably and safely be with the person each other loves. They were torn apart from each other, after having to hide their relationship. In essence, Isabelle and Robert may have felt isolated during their entire relationship, since they



were unable to share their deepest and most joyful feelings with other loved ones; each was isolated from their respective families and communities in the sense that the greatest thing happening in each of their lives had to be hidden.

Dorrie's sense of isolation seems to come from a place of survival. She has been a single parent for so long that it seems easiest for her to shut herself off from trusting other people to do anything for her or to help her. Dorrie seems to isolate herself also out of a sense of martyrdom, acting like it's necessary in order to succeed in her life.

John and Marg McAllister were isolated from Isabelle, as she not only hid her greatest relationship from them, but also her later marriage to Max. Isabelle also kept completely to herself while she was locked up in her room and in her house, choosing to shut out her parents from anything she was thinking or feeling. John and Marg were locked out of their daughter's life, and they also had no control over Jack and Patrick, possibly making them feel isolated as parents.

The reader can also see a sense of isolation in Stevie Jr. He clearly does not want to tell his mom about the situation with Bailey, as his first answers when she asks how everything is are monosyllabic. Though he eventually tells Dorrie what is going on, his lashing out at Dorrie in an attempt to justify his behavior likely comes from a place of isolation, as he may feel completely alone in his situation since he doesn't think his mother will understand or help him.

Gender differences

Similar to the theme of race relations, there is a power struggle of genders present in "Calling Me Home." The concept is most prominent in the relationship dynamics present in Isabelle's family. For example, Isabelle had a better relationship with her father than he did with her brothers, so much so that Isabelle gleaned from her father that he believed she could do something great with her life. Despite the fact that women in the 1930s were not considered to be able to achieve high professions, Isabelle seemed to believe a sort of invincibility as a result of her relationship with her father.

On the other hand, Isabelle was treated differently by her father when her father didn't stop her brothers from bringing her home after marrying Robert. Because she is a woman, Jack and Patrick believed Isabelle could be controlled, and their father did nothing to stop it. Jack and Patrick believed that as Isabelle's brothers, and as men of Shalerville, it was their duty to protect her and the rest of the town from men like Robert – black men who wanted to date and marry white women.

Gender differences can also be seen in Dorrie's relationship, as the author makes clear the anxiety Dorrie feels about her relationship with Teague. She has unknowingly yet willingly given Teague all the power, as she waits for him to surprise her by sticking around. Teague, however, is the pursuer, continually calling until Dorrie picks up the phone and is willing to talk about her salon situation. The gender differences in their relationship are fairly stereotypical, with the woman being the nervous wreck, hoping the



man will stay even though she considers her life to be messy, and the man being confident of their relationship, wanting to help and even somewhat rescue Dorrie from herself.

Fear

Fear can mainly be detected in Robert and in Dorrie, but it can also be found in Isabelle's parents. Dorrie's fear plays out in regards to her son and his current situation, having gotten his girlfriend pregnant. She is afraid of the path down which he is heading, and she wants nothing more than to turn back time or to stop it all together. The other dimension of Dorrie's fear comes from her new romantic relationship with Teague. Dorrie has been conditioned by her ex-husband as well as by a string of other men that she will be disappointed, betrayed, and left behind at the first sign of trouble. Teague proves Dorrie wrong, but that does not stop Dorrie from fearing his leaving her all the way through her road trip with Isabelle.

Robert's fear can be found in his hesitancy to enter into a romantic relationship with Isabelle. He openly feared the family and community consequences of himself as a black man engaging in a romance with a white woman, especially one whose father was well-respected and somewhat revered in the community. Robert openly feared the violence that he and Isabelle would face as a result of their relationship. His fears were not unfounded, but they also, ultimately, did not stop him and Isabelle from courting and eventually marrying, even though they only got one night together before Robert's fears came to fruition.

John and Marg McAllister are also two incredibly fearful characters, though the reader may not immediately notice it. Mr. McAllister's fears seem present mostly in dealing with his wife and his sons, in that he allowed his sons to be rambunctious and violent, even at the expense of his daughter's happiness. Mr. McAllister did not stand up to his sons and only once stood up to his wife when it came to Isabelle.

Marg McAllister, on the other hand, expressed her fear via control. She fiercely worked to control Isabelle and her whereabouts, both before and after she married Robert. Mrs. McAllister was terrified that her high society standing would be in jeopardy as a result of her daughter's relationship with a black man. Fear of losing the life she had carefully created for herself and her family, controls many of Mrs. McAllister's actions, especially when it came to Isabelle.

Secrecy

Since Isabelle and Robert must work to keep their relationship hidden from their families as well as from their respective communities, secrecy is a significant theme in the first half of the novel, before Isabelle and Robert marry.

Isabelle's first act of secrecy actually had nothing to do with Robert. Instead, it was for herself and her desire to be more grown-up, as she kept from her family her night in



downtown Newport, Kentucky, at a nightclub. She lied to her friend's parents so she could leave a party, and secretly headed to Rendezvous. The deception backfired when she was almost sexually assaulted and Robert was there to rescue her.

Though Robert rescued Isabelle and the reader might think Isabelle's father and family would be grateful, the act was kept a secret for multiple reasons. For one, blacks were not supposed to be on the streets of Shalerville at night. Second, Isabelle did not want her parents knowing where she was at that time of night. And third, Robert's act of chivalry intrigued Isabelle to the point of romantic interest, and Isabelle and Robert both believed that it was best for their relationship and for their safety if nobody knew about her feelings.

When Isabelle and Robert began their romantic relationship – after much convincing and strong encouragement from Isabelle – it was a secret. Nell knew the two cared greatly for each other, even though neither Isabelle nor Robert talked openly about their relationships. Nell secretly transported letters between Isabelle and Robert, with she and Isabelle using a secret hand signal system to transfer the letters from Isabelle to Nell, then from Nell to Isabelle.

Neither the reader nor the characters can know if their secrecy contributed to the grave consequences experienced by Robert and Isabelle as a result of the relationship, since the two felt that traditional societal norms prevented them from making their relationship public. Their secrecy felt forced, yet it felt necessary, despite the fact that Isabelle openly wished she could put their relationship on display.

Powerlessness

One of the strongest themes in “Calling Me Home” is the powerlessness of the main characters to create the life they want. Whether the sense of powerlessness comes from societal and/or family pressures, it is real and it is life-altering.

Isabelle and Robert were powerless to change the values and attitudes of society in general. Even though they wanted to be accepted as a biracial couple, the laws and social mores worked against them. No matter their level of education, Robert's position in his church, Isabelle's family's position in their town, or their feelings toward each other, Shalerville, Kentucky, and the general population of the Southern United States rejected them as a couple. Isabelle and Robert got married in an effort to work to change such attitudes, but were torn apart by Isabelle's family before they had a chance to model their relationship to the public.

Isabelle and Robert were also powerless to change Isabelle's family's attitude toward her and Robert's relationship. Not only was Isabelle underage, making it easy for her parents to tell her what to do, but her brothers physically forced her to return home after marrying Robert. They also threatened to hurt Robert – even kill him if they had to – for defiling their sister. Isabelle was powerless to stop their ruthlessness. The only hope she might have had was her father, but her father acted powerless to stop her brothers,



as well. Robert and Isabelle's relationship was out of their hands. They desperately tried to regain control, but forces stronger than them worked to pull them apart.

Though she is a supporting character, the reader might also pay attention to Isabelle's mother's sense of powerlessness. She was clearly feeling a sense of powerlessness at her only daughter's insistence on loving Robert. Marg felt so powerless that she went to great lengths to control Isabelle, both physically and emotionally. By keeping Isabelle locked up in their home, Marg tried to regain control of Isabelle's physical whereabouts. She was also likely hoping that the time away from Robert would curb her romantic feelings for the young man.

Dorrie's sense of powerlessness is somewhat more subtle. She is in a place where she is trying to be more in control of her love life as she is challenged to trust the man she is currently dating. Her sense of powerlessness comes when her son, Stevie Jr., tells her that his girlfriend is pregnant. For all the work she's done as a single parent, she feels powerless to help Stevie Jr. process through such a significant event, since she is traveling more than one thousand miles away from home. To compound her feelings of powerlessness, she finds out that Stevie Jr. breaks into her salon and steals her cash. Dorrie seems to feel that her child's life is in a downward spiral that she is powerless to stop.

Hope

Despite the fact that an overwhelming feeling from the main characters is a sense of powerlessness, there is also a great sense of hope within each of them. The hope dissipates at a certain point in the novel, as the characters succumb to their sense of powerlessness.

Hope comes in the form of romantic love, mainly for Isabelle and Robert. Before Isabelle and Robert began their romantic relationship, she constantly hoped to run into him in town; she hoped to have a conversation with Nell about Robert; she hoped Cora or Nell would mention Robert, and she hoped to have a positive interaction with him at the arbor. Once the two began a romantic relationship, Isabelle hoped they could continue. She hoped they could marry in peace. She hoped nothing would tear them apart. Isabelle's hope was so strong and so confident that it blinded her to the realities of a white woman loving a black man in 1939 Kentucky.

Robert's sense of hope was more reserved and more aligned with what he believed was likely to happen as a result of their romantic relationship and their eventual nuptials. He hoped they would be safe, but he also warned Isabelle time and time again of the dangers of their situation. Still, Robert worked to find a job in Cincinnati and a place for them to live, with the hope of being able to share their lives together for the rest of their days.

Though Robert succumbed to powerlessness and hopelessness before Isabelle in regards to their relationship, the reader can see that Robert maintained his hope for a life with



Isabelle until his dying day. For example, Robert visited Isabelle at her home after she had married Max. He told her of why he didn't go after her; Jack and Patrick had beat him almost to the point of death, and he feared for not only his life, but his family members' lives as well as Isabelle's. Now that he was joining the Army, however, he shared with Isabelle the hope that they could still share a life together.

Grief and loss

There is a great deal of loss in "Calling Me Home," but little of it is in the form of death. Still, the loss experienced by the characters lead to significant feelings of grief.

Isabelle's life started with no indication of ever having to want for anything. She seemed to have a full, fun childhood. As a young woman, however, Isabelle began to experience one loss after another. First, her friendship with Nell after Isabelle made an off-handed comment about getting her hair done at a salon.

Second, she lost her relationship with her father when she couldn't share the love she felt for Robert, since he was a black man and in 1939 it was frowned upon for whites and blacks to socialize. Eventually, she lost Robert, as well, which was her most significant loss until she lost the baby girl she prematurely gave birth to. The losses Isabelle deals with when she was 17 and 18 years old have lifelong consequences, since losing Robert and her daughter meant losing the life she would've had with them. Her grief never really ended; she carried it with her all throughout her marriage to Max and well past his death.

In a similar vein, Robert lost Isabelle when she was forced to return to her family, effectively losing the life he would have had with her and the baby she didn't know he's pregnant with. Robert's grief was shown less so, since Isabelle only saw him once after they were forcibly separated by her family. Nell let Isabelle know that losing her nearly killed him, and that his grief was real.

The whole Prewitt family dealt with the loss of Isabelle and her family, since Cora and Nell lost their jobs as a result of Robert and Isabelle's romance. A couple years later, they lost Robert to World War II; he died as a medic in the Army.

Anger

One of the major themes that runs through almost every character in "Calling Me Home" is the notion of anger. The source for each character is different, but the emotion is present and it is strong.

For Isabelle, anger courses through her life as she was told – not in words, but in the actions of others – that she could not be with Robert. Also, as she was forced to leave Robert the day after they married, then be kept hidden in her home while she was pregnant, and then again when she found out how violent her brothers were to Robert. Anger was her strongest emotion, along with desperation. Anger is what kept her from



truly moving on, as she let it fester and stick with her even through her marriage with Max.

Anger is also present for Dorrie as she processes her son's current situation. Dorrie was a teen mom, getting pregnant with Stevie Jr. before she turned twenty. About half-way through her and Isabelle's trip, Dorrie finds out that Stevie Jr.'s girlfriend Bailey is pregnant. She is angry at him for being careless, for breaking into her salon and stealing her cash, for considering an abortion, and for repeating the same mistake she made by getting pregnant so young. She's also likely mad at herself, since a mother's first thought when her child does something wrong or unfavorable is usually to blame herself. Dorrie's anger is also aimed at her ex-husband for not being a more present father.

Dorrie learns from Isabelle, though, and does not let her anger fester. She takes a break from talking with Stevie Jr. so she doesn't say something she'll regret, and she does the same thing with Isabelle. Dorrie also works harder at trusting Teague, even though she's usually untrusting of men and angry at them in general, thanks to her mother's habits during Isabelle's childhood as well as her ex-husband's lazy ways.

Anger can be seen in the supporting characters, as well: Nell and Cora, when they needed Isabelle to stay away from them and not cause trouble; Jack and Patrick when they found out Isabelle married a black man; Max when he had an affair to get Isabelle's attention; Stevie Jr. when Dorrie opposes the abortion; and Marg when meeting moments of disappointment with Isabelle.

The presence of anger in the characters of "Calling Me Home" seems to have a dual purpose: to show what anger can do to a person when it's not let go of, and to show how productive it is for a person's life when it's dealt with and replaced with a more positive emotion.

Social status

Social status is an idea that Isabelle's mother thrived on, and one that Isabelle herself felt stifled from. It is clear that the McAllister's social status as a family mattered a great deal to Isabelle's mother, and it is equally clear that it is what kept Isabelle under lock-and-key for months. In a small Southern town, social status mattered to its residents, especially to its richest residents. Marg McAllister saw herself and her family as being more important and of a higher caliber than others, simply because her husband was the town's physician.

It is social status that fueled Marg's actions of keeping Isabelle hidden while she was pregnant. Not only could an upper-class lady not be pregnant out of wedlock, but she could not be pregnant from a black man out of wedlock. Such a thing was unacceptable to Isabelle's mother.

Social status didn't matter at all to Isabelle. She saw people as equal, whether it was out of a desire to be nothing like her mother or purely motivated, the reader will have to



infer. Isabelle rejected her mother's high-society attitude early on, being friends with Nell and not being afraid to get dirty as she played outside as a child. She continued to reject the notion of high society as a young woman, leaving home with just \$15 from her father and going to live in Cincinnati. She married a simple man who had a middle-class job, and the two created a middle-class life. Isabelle likely saw her mother's elitist upper-class attitude as one of the things that had ruined her life.

Moving forward

One of the themes in "Calling Me Home" is the idea of moving forward, progressing with one's life even when one doesn't want to. The concept is present for both Isabelle and Dorrie, as well as for some of the supporting characters.

Isabelle's late adolescence/early adulthood was met with much passion and grandiose ideas of what she wanted her life to be. However, in a very short span of time, everything she loved was taken from her: her husband, her child, her best friend (Nell), the family she wanted to be a part of (the Prewitt's), and the future with Robert she had been envisioning. Since everything was taken away from her and she was powerless to get it back, Isabelle was forced to move forward. She did so with sadness weighing on her heart, but she did it nonetheless, by getting a job, moving away from home, meeting and marrying Max, and having a child.

Dorrie's life is in disarray when she and Isabelle embark on the road trip, but it isn't until they're on the road trip that Dorrie realizes that. When she leaves Arlington, there's a new man in her life that she really likes but isn't yet totally committed to, and her children haven't caused any major issues. During the road trip, Stevie Junior tells her that his girlfriend is pregnant and he broke into her salon and stole \$300 cash, and Teague's kindness and reliability sends her into a constant state of self-doubt. Dorrie is forced to move forward, to progress into an attitude of trust, as well as one of response instead of reaction.

Robert, Nell, and Cora were forced to move forward, too, though they didn't want to without Isabelle. All the pieces aren't put into place for Isabelle and the reader until the conclusion of the story, but the Prewitt's were forced into caring for Pearl. They had to move forward without Isabelle if they wanted Pearl to be raised well. They couldn't be at a stand-still if they wanted Pearl to know love and joy.

Each character is forced to move forward with his or her life, despite strong callings from each of their pasts. Each character does so with sadness weighing on them, but they do it nonetheless.



Styles

Point of View

"Calling Me Home" is told in a first-person point of view from both Dorrie Curtis and Isabelle McAllister. The chapters alternate between the two women, as Dorrie tells her story in modern-day and Isabelle tells her story from 1939-1943. Toward the end of the novel, Isabelle's story moves from 1943 to modern day, though the information she gathers at Pearl's funeral is from long ago.

The value of the alternating first-person point of view for the reader is the ability to fully understand each woman's story as she sees it. Dorrie's and Isabelle's stories have similar underlying tones even though they take place decades apart. By alternating between the two, the author shows the similar components between the two women and their stories. Dorrie is learning lessons from Isabelle's story as she tells it.

Language and Meaning

"Calling Me Home" is alternatively written from the modern-day vantage point of an African American woman in her late 30s or 40s who grew up in Texas and is a single parent, and from the viewpoint of a 90-year-old white woman who tells the story of when she was 17 and in love with a black man in Kentucky. The language is all first-person, some of it reflective and some of it reactionary.

Isabelle's story is told during a three-day car ride from Arlington, Texas, to Cincinnati, Ohio. She tells Dorrie that her story is being told at 90 years old, but it's really being told through Isabelle's 17-year-old eyes. The ages of each storyteller matter because they are at completely different life stages during the telling of the story, and Isabelle is in an entirely different life stage at the age of most of her story. The meaning conveyed by each woman through their storytelling says something different about each woman, and about the way the author wanted to tell the story.

For Isabelle to be telling a story about when she was 17 years old but is currently 90, tells the reader how deeply impacted she was by the chain of events Isabelle lays out for Dorrie. The author clearly wanted to convey the life-long consequences that can come from just one decision, in Isabelle's case, her decision to be with Robert.

Dorrie's language is a good bit more reactionary than reflective; while she does remember some of the things that have happened to her, she is thinking more about and reacting to her life's current events. Because of Isabelle's reflection on her own life, Dorrie seems able to process through more healthily the events of her own life.

By contrasting the two women's stories and the way each tells their own, the author can show Isabelle being somewhat of a mentor to Dorrie, and Dorrie acting as a healing

helper for Isabelle, since telling her story and making her way to Pearl's funeral both seem cathartic experiences for Isabelle.

Structure

"Calling Me Home" is split up into 43 chapters, most of which alternate between Dorrie in modern-day and Isabelle in 1939-1943. Two of Isabelle's chapters are in modern-day, one at the beginning when she is introduced and explains how she feels about Dorrie, and one at the end when she arrives at Pearl's funeral. All of Dorrie's chapters are set in modern day.

With the exception of her introduction chapter which takes place in Texas, Isabelle's chapters are set in Kentucky and Ohio. The first half are fairly jovial in nature, though because Isabelle is telling the story and she knows where the story ends up, there is a hint of sadness underneath her tales. Once Isabelle is taken away from Robert, about half-way through the novel, Isabelle's tone loses all sense of innocence and wonder and moves completely to bitterness and anger.

The tone of Dorrie's chapters gradually change from hesitant and uncertain, to confident, thankful, and a feeling of peacefulness that is only present at the conclusion of Dorrie's side of the story.



Quotes

I had to admit I was intrigued, though I usually left mystery solving to television personalities -- figuring out how to pay my bills was mystery enough for me.

-- Dorrie (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

Importance: Dorrie's statement tells of one of her reasons for escorting Miss Isabelle up to Cincinnati: intrigue, which is important to the reader because in a normal situation, it's a lot for a person to ask of another, at the drop of a hat, to drive her about 1,000 miles. The statement also speaks of Dorrie's position in life. The reader comes away from that statement knowing that Dorrie's finances are tight, and that she likely lives month-to-month regarding her finances. This identifies her as a working, middle-class citizen.

It all started and ended with a funeral dress.

-- Dorrie (chapter 2 paragraph 7)

Importance: The story starts with Miss Isabelle asking Dorrie to escort her from Arlington, Texas, up to Cincinnati, Ohio, for a funeral. With this statement, the author is foreshadowing how the novel will also end with a death of some kind. It also sets the overall tone of Miss Isabelle's story as morose, bereft of joy.

I crossed my fingers behind my back as I produced the fib.

-- Isabelle (chapter 3 paragraph 4)

Importance: Isabelle's act of crossing her fingers while telling another girl a fib speaks of the innocence not only of the time, but also of Isabelle. She believes that crossing her fingers negates the lie, which is a notion that children often engage in, not adults. In 1939, when Miss Isabelle's side of the story takes place, society was thought to have a gentler set of mores and rules as compared to modern day.

I'd lived in this three-light and a Wal-Mart bump in the road my whole life until Steve and I moved to Arlington to make a fresh start - that is, so I could work somewhere that paid more than minimum wage and built my clientele until I could set up my own shop while Steve continued his shining career of not having a career.

-- Dorrie (chapter 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: The quote reads like a sarcastic monologue and speaks to Dorrie's scathing, angry attitude, especially toward her ex-husband. Throughout the novel, Dorrie is challenged to release some of her anger and let good things into her life. This statement, so early in the novel, lets the reader know where she's starting. Even though her ex-husband has been gone for quite some time, it is clear that Dorrie retains her bitterness toward him, their life together, and the life he left her with.

I hoped it reached a God who protected both the whites and the Negroes. I suspected our town worshiped one who wouldn't honor such a request.



-- Isabelle (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: Isabelle's statement lets the reader know that she may or may not believe in God, since she refers to the figure in a general sense and with an uncertainty of its existence. It also lets the reader know of her attitude toward African Americans and their relations with white people. In 1939, the United States, and especially the Southern portion, was unfavorable toward African Americans. Clearly, Miss Isabelle is of a different mind than the people in her town.

But Mother's campaign to wind back the decades was comprehensive.

-- Isabelle (chapter 5 paragraph 4)

Importance: Isabelle wants to be able to wear trousers or divided skirts; her mother insisted Isabelle wear a dress every day. While she does not disobey her mother, Isabelle's statement lets the reader know of her desire to progress, grow up, and make her own choices. She doesn't want to be stuck in her mother's old-fashioned rules anymore.

The heart is a demanding tenant; it frequently makes a strong argument against common sense.

-- Isabelle (chapter 7 paragraph 9)

Importance: Isabelle's portion of "Calling Me Home" is full of intense emotion, both positive and negative. This statement shows of Isabelle's passionate nature. She doesn't do anything in-between; it's all or nothing, full force or nothing at all. That kind of personality often belongs to a person who follows her emotions, rather than any kind of rationale. The relationship pursued by Robert and Isabelle defied any kind of common sense for the time period; rather, it is driven by intense emotion.

Only reason I'd ever wish you were different, Miss Isabelle," he said, intentionally emphasizing the word he never used anymore when we were alone - not even by accident - "is so we could do this in public, out in front of everyone, no worry the wrong somebody might see us. Otherwise, I think you're perfect. Every last thing about you.

-- Robert and Isabelle as narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 2)

Importance: Robert's admission of his feelings for Isabelle is both shocking and expected at this point in the novel. It is shocking because for a black man to admit he had feelings for a white girl in the 1930s was a dangerous act, and Robert was quite concerned with propriety and protecting his family, as well as protecting Isabelle. Yet, the admission is expected because of the time Robert and Isabelle were spending together.

We'd been conditioned that way.

-- Dorrie (chapter 10 paragraph 6)

Importance: Dorrie's portion of the story takes place in modern-day, yet the idea of racial bias remains central to the story. Dorrie recognizes that some of her actions, as



well as some of Isabelle's actions, stem from societal conditioning, not necessarily the way these two women truly feel toward one another. Racial bias and race relations are central to "Calling Me Home," and this statement is one example of how the concept spans generations and eras.

I attempted to regain Nell's trust when we happened to cross paths. I hoped she'd give me a glimmer of news about Robert, but I also missed her desperately.

-- Isabelle (chapter 11 paragraph 2)

Importance: Part of Isabelle's struggle is where her loyalties lie. Her loyalty to her friendship with Nell versus her friendship and budding romance with Robert are blurred lines. Isabelle wants to enjoy her friendship with Nell, like they did when they were children. Yet she cares so deeply for Robert, she is desperate for any nugget of information about him ever since her mother has kept her on a tight leash since finding out Isabelle was lying about where she had been spending her Wednesday afternoons.

Why couldn't I step away from this folly and ask him to walk me to the outskirts of Shalerville, once and for all, back where I belonged - even if it no longer felt like home?

-- Isabelle (chapter 11 paragraph 6)

Importance: One of the themes running through "Calling Me Home" is the concept of home, and how one's physical home is not necessarily one's physical home, the home where one's heart feels most content, a True North. Isabelle knows she belongs in Shalerville because she is under the age of 18 and Shalerville is where her family has made its home. Yet, Isabelle's feelings for Robert are so strong, she knows that her heart's true home is with him. Since she'd stated before that the heart is a demanding tenant, free from common sense, it seems a natural tendency for Isabelle to feel as though her physical home is not her True North.

My silence violated our connection, the one he didn't have with my brothers, who spent their days and nights carousing, wasting his money, and getting into senseless trouble.

-- Isabelle (chapter 13 paragraph 6)

Importance: One of the most significant casualties of Robert and Isabelle's reunion and quick dissolution was Isabelle's loss of relationship with her father. Yet, it started before Isabelle and Robert were forced apart by her brothers; when Isabelle and Robert began their romance, Isabelle knew she couldn't share it with her father because of the potential repercussions it would cause. Though Isabelle sees her relationship with her father fall apart after he stands by and watches her brothers take her away from Robert, it really begins when Isabelle feels unable to share such a significant event - the love of her life - with her father.

Then again, none of them had been Teague. He blew me away. He wasn't just kind; his concern had legs that walked.

-- Dorrie (chapter 12 paragraph 5)

Importance: Dorrie's journey is mostly about learning to trust her new boyfriend,



Teague. In this scene, he is helping her do some quick problem-solving after her hair salon was broken into and some cash stolen from a filing cabinet. Dorrie is having a hard time trusting Teague, even though he had thus far done nothing to earn her distrust. This statement is a fleeting thought of Dorrie's as she begins to process the burglary, but it's one that Dorrie is challenged to hold on to, as opposed to her normal way of thinking that the guy is going to cheat her out of money and affection.

Just because the laws are different doesn't mean the people are.
-- Robert (chapter 17 paragraph 2)

Importance: Isabelle has proposed marriage to Robert, saying that across the river in Cincinnati marriage between black people and white people is legal. Yet Robert is telling her that the legality of the matter doesn't change the fact that the two of them would still be judged. His statement sheds light on the times, and how, at that point in history, it didn't matter how hard people worked to change others' perceptions. Even when something was made legal, in this case the marriage of blacks and whites, the social taboo of the same act remained the same, putting Isabelle and Robert in a tough spot: legally marry, but face social condemnation, or don't marry and feel isolated from the love of their lives.

It wasn't just asking for help. It was asking her to align herself with what would cause a rift between our families - even as it joined them at one tenuous point.
-- Isabelle (chapter 17 paragraph 5)

Importance: The author has pointed out the irony of the situation: Isabelle and Robert would be joined in marriage, a union that one would think and hope would also join their two families. Yet, Isabelle knows that such a union would instead create a divide between her and Robert's family.

I'd never traveled far from home before and somehow I'd expected things to look different.
-- Dorrie (chapter 22 paragraph 2)

Importance: Dorrie points out that her expectations were off the mark in terms of how the country would look as she and Isabelle drove from Texas to Cincinnati, Ohio. Though this is an aesthetic expectation, it speaks deeper to Dorrie's general perspective on life. She seems to rarely expect things to be good, instead first assuming they'll be bad. Throughout her journey with Isabelle, Dorrie learns to reverse her logic and begin believing in a good outcome before assuming a bad.

How many of those girls had, like me, been prisoners in their own homes?
-- Isabelle (chapter 27 paragraph 5)

Importance: Isabelle's pondering the shut-ins to whom her mother's church group writes encouraging notes. She is wondering how many of the shut-ins truly need/want to be, and how many are being kept locked up by a controlling mother such as her own.



Her question lets the reader know of the isolation Isabelle is feeling as she is kept under strict supervision as her pregnancy progresses.

The only person I needed to trust was myself. The other road had too many curves, and I wanted to see straight ahead.

-- Dorrie (chapter 28 paragraph 7)

Importance: Dorrie is used to relying on herself to take care of her and her children. At this point in the novel, Dorrie is trying to convince Isabelle to trust her that they'll make it to Cincinnati on time despite their car troubles. Isabelle points out that Dorrie is asking someone to trust her, yet she's not making the effort to trust Teague. Dorrie is inwardly defensive, justifying her lack of trust in others by reminding herself that trusting others is how she gets off track. However, Dorrie is being self-reliant and independent to the point of damaging relationships and/or cutting them short.

His gaze stayed on my face as he fumbled in his pocket for his wallet. He withdrew a slender stack of bills, only glancing down to identify a five and five ones. Before he bent them together and slid them across the desk, he added another five.

-- Isabelle (chapter 31 paragraph 8)

Importance: Isabelle and her father have lost the good relationship they once had, Isabelle feeling left in the dust by her father's lack of ability to stand up to his wife and his sons. Isabelle has had to give up Robert, as well as the child they conceived, because of her mother's control. Isabelle's father shows clear signs of guilt at his role in his daughter's misery, and so when she comes to him for money - something she has rarely, if ever, done before - he gives her five additional dollars over what she asks for, likely an attempt to atone for his mistakes.

To add insult to injury, a family tradition of service and mutual respect, generations old, had ended with our actions - my mother's, and mine.

-- Isabelle (chapter 31 paragraph 5)

Importance: Isabelle's statement touches on several themes: generations, tradition, family, and loyalty. She acknowledges that not only did she contribute to the crumbling of her and her family's current life, but she irreparably damaged the tradition, reputation, and trust built up between the Prewitt's and the McAllister's over the course of at least two generations.

One wedding was in bitter January. The second was in late, bright spring. My mood had been spring the previous January, and January that spring.

-- Isabelle (chapter 35 paragraph 2-3)

Importance: Isabelle's comparison of her moods between her wedding to Robert and her wedding to Max is a strong one. It conjures the image of a joyful woman at one wedding, the one she wanted, and the essentially lifeless woman at the wedding she didn't want. Her description lets the reader know how full of life she once was, as spring is the season that brings about the first signs of life, and how desolate she is now, as



January is in the dead of winter, a time when the cold and snow tend to bury any signs of life.

Love. Still love.

-- Isabelle (chapter 35 paragraph 9-10)

Importance: Isabelle's simple statement lets the reader know that for all the complicated emotions and dramatics that surrounded her marriage to Robert, the strongest emotion she has felt for him all this time was just one word: love. Her statement also lets the reader know that their feelings for each other stood the test of time. No matter their separation or their families' severance, they love each other just as they always have.

That's why I live here in this pleasant picture of hell.

-- Isabelle (chapter 35 paragraph 13)

Importance: Isabelle's statement is to Robert, explaining why she's in the position she's in. It lets the reader know that even though a few years have passed since everything happened with Robert and her family, her heart has turned to ice. She is clearly still miserable, and has let her experiences and her circumstances determine her attitude and outlook on life. The author contrasts Isabelle's life by using the word 'pleasant' to describe what she considers to be hell. The descriptor doesn't match the subject, but then Isabelle's true feelings don't match her facade.

I believe Miss Isabelle was ready. This time, she wore a celebration dress.

-- Dorrie (chapter 43 paragraph 9)

Importance: The reader knew from the beginning of the novel that the story started and ended with a funeral dress. The first was the dress Dorrie and Isabelle would wear to the funeral in Cincinnati. The last line of the novel reveals the funeral dress ending the story: Miss Isabelle's own, as she has passed and is being set by Dorrie and the undertaker. The first dress is called a funeral dress. This second dress, however, since Dorrie considers Isabelle truly home now that she's in Heaven with Robert, is called a celebration dress.