

Circle of Friends Study Guide

Circle of Friends by Maeve Binchy

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Plot Summary

Maeve Binchy's novel *Circle of Friends* focuses on Benny Hogan and Eve Malone, two close friends who live in a small Irish village called Knockglen. Although they have grown up together, their circumstances are quite different. Benny is the beloved only child of overprotective parents while Eve's parents died when she was an infant, and she has been raised by the loving nuns in the local Catholic convent. Both harbor some resentments – Benny toward her parents' tendency to be overbearing and controlling, and Eve toward the Westwards, the influential family who disowned her mother when she married below her station and then abandoned Eve when she was orphaned.

When the girls finish school, both head for nearby Dublin, each under different circumstances. Benny's parents have saved enough money to send her to the University College of Dublin, but they demand that she return home to Knockglen each night. Although Mother Francis, who heads the convent and loves Eve like a daughter, has made many attempts, there is not enough money to send Eve to college so it has been arranged for her to live at a Dublin convent while doing a secretarial course. Eve longs for a college education and the university experience, so she eventually swallows her pride and asks her cousin, Simon Westward, to pay for it and to her surprise, he agrees.

A freak accident on the first day of college takes the life of student Frank Hegarty and injures Eve, but it also brings the girls together with fellow students Nan Mahon and Jack Fogerty. Nan is stunningly beautiful and, encouraged by her mother, harbors plans to escape her modest home and alcoholic father by marrying well. Jack is the charming, handsome son of a local doctor. They form a close circle that includes several other students, and soon Benny, who is a large, somewhat gawky girl, attracts the attention of the sought-after Jack and begins a relationship with him. This development also surprises Sean Walsh, a smarmy young man who works in Benny's father's menswear shop and plans to inherit the business by marrying Benny, an idea that pleases her parents, who cannot envision a different future for her.

As the university life in Dublin converges with life in Knockglen, Nan meets Simon Westward, Eve's cousin, and begins plotting a future, which includes having sex with him. What Nan does not realize is that despite outward appearances, the Westwards are no longer wealthy and while Simon is infatuated by her beauty, he is also shopping around for a wife who can bring a significant amount of money into the marriage. When Nan gets pregnant, she is shocked when Simon ends the relationship by giving her money for an abortion. In the meantime, Benny's father dies suddenly, and she feels the need to spend more time in Knockglen, which frustrates Jack. Nan takes advantage of the situation and begins secretly seeing Jack, eventually telling him she is pregnant and implying she was a virgin when they began sneaking around and sleeping together. He feels obligated to marry her, and they get engaged, breaking Benny's heart and shocking all of their friends. At a party, Eve realizes what happened and confronts Nan, who falls into a glass door and is seriously injured. She recovers but miscarries. She and Jack end their relationship. Jack tries to reconcile with Benny, but she has now

moved beyond her obsession with him and is able to see him simply as a member of their circle of friends.



Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

Circle of Friends is a coming-of-age novel by Irish author Maeve Binchy. The plot revolves around Benny Hogan and Eve Malone, two lifelong friends who have grown up together in the small village of Knockglen. When they begin their studies at University College in nearby Dublin, they form a new group of friends that includes the beautiful Nan Mahon and the charming, handsome Jack Foley. When a shocking betrayal occurs, Benny and Eve are forced to face new realities and learn the true meaning of friendship.

Chapter 1 introduces the book's two central characters, Benny Hogan and Eve Malone. Benny lives with her parents, Annabel and Eddie Hogan, while Eve has been raised by the nuns at St. Mary's Catholic Church. Her mother had died in childbirth, and her father died shortly thereafter in an accident. Today is Benny's 10th birthday, and Patsy, the family's maid, is preparing a cake and other things for the party that will take place later. Benny is very excited because she hopes her parents have bought her a velvet dress and new shoes that she has wanted for some time. She is crushed when they give her a dull navy skirt, sweater, and a pair of sturdy shoes. Benny is a somewhat large girl, and the heavy clothes just call attention to her size. She tries to hide her dismay from her parents, who dote on her. Benny's mother insists that she invite her classmate Eve Malone to her party although Benny doesn't know her well, but the two girls quickly become close friends. Eve's background is a source of gossip in their small Irish town of Knockglen. Her mother was the daughter of a wealthy family, but she was disowned when she married a poor handyman and the family refused to accept Eve, leaving her to be raised in the convent, primarily by Mother Francis, who adores her.

Chapter 2 opens several years later in 1957. Benny and Eve have graduated from the Catholic school in Knockglen. Benny is about to start her studies at the University College in Dublin, but she is unhappy that her parents insist that she come home on the bus every night. Eve will not be attending the university because, despite great efforts by Mother Francis, there is no money for her education. So, she will live at a convent in Dublin and do light housework there while she takes a secretarial course. As the girls walk through Knockglen, they encounter Sean Walsh, a smarmy young man who works at Hogan's Outfitters, the menswear shop owned by Benny's father. Apparently, Sean plans to take over the business by marrying Benny. They go to Eve's room at the convent, where Benny wonders whether Mother Francis approached the Westwards, Eve's mother's family, about paying her tuition, but Eve makes it clear that she detests the family and would never take money from them. They talk about the fact that neither is perfectly happy with her situation. Benny is having to return home each night, and Eve is staying in the Dublin convent and not going to university. But, they laugh about how different things might be in the future.



Analysis

The book's first two chapters primarily serve to introduce the two central characters and establish their backgrounds and the nature of their friendship. Their background are very different in that Benny has been raised by a set of parents who worship her while Eve never knew her parents, but Eve has received unconditional love from the nuns who have raised her, Mother Francis in particular. The author also goes to great lengths to paint Benny as a large, somewhat clumsy girl, a trait that will continue to affect how she views herself and how she reacts to other people.

It is also important for the reader to pay attention to Eve's feelings toward her mother's family and the fact that they have abandoned her to the nuns at the convent. She resents them bitterly and has become very prickly, as Benny describes her, about the situation, a fact that will come into play many times as the story progresses.

This section also begins to contrast the worlds of Knockglen and Dublin. Although they are only a short bus ride apart, they are very different. Knockglen is a tiny village in which all the quirky residents know each other's business. Rumors -- most of them untrue -- spread quickly. Dublin, on the other hand, is portrayed as a place where freedom can be acquired -- for Benny, freedom from her parents' well meaning but overbearing ways and for Eve, freedom from the shadow of her uncaring relatives and the feeling that she is different from everyone else. But despite all those possibilities, both girls will continue to be tethered for the time being -- Benny by her parents' insistence that she continue to live with them rather than fully experiencing the university life, and Eve by the arrangements for her to live and work at another convent rather than attend college as she longs to do.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Benny and Eve. Include their physical descriptions as well as personality traits. What characteristics make them likely friends? Are there other characteristics that would seem to make them unsuitable as friends?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Eve's attitude toward the Westwards. Do you think her feelings are justified? What factors is she not aware of that would make her even more bitter toward them?

Discussion Question 3

What role does religion play in the Westwards' attitude toward Eve and her parents? Given that the story takes place in the 1940s and 1950s, do you think the situation would be similar today? Why or why not?



Vocabulary

immemorial, pantomime, lithe, parrot (verb), dismissive, grimace, flustered, vehement, emigrant, dispensation, shoddy, unwieldy, intense, obstacle, belligerent, impasse, earnest, ritual, wistful, apprentice, sagely, falter, disconsolate, jaunty, oblivious, gentrify, formidable, exude, sanctimonious, elfin, languid, precarious, bemoan, inordinately, stance, retort, untoward, staid, sanction, gangly, conviction, speculate, diplomatically, fanciful, discretion, incriminate, deliberate, dismissive, regime, menial, qualms, insolence, vociferous, trepidation, tableau, resolute, complacent, superficial, adamant, adulation, incomprehensible, petulant



Chapters 3 and 4

Summary

Chapter 3 first introduces Nan Mahon and her family. Brian, her father, drinks heavily and is often verbally abusive to her mother, Emily, who has high hopes that her beautiful daughter will have everything she never had. Nan has always been supportive of her mother, including helping her overcome Brian's objections to her getting a job, and she now enjoys her job in a hotel shop. Nan is very successful at manipulating her father and consequently gets almost anything she wants, including a guaranteed allowance when she begins her studies at the University College. Meanwhile, in the Dun Loaghair section of Dublin, Kit Hegarty takes student boarders in her large house to make ends meet since her husband abandoned her years earlier, and she too is preparing to send her only son, Frank, off to the university. She is excited about his future, but concerned about the motorbike he bought recently. Back in Knockgleng, we learn that Eve inherited the small cottage where her parents lived before their deaths and that although Eve shows no interest in it, Mother Francis continues to keep it up for her. Eve arrives at the Dublin convent and clashes immediately with Mother Clare. She walks to the university and longs to be among the new students who will arrive in a few days. Benny has reluctantly accepted a date with Sean Walsh and although she tries to put him off, he makes it clear that he expects to see more of her. Meanwhile in Dublin, Jack Foley, the son of a prominent doctor, also prepares for his first day at the university, although he insists on studying law rather than medicine as his father would like. Benny takes the bus to Dublin for her first day of college and Eve, who has lied to Mother Clare about needing to have medical tests done, meets her there. As they are standing near the gate, a motorbike loses control and skids into Jack's father's car, knocking Eve unconscious and killing its operator, Frank Hegarty.

Chapter 4 opens with the chaos following the accident, during which one of the bystanders, Nan Mahon, introduces herself to a distraught Benny and accompanies her to the hospital to check on Eve, who is going to be OK. Jack Foley and his friend Aidan Lynch see the accident scene and Jack goes to the hospital also after seeing that his father's car was involved. Benny calls Mother Francis about Eve's accident, then calls her father to ensure him she is alright. At the hospital, Benny and Eve meet Jack, and Benny assumes he is interested in the beautiful Nan, but he invites both of them to go for some chips. Just as they are leaving, Sean appears, insisting on driving Benny home, but Jack steps in and says she has to go for more tests, thus saving her from having to leave with Sean.

Analysis

This section introduces the book's other main characters, Nan and Jack. Both are portrayed as "golden" people to whom everyone is immediately attracted. However, rather than being conceited about their respective good looks and charm, both are



friendly and unassuming, and they make the initial overtures toward a friendship with Benny and eventually Eve. While Benny, like all girls, is attracted to Jack, it never occurs to her that he might also be attracted to her. She assumes that he will want to date the seemingly-perfect Nan. This initiates the on-going conflict she will feel as she tries to sort out her feelings for Jack and his for her, a situation that will continue until the end of the novel. Jack is also set up as something of a knight in shining armor from the beginning as he senses Benny's discomfort when Sean arrives to take her home and deftly comes up with a story to rescue her.

This section also establishes the fact that Eve owns the cottage in which her parents lived, even though she never visits there and shows no interest in it. This is important because the cottage will eventually become a central part of the book's plot. It also establishes the fact that Mother Francis, who is a maternal figure to Eve, has dreams for her "daughter" and hopes she will eventually want to set up a life for herself in the cottage.

The character of Frank appears only briefly in the novel since he dies before even beginning his college studies, but he serves several purposes. It is the accident that kills him that begins the relationship between Benny -- and eventually Eve -- and the other pivotal characters of Jack and Nan, and it introduces his mother, Kit, who will become a key figure in Eve's life.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the relationships between Benny and Nan and their parents. Is one relationship healthier than the other, in your opinion? What do you think would happen if the positions were reversed? How might Benny react to Nan's parents and Nan to Benny's?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Benny agree to go out with Sean Walsh even though she dislikes him? Do you think she is smart or foolish to begin seeing him?

Discussion Question 3

The parents of Benny, Nan, and Eve -- with Eve's "parent" being Mother Francis -- have envisioned certain things for the three young women's futures. Discuss what each family sees for the girls and how they are similar and different. How do the parents's ideas line up with those of the girls?



Vocabulary

demurely, inarticulate, remonstrate, callous, agitated, provisions, recriminations, inconspicuous, hypocritical, unduly, interrogation, callous, bland, malinger, liability, relevant, meticulous, impertinent, brandish, affront, gauche, consultaion, cunning, ingenuity, resolutely, paragon, bravado, petulant, droll, pique, impeccable, repentant, extricate



Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

In Chapter 5, Benny takes the bus home and is met by her very worried parents as wildly inaccurate rumors about the accident circulate in the small village. Mother Francis asks her old friend Peggy Pine, who runs the local dress shop, to drive her to Dublin, where she visits Eve in the hospital. She says she will take her back to the convent to recuperate, assuring her that she will take care of the situation with Mother Clare. Before leaving the hospital, Mother Francis introduces herself to the grieving Kit Hegarty and, after comforting her, invites her to visit the convent in Knockglen when she feels better. Back in Knockglen, Mario, who owns a local restaurant, is resistant to the suggestions his nephew Fonsie makes for modernizing the place, and the Hogans' maid, Patsy, goes for a walk with her boyfriend, Mossy Rooney, who rarely speaks. Eve tells Benny that she is determined to attend the university and plans to get a job to pay for it, but she is not ruling out asking her mother's family for the money. At school the following day, Nan asks Benny if she can go with her to visit Eve at lunchtime even though they have not met, but Benny asks her to wait until the next day, fearing that Eve would not like her to bring a stranger around because she can be a bit prickly.

In Chapter 6, Benny visits Eve and takes along Nan, who brings her a collection of catalogues and other materials about the university. Benny is astounded when Nan says she plans to ask her cousin Simon for money, but Nan talks with her about how she might approach him. In the following days, Benny is a little jealous when she learns that Nan visits Eve at night after she has returned to Knockglen, a practice that is also forcing her to miss out on social activities at the college. Mario is sent to pick Eve up when she is discharged, and Eve returns to the convent to finish her recovery. Mother Francis is a bit surprised when Kit takes her up on her offer for a visit, but she makes accommodations for her and the two women begin to bond.

As Benny resists her parents' continued attempts to fix her up with Sean. Eve has a heart to heart talk with Mother Francis, and they agree that she will approach her mother's brother Simon for the money to attend university.

When she goes to their large home, she meets Simon's 12-year-old sister Heather, who takes an immediate liking to Eve. Eve meets Simon and tries to remain calm as she explains her situation and asks him to pay for her university education, and she is surprised when he immediately agrees and gives her a check for the entire four years. Returning to the convent, Mother Francis arranges for Eve and Kit to talk and they realize that having Eve move into Kit's home would be a perfect solution for both of them, giving Eve a place to live and Kit a hand with the housework.



Analysis

Chapters 5 and 6 are pivotal in moving along both the plot and character development. Nan quickly emerges as a poised young woman who always knows the right thing to do. Even though Benny has confided in her about Eve's background and family situation, when Eve herself tells the story Nan gives no indication that she already knows about it, making Benny both relieved and impressed. Rather than bringing candy or flowers when she visits Eve in the hospital, Nan brings her what she most desires -- information that will help her apply to the university. She also provides Eve with exactly the right advice about approaching Simon for money. The author takes great care to develop Nan as a wonderful friend to everyone, and someone who has exactly the right solution to every situation.

This section also further portrays Mother Francis as a maternal figure to Eve. Rather than expressing dismay at Eve's lies to Mother Clare, she realizes that the situation she has set up with the Dublin convent is not a good one after all and finds an effective way to extract Eve from it. She also subtly maneuvers a relationship between Eve and Kit that will be beneficial to both of them. Throughout the novel, Mother Francis is portrayed as someone who quietly manipulates various situations to help the people she cares about while avoiding overt actions that would seem unbecoming to her position.

An important aspect of Chapter 6 is the introduction of Simon and Heather Westward. Although the family owns a large estate, it is immediately apparent that their money has not lasted and the property has become somewhat shabby, thus setting up Simon's need to marry someone who can bring an infusion of cash. While the initial meeting between Simon and Eve is tense and awkward, Nan's advice pays off. Eve is successful in getting the money she needs, and she begins what will become an important relationship with her young cousin Heather.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author incorporate humor into Chapters 5 and 6? Include at least three specific examples.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the initial meeting between Eve and Simon. How does each character react to the other? Do you think things would have gone differently if Eve had not gotten advice from Nan prior to approaching Simon? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 3

Describe several ways in which Mother Francis intervenes to help Eve sort out her life. Why does the nun feel a little guilty about some of her activities? Does she have reason to feel that way?

Vocabulary

flamboyant, obscure, disentangle, audacious, breach, divulge, fallacy, escarpment, lofty, scornful, ferocious, misapprehension, hypocritical, wince, provincial, shrewd, adamant, mortifying, pretentious, antidote, resplendant, malevolent, insatiable, reinstate, succumb, devious, cunning, decipher, eccentric, alienate, impertinent, monopoly, defaced, contingency, conspiratorial, caliber, furtive, mollify, abomination, fervent, etiquette, dilapidated, antipathy, elocution



Chapters 7 and 8

Summary

In Chapter 7, Nan has announced to her family that she will study in her room from now on, removing herself from her father's drunken rages, and despite his objections, she charms him into accepting the situation. Meanwhile, Eve settles into Kit's home and the two become closer. Jack's father has been asked to consult with an old friend who lives in Knockglen and is ill, and Jack agrees to accompany him, calling Benny to see if he can see her while his father is busy with his patient. When Nan learns about this, she helps Benny fix herself up, although Benny insists that it isn't a date, thinking that Jack would never be attracted to her. When Jack arrives, the Hogans serve a very nice tea and Benny shows him around the town and he is fascinated with it. At the end of the day, he suggests that they have lunch, and she tosses it off. However, the next day she receives a note from him inviting her to lunch, and she is thrilled. But, Benny is still a little skeptical that he could really be interested in her.

Chapter 8 finds Benny going on an extreme diet in the hope of losing weight before her lunch date with Jack. Nan and Eve get closer, and Eve remarks to Kit that the very popular Nan is equally nice to the attractive and unattractive boys. She does not seem to have her eye on anyone. Jack's friend Aidan begins pursuing a relationship with Eve, and Benny learns that a classmate named Rosemary is interested in Jack. Nan continues to politely turn down anyone who asks her for a date because she is waiting for someone with money and position who will give her the life she wants. When Benny arrives for her lunch date with Jack, she is crushed to discover that he has invited a group of people and did not intend it as a date for the two of them. Meanwhile, Heather is disappointed that Simon never visits her at her boarding school. When she runs into Eve, she asks if she will come and take her out sometime since they are cousins. Only relatives are allowed to do so. Eve is not inclined to get involved with Heather, but Nan strongly encourages her to do it because it will get her an invitation to the family home and Nan wants to go with her.

Analysis

Chapters 7 and 8 begin to reveal more about Nan's true nature. She is something of an enigma to her fellow students because she never accepts invitations for dates from the many boys who like her. What no one realizes is that she and her mother have been planning for years that Nan will marry someone well-to-do and important, giving her the opportunity to escape from her current life. She spends a great deal of time and effort preparing herself for the life she intends to lead, including having impeccable clothing and reading books and magazines to learn how the upper class behaves. None of this is apparent to her friends, and there is no reason to suspect that anything is amiss because she is unfailingly friendly and polite to everyone, giving no evidence of her plans to marry above her current circumstances. The first hint of her plans comes when,



despite knowing about Eve's hatred of the Westward family, she encourages her to befriend Heather not for the lonely child's sake, but because it might get her an invitation to "the big house" and Nan could come along.

Benny's relationship with Jack continues to be a source of confusion for her. She vacillates between thinking he might actually be attracted to her and believing he is simply friendly to all the girls. Her disappointment is searing when the lunch she thought was a date turns out to be a group outing, but she makes the best of it and resigns herself to simply being someone who is invited along because she is good for laughs,

Jack's visit to Knockglen is a significant development because it is the first time Benny's two worlds intersect. Having Jack get to know the village and having the townspeople learn about him will become important to later plot developments.

Discussion Question 1

Do you think Benny is right to be confused about Jack's feelings toward her? In what ways does he seem to indicate that he is interested in her? In what ways does he seem to think of her as a friend only? Do you think he is leading her on or is he oblivious to her feelings?

Discussion Question 2

How does Jack react to seeing Knockglen for the first time? How does his reaction cause Benny to see her small village in a different light?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Nan encourage Eve to befriend Heather? Do you think she is interested in Eve's well-being, her own or both? Explain.

Why does Nan encourage Eve to befriend Heather? Do you think she is interested in Eve's well-being or her own? Explain.

Vocabulary

blasphemy, vendetta, devout, affably, recalcitrant, agitated, impassive, distraught, ruefully, ritual, remorse, ultimatum, adamant, immaculate, repertoire, repose, futile, infectious, pontificate, menace, discrepancy, bereavement, knell, amiss, sepulchral, encumbrance, solicitous, authoritatively, exasperated, discerning, captivate, arduous, torpor, petulant, partake, doctrine, contrite, indoctrinated, pittance, counterproductive

Chapters 9 and 10

Summary

In Chapter 9, Peggy Pine's niece Clodagh arrives to help Peggy in the dress shop, and she causes a stir in Knockglenglen because of her short skirts and outlandish style. As a big college dance approaches, Jack and the other boys ask Benny, Eve, Nan, and the other girls to go with them in a large group, preceded by a party at Jack's house. Benny's mother gives her an outfit to wear to the dance, but it needs altering. When Benny asks Clodagh to help, she redesigns the top to show Benny's ample cleavage. Eve dreads taking Heather for an outing, but she is surprised when she has a good time. Benny continues to go to movies with Sean, but she is able to handle his advances successfully thanks to advice from Nan.

When Mother Clare invites herself to visit the convent during Christmas, Mother Francis uses the opportunity to suggest that since Eve does not want to spend time with her, she should stay in the cottage left to her by her parents. Simon writes a note thanking Eve for taking Heather out and inviting her to visit Westlands during the Christmas holidays, but she politely rebuffs him.

In Chapter 10, Benny is terrified that her parents will accept Jack's invitation to attend the dance before the dance cocktail party at his home, especially when Sean offers to drive them there, and she is relieved when they do not come. When they arrive at the hotel where the dance is being held, Eve, Benny, and Nan run into Simon, who is immediately attracted to Nan. During the dance, Benny overhears a conversation in which some of the other girls say that she is no competition for Jack's attention. Although her feelings are hurt, she tries to shrug it off and focus on the many compliments she receives that night. Eventually, she gets to dance with Jack, but she cannot determine whether he is attracted to her, as he seems to be, or whether he is simply charming to all the girls. Benny is thrilled that her parents have given her permission to spend the night of the dance at Eve's house in Dublin, and she is shocked when Jack calls the next morning, asking her out to lunch and making it clear that it will be just the two of them this time.

Analysis

Peggy's niece Clodagh is introduced as a minor character but one who will be significant to Benny. Clodagh is very free-spirited, particularly for that period in time, and her unusual clothing is symbolic of her general attitude. She also cares very little about what other people think of her, which is a fairly sharp contrast to Benny, who thinks often about how other people perceive her. Since Eve is in Dublin most of the time, Clodagh becomes a local friend for Benny, and her influence gradually begins to show. The first example of this is Clodagh's tailoring of Benny's dance outfit and her clever idea to build in a modesty panel that lets her slip the dress by her parents. Still, Benny



spends much of her time at the dance worrying about how her display of cleavage is being perceived, something that would never concern Clodagh.

This section also sheds more light on Benny's complicated feelings about her parents. She feels guilty about the fact that she is somewhat embarrassed about them when she fervently hopes they will not attend the party at Jack's house. At the same time, she is grateful for all they do for her. This relationship highlights the book's coming-of-age theme, as Benny, like many other young people, struggles with her conflicting feelings of appreciating her parents, yet wanting to be independent from them.

Nan again comes through with exactly the right advice to help Benny deal with her difficult situation with Sean, but the reader begins to get a sense of her manipulative, self-centered nature during the scene in which the girls arrive at the dance. She subtly manipulates a situation in which she comes into Simon's orbit and gives her mother subtle signals to let her know that she should not reveal that they are related, as Nan does not want Simon to think she has a mother who works in a hotel shop. As always, she plays the situation perfectly to attract Simon's admiration and leave him wondering who she is and wanting more.

Discussion Question 1

Benny continues to suffer from psychological issues relating to her body. How does she feel about her body in general? How do those feelings affect her behavior toward others and her self esteem? Are there developments that point toward a possible change in her feelings?

Discussion Question 2

How does Benny's vision of her future differ from the future her parents envision for her? Why is Sean Walsh an important part of their vision even though Benny clearly is not interested in him? Why do you think they are sending her to university?

Discussion Question 3

How does the author use personal notes and letters to move the plot and character development forward? Is it an effective device? How might she have accomplished the same purpose in a different way?

Vocabulary

consignment, rueful, feudal, fulminate, dally, refurbished, pliant, dismissive, sordid, lurch, immaculate, derelict, confrontation, fanciful, maneuver, revulsion, neurotic, meticulous, deft, trundle, ludicrous, demean, imminent, interminable, cajole, taunt, guile, collusion, agitated



Chapters 11 and 12

Summary

In Chapter 11, Clodagh and Fonsie subtly work to update and improve their families' respective businesses. Sean begins a friendship with Mrs. Healy, who runs the hotel in Knockglen. When Clodagh and Fonsie go to the hotel for a drink, Mrs. Healy refuses to serve them because she does not like the way they look, which causes everyone in Knockglen to take one side or the other. Benny is nervous before her lunch with Jack, but the afternoon goes well, and she is thrilled when he kisses her hand several times, leading her to believe that perhaps he is interested in her after all. She returns to Knockglen feeling very happy and satisfied.

In Chapter 12, Simon invites himself to Eve's next outing with Heather and tries to ask about Nan, but Eve evades his questions. Later, Nan also questions Eve about Simon, she but gets the same brush off. Kit Hegarty is shocked when Joseph, the husband who abandoned her many years earlier, suddenly shows up. He is aware of his son's death and asks to come back, but Kit refuses. Mother Francis is surprised to see Sean in the area near Eve's cottage and wonders if he is considering buying a small house for himself. Nan schemes to run into Simon at a restaurant and gets Benny to introduce them. Jack is disappointed that Benny will be in Knockglen for the three-week Christmas break, and Benny is surprised when he kisses her as they say goodbye. Eve will also be in Knockglen for the holidays, and she surprises herself by impulsively announcing that she is planning to have a party.

Analysis

As the book reaches the halfway point, a number of things happen to move the story forward and provide clues about events to come. For example, Sean's budding friendship with Mrs. Healy opens the door to the eventual outcome for this character. Benny's relationship with Jack progresses and is clarified somewhat in her mind by his increasing physical affection toward her, and at the same time, she grows more confident regarding her body and her general self esteem. From the beginning, Jack has been portrayed as a charismatic young man. Now, Benny begins to emerge from within herself as the light of her personality shines on her.

The triangle involving Eve, Nan, and Simon begins to emerge in this section. It is not a love triangle, but one in which both Nan and Simon try to use Eve to get closer to each other. She resists, seeming to sense that a relationship between them would not end well. She does not know Simon well, but her instincts about him, which are born from her knowledge about the family's behavior toward her parents and their subsequent abandonment of her, are completely correct.



In other developments, Mother Francis' sighting of Sean in the quarry area sets the stage for Sean's eventual discovery of the activity going on at Eve's cottage as well as the way in which he is getting money to buy a home. Eve's impulsive statement about having a party sets up the convergence of life in Knockglen and Dublin and brings in her cottage as an important location for the remainder of the plot.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Eve avoid introducing Simon and Nan, or even telling Simon Nan's name? What, if anything, does she hope to accomplish? Is she successful?

Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Frank Hegarty's relationship with his mother and his father. Why do you think he did not tell his mother that he had been in touch with Joe? Why does Joe continue to keep this information from Kit?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the conversation between Mother Francis and Sean Walsh?

Vocabulary

decipher, eccentric, impertinent, categorize, dispensation, stead, mollify, catastrophic, abomination, brocade, majestic, fervently scant



Chapters 13 and 14

Summary

Chapter 13 finds the people of Knockglen celebrating Christmas, and Sean is glad to have been invited to lunch at the Hogans' home. Patsy, their housekeeper, tells Benny that her parents expect her to marry Sean, but Benny thinks this can't still be true because business at the shop is poor. Money is tight. On Christmas Day, Jack phones to say how much he misses Benny. Benny talks to Sean about her hopes and dreams of living in Dublin and about her relationship with Jack, but Sean insists that she simply has a crush on Jack, and it is unlikely to last.

Later, Sean approaches Mr. Hogan about being made a partner in the business and says he will leave if it does not happen. Mrs. Walsh, the housekeeper at Westlands, reflects to herself that Simon has found a woman in England that he apparently hopes to marry for her money, as the family's money has run out despite outward appearances. Back in Dublin, Nan goes to the racetrack in a scheme to run into Simon there. The next day, she calls Benny to say she will be coming to Eve's party even though she had declined the invitation earlier. She asks if she can spend the night at Benny's house. All of Eve's and Benny's friends arrive for the party, and it is a huge success. Nan arrives very late and reveals that she has spent the afternoon at Westlands, which angers Eve.

In Chapter 14, Benny's father dies of a heart attack, but not before sending Sean a letter confirming his partnership and saying the legal contract would be worked out soon. Benny is not there when he dies, having gotten permission to spend another night in Dublin, as Jack is becoming increasingly unhappy about not having her available for evening social activities. Jack drives Benny to Knockglen despite Sean's offer to pick her up. In light of her father's death, Benny decides she must find a way to keep Sean from taking over the business and wishes she could talk with someone about the problem, but she is reluctant to burden Jack with it. After the funeral, which is attended by all her friends, Benny goes to the store and insists that Sean show her the books. Upon studying them, she realizes that Sean apparently has been stealing money on a regular basis, but she does not tell anyone. Nan begins seeing Simon, but she refuses to let him come to her home. When Heather announces that Simon has a new girlfriend who lives in Dublin, Eve is stunned to realize that it might be Nan.

Analysis

Eddie Hogan's death is a pivotal point in the story. Although he has been a fairly minor character, he is the link between Benny and Sean, and his death leaves not only an emotional hole in Benny's life but also the problem of how to continue the business. Although she has never taken an interest in it before, nor has her mother, her instincts tell her that letting Sean take it over would not be the right thing to do, and this leads to



her discovery of the missing funds. Benny's new confidence in herself enables her to set just the right tone in her conversation with Sean about learning more about the business and going over the books.

The conversation in which Heather reveals that Simon has a new girlfriend who lives in Dublin is one of a number the author includes throughout the book in which information that will be important later is revealed in a subtle, indirect way.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Eve realize that Simon's new girlfriend might be Nan? What previous events have helped lead her to this assumption?

Discussion Question 2

Analyze the conversation between Benny and Sean after lunch on Christmas. What does Benny hope to accomplish with it? What does Sean want? What clue does the author drop to indicate that Sean understood more of what Benny said than he indicated?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss how the relationship between Eve and Mother Francis is continuing to evolve. Do you think they are more like mother and daughter, or more like friends? Explain your answer.

Vocabulary

blasphemy, affable, inevitable, embark, recalcitrant, bland, forewarn, beckon, condolences, lank, futile, dredge, missal, lofty, animated, remonstrate, discrepancy, laboriously, feeble,



Chapters 15 and 16

Summary

In Chapter 15, Benny looks around her father's shop and thinks about improvements that could be made, but she does not let Sean know she suspects him of stealing. She also looks at the rooms above the store and realizes they could be made into a nice apartment. Jack asks Benny to go to Wales for the weekend with him, but she refuses. She is disappointed when he does not call from the trip and after he returns, she learns that he cheated on her while he was away. Although Benny arranges to spend one night each week in Dublin, tensions continue with Jack over her lack of availability. Nan's mother realizes she has met someone and warns her to be careful, but Nan assures her she has no intention of sleeping with the man she is seeing. However, she does sleep with Simon at a hotel. Since he cannot afford hotel rooms on a regular basis and refuses to take her to Westlands, they begin using a hidden key to let themselves into Eve's cottage. Although they try to hide the fact that they are there, sometimes people in Knockglen hear a piano being played, and rumors spread that the cottage is haunted. Meanwhile, Sean continues his friendship with Mrs. Healy, who is the only person to encourage him in his plans to take over the menswear shop. Heather visits Eve in her cottage, then takes her to Westlands, where Simon greets her warmly. However, her grandfather starts an argument that causes Eve to leave in distress. Heather is distraught because she thinks Eve will never want to spend time with her again. When Eve returns to Dun Loughaire, she learns that Kit's estranged husband has died and left an insurance policy for her. She agrees to go with Kit to England for his funeral, but when she sends a note to Heather saying she won't be able to visit her that weekend, Heather runs away from her boarding school.

In Chapter 16, everyone searches for Heather, and Simon sadly realizes he has been too absent from her life. Finally, Mother Francis finds Heather at Eve's cottage and at the same time, Eve, who has been kept informed while she is in England, gets the same idea and sends Benny to find her. Mother Francis and Benny talk with Heather and arrange for her to return home, and Simon and Nan realize they were lucky Heather did not find them at the cottage. At her husband's funeral, Kit learns that he had secretly developed a relationship with their son in recent years, and she tells Eve she plans to give her some of the money from the insurance policy to pay back the funds Simon loaned her for school. Benny realizes that things are increasingly strained between Jack and herself and she wonders if she will have to sleep with him soon in order to keep him. When she cannot attend a movie with Jack, she agrees that Nan should go with him, thinking to herself that Nan is a good friend. Back at home, Heather tells Simon how much she hates her boarding school and threatens to run away again if she is sent back. Benny's mother agrees that she should start spending time at the shop and learning how it is run. Benny goes into the shop's storage room to retrieve an old sewing machine and in its drawers, she finds the money Sean has stolen over time and hidden there. She tells her mother about it and they fire Sean, who moves into Mrs. Healy's hotel.



The following Sunday, Benny, her mother, and some of their friends spend the day fixing up the shop while Jack tries futilely to phone Benny. Later, Benny reflects that she will soon get her life back to normal and have the freedom to spend more nights in Dublin, but she fears that she might have neglected Jack for too long.

Analysis

Communication problems between Jack and Benny mount in these two chapters. Benny continues to hold Jack on a pedestal, which causes her to think that telling him about the issues she faces in Knockglen, including what to do about the shop, her mother's uncertain future, and Sean's possible thievery, would be placing an undue burden on him. The fact that she does not share these issues with him leads him to question why she needs to spend so much time in the village, and he becomes increasingly impatient. This can be interpreted as shallowness and immaturity on his part, or as an understandable reaction to Benny's failure to communicate with him.

This section also highlights the difference in attitudes toward sex at the time the story takes place. Particularly in the Catholic community in 1957 Ireland, premarital sex was considered a great sin and was not as common as it is today. So, Nan's decision to sleep with Simon, particularly since she does it as a means of trapping him, would be cause for much gossip. Even though Benny briefly considers sleeping with Jack, there is little question that she will do it, while Nan openly uses her sexuality as a tool to ensnare the man she wants.

This section also shows the sense of community that is present in Knockglen. Even though the villagers gossip and sometimes snipe at each other, they rally around when someone is in need. This has been demonstrated in previous incidents and is shown again when a number of friends rally to help Benny and her mother quietly fix up the shop after Sean's departure.

Discussion Question 1

How does the Hogan family's menswear shop serve as a metaphor for Benny and her mother?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Simon refuses to take Nan to Westlands for their encounters? Why does he not want to take her to a hotel? Is Nan naive not to guess the reasons?



Discussion Question 3

Some characters in *Circle of Friends*, as in many novels, are minor but serve an important purpose to the plot and themes of the book. Choose two such characters in this book and describe their purpose.

Vocabulary

musty, intrusion, wheedle, abolish, decree, amiss, sepulchral, encumbrance, adamant, reflectively, discerning, inevitable, dismissive, petulant, peeved, cravat, doctrine, contrite, irrelevant, solidarity



Chapters 17 and 18

Summary

Chapter 17 opens with Nan realizing that she is pregnant. When she goes to Westlands to tell Simon, he is very sympathetic. Yet, he gives her money for an abortion and makes it clear that their relationship is over. Nan takes the bus back to Dublin, changes clothes, and searches the pubs until she finds the guys in her group. Jack is upset that Benny is not there again, having forgotten that she did plan to be in town that night. Jack and Nan decide to attend a dance together that evening, and Benny spends the evening with Eve. The following day, Benny runs into Jack, and he apologizes for forgetting that she was in town. When he tells her he went to the dance with Nan, she is very relieved, thinking she has nothing to worry about. Back in Knockglen, Heather is happily enrolled at the convent school rather than her old boarding school. Sean, after considering his limited prospects, proposed marriage to Mrs. Healy, and she has accepted. This makes him manager of the hotel.

Chapter 19 opens with the revelation that Jack and Nan have been sleeping together for a few weeks, always at Eve's cottage, and that Nan pretended to be a virgin the first time. However, their relationship is kept secret from everyone else and Jack feels very guilty about cheating on Benny, who thinks she will soon have more free time now that her mother is spending more time, at the shop. Although they are very careful, a few people mention that they have seen Jack in Knockglen, but Benny thinks they must be mistaken. When Eve goes to her cottage to meet and visit with Heather, she senses that someone has been there but thinks she is imagining things. Nan is annoyed when Jack tells her Eve has gone to her cottage and they must cancel their own plans to go there, because she has planned to tell him that night about her pregnancy. She talks him into going to a hotel instead, and the following day, a distraught Jack tells Benny that Nan is pregnant with his child and they are getting married.

Analysis

The true nature of several characters comes to light in these two chapters. While Simon appeared to have softened a bit in light of Heather's disappearance and his realization that he has not been attentive enough to her, his reaction to Nan's pregnancy demonstrates his coldness. There is never any question about the outcome; an abortion is the only answer he can consider since his plan remains to marry someone with money, and Nan does not qualify.

Nan also proves to be cool and calculating as she considers her options and chooses the one that will hurt the only friend she really has. She is a classic user who manipulates her father into providing all the money she wants, takes advantage of Eve's cottage without her knowledge, attempts to trap Simon into providing the life she has



dreamed of, and takes advantage of Jack's sense of duty to trap him into a marriage based on lies.

Jack's weaknesses as a man are also increasingly evident. Although he claims to love Benny, he shows little understanding of the kind of person she is and is unlikely to change. He has proven to be untrustworthy by sleeping with someone during his trip to Wales, and he now becomes involved with Nan even though he claims to feel guilty about it. When she announces that she is pregnant, his immediate agreement to marry her can be seen as a sign of his sense of honor, but it is also as another sign of weakness as he does not question the situation.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Nan so shocked at Simon's reaction to the news that she is pregnant? Why does Eve, who has spent very little time with him, understand his motivations and needs better than the more worldly Nan does?

Discussion Question 2

What options does Nan consider after Simon refuses to marry her? Why does she discount most of them?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think Jack truly loves Benny? Do his actions toward her match his words?

Vocabulary

consignment, speculate, saga, restraint, aspiring, mournful, sordid, observant, immaculate, derelict, compartmentalize, perplexed, condone, maneuver, revulsion, hypocritical, nuptials

Chapters 19 and 20

Summary

Chapter 19 opens with Benny telling Eve about the situation with Jack and Nan. Eve is furious and unforgiving, but Benny clings to the idea that he still loves her. Eve insists that they go out immediately and tell their friends, which she thinks will make things easier for Benny in the long run. Everyone is shocked and assumes that Nan is pregnant. Jack and Nan tell their families. Although everyone is upset, plans begin for their marriage. Benny, Eve, and Nan's mother all wonder whether Simon could be the baby's father and where they could have gone to have sex, but none share their suspicions with anyone else.

Easter weekend arrives, and it is determined that the friends will proceed with their plans for a large party in Knockglen. Everyone is gathered at Eve's cottage, and the party is in full swing when Jack and Nan arrive unexpectedly. Most people, including Benny, are happy to see Jack but shun Nan, who goes into the kitchen to talk with Eve. A confrontation ensues as Eve realizes that they used her cottage to meet behind Benny's back. During the confrontation, Nan falls into a glass door and is badly cut. She is rushed to the hospital and recovers, but she has a miscarriage.

In the book's final chapter, Nan recovers but she and Jack decide not to marry, much to Jack's relief. Nan plans to go to London and study dress design, and Jack returns to his studies. Sean and Mrs. Healy get married, and Patsy marries Mossy at the Hogans' house. Kit also agrees to marry Paddy Hickey and move to his home in Kerry. Eve eventually tells Benny that Jack and Eve used her cottage, but as the summer progresses, Benny's pain gradually lessens. The two friends begin looking for an apartment to share the next year. They run into Jack, who asks Benny to go out with him. She refuses, realizing that she would always worry that he was being unfaithful. The book concludes with the entire group gathering for a beach party in London, and everyone is surprised when Jack arrives. He is accepted back into the group, and Benny realizes that she is finally over him and is simply happy to be with her large group of friends.

Analysis

Eve's relationship with Nan comes full circle in the book's conclusion as it began with an injury to Eve and ended with one to Nan. Eve's early promise to knock someone down for Benny also comes back around in the confrontation with Nan in the kitchen. While Nan has always been the one with the answer to everything, Eve sees her more clearly than anyone else as the complete realization of what Nan has done slowly dawns on her. Her outrage has no effect on the always cool Nan, however, who sees no reason why everyone should not continue to be friends.



The book's conclusion has a happily ever after feel as each character's story is neatly wrapped up. Benny's maturity has grown enough that she has the strength to refuse Jack's attempt at reconciliation. There are hints that she will develop a relationship with Bill, another member of their group who pursued her early on. Before she was blinded by her attraction to the more glamorous Jack. The final scene again unites the characters from Knockglen and Dublin as they sit literally in a circle of friends.

Discussion Question 1

What scene early in the novel foreshadows the kitchen scene between Eve and Nan? How does Eve's behavior symbolize the overall nature of her relationship with Benny?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Benny refuse when Jack asks her out? Do you think she is right or wrong to do so?

Discussion Question 3

By the time the book ends, do the major characters get what they want? Have their wants changed since the book began? If so, in what ways? Include Benny, Eve, Jack and Nan in your discussion.

Vocabulary

deft, trundle (verb), ludicrous, obelisk, listless, incomprehension, fickle, irrelevant, renowned, confrontation, effusive, cunning, ribald, aghast, adept



Characters

Benny Hogan

When Benny Hogan is introduced, she is a 10-year-old girl who feels clumsy and different because of her larger than average size, something that is often pointed out to her by others, including her parents. Her attitude toward herself has not changed when we meet her again as she is preparing to enter college. Although the author does not portray her as morbidly obese, her size causes her to be self-conscious. So, she finds it impossible to believe that the handsome, charming Jack Foley could possibly be attracted to her when there are so many prettier, smaller girls he could choose. Benny's parents dote on her, sometimes to her dismay as she feels stifled by their insistence that she return home to their small village each night rather than enjoy the full range of university life, although she appreciates their unconditional love and feels guilty for chafing under their constant vigilance. Benny is a very kind person who has difficulty with confrontation, and she is a very loyal friend, particularly to Eve Malone. Her sheltered upbringing also makes her somewhat naive, a trait that factors into her relationship with Jack and her failure to see that Nan could be a threat to her. Benny matures in a number of ways as the novel progresses. She is forced to lose some of her naivete as a result of the heartbreak caused by Jack's betrayal, but she is also able to step up on her own when her father dies and she is the one to handle the situation with Sean, save the family business, and help her mother recover, all by her own wits.

Eve Malone

Eve Malone has had an unusual upbringing, a fact that has a strong affect on her personality. Her mother died in childbirth, and her father was killed in an accident shortly thereafter. Her mother's wealthy family, the Westwards, refused to have anything to do with her because they disapproved of her mother's marriage, so she was left to be raised by the nuns at the local convent and school. Eve fully appreciates everything the nuns have done for her, and she is particularly close to Mother Francis, the head of the convent, but she is keenly aware that her background makes her a bit different from her friends. She bears an enormous grudge toward the Westwards, so it is a huge step for her to approach her cousin Simon for money to attend university, and she does so only when she sees no other options. However, her budding relationship with Simon's 12-year-old sister Heather causes her to soften somewhat toward the family. Eve values her friendship with Benny above all else. When Benny is betrayed by Jack and Nan, it is Eve who helps her face the situation and come out as unscathed as possible. Less naive than Benny, Eve is also less trusting, and she puts the pieces together before anyone else figures out what happened with Nan and Jack, including the fact that the baby likely is Simon's.



Jack Foley

Jack Foley is a handsome, charming young man who is entering university along with Benny, Nan, Eve, and the rest of their group. His father is a doctor, but Jack is not interested in medicine and plans to study law instead. Jack quickly emerges as the leader of the group, always being the one to organize activities. Everything seems to revolve around him. All the girls are attracted to him, and he is friendly to all of them. So, it is a bit of a surprise when he chooses Benny as his girlfriend, but he appears to really care about her. As time goes on, however, a shallow side emerges when he cheats on Benny with another girl while on a weekend trip to Wales. He becomes impatient with Benny's need to spend time in Knockglen after her father's death, and later he begins sleeping with Nan behind Benny's back. An honorable man in most respects, he agrees to marry Nan when he believes she is carrying his child and seems genuinely distraught about hurting Benny. The author implies that Jack has been somewhat humbled by the end of the book as he sits on the edge of the group rather than at his usual place at the center of things, but his friends appear ready to accept him again.

Nan Mahon

Nan Mahon is frequently described as cool and beautiful by both the book's narrator and other characters. She has been raised in a middle-class family by an alcoholic, verbally-abusive father and a somewhat meek mother who wants nothing more than for Nan to escape and have a better life. Although she is enrolled at university, Nan and her mother are quite clear on the fact that her future success lies not in a career, but in marrying well. Nan has spent many years carefully preparing for that future by perfecting her appearance, her manners, and her attitude. All the boys at school are attracted to her, but she politely refuses them because she is waiting for the right opportunity, which she thinks she has found when she meets Simon Westward. Although Nan appears to be a good friend to Benny and Eve, the reader is not particularly surprised to see a different side emerge because she has become an expert at manipulation by getting her father to bend to her will. After betraying Benny and forcing Jack into marriage, she shows no remorse for her actions, further revealing the cold, calculating side of her personality.

Simon Westward

Simon Westward is Eve's cousin, although they have never met until she goes to him to ask for money. He manages his family's once-grand estate, but is quietly looking for a wealthy wife because the family's money has run out.



Heather Westward

Heather Westward is Simon's 12-year-old sister and Eve's cousin. She is significant because she brings Eve more deeply into her mother's family and helps her see that they are not all evil as she has believed.

Annabel and Eddie Hogan

Annabel and Eddie Hogan are Benny's overprotective parents. Eddie's death provides an opportunity for Benny to grow up in several ways, including helping her mother find happiness again and discovering Sean Walsh's deception.

Emily and Brian Mahon

Emily and Brian Mahon are Nan's parents. Brian is a verbally-abusive drunk. Emily works in a hotel shop. She is responsible for setting Nan on her quest to find a wealthy, powerful husband.

Sister Francis

Sister Francis heads the convent and Catholic school in Knockglen. She has been a lifelong maternal figure to Eve and is skilled at finding subtle, clever solutions to the problems of a variety of characters.

Sean Walsh

Sean Walsh has spent 10 years as an assistant in Eddie Hogan's menswear shop. He quietly intends to inherit the business by marrying Benny, but he is fired when Benny discovers that he has been stealing from the shop for many years.

Kit Hegarty

Kit Hegarty rents rooms in her home to university students, having been abandoned by her husband many years earlier. She becomes a central figure in Eve's life when Eve comes to live and work in her house while attending university.

Frank Hegarty

Frank Hegarty is a minor character since he dies very early in the book, but his death is central to the plot because it brings together many of the main characters, including Benny, Jack, Nan, and Eve, and introduces his mother, who plays a strong role in Eve's life.



Clodagh

Clodagh is the niece of shop owner Peggy Pine. She becomes a good friend to Benny and, along with Fonsie, is responsible for helping the village of Knockglen begin to modernize.

Fonsie

Fonsie is the nephew of Knockglen cafe owner Mario. He joins Benny and Eve's group of friends.

Patsy

Patsy is the Hogan's housekeeper and cook.

Aidan Lynch

Aidan Lynch is a university student, a close friend of Jack Foley, and a persistent suitor for Eve's affections.

Paddy Hickey

Paddy Hickey is the father of one of Kit's boarders. Near the book's end, he and Kit decide to marry.



Symbols and Symbolism

Knockglen, Ireland

Knockglen is a small village near Dublin. It is the home of Benny and her parents, Eve, the Westwards, Sister Francis, and other characters. The town is important because it has helped to shape the characters and personalities of Benny and Eve. Knockglen is a contrast to the more bustling, sophisticated world of Dublin. As much as Benny and Eve want to escape and find a more exciting, fulfilling life, they are forever tied to their hometown. They have genuine affection for its people and their sometimes peculiar ways.

University College, Dublin

The book's central characters -- Benny, Eve, Jack, and Nan -- are just beginning their studies at University College. The school serves as a symbol of their coming of age as they move into a different, more independent life than the ones they have led previously. It also represents opportunity and freedom, particularly for Eve and Benny, who view the university as an opportunity to escape from the quiet town of Knockglen.

St. Mary's

St. Mary's is both a convent and a Catholic school in Knockglen. It has also been the only home Eve has ever known and has given her a sense of belonging to something. It also serves as a striking contrast to the more stifling convent in Dublin where Eve lives for a short time.

Hogan's Outfitters

Hogan's Outfitters is the Knockglen Menswear store owned by Eddie Hogan, and it is important to the plot for a number of reasons. His job at the shop brings Sean Walsh into the orbit of Benny and the other characters. The shop becomes a symbol of the modernization that is gradually taking place in Knockglen. Becoming involved in the shop also causes Benny to appreciate her now-deceased father more and forces her to confront unpleasant things like Sean's thievery.

Eve's Cottage

After Eve's parents died when she was an infant, she inherited a small cottage near the convent. The house is very important to the plot because it is the location Nan chooses to sleep with both Simon and Jack. It also becomes a gathering place for Eve and Benny's growing group of friends, bringing together their Dublin friends with those in



Knockglen, and it gives Eve a sense of independence that she has never felt, having been raised in the convent.

Westlands

Westlands is the once-grand estate near Knockglen owned by Simon Westward's family. It was home to Eve's mother before her family banished her after her marriage, but it is now becoming shabby since the family's money is running out. To the people of Knockglen, Westlands represents wealth, privilege, and power, but to Eve it represents all the pain the family caused her mother and their resulting abandonment of her.

Eve's Mother's Portrait

When Eve visits Westlands for the first time, her stay is brief and she does not have -- or want -- an opportunity to look around the large home, so she is unaware that a portrait of her mother still hangs there. Later, when Nan visits the house for the first time with Simon, she tells Eve about the portrait in a thinly-veiled attempt to achieve superiority by demonstrating that she is now closer to Eve's family than she herself is.

Sewing Machine

When Benny needs to help Patsy prepare linens for her upcoming marriage, she remembers an old sewing machine that is in a storage room at her father's shop. When she goes to get it, she opens the drawers and finds the money Sean has been stealing from the shop for years. The ancient machine also represents the cramped, old-fashioned nature of the store before Benny and her mother step in to turn it around.

Dun Laoghaire

Dun Laoghaire is a seaside suburb of Dublin and the location of Kit Hegarty's house. It is important because it becomes a home for Eve when she begins to attend the university. It is a symbol of her new life outside Knockglen. It also becomes a refuge for Benny on the rare nights she is able to spend away from her parents.

23 Maple Gardens

23 Maple Gardens is the address of Nan's family home. For her, it represents everything she is trying to escape, including not only her alcoholic father, but also a mundane middle-class existence.



Settings

Knockglen, Ireland

Knockglen is a small village near Dublin and home to Benny, Eve, and several other major characters. It is filled with quirky characters and the main pastime is gossip, which causes stories to become wildly exaggerated as they are passed along. The people are good-hearted, for the most part, but provincial and stuck in the past, which is the main reason Benny and Eve long to escape even though they love the town and recognize how it has shaped their lives thus far.

Dublin, Ireland

Dublin is Ireland's largest city and the location of University College, where the book's four main characters are beginning their studies. For Eve and Benny, it represents an opportunity for freedom and excitement, but for Benny's parents and many of Knockglen's residents, it represents danger. Much of the book's plot takes place at various locations in Dublin, including a number of restaurants and pubs.

Dun Laoghaire

Dun Laoghaire is a suburb of Dublin and the location of Kit Hegarty's home. Many scenes take place at her house as well as the surrounding area, including the walkways along the sea.

University College, Dublin

University College is a large public university in Dublin where Benny, Eve, Jack, Nan, and several other characters are beginning their studies. Many scenes take place in classrooms and other gathering places on and near its campus.

Eve's Cottage

Eve's Cottage is a particularly important location within the village of Knockglen because it is the place where the growing group of friends gather for social activities and where Nan sneaks in to sleep with both Simon and Jack. It is also the place where Eve and Nan have the confrontation that leads to Nan's accident and subsequent miscarriage.

Hogan's Outfitters

While many scenes take place in various locations around Knockglen, Hogan's Outfitters is worth noting in particular. While Benny has always taken her father for granted to some extent, his death forces her and her mother to become more involved in the business, leading to the discovery of Sean's ongoing theft.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Circle of Friends is first and foremost a coming-of-age novel in which the main characters grow into young adulthood. We have an opportunity to see the most significant changes in Eve and Benny since they are first introduced as 10-year-old girls. After just one chapter the story jumps forward several years to when they are about 18. Although the reader follows the lives of Jack, Nan, and the other characters for only a few months, all of them undergo significant changes as the story progresses.

The book's characters undergo change as a result of the new experiences they encounter. The lives of Benny and Eve alter significantly when they enter college because, unlike the other students they meet, they come from a small village and are exposed to city life in Dublin for the first time. After growing up among a small number of often-quirly neighbors, suddenly they have an opportunity to meet a wide range of other people, including young men, which is very different from their own experience in a convent school. As their horizons broaden and they learn more about the world outside of Knockglen, however, they also become vulnerable to heartbreak. By the end of the book, Benny in particular has experienced a greater pain than she has ever known as a result of Jack and Nan's betrayal, but the author makes it clear that she is coming out the other side and growing in positive ways.

Much of Eve's growth comes in relation to her family, the Westwards. She has spent her entire life resenting and feeling anger toward them, but when necessity forces her to approach Simon for money, she is surprised to meet her young cousin Heather, who becomes a very positive force in her life and lets her learn that the Westwards, like all families, have redeeming qualities. Despite her sheltered upbringing in the convent, her growth process is also fostered by Mother Francis, who serves not only as a maternal figure but also increasingly as a friend and confidant.

Nan and Jack grow through the painful process of deceit and the betrayal of their friends. Both are more worldly than Benny and Eve, but Nan in particular seems wise beyond her years as a result of her lifetime of careful planning for her future. However, both are more naive than they know, which comes to light when Nan does not realize that Simon would never marry someone like her and when Jack simply assumes Nan is telling the truth when she tells him the baby is his. Nan's growth prompts her to abandon her plan to marry a wealthy man, while Jack is forced to face the fact that while Benny forgives him, she is not willing to resume their relationship, which is a clear sign of Benny's growing maturity.

Even some of the adult characters grow as a result of their experiences. For example, Annabel Hogan becomes a more confident, independent woman when her husband's death forces her to enter the world of business, and Kit Hegarty learns to cope with her son's death, learns the truth about her husband, and finds love again.



The Nature of Friendship

As the book's title indicates, friendship is one of the primary themes of *Circle of Friends*. Benny and Eve share a lifelong friendship that seemed unlikely in the beginning because Benny was initially reluctant to invite Eve to her birthday party because of Eve's prickly personality. However, they form a strong bond that enables Eve to support Benny in the best way possible when she learns of Jack and Nan's betrayal. There are times when the friendship seems to be waning as Nan enters the picture and begins spending time with Eve, but it is clear that the bond with Benny will outlast any issues that arise between them.

The friendships between Jack and the other young men appear to be more superficial, as is the stereotype for friendships between men. They do not share secrets and dreams the way the young women do, and their bond, while strong, is forged more through socializing and sports.

Nan's idea of friendship is the most complex among all the characters. When they meet, Eve and Benny have no reason to assume that Nan's friendship is as genuine as it seems. She offers welcome help in a variety of ways. She brings college materials to Eve and advises both girls on issues such as clothes, makeup, and relationships. However, Eve's sheltered upbringing does not prevent her from becoming suspicious when Nan takes an acute interest in Simon after learning that he is Eve's cousin. However, Eve is only mildly annoyed and has no idea about the kind of betrayal that will eventually result. While Nan uses Eve as a method of getting close to Simon, her friendship with Benny seems more pure as there appears to be nothing Benny can do for her. However, in the end, she betrays both girls by trapping Jack and by callously using Eve's home when she needs a place to meet Simon and later Jack. Nan's cavalier attitude toward friendship becomes clear when she talks with Eve during the last party at her cottage, as she sees no reason everyone cannot go on as they have despite the deep hurt she has caused. Jack, on the other hand, seems to realize that he must earn his way back to the group of friends he has betrayed.

Betrayal

The concept of betrayal appears as a theme in several ways in this novel, and it is closely tied with the related theme of friendship. Most obvious is the stunning string of related betrayals that occur among the book's central characters. Nan's betrayal of Benny's friendship is glaring when she sleeps with Jack for the sole purpose of trapping him into believing that the baby she is carrying is his and, henceforth, into marriage. Nan and Benny are unlikely friends -- a fact that is not lost on Benny, who realizes that the beautiful Nan would not typically befriend a large, somewhat clumsy girl like her. For most of the book, however, the friendship seems genuine. Rather than trying to steal Jack for herself like most of the other girls do, Nan strongly encourages Benny's relationship with him and tries to help it succeed. This makes her actions that much more reprehensible.



Jack's betrayal of Benny is no more forgivable. His decision to marry Nan would seem, on some levels, to prove that he is an honorable man. The fact is that he has been sneaking around to sleep with Nan for several weeks, and his feelings of guilt make his actions no less of a betrayal. In addition to betraying Benny, Jack also betrays the moral code he claims to follow and the sense of decency his parents tried to instill in him.

Nan's betrayal of Benny -- and of Jack, by lying to him -- is a direct result of Simon's betrayal of her trust in him. While she was naive to think so, Nan believed that she was marriage material for Simon and that he would do the right thing when she announced her pregnancy, but instead he turns his back on her. Betrayal is nothing new for the Westwards, however, since the entire family abandoned Eve's mother and later Eve herself.

The theme extends to the character of Sean Walsh, who betrays Eddie Hogan's trust in him by stealing from the shop, and to Kit Hegarty's husband, who abandoned her for another woman many years earlier. However, he redeems himself in the end through his secret contact with his son and the insurance policy he leaves for Kit.



Styles

Point of View

Circle of Friends uses a third person omniscient narrator. The narrator is reliable, providing both an objective view of events that take place in the novel and an insight into the thoughts and emotions of the characters. Using a third-person narrator works best for this book because there are a large number of characters, many of whom are quite complex and many go through substantial emotional turmoil as the plot progresses. If the book were written in the first person from Benny's point of view, for example, the author would not be able to provide insights into Nan's thought process as she considers what to do about her pregnancy or give the reader a sense of Jack's feelings of guilt when he begins sleeping with Nan behind Benny's back. Using a third person narrator also enables the author to include both long and short scenes that involve different characters, which is not possible when a first-person narrator is required to be present in every scene.

The book includes both exposition and dialogue, and there is an appropriate balance of each. This enables the author to provide more objective descriptions of events, places, etc. while also giving the reader a better sense of each character's personality and the dynamics between various characters through glimpses into their conversations.

Language and Meaning

The language used in Circle of Friends is informal. The tone is light and easy to comprehend while also using a number of words that would be appropriately challenging to a younger reader.

Because the novel is set in Ireland, the author, who is Irish, uses a large number of expressions, terms and structures that are typical for Ireland but not for other cultures. She also uses language that would be appropriate for the time period -- 1957 -- in which the story is set. For example, Jack says to his friends, "Will we go to the pub?" whereas an American would be more likely to say, "Do you want to go to the pub?" and movies are referred to as "the pictures."

Structure

Circle of Friends is divided into 20 chapters of varying lengths. The chapters are numbered but do not have titles.

The first chapter takes place when Benny and Eve are 10 years old. Beginning with Chapter 2, the story moves forward to 1957 when the girls are around 18 years of age and preparing to leave their third-level school -- the equivalent of high school in the United States -- and enter university. The remainder of the plot takes place over a

period of just under a year as the students finish their first year of school and prepare to begin the second.

The story itself is fairly complex because while it follows the lives of Benny, Eve, Nan and Jack primarily, a large number of other characters are woven in, creating a series of related and unrelated subplots. For example, the reader follows Kit Hegarty as she recovers from her son's death and becomes engaged to Paddy Hickey, the story of Sean Walsh including his engagement to Mrs. Healy, the lives of Fonsie, Clodagh and other residents of Knockglen, and the story of Patsy and her romance with Mossy. All of these diverse characters are woven together by their relationships and interactions with Eve and Benny.



Quotes

Nan pealed with laughter. 'You're marvelous, Eve,' she said. ' I'm so glad I'm your friend. I'd really hate to be your enemy.'

-- Nan (Chapter 12 paragraph 13)

Importance: This casual remark foreshadows the bitterness that eventually occurs between Nan and Eve, along with its consequences

Slowly Benny got off her bed and went over to the mirror on the wardrobe to see if her face looked as red and tearstained as she feared. She saw the chunky figure of a child in vest and knickers, neck red from scrubbing, eyes red from weeping. She was not a person that anyone would ever dream of putting in a pink velvet dress and little pumps with pointed toes.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 12)

Importance: This shows that Benny's body issues began at an early age, causing her to feel that her size makes her different and less attractive than others.

Suddenly Eve grasped her hand. Someday, when I'm big and strong, I'll knock someone down for you, she said. 'I mean it, I really will.'

-- Eve (Chapter 1 paragraph 10)

Importance: This quote foreshadows the scene between Eve and Nan after Nan has stolen Jack from Benny.

But it wasn't money for clothes that she wanted. Eve knew that only too well. She wanted a different kind of life entirely. She wanted to study, to spend three, even five, years at university. She was prepared to make sacrifices for it, but there seemed to be no way she could even begin.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 10)

Importance: This quote establishes the nature of Eve's ambition and foreshadows what she eventually will sacrifice to get her wish -- her pride, by asking Simon for the funds.

It was much easier than Benny had thought to be in the middle of a group like this. She had completely forgotten that she was big and that they were boys.

-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 6)

Importance: On this occasion, Benny forgets about her inadequacies, and the author provides the first reference to the book's title as Benny finds herself for the first time becoming part of a circle of friends.

The answer to the last part was that Nan thought she was a lot too good for Brian Mahon and Maple Gardens. Her mother had ensured that over the years. As she brushed her daughter's golden hair, Emily had always made the girl believe that there



would be a better and a different life. Nan had never doubted it. She felt no need to conform to the life-style of a house ruled by an often drunken father. Nan Mahon was not afraid of her father because she knew with a certainty which her mother had helped to create that her future didn't lie in her father's kind of world. She knew without arrogance that her beauty would be her means of escape.

-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote establishes the nature of Nan's ambitions, her mother's role in forming them, and the fact that she will eventually use her looks as a means of advancement.

Jack Foley made a note to leave Shirley alone. Next time it would be Rosemary or even the ice-cool Nan Mahon. No more crazy ladies thank you very much.

-- Narrator (Chapter 8 paragraph 5)

Importance: This foreshadows Jack's eventual relationship with Nan and the fact that her emotional issues outpace those of the other girls in his life.

Emily's glance fell on the desk and amongst Nan's books and files were magazines, The Social and Personal, The Tatler, Harper and Queens. There were even books of etiquette borrowed from the library. Nan Mahon was studying a great deal more than First Arts.

-- Narrator (Chapter 8 paragraph 22)

Importance: This paragraph firmly establishes the nature of Nan's plans to charm and manipulate her way into the life of a well-to-do man.

Yes you will," said Nan Mahon firmly. "And what's more you'll take me with you.

-- Nan (Chapter 8 paragraph 22)

Importance: This quote establishes the fact that Nan has now set her sights on Simon Westward and will use her friendship with Eve to get close to him.

They simply couldn't envisage a life for their daughter that didn't revolve around Knockglen and the main street business of Hogan's Gentleman's Outfitters. And, though they hardly dared speak of the matter to each other, they thought too that it might best revolve around Sean Walsh.

-- Narrator (Chapter 9 paragraph 8)

Importance: This paragraph provides insight into the thought process of Benny's parents and how different it is from that of Benny herself. It also calls into question, as Benny sometimes does, the reasons they are sending her to university if this is the life they think she will have.

Lilly knew that like his father before him Jack Foley was a heartbreaker, and would be one until the day he died.

-- Narrator (Chapter 11 paragraph 5)



Importance: This quote foreshadows the way in which Jack eventually breaks Benny's heart and the reason she does not accept when he tries to rebuild their relationship.

She was going to put herself down for fear of thinking that she might actually believe herself to be acceptable. But something warned her it wasn't the right thing to do. She put her head on one side and smiled at him.

-- Narrator (Chapter 11 paragraph 10)

Importance: After getting off to a nervous start at her lunch with Jack, Benny finally turns a corner and not only resists the urge to disparage herself, but also begins to have a tiny bit of hope that Jack might actually be interested in her. This is a turning point in the relationship and in her character development.

There were smiles here and there and people calling to him. She felt confident that she was their equal. There were no pitying looks. Not one of those people would ever know the kind of house she had left this morning to get here on the bus. A house where drink had been spilled, where a lamp had been broken, where half the Christmas pudding had been thrown against the wall in a drunken rage. These people accepted Nan as an equal.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 8)

Importance: This paragraph demonstrates that Nan's years of hard work and her easy confidence in herself is beginning to pay off when the opportunity she has been waiting for finally presents itself.

She wondered why she was making excuses for not inviting this man for whom she had felt nothing but dislike all her life. But then who could ever have foreseen the way things would turn out. That she would be very fond of his younger sister, and that she would have settled in this house where she had vowed never to live. The day might well come when her cousin Simon Westward could cross this door, but not for a long time yet.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 3)

Importance: This paragraph shows that Eve is beginning to change in ways she could not have imagined. It also foreshadows the fact that Simon will indeed visit the cottage, but not in the way Eve would have predicted.

Mother Clare, to her great rage, had discovered Eve sitting blamelessly studying instead of what she had hoped to find as the aftermath of a party, and would have found had it not been for Mother Francis.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 2)

Importance: This sentence shows the continuing evolution of the relationship between Eve and Mother Francis as friends and confidants rather than a mother and daughter one.



The tedious in-fighting over a small shabby country shop. Nobody would bother Jack Foley with all that. Not even if she loved him, and he loved her.

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 5)

Importance: Even though her relationship with Jack is evolving and she is feeling more confident about it, Benny continues to think he is somehow above her. This marks the beginning of her reluctance to share her problems with him, which is a decision that contributes to the demise of their relationship.

So why do you look so worried. He obviously likes you if he keeps asking you to all these places." "Yes, but he wants to sleep with me." Benny's eyes were round. "You won't, will you?" "I will, but how? That's what I'm trying to work out. Where and how.

-- Nan and Benny (Chapter 15 paragraph 9)

Importance: This casual conversation serves two purposes. It establishes in Benny's eyes the possible necessity of sleeping with a man in order to hold onto him, and it sets up the important plot element in which Nan and Simon begin meeting at Eve's cottage.

I know I'm not going to be popular for saying so, Dr. Johnson, but I have to say what's true. That cottage up in the quarry is haunted.

-- Mrs. Carroll (Chapter 15 paragraph 7)

Importance: This conversation is the first of several hints that people in Knockglen are aware that something is going on in Eve's cottage, although they do not know what it is.

Benny waited. Mother Francis said that if it was of any use to Benny she should know that Sean Walsh had enough money, from whatever source, to think himself able to buy one of the small cottages up in the quarry road. Cash deposit.

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph 19)

Importance: This paragraph serves to deepen Benny's suspicions that Sean has been stealing cash from the shop, and it also continues to establish Mother Francis as a character who subtly maneuvers various situations toward a positive outcome.

She had a terrible foreboding that she had left it all too late. That she had been away too long.

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph 11)

Importance: This foreshadows the end of Benny's relationship with Jack.

Because Eve knew very well that Nan was not someone that her cousin Simon was going to bring home to Westlands.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 8)

Importance: Having been raised in a convent by a conservative group of nuns, it would seem that Eve would not be particularly savvy about the outside world, but this single



sentence demonstrates that although she has not spent much time with Simon or any other member of her mother's family, she understands him very well.

I was stupid enough to think I was coming home." She looked around her, at the portraits on the wall, the piano, the view from the window.

-- Nan (Chapter 17 paragraph 17)

Importance: For all her outer worldliness, Nan understands far less about Simon, his world and his motivations than the more naive Eve does.

Thank God he had met Nan and invited her. Now she had nothing to worry about.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 13)

Importance: This shows that Benny, for all the evolving the character has gone through since the story began, is painfully naive when it comes to Nan, and this quote foreshadows the realization that is forthcoming.

Benny looked distant and abstracted. Heather had been about to tell her that there had been some great row with Nan. That Nan had come to Westlands about four weeks ago all dressed up and there had been words in the morning room and she had driven Simon's car to the bus and wouldn't let him come with her. Heather remembered the date, because it was when they were casting for the Easter pageant and she had been very nervous. If she had told Benny then, Benny would have realized that it was the very same day as the party in the rugby club. The one she hadn't gone to, but Nan had. The very night it had all begun.

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 12)

Importance: This is a good example of a technique the author uses several times as the book begins to come to a conclusion in which she has characters barely miss receiving important information that would have changed the course of events.

It would all be a great sense of peace compared to the never-ending contest. The game where the goalposts kept moving, and the rules changing. Nan Mahon was going to marry Jack Foley, not just because she was pregnant, but because at the age of almost twenty she was tired.

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 5)

Importance: This effectively sums up the tremendous amount of effort Nan has given to posing as the perfect woman and preparing herself for the role she felt she was destined to play, and how badly she misjudged various situations and people in her life.

She talked flatly, with no light and shade in her voice. Jack fought down the guilty, overwhelming surge of relief, that he was not going to have to marry this beautiful dead girl and spend the rest of his life with her.

-- Narrator (Chapter 20 paragraph 9)



Importance: This quote demonstrates how different the current version of Nan is from the bright, effusive girl from the earlier parts of the novel.

Benny didn't want to wonder and watch over Jack for the rest of her life. If she went out with him now, it would be so easy. They would be back to where they had been before. In time Nan would be forgotten like the incident in Wales had been sort of forgotten. But she would always worry about the next one.

-- Narrator (Chapter 20 paragraph 10)

Importance: This circles back to Jack's mother's idea that Jack was like his father and would break many hearts. Benny realizes that she will never be able to fully trust Jack, so she is willing to let him go.