

# **Commonwealth Study Guide**

## **Commonwealth by Ann Patchett**

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# Plot Summary

Ann Patchett's *Commonwealth* follows the repercussions from a chance encounter between Beverly Keating and Albert "Bert" Cousins that sees the end of both of their marriages and influences the lives of their families for years to come. The novel spans nearly 50 years and three generations of both families through major events and the seemingly mundane day-to-day that make up a life. To give the reader a sense of fleeting from memory-to-memory, the timeline is non-linear, a literary device that Patchett uses along with a rotating cast of narrators to delve more deeply into specific events and demonstrate how both time and point of view impact how events are remembered.

The novel opens with the christening party of Frances "Fix" and Beverly Keating's youngest daughter, Francis or "Franny." Bert Cousins has showed up uninvited looking to escape spending time with his own family over the weekend, and by the end of the chapter he has kissed the hostess and sent both the Keating and Cousins on a path that will see the families split between Virginia and California. The children are simultaneously torn between two environments and caught in the tension between their separated parents. All six children spend the summers together in Virginia with minimal supervision from Bert and Beverly. During these formative summers the children establish an unwilling camaraderie and cultivate a sense of independence until the tragic death of the oldest Cousins boy, Cal. The actual events surrounding his death are kept intentionally ambiguous by the witnesses involved, both to the reader and their parents.

How different characters respond to Cal's death drives both character development and the plot. The youngest Cousins child, Albie, who was drugged during the event, is disconnected from what actually happened, and as such is set adrift during his adolescence. A series of events sees him joining a bicycle gang, setting fire to his school accidentally, and then spiraling downwards into drug use and a nomadic existence. After an eight-year absence, he appears unannounced at his sister's apartment and is given a copy of Leon Posen's novel, *Commonwealth*. The novel was inspired by Franny's childhood as told to Leon Posen, and features many of the pivotal events during those summers in Virginia. While steps have been taken to prevent it from being recognizable to anyone outside of the Keating and Cousins families, Albie is able to recognize many of the events as being parts of his childhood. After reading the novel, Albie hunts down its author, Leon Posen, to discover why his childhood has become a bestseller. In doing so, he reconnects with Franny, which ultimately sets both Franny and Albie on separate but connected paths towards becoming fulfilled adults with families of their own.

Interspersed through the chapters dealing with the past and memory are chapters intended to deal with more "present day" events, including Fix's battle with cancer and the death of Teresa Cousins. During these chapters, Patchett focuses on how stories are passed down through generations and how when stories are publicly shared en masse, be it through a novel or worse, a movie, they become distorted perversions of

the actual events. As the guilty party who shared the family stories, Franny feels the shame of making the events acutely, but at the end of the novel she has developed an understanding that there is a value in keeping certain events to herself.



# Chapter One

## Summary

Ann Patchett's *Commonwealth* opens with the christening of Franny Keating, the second daughter of Francis "Fix" and Beverly Keating. Told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator, this seemingly routine and unremarkable event has a profound impact on the lives of two families, the Keatings and the Cousins.

Surrounded by family, friends, and coworkers Fix does not expect Albert "Bert" Cousins, a district attorney to show up, but Bert is seeking an excuse to be away from his family on the weekend and so he shows up to the christening uninvited, a bottle of gin in hand. Bert is so desperate to get away from his family that he went to a christening party for the child of a man he did not even really know. When his wife asks him whose party he is going to, "he hoped she wouldn't ask the cop's name because at that particular moment he couldn't remember it" (17). He takes immediate notice of the hostess, Beverly Keating, and enjoys fleeting electric moments with her while they slice oranges together in the kitchen.

Feeling a bit overwhelmed by the size of the party, Fix leaves to get more ice. When he returns he feels like everything has changed, though he is not able to perceive why. The party has crowded into the house despite the heat, but more than that, the atmosphere has changed. In Fix's absence, Bert has been hanging back from everyone else and comparing himself to Fix and Fix's family, which leads Bert to the conclusion that Fix has far too nice of a life for a simple policeman. Despite having a more education and working in a more prestigious position, Bert cannot help but compare his life to Fix's and envy much of what Fix has. "Fix Keating had fewer children and a Niver watch and a foreign car and a much-better-looking wife. The guy hadn't even made detective. If anyone had bothered to ask him at that moment, Cousins would have said it seemed suspicious" (25). Bert's own wife is frazzled from trying to manage three small children with minimal assistance from her husband, with a fourth on the way. Inadvertently, Fix seals his own fate by sending in Bert to fight through the mass of people to find Franny. Franny is with her mother, and what started as casually brushing hands becomes kissing over the baby. Bert takes Franny back to Fix, and Fix tells Bert that they named her "Frances" after himself, which inspires Bert to name his soon-to-be born fourth child after himself in turn. Tellingly, the rest of the Cousins family rejects the name "Albert," and instead calls the youngest Cousins child "Albie."

## Analysis

Within the first chapter, Patchett plays the characters off each other in a way that creates their personalities through contrasts. On one side is Fix, a working class Catholic cop: devoted to his family, observant, down-to-earth, and above all, unpretentious. On the other side is Bert, a deputy district attorney with more than a



touch of arrogance; his primary motivation for attending the party is to get away from his own family for the weekend. Fix, like the other cops, is exactly as he seems, and has no interest in pretending otherwise. Bert, like the other lawyers, has hidden motives and a desire to appear better than he is. “DAs were the guys who smoked your cigarettes because they were trying to quit. The cops...they weren’t trying to quit. They drank their iced tea mixed with lemonade and smoked like stevedores” (2). Bert and Fix are foils to one another, with Frances functioning as the relatable, working-class protagonist and Bert as the morally slippery antagonist. The kissing scene foreshadows Bert’s and Beverly’s future actions in the novel. In fact, the christening party is a significant plot device in many ways, as it sets in motion rising conflict.

Chapter One introduces the motif of Bert avoiding any parental responsibility, as well as the theme of memories being both precious and powerful. While Fix may not be able to match Bert intellectually, he is blessed with an incredible memory, and in a novel focused on storytelling, that gives him more status. By naming Fix’s youngest child “Frances,” Patchett has established a connection between Franny and her father, and invites comparisons between events in both of their character arcs. Both will be betrayed by someone they love dearly, and both will struggle to become attorneys. However, both are noted for their kindness or being a decent person by other characters throughout, unlike other characters who may be more intelligent but are less principled.

Chapter One teems with sensory details and imagery, ranging from the oppressive Southern Californian heat to the kitchen “packed with wives, all of them laughing and talking too loud” (4), to “the smell of orange blossoms” (5), to the “electric sparks as reels the orange itself” (18) between Beverly and Bert. With short descriptions of specific details, Patchett has created an atmosphere of an over-crowded party, in which it is not difficult to sympathize with Fix’s desire to escape for ice.

## Discussion Question 1

Rather than rely on lengthy descriptions of characters and events, Patchett uses imagery to create both the characters and the world of the chapter. Choose one passage and explore what the imagery implies about a character, an event, or the setting.

## Discussion Question 2

Contrast Bert and Fix. How has Patchett set them up to be foils of one another?

## Discussion Question 3

Patchett’s writing style is intentionally straightforward and unaffected. How does she manage to create characters with specific details that make you feel like you know them already?

## Vocabulary

stevedores, scrim, bedlam, stench, imperceptible



# Chapter Two

## Summary

Chapter Two opens roughly 50 years later, and starts as if the end of Chapter One was a memory that Fix was relating to Franny while he is waiting for chemotherapy. The aftermath of the christening party is rapidly made clear. Bert and Beverly leave their respective spouses and move to Virginia, thus dividing their families. Interspersed throughout the chapter with discussions of his cancer and the medical facility where he is being treated are Fix's memories. Characters who were not featured in the first chapter are mentioned but not intensely developed, namely Franny's older sister Caroline and her one-time flame. Topics range from his long service as cop to old family friends, with special detail to Albie and the impact that Fix had on Albie's adolescence, Beverly and Beverly's best friend, Wallis, who Fix despised and blames for the end of their marriage, as well as Lomer, Fix's partner who died in the line of duty shortly after the events of the first chapter. Fix philosophizes about what would be better - dying young and in his prime like Lomer, or dying old and hooked up to machines, but with the benefit of a full life.

In particular, Fix looks back on Lomer's humor and love of telling jokes, as well as the night that Lomer was fatally shot during a robbery at a gas station. Fix laments that Franny will never meet a man of Lomer's caliber, and is particularly irritated when Franny suggests that maybe Lomer was gay. Fix shares with Franny the last call that Lomer and Fix responded to was a home invasion. Fix begins to feel like he is back in the past, sitting in the old patrol car with Lomer strapped in next to him telling a joke about a beagle and a cheating husband as if it actually happened to "the cousin of someone I know" (48). When Lomer and Fix arrived at the house they find that the father of was brutally beaten by a man looking for money owed for smuggling the family into the United States from Mexico. Specific details are added, like that "the back door was open" (52) and Lomer drawing mice on the back of an envelope to cheer up the youngest child in the Mexican family. Franny reflects on the value of these moments; by taking her father to chemo and sitting with him during the therapy, she gets a chance to hear the stories she missed out on by living with her mother across the country.

Fix continues with the story about how Lomer was very particular about his coffee, which is why the pair went to a nearby gas station for better coffee than what was available at the station. Fix remained in the car while Lomer went into get coffee and was still outside when the man who shot Lomer and the gas station attendant fled. Fix, who has an incredible memory, is unable to remember the face of the man who shot his partner, and instead remembers the face of the man who attacked the husband from their last call. He ends the story by telling Franny that his memory failed him when he needed it most, but the man who shot Lomer was still convicted. Eventually, Fix "... managed to get Lomer out of my head" (60), even though doing so made him feel a mix of guilt and relief.





## Analysis

Chapter Two begins to delve more deeply into some of the central themes and motifs of the novel. A central theme of *Commonwealth* is the ownership of stories and the nature of memory. As demonstrated by Fix's inability to remember the face of Lomer's killer, human memory is not completely reliable and, as is developed in future chapters, highly dependent on the point of view of the person telling the story. Despite his advanced age and the chemotherapy, Fix is still blessed with a remarkable memory, and while he may pretend to be old and sick and not remember about Bert's latest failed relationship, Franny knows better when Fix peppers her with questions. "...He had asked her the same questions a month before and would ask her again a month from now...He was old and sick, but he remembered everything" (41).

Fix is highly possessive of his stories, a behavior that Franny is beginning to learn the value of. When Franny upsets him by suggesting that Lomer might have been gay, it is almost enough to make him hoard the stories he has to share about Lomer. This suggests that in the world of *Commonwealth*, stories are only to be shared with people who deserve to hear them and can be trusted. Fix sees Franny's one time lover Leon Posen as "That old guy she'd been so crazy about when she was young," but remarks that Posen was "the one who'd robbed her blind" (46). The details of this encounter will be explored in later chapters, but what was stolen was not money or material goods; it was her family stories.

The motif that death silences stories is introduced. Two characters, Wallis and Lomer are dead, and because of that they are not capable of presenting their own point of view or adding to the stories that Fix is telling that involve them. Death also robs the next generation of those stories if they have not been passed down to the next generation, which Franny sees as potential impending tragedy.

### Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Fix blames Wallis, Beverly's best friend for their divorce, and not Bert or even Beverly herself?

### Discussion Question 2

How does Lomer (or more specifically, Fix's memory of Lomer) contrast with Fix? Do you think elements of Lomer's life and personality are heavily romanticized?

### Discussion Question 3

How does jumping ahead several decades change your perception of the events described in Chapter One and the direction that the novel is headed?

## Vocabulary

discordant, strictures, liberation, tourniquet, colostomy, antiemetic, insatiable, barrage



# Chapter Three

## Summary

Taking place closer in time to the events of Chapter One than to Chapter Two, Chapter Three begins with Bert half-heartedly trying to convince his first wife, Teresa, to move to Virginia with them. His condescending attitude quickly convinces her to remain in Los Angeles. Teresa is able to get a job working at the District Attorney's office where Bert used to work, mostly through the shared sense of guilt Bert's coworkers feel for covering up Bert's long affair with Beverly Keating. Bert is given custody of the Cousins children, Cal, Holly, Jeanette, and Albie, for the summer, something which Teresa is publicly upset by but privately very pleased with. The Cousins children begin to make yearly trips back to Virginia, first with chaperones, then independently. The first time the children make the trip independently, Teresa, determined to make Beverly and Bert shoulder some of the financial and emotional burden of raising four children, sends the children without so much as their toothbrushes.

Both the Cousins and Keating children find themselves torn between their parents and split between the two coasts. The two Keating daughters, Caroline and Franny go to live with Beverly and Bert, despite their protests about leaving their father. Both sets of children greatly prefer to be in California. "...Caroline and Franny traveled west for two short weeks... just enough time to remind the girls how greatly they preferred California to Virginia. They shuffled off the plane looking like they were in an advanced state of dehydration from having cried for the entire flight" (71). They spend a few weeks out of every summer with their father, who takes vacation time so that he can spend the time with his children. Bert on the other hand continues to avoid spending time with his children. The time during the summers when all six children are together in Virginia proves to be transformative. While the children may not be particularly close or have a great fondness for each other, they do find a common ground. The six children are united in their hatred for their parents (particularly Beverly and Bert), but they get along well with each other. As such, collectively they act out against Beverly and Bert, engaging in behaviors ranging from simple temper tantrums to Albie following Beverly around singing "the stripper soundtrack" (73).

When the tension escalates to new levels, Bert finds a new way to avoid time with his children: by packing them off on vacation and visiting the countryside and his parents. Likewise, the older children find a way to avoid spending time with Albie, who has begun to be a nuisance: they give him Benadryl to make him drowsy. The children use the lack of adult supervision as an opportunity to assert their independence and explore, even engaging in adult behaviors like drinking gin. The lack of parental supervision and the unbridled freedom that goes with it see the children breaking into Bert's car, playing with guns, trying alcohol for the first time, and ultimately, tragedy. Albie, as the youngest Cousin is treated as a nuisance, and even drugged with Benadryl at times. In hindsight they admit "Not that the days were always fun, most of them weren't, but they did things, real things, and they never got caught" (92). Those summer days are tinged with



nostalgia for the Cousins and Keatings, but none of the children are idealistic enough to look back at it as a happy time.

## Analysis

Chapter Three continues to build on the contrasts between Bert and Fix. One has “his caseload at work mysteriously doubled” (67), leaving his wife to take care of six children by herself, a situation she is overwhelmed by. The contrasts extend down to their children and their preference for California or Virginia. California symbolizes the life they lost when Bert and Beverly began their affair. To both sets of children, it represents the familiarity of childhood and a caring family, especially to the Keating daughters, who are only able to go back briefly every summer. California is less rosy for the Cousins children, but it does symbolize an organized routine, which is lost when they travel to Virginia in the summer.

In Chapter Three, Patchett begins to introduce the theme of family bonds. As the relationships between the Cousins and Keating children show, these bonds are not always based on mutual fondness or blood, but can be instead fostered by familiarity, and as is the case with their time in Virginia, by shared misery. Additionally, Chapter Three builds on the nostalgia motif that began in Chapter Two: “Those summer days are tinged with nostalgia for the Cousins and Keatings, but none of the children are idealistic enough to look back at it as a happy time.” It also serves as a contrast to Chapter One, which detailed a very specific event. Chapter Three is instead focused on the the day-to-day reverberations felt from that event and how they impact the lives of everyone involved.

## Discussion Question 1

What impact does birth order seem to have on the characteristics of the children?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Bert's attitude towards his children mirror the older children's attitude towards Albie?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways are the children establishing their own community? How do they support and take care of each other?

## Vocabulary

dawdling, pervasive, scythe



# Chapter Four

## Summary

Chapter four takes place several years after Chapter Three. Franny is an adult, and working as a cocktail waitress at a bar in Chicago after dropping out of law school. As someone with “no skills and no idea what she wanted to do with her life other than read, cocktail waitressing was the most money she could make while keeping her clothes on” (96). She is a great cocktail waitress; not only does she follow the rules perfectly, but she is unfailingly reliable and compassionate to her coworkers. Like the other waitresses, Franny brings drinks to the cooks in the back, however, “Franny never forgot the lemonade, nor how many extra packets of sugar he liked, nor the bar pretzels needed to make up for the body’s lost salt” (95). One fateful night, she meets Leon Posen, a famous author who Franny admires greatly. After joking with her about women wearing heels and the influence it has on the tipping of their male customers, she bends the rules to take his drink order. Over the course of a few drinks, Franny and Leon Posen chat and flirt, until the time comes for Leo Posen to go back to his room. He convinces her to help him find his room, putting her job on the line so that she can guide him to his hotel room as he has no idea which one is his. A few weeks later, Franny is invited to Iowa to spend more time with Leon Posen, and it is the start of long affair between the two.

Chapter Four also looks back how while Bert and Fix agree on very little, they both agreed that the children should go to law school. Fix himself decides to follow the path of his friend Dick Spencer, who got his law degree by going to night school. Franny is very proud of her father for this pursuit, however when Caroline finds out that she has told their mother, she sees it as a betrayal of their father and strikes Franny, calling her “a snitch” (126). All of Fix’s work is in vain however, as he fails to pass the bar multiple times.

## Analysis

Similar to how Patchett has developed Fix and Bert’s characters through contrasts, Franny’s character is developed through comparisons. In the case of Franny, her character is contrasted with her sister, who is ruthless, stubborn, and above all, driven to succeed. In contrast, Franny is sweet, kind, “professional,” but pliable and accommodating. One sister became a successful lawyer; the other became a law school dropout and cocktail waitress. Franny, as one of the youngest members of her family, is by nature a consumer of stories, as evidenced by her love of reading. This characteristic connects Franny to the theme of stories and storytelling. Chapter Four also introduces the idea that there needs to be a balance between consuming stories and telling stories. Franny has the capacity to be a natural storyteller because, like her father, she is highly observant and possesses an excellent memory. Also like her father, she has a keen sense of time. The soundtrack at her work symbolizes the static



monotony of passing time. Most people do not notice it, and it moves in arbitrary but concrete units.

Leon Posen symbolizes the danger of sharing stories with the wrong audience, though in Chapter Four this concept is only introduced but will not be fully developed until later in the novel. He also serves as catalyst for Franny's eventual maturation into adulthood. It begins by challenging her to move beyond expectations and boundaries- like women wearing high-heeled shoes, or being absolutely rigid about the rules that govern Franny's work environment, however it is not without limit. Posen has this effect on Franny by giving her clarity and guidance. Being with Leon gives her a clarity she has not experienced before. "...she could see her life was boring and hard. Going to law school had been a terrible error in judgment that she had made in hopes of pleasing other people" (102). Leon Posen will have a major impact on Franny's life for years to come, but in many ways her desire to avoid anything "that could startle him away" (102) is Franny replacing seeking approval from her family with seeking approval from Leon Posen, which will have disastrous consequences in chapters to come.

There is foreshadowing that not only are Franny and Leo destined for a relationship, but that that the relationship will be unfulfilling for Franny. As they leave the hotel the song that is playing is one that "the gist of the story was that the relationship was over and neither party was willing to own up to it. The first thirty times she heard that song she'd loved it. Then she didn't anymore" (113). That Leo is still enamored with the song suggests that he will not be ready for things to end, however Franny will grow weary of the relationship.

## Discussion Question 1

Franny's characteristic of people-pleasing is a double-edged sword. How does it serve or hurt her in Chapter Four? How does it drive the plot?

## Discussion Question 2

How would you describe the initial dynamics between Franny and Leo? What is the power differential, and how is it established?

## Discussion Question 3

What do Bert and Fix's reasons for sending the children to law school reveal about their character?

## Vocabulary

paternalistic, inexplicably, apprehension, beguiling, montrachet, devoid, negligence



# Chapter Five

## Summary

An adult Albie shows up unexpectedly in New York City at Jeanette's apartment, heavily tattooed and sporting a long, dark braid. Jeanette is now married to a Guinean epidemiologist, Fodé, with a son named Calvin, or "Dayo." Albie has disappeared from his family for several years, and has reemerged to his longtime partner-in-younger-sibling misery, Jeanette. It is told alternatively from both of their points of view. Only snatches of where Albie has been are revealed; he has been out of contact with the family for years, living in California and working as a heroin-addicted bike messenger. He quickly finds work in NYC as a bike messenger, and stays with Jeanette and Fodé.

Chapter Five delves more deeply into the events surrounding Cal's death and the changes that event created, ranging from his mother's avoidance of his favorite frozen pizza to an end of the trips to Virginia for the Cousins children. The events are related slowly, piecemeal. First discussed is Albie's explanation, that Cal was shot, which is completely inaccurate because his siblings had drugged him with Benadryl and Albie was asleep when Cal died. Teresa, similar to the reader, is given minimal information, until finally, Holly tells the story that the surviving children who were awake have agreed to: that Cal was stung by a bee, but no one was around to see it happen because Franny had gone back to the house to put on long pants. Cal's death is discussed as an event that drove the family apart: it ended Bert and Beverly's marriage, and it divided Teresa and the remaining Cousins children.

Chapter Five also provides the details of Albie's adolescence, including his time spent as a member of the "Goddamn Boys on Bikes," a group of rough youths that terrorize their neighborhood. During a Saturday visit to school, a flicked match into an art room trash can started a blaze that saw Albie sent to juvenile detention. Beverly asked Fix to get him out, which he did, and after a visit to Fix's brother Tom, a firefighter intended to set Albie on the right path, Albie was sent to live with his father in Virginia. He was bounced from a private school in Arlington to boarding school, and then to military school before finally quitting education.

While living with Jeanette's family, Albie begins to at last to get on his feet and to develop a sense of family. He bonds with his sister and her husband, but he especially bonds with nephew, who he delights in taking to the park and who "... wanted to hold on to his legs the minute he walked in the door" (175). During a delivery, a woman in a publishing house gives Albie a copy of *Commonwealth* after hearing of his ties to Virginia. Albie recognizes the eerie similarities to his own family history. He makes the connection that the "tic tacs" his older siblings gave him were in fact, Benadryl. The chapter ends with Albie approaching Jeanette to learn the truth.



## Analysis

Chapter Five has heavy symbolism throughout. Albie's long braid, which is "long enough to make Jeanette wonder if he'd cut it even once since she'd seen him last" (143) is symbolic of the journey that Albie has taken since he disappeared from his family. Fire, Albie's young adolescent obsession, is symbolic of Albie himself: wild, and "emblematic of what can never be overcome" (179), but also mysterious and impossible to control. Albie is so defined by symbols that he himself symbolizes the burden that his father and stepmother, as well as siblings, need to overcome to pursue happiness in Posen's novel, *Commonwealth*.

Albie is able to relate immediately to Jeanette's husband, Fodé, in part because they are both outsiders trying to work in a society which does not seem to either want or understand them. Indeed, it is Fodé who first notices Albie and embraces him like a brother. Despite their differences in culture and ethnicity, they share experiences like having trouble with security in office buildings. Having spent so much of his childhood feeling alone and unwanted, a feeling validated by how Albie is described in the novelization of his family's life, it is no wonder that he almost instantly bonds with Dayo. Both Dayo and Albie are developing and maturing, and there is a strong sense that Albie wants to protect Dayo from a fate similar to his own.

Chapter Five features strong development of the motif that point of view has a strong influence on how a character tells a story. Albie's fabrication about the events surrounding Cal's death suggests that the need to tell stories is deep and innate; Albie needs an explanation for what happened to Cal, and in lieu of having a memory, he comes up with a completely implausible story about Cal being shot. The accuracy of his siblings' accounts is not as questionable, however, the fact that Caroline felt the need to establish consensus suggests that what actually happened might have different interpretations or that there is something that the children want to hide.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Virginia represent to Jeanette and Albie? How is this different from their older siblings?

## Discussion Question 2

How does the description of Cal's death hint that both the children and the narrator are not being honest or straightforward? How does Albie sleeping through the event create a gap between him and his siblings?





## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Albie shows up at Jeanette's apartment and not the household of a different family member?

## Vocabulary

ingeniously, pageantry, acromion, culpability, incessant, turpentine, epidemiology, amalgamation



# Chapter Six

## Summary

Leo Posen and Franny are stationed at an actress's house in Amagansett for the summer. Leo's intention is to write a new novel, however instead they play host to a revolving door of uninvited visitors. Franny finds herself in a combination role of mistress, muse and involuntary co-host. On a typical night, she is all but waiting on Leo's friends and hangers-on. She is constantly called on to make drinks, dinner, and run errands. It is in Amagansett that Franny begins to feel herself driven away from Leo. Chapter Six goes into detail about why Leo and Franny's relationship is not likely to last—the differences in their age, social circles, and life experiences leaves Franny feeling unfulfilled. Franny finds the empty intellectualism, hypocrisy, and elitism of Leo's hangers-on to be incredibly off-putting. They are completely unaware of how ridiculous it is to say things like "I'm really a vegetarian but I'll eat fish socially" (188), similar to the lawyers from chapter one who are trying to quit for appearance's sake, but really just do not want to buy their own cigarettes. Unsurprisingly, it is the social fish-eater who thinks it would be fun to have lobster for dinner.

A pending visit from Leo's daughter Ariel, who has a contentious relationship with Franny, as well as the growing pressure to pursue her own work pushes Franny to brink; Franny takes several boxes of lobsters that one of the visitors has brought to the water and releases them. She returns to discover that Albie has shown up in Amangansett, fresh from reading *Commonwealth*. It becomes clear that he was not looking for Franny, but that she is with Leo Posen explains how Posen was able to include so many intimate details about his life in the novel. In fact, it provides many of the answers as to how the novel felt so intimately familiar. After a brief but dramatic disagreement with Leo, Albie leaves, but the stage is set for the dramatic ending of Franny and Leo's relationship.

Chapter Six ends with some new insights into the divorce between Beverly and Bert. They divorced several years after Cal's death, but it is cited by both of them as the cause of their divorce. Bert blames Cal's death on Beverly because she left the children unsupervised on his parents' farm. With all the adults on the farm, Beverly feels this accusation to be extremely unfair. Beverly and the children felt unwelcome at Bert's parents' farm, especially since the offer to visit was made so that they could see their son, not his second wife and the children. Bert however was too busy keeping up an affair with a paralegal to stay in the country. By the time Albie arrived in Virginia after setting the fire at school, more than five years later, the marriage was hanging on by a thread that snapped shortly thereafter.



## Analysis

As foreshadowed in Chapter Four, the relationship has soured for Franny long before she ends it. Amagansett symbolizes the worst aspects of Leo Posen and their relationship: Leo's fixation with status symbols and Franny being trapped into a position where she is taken advantage of. Franny is ill-fitted for the muse/mistress role that she is forced into, and that is symbolized by her inability to fit into the actress's shoes. Franny is "Cinderella's ungainly stepsister" (193), and similar to Cinderella, she is expected to cook, clean, and serve Leo and his guests. Like her big feet, Franny's intellect and potential is too big to be forced into that role. While Franny might have felt a strong connection to the working class, especially to Jerrell, while she worked in the restaurant, it is not work that she finds fulfilling.

The most overt symbol in Chapter Four is the lobsters. Franny readily identifies with the lobsters: "...the thought of each separate lobster in the dark was every bit as excruciating as the thought of Ariel Posen coming to Amagansett, either that or she was experiencing some sort of emotional transference" (204). Franny frees the lobsters in part as an act of defiance, but also because she can not quite free herself-yet. Albie serves as a catalyst for Franny being set free. The relationship between Franny and Albie begins to be delineated in Chapter Six. By freeing Franny from Leo Posen, Albie is reciprocating for when Franny freed Albie from his own entrapment. As a teenager, "[Albie] lived on the other side of a thick wall and so no one could take him into their arms, Franny took him into her arms and squeezed him hard" (220). Now, Franny, who has always been "...sweet and small, eager to please, quick to nap, always crawling into somebody's lap" (219) needs a push to free herself from a situation that has become a trap.

Leo Posen and his novel *Commonwealth* symbolize how the stories that are told publicly are less honest. As a published, award-winning author, Posen is ironically not a skilled storyteller; he is a thief and distorter of stories, and Franny, who is consummate consumer of genuine stories, is appropriately made almost physically ill by the finished product. Her time with Posen is what Franny needed to make the transition from her people-pleasing ways, and because Franny is characterized as too sweet and kind for her own good, it takes her longer than it should to realize that she needs to leave the relationship, but doing so is a major step towards her becoming a fulfilled adult.

## Discussion Question 1

Of all the children, Franny and Albie arguably share the closest bond. How do their journeys from childhood to adulthood compare?



## Discussion Question 2

What aspects of her environment in Amagansett symbolize Franny's inability to fit in, either socially or physically? What aspects seem to suggest that her relationship with Posen is approaching its end?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Franny's perception of Posen change in Chapter Six?

## Vocabulary

sentry, raucous, categorically, abstinence, ungainly, refusenik, proximity, excruciating

# Chapter Seven

## Summary

The novel moves ahead to the same time period as Chapter Two, approximately 20 years after the events of Chapter Six. Leo Posen has been dead for 15 years; Caroline and Franny are now married with families of their own, and they trade off flying to Los Angeles to spend time with their father. Due to the advanced state of his cancer, they are both in town for his birthday. Franny, Fix, and Caroline decide to see *Commonwealth*, the movie, which turns out to be a glamorized misrepresentation of their lives. Most memorably, Beverly is no longer a housewife, but a doctor in perfectly tailored scrubs having an affair. Fix decides shortly that he has had enough of the film, and after an emotional outburst, storms out with the assistance of his daughters.

Afterwards, Franny receives a message from Albie (whom she has become close with) asking her to check in on his mother. Fix insists on seeing Teresa, whom he has not seen in a very long time. Teresa spent her working life as a paralegal; now she lives alone in the same house in Torrance, California. For three days, she has had severe stomach pain, but she is resistant to seeking medical treatment. Teresa gathers all of her legal documents and writes a brief note.

The Keatings arrive in time to take Teresa to the hospital, where she is diagnosed with a diverticular abscess. During the drive and her time spent in the hospital, Teresa reflects on previous visits to the Emergency Room, including the first time that Cal was stung by a bee and they discovered his allergy. This explains why Cal always had Benadryl on hand, Benadryl that was given to Albie on that fateful day in Virginia. The details of Cal's death are finally clarified - not only was Cal not alone when he died, but the girls thought he was faking being stung "for show." As the oldest, Caroline removed the gun he had tied to his leg and then created a narrative for the rest of the children that was intended to shield them from any blame for Cal's death.

Chapter Seven ends with Fix asking Franny to assist him in ending his own life by holding the gun while he pulls the trigger. As she lies awake later that night, she receives a call from the hospital that Teresa Cousins has died.

## Analysis

Being forced to sit through the movie *Commonwealth* represents the final punishment for Franny for betraying the family story to an outsider. Appropriately, the movie itself is hackneyed and poorly done, and sitting through it is painful for all three of the Keatings. It is no surprise that the family cannot sit through it. The process of watching the movie also harkens to the motifs of the unreliability of memories and the importance of point of view in telling stories. The movie, like the book, represents a different telling of the events that played out as remembered by any of the participants; while it is inaccurate,



so too are memories notoriously faulty, As the ambiguity of the events surrounding Cal's death shows, the memories of an event can be remembered inaccurately by choice.

Chapter Seven begins to explore the strong bonds that exist between the Cousins and Keatings, including between Teresa and Fix. To the surprise of his daughters, Fix knows Teresa and feels a strong connection to her. "The four girls used to talk about it in their bunk beds at night when they were all together for the summer, how perfect it would be if Caroline and Franny's father could marry Holly and Jeanette's mother" (241). While they have only met in person a handful of times, Teresa's interactions with Fix on the way to the hospital are very spousal, due in part to the way they are bonded through their children. In many ways, their lives have run in parallel: both were stuck in less glamorous jobs than they were capable of, and both were left behind by their spouse in pursuit of someone who had some characteristic - in the case of Bert, his profession and the status that comes with it; for Beverly, her noted beauty-that made them seem less desirable.

Contrasting with the fictionalized version of the events surrounding Cal's death is the final reveal of what really happened, as told by Caroline and Franny. Previous chapters have hinted at what happened and included tiny tweaks that made it seem like his death was inevitable. Whether or not this is accurate is unclear, however, both of the Keating daughters still feel guilt over the events, many years later. This is reminiscent of their father's guilt about the events surrounding Lomer's death; similar to their father, while they conclude there was almost nothing they could have done differently, they are still haunted by the events.

Fix's gun that he carried as a policeman is a strong symbol of his identity. That he requires assistance to use it symbolizes that he can no longer function as the person he was, and that he is ready for death.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What do the characters' reaction reveal about how the movie hits close to home? Do you think the Hollywood-ization is more bothersome than the more accurate aspects?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What events have bonded Fix and Teresa? How are they similar personalities?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why do you think Fix asks Franny to help him end his life instead of his "favorite" Caroline? Does her response surprise you?

## Vocabulary

acquiescence, supplicants, flotilla, changeling, hapless, chivalrous, tantamount



# Chapter Eight

## Summary

Upon her retirement, Teresa visits Holly in Switzerland at a meditative retreat that Holly has made her home. During the journey, Teresa reflects back on her previous trip to Europe, as well as shifts her relationship with her companion for that trip, her new husband, Bert Cousins, and the rapid descent of her feelings for him, from unconditional love, to tolerance, to consuming hatred, to finally indifference. The visit to Switzerland represents a leap into new territory for Teresa. The flight is long and arduous for her, but it gives her time to reflect on her previous trip to Europe as her honeymoon with Bert. The contrast between the two trips is stark; when Teresa went to Europe with Bert, the trip with Bert was a surprise and Teresa was dependent on his planning and guidance. The planning of the trip to Switzerland was completely independent. Teresa startles herself by thinking about "...the beautiful boy Bert Cousins had been, tall and sandy blond, with such dark blue eyes they startled her every morning when he opened them" (276). Given the progression of her feelings for Bert after their divorce, from hate to indifference, the thought that she was once so in love with him is hard to "... hold the thought in her mind" (277). After all the time that has passed, she has finally forgiven Bert. "She had lived long enough that Bert and all the love and rage he engendered were gone," however, "Cal was still with her" (278).

A misunderstanding of a doctor's order for "medication" (she thought she heard meditation) lead Holly to go to Switzerland. At first it was temporary, but it became her permanent home. She has made peace with the events surrounding Cal's death, and found a new appreciation for the imperfect relationship she had with him. Both mother and daughter are surprised by the other's appearance when they are reunited, but the intensity of their love for one of another is immediate and intense. Despite the years - "...ten years? More than that? - she was flooded with love, such a huge wave, both her love and her brothers" (283). The quiet and solitude have allow Holly to make peace with the regret about not having a closer relationship with Cal before his death, and it is finally in Chapter Eight that the same environment fosters a vision of startling clarity for Teresa of the events surrounding Cal's death.

## Analysis

Switzerland represents an opportunity for both Holly and her mother to escape from the distractions of living in California to finally work through their own thoughts and feelings. As the spokesperson who had to tell her mother about Cal's death and the events of that dreadful day, Holly has a greater burden of guilt than either of her siblings. The bond between mother and daughter is still extremely strong, in part because of all of her children, Teresa feels like Holly was "the least mysterious" (274). With her children spread so far from home, Teresa is the focal point that keeps the family connected.





Ironically, it is the child who spent most of her youth and adolescence in silence who grows up to "like all the noise, her tight little space" in New York (285).

While some of the previous chapters, in particular Chapter Three and Chapter Four, deal with non-specific events that barely create memories, Chapter Eight explores what is possible when the noise and static of those routine occurrences is silenced. The revelation that Teresa experiences at the end of the chapter represents the final catharsis she needs to understand what happened to her son, Cal. The non-linear structure of the novel places this catharsis in the chapter following Teresa's death, a plot device that magnifies the impact that catharsis has on both Teresa and the reader.

## Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the experience Teresa and Holly have in Switzerland. The meditation center has a similar effect on both of them; however, Teresa is eager to leave after her time there, but Holly is not. What does this say about their feelings surrounding Cal's death?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Patchett has the events in Chapter Eight follow Chapter Seven, in which Teresa dies?

## Discussion Question 3

How would you describe the impact that the retreat has on Teresa? Do you think she would have the same revelation outside of the retreat that she does at the very end of Chapter Eight?

## Vocabulary

doddering, dharma, condescension, tandem, chalet, idleness



# Chapter Nine

## Summary

Chapter Nine continues where Chapter Seven left off. Fix is still alive the following Christmas. Franny and Caroline flip a coin to decide who is going to visit Beverly and who is going to visit Fix. Franny and her family go to visit Beverly and her third husband, Jack Dine who is a successful car dealership owner with a large family. Kumar and Franny fantasize about skipping the holidays with family all together.

Chapter Nine goes into detail about how Kumar and Franny reconnected. Following the death of his first wife, Kumar had a chance meeting with Franny while she was waitressing. Almost on sight he offered her a job, and worked out the details that not only would they work together, but that they would get married as well.

On a lark, Franny goes out to visit Bert, who is still living in the same house that he shared with Beverly and her daughters. Bert greets her as “the ghost of Christmas past” (314), and their conversation has distinctive tinge of nostalgia.

The chapter and the novel end with Franny remembering a very similar night many years distant when she could not find Albie, who was hiding outside in a sleeping bag because he was worried if he came in the house, everyone would know he was stoned. She stayed with him until they both lost feeling in their feet.

## Analysis

Similar to the opening, the novel ends with a large, confusing gathering of family; the story has come full circle. Much of the chapter deals with the bonds that bind together a family, and how given enough time, bonds that have been strained or broken can be healed. “This was the pleasure of a long life: the way some things worked themselves out” (300). While Caroline and her mother had a rocky relationship during Caroline’s youth and early adulthood, they have become very close with time. Franny shares a close bond with her husband and her stepchildren. The fact that she did not give birth to them does not keep her from seeing them as her sons, or them from seeing her as their mother. These relationships, similar to Franny’s closeness with Albie, tie into the motif that some of the most powerful family bonds exists outside of blood relationships.

Appropriately, in a parallel to the events of the first chapter, Franny finds herself seeking Bert. When she calls him to announce that she is going to visit him, he answers “as if he’d been waiting for exactly this call” (314). While Franny feels bonded to her father, without a doubt she shares a strong kinship with Bert, something that has been developed since the very first time he held her in Chapter One. Bert in turn feels more fatherly affection towards Franny than towards his own children. “Always she was the baby he had carried around Fix Keating’s party. The most beautiful baby he had ever seen” (315).



Returning to Bert's house brings back powerful memories for Franny. The particular memory that surfaces of searching for Albie on a snowy day demonstrates the close kinship Franny feels with Albie. Unlike so much of her history with Albie, this is story that Franny realizes she has not shared with anyone else. Patchett uses this insight as a final thought on the value of not sharing all the stories. "Now she [Franny] understood that at some point far out in the future there would be a night just like tonight, and she would remember this story and know that no one else in the world knew it happened except Albie" (322). While there is a great value in sharing stories with the next generation, sometimes it is valuable to save some of the gems for oneself.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Beverly's third husband compare to her first two? What insight do we gain on her character from her choice of spouse?

## Discussion Question 2

Kumar decides instantly that he is going to marry Franny. How does this contrast with Franny's relationship with Leo Posen?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Franny felt compelled to visit Bert?

## Vocabulary

miscegenation, acquisitions, behemoth, impunity



# Characters

## Francis "Fix" Keating

The first husband of Beverly and father of Franny and Caroline. He is a working class cop and, despite being separated from his daughters after the divorce, a devoted father. He is observant and blessed (or cursed) with a great memory. He is a masterful storyteller, which makes him highly valued by the other characters. At one point, he attempts to leave law enforcement to become a lawyer; however he is unable to pass the California Bar Exam despite repeated attempts.

He is a foil for Albert "Bert" Cousins. While Bert is focused on style and appearances, Fix is focused on substance. Fix also contrasts with Leon Posen: while Leon Posen is an author, Fix is a storyteller.

## Frances "Franny" Keating

The younger daughter of Fix and Beverly, and sister to Caroline. The events of her christening party set the course for the novel. She is described as kinder than her sister but not as smart. Unlike her sister, she drops out of law school at the University of Chicago early in her third year and works as a cocktail waitress until she meets Leon Posen, an author. She becomes his muse and mistress, and her family history and childhood are the inspiration for his masterpiece, titled *Commonwealth*. Franny eventually becomes disillusioned and unfulfilled with Leo, and leaves him to resume her life in Chicago, working again as a cocktail waitress. After a time is reunited with her friend Kumar, who offers her a job at his firm and eventually marries her.

Franny is an avid consumer of stories: she is characterized as being a lover of books, and often finds herself wishing she had spent more time with her father so that she could have heard more of the stories that he will take with him after he dies.

## Albert "Bert" Cousins

Bert is a District attorney who shows up uninvited at the christening party of Franny Keating and promptly falls in love with her mother. He is the husband of Teresa before leaving her for Beverly Keating, and the father of Holly, Cal, Jeanette, and Albie. Proud, intellectually arrogant, and a negligent father, Bert develops a fatherly attachment to Franny at the party that in many ways is closer than any of the relationships he has with his biological children. A womanizer, Bert eventually cheats on and leaves Beverly. At the end of the novel, he is unmarried and all but estranged from his biological children.



## **Albert “Albie” Cousins**

Albie is the youngest of the Cousins children. As a child he is often given his brother Cal's Benadryl to keep him from being a burden. As a teenager he joins a bicycle gang and becomes an amateur arsonist. Both as a child and as an adolescent, he is treated like a wild, unruly, burden to both his parents and his siblings. This feeling of being unwanted shapes much of his emotional development, and it is not until he lives with his sister Jeanette that he finally starts to develop an attachment with his biological family.

After accidentally setting fire to the school art room, he is sent through a series of private or military schools, before finally becoming estranged from his family for about eight years. He reemerges in New York City at Jeanette's apartment and begins to put his life on track. After reading Commonwealth, he confronts Leo Posen and in the process reconnects with Franny. Franny and Albie become close.

## **Teresa Cousins**

Teresa is Bert's first wife, and the mother of Cal, Holly, Jeanette, and Albie. Teresa is stubborn, and after her divorce, jaded and independent. After the divorce, she is able to obtain a position as paralegal to support herself and her children, which works for the rest of her career. As a single mother, she is frequently spread thin and frazzled.

Teresa never remarries, but she does have a long relationship with an attorney named Jimmy Chen that ends with his death. Following her retirement, a visit to Holly in Switzerland gives her the clarity she needs to intuit the truth about Cal's death and finally make peace with losing her son.

## **Beverly Keating/Cousins/Dine**

Beverly is Fix's first wife. She leaves him for Bert Cousins, thus setting in motion the events of the novel. Beverly is the mother of Franny and Caroline, and is noted for her beauty and femininity. Similar to Teresa, she is frequently driven to the brink by the children, however unlike Teresa, she never has to work to support herself.

## **Caroline Keating**

Caroline is the older Keating sister. She is smart and hard working; very much the typical "overachiever" older sibling. When Cal Cousins dies from a bee sting, it is Caroline who takes charge of the situation. Growing up, the Keating sisters were not close, however, as they matured they begin to feel a kinship.

As an adult, Caroline is a patent lawyer and lives in Silicon Valley with software designer husband, Wharton, and their son Nick.



## Cal Cousins

Cal is Teresa and Bert's oldest child. He has a horrible allergy to bees that makes it necessary for him to have Benadryl on hand at all times. His death from a bee sting is a major event in the novel, but it is only told retrospectively and true course of events is not revealed until late in the novel when Teresa finally intuits the truth at a meditative retreat.

## Holly Cousins

Holly is the second oldest Cousins child. Holly was "almost fourteen was good at pretty much everything" (151), and as such became responsible for the family budget. After college and some time spent working for bank, she goes on a meditative retreat in Switzerland, where she eventually decides to stay permanently.

## Jeanette Cousins

The second-to-youngest of the Cousins children, Jeanette is the first to have been born in California. Together with Albie she is a part of a "team that neither one of them wanted" (149). During her youth she was especially quiet. As an adult she marries Fodé, an epidemiologist from Guinea. Together they have a child named Calvin or "Dayo."

## Wallis

Wallis is Beverly's oldest and closest friend and is a bridesmaid at Beverly's first and third weddings. Fix blames Wallis' talk of "free love" and "liberation" for his divorce from Beverly.

## Lomer

Lomer was Fix's partner. A "smart heterosexual cop who loved kids and looked like Steve McQueen and didn't have a girlfriend" (45), he died in the line of duty during a gas station robbery while Fix was in the car. Fix remembers him for his upstanding character and his exacting taste in his coffee.

## Leon "Leo" Posen

Leo is a famous author who Franny meets while working as a cocktail waitress. He is significantly older than her. Franny tells Leo the story of her family and childhood, which he in turn uses as the inspiration for his novel, Commonwealth. His relationship to Franny meets its spectacular end during a summer in Amagansett, where Leo has stationed the couple so he can write his next masterpiece.



Leo has had two previous wives, one whom he is still married to during his relationship with Franny. His daughter, Ariel, despises Franny, and her coming to Amagansett is especially stressful for Franny.

## **Kumar**

Kumar is Franny's onetime roommate, fellow law student, and eventual husband. His first wife dies shortly after the death of their second child from a heart defect.

## **Fodé**

Fodé is Jeanette's husband. He is an epidemiologist from Guinea. Recognizing that Albie too is a bit of an outcast in Brooklyn, Fodé enthusiastically welcomes Albie into their home when Albie makes his reappearance.

## **Ernestine**

Ernestine is the housekeeper of Bert's parents. During the summers that the Cousins children are in Virginia, she provides minimal supervision.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Albie's braid

A long, dark, twisted braid, it represents the journey Albie's taken since he disappeared from the family.

## The soundtrack at the Palmer House

A mix that repeats every two hours, the soundtrack at the Palmer House represents the passage of time as unobserved by most.

## The lobsters

The lobsters bought by Marisol for dinner in Amagansett represent wealth and privilege, but they also represent how Franny feels consumed and trapped by her environment

## Fix's gun

A thirty-eight Smith and Wesson, Fix's gun represents Fix's identity. The fact that he can no longer handle it demonstrates he is ready to end his life.

## Fire

Fire symbolizes Albie's youth; it is uncontrollable, mysterious, and incredibly destructive when mismanaged.

## California

The initial setting of the novel, California represents a return to routine, comfort and enduring family bonds for many of the characters.

## High Heels

When Franny stops wearing high heels as a waitress to get good tips, it represents her leaving the societal expectations behind in order to be with Leon Posen.



## **Benadryl**

Benadryl represents deception and the theft of time and memories. Albie is given Benadryl as a child so that he would be asleep and his older siblings did not need to deal with him, which caused him to miss out on stories from his childhood. His older siblings lied to him and said the Benadryl were "tic-tacs" for his stinky breath. Similarly, Benadryl caused Fix to fall asleep during his chemotherapy while he is telling stories to Franny.

## **The Actress's Shoes in Amagansett**

Franny being unable to fit into the shoes in the closet, symbolizes that she is too smart and capable to be forced into the role that she plays in Amagansett of muse/mistress/housekeeper.

## **The novel and film Commonwealth**

Both the novel and the film Commonwealth symbolize the perversion of a story after it has gone through too many tellings by individuals not involved.



# Settings

## Los Angeles/Southern California

Los Angeles is setting of the christening party, and long time home of Fix Keating and Teresa Cousins. The four Cousins children live with their mother in Los Angeles during the school year, but after college none of live there with their families as adults.

## Chicago

Franny moves to Chicago initially to study law, but after dropping out, it is where she works as a cocktail waitress when she meets Leo Posen. It is also the city Franny returns to after her relationship ends with Leo. After returning to Chicago, Franny reconnects with her former classmate Kumar, who promptly offers her a job at his firm, and eventually marries her. Franny settles in Chicago with Kumar and his two children permanently.

## Virginia

Virginia is the birthplace of the older Cousins children (Holly and Cal), and where Bert and Beverly relocate to after their wedding. Following the divorce between Fix and Beverly, the two Keating sisters live in Virginia, and the four Cousins children travel to Virginia to be with their father during the summer. It is during one of these summer visits that Cal dies from anaphylactic shock after being stung by a bee, and is afterwards buried in Virginia.

Both Bert and Beverly remain in Virginia after their divorce, and the novel ends there during a large family gather for Christmas.

## Amagansett

Amagansett is small hamlet in the Hamptons. Leo and Franny spend a summer there while he writes Commonwealth, amidst a revolving door of guests.

## New York City

Jeanette and her family, husband Fodé and son Calvin or “Dayo”, live in New York City. After a prolonged absence, Albie shows up at their apartment with minimal explanation as to where he has spent the last eight years. While in New York, Albie establishes himself as bike messenger and begins to progress towards a more stable lifestyle.

## Switzerland

Burnt out on life in California, Holly goes to Switzerland for meditative retreat. Eventually she moves there permanently, and her mother comes to visit her at the meditation center. During a moment of clarity during her time at the meditation center, Teresa is able to intuit the events surrounding her oldest son's death, and in the process, finally make peace with the loss.



# Themes and Motifs

## Ownership of Stories

Throughout *Commonwealth*, the author demonstrates that stories belong not only to the people involved, but also to the people directly impacted by the course of events. Being let in on those stories is a privilege and when that privilege is abused, the consequences can be painful. In one sense, this means that stories belong principally to the participants and witnesses of the events, but also that 'ownership' involves taking care of and protecting the stories. The consequences of failing to do so, whether it be sharing the stories with the wrong audience, intentionally altering the story, or simply failing to pass the story on can lead to considerable grief.

In *Commonwealth*, the consequence for each of these breaches is critical to development of the plot. Franny shares the story of her childhood, including the story of Cal's death with Leo Posen, who pens a bestselling novel based around the events, and in the process "robbed her blind" (46). When this novel is turned into a film, it further exacerbates the shame Franny feels over sharing the stories outside of the family. At the end of the novel, Franny at last begins to understand the value of "keep[ing] something for herself" (322). When Caroline imposes a fabricated story about the events surrounding Cal's death to avoid any appearance of wrongdoing by the other children it creates additional confusion and might even hamper the healing process for many involved. Finally, as pointed out by Franny during her interactions with Fix in the chapters focused on the later events, when Fix dies, he takes with him all of his stories that he was not able to pass on to Franny and Caroline. This is portrayed as troubling and a source of grief for Franny.

Throughout the novel, holding the position of narrator can be both a burden and source of catharsis. When Holly has to tell her mother their modified story of how Cal dies, it is emotionally challenging. "Had no one told her? Hadn't their father explained things? It wasn't fair that everything fell to Holly but it did" (152). Later Jeanette is "surprised by how good it felt to tell the truth about something" (157).

## Unreliability of Memory

Throughout the novel, the author shows how different participants remember events is affected by the point of view of those participants as well as how those participants choose to 'shape' the events.

Despite having a clear sighting of the man who shot his partner Lomer, Fix is unable to recall his face. In fact, his memory has instead replaced the shooter's face with the face of the last man who Fix and Lomer arrested together. In some instances, a character's understanding of the events changes with time, as seen with how Beverly and Bert attribute their death to Cal's death, when in actuality their marriage was already



unraveling prior, and continued to sputtering along for almost six more years after his death.

Franny “was shaping the story in her head even as he was sitting in front of her” (98) when she meets Leo Posen. She is already creating the narrative that she will remember, and this demonstrates how right in the moment, how the memory is formed and then retold later is shaped by how it is made and the focus of the person recalling the events. This focus is different from participant to participant, and can create variation in the retelling of events. The more participants, the more difficult it is to establish an accurate account of what happened.

The most powerful example of this is Cal's death and how Caroline creates a partially fabricated version of events that usurps the actual memories of the other children. While the three awake children will probably have a similar recounting of how events took place, the story that Albie has created to make sense of the events is wildly inaccurate and deviates significantly from the version that Caroline and the other children tell.

## Truth in Simplicity

The language throughout the novel is noticeably straightforward and unaffected which intentionally recalls a sense of being an observer of a family history. The most honest and reliable points of view are the least sophisticated, namely Teresa and Fix. They are also the most trustworthy characters and narrators. Other characters, such as Bert and Leo Posen, who are focused on either luxury or status and prestige, are portrayed as dishonest and untrustworthy.

In the case of Bert, the contrast centers around Bert trying to appear other (usually better or more important) than he is: he is never completely honest with the other characters as to his motivations, and he is not as impressive as he would like to seem. He is mostly driven by the pursuit of material possessions and status symbols, like a fancy seeming car and a beautiful wife. Contrary to Fix, who feels that the children should all earn legal degrees so that they can be financially stable, Bert feels that the children should pursue a legal education because a law degree is an impressive thing to have. Similarly, Leo Posen aims to seem more impressive and far wealthier than he is, and from Fix's point of view, he is a thief as well. Leo is not the great storyteller he thinks himself to be, and the luxurious house that he inhabits in Amagansett is not his own.

## Self-Determination

While others can be catalysts for personal growth and development, the most fulfilling events are self-created and self-driven. As Franny demonstrates during her summer in Amagansett, others such as Albie can help push her towards independence and a rewarding career indirectly, but it is only Franny who can make the decision to leave Leo Posen and return to Chicago. For Franny this is not a straight line towards self-actualization, but instead a progression of freeing herself from her need to fulfill other's



expectations. This starts with quitting law school, then leaving her relationship with Leo Posen once it has become stifling and restrictive.

Similarly, when Teresa stops listening to Bert and begins to start her own course, she becomes her own realized person. Teresa reaches the apex of her character arc in Switzerland, when she quiets her mind and is finally able to intuit - without any input from her who were present - the events surrounding her son Cal's death. This represents the incredible value of self-reflection and internal focus, but also highlights that while it is impossible to control everything that happens in life, it is possible for an individual to control how they interpret and find meaning in events, which in turn dictates how they tell their version of that story.

## Family Bonds

The profound connections between individuals, even individuals not bound by blood, can run deep and has profound influence on character development. Despite only being step-siblings for a short period, Albie and Franny are deeply connected because they have been present during pivotal moments in each other's lives. Because of these shared moments, they are in many ways, much closer with each other than they are with their blood siblings.

Likewise, Albie is deeply influenced by Fix, who has only interacted with Albie briefly but during times of critical development, such as after Albie set the school fire and when his mother was dying. Because of his actions during these highly impactful moments, Fix has established a deeply meaningful bond with Albie.

Both Albie and Franny also have strong bonds that bind them to their blood siblings, and especially in the case of Albie, his bond with his blood sister Jeanette proves to be critical to him maturing beyond his drug-addled bike messenger days. Jeanette and Albie bonded as the youngest siblings in the Cousins family, and that bond is strong enough for him to find her when he needs a stable environment to help him find stable footing and embrace adulthood.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel rotates between points of view and often transitions from events in present time to memories. One constant throughout is an omniscient narrator that is able to delve into each character's side of a story. Often within a chapter the focus changes from one character to another, which allows Patchett to explore the unreliability of a single point of view. By being omniscient, the narration is not tied down to one version of events, but is instead able to develop a more nuanced story than if the story was told from a single character's point of view. Particular focus is given to Franny, Albie, and Fix, however Bert, Beverly, Holly, and Jeanette are also focal points for sections of chapters.

## Language and Meaning

The language used throughout is simple and unaffected, creating a sense of reading a family history. Combined with the non-linear structure, this creates a connection between past events and the current situation as it unfolds. Beyond the events, the trustworthiness of characters both major and minor is determined by how they use language. Characters like Bert and Marisol in Chapter 6 share a duplicity in their language. Marisol "eat [s] fish socially" (188), a statement that is not only pretentious, but is shown to be false when Marisol buys lobsters for everyone.

Characters such as Fix who use simpler language and are straightforward with their telling of events are depicted as having seemingly simple, but profound insights. With regards to Albie and he was named, Fix is the one to make the connection between how the Cousin family dynamics - i.e. Bert becoming increasingly selfish and distant from his family at the time of Albie's birth, as well as beginning of Bert's involvement with Beverly - influence Albie's early years: "If I'd named Albie I wouldn't have given him such a stupid name. You could trace a lot of that kid's problems back to his name" (25). Fix is not only wise enough to realize the situation and Albie's childhood problems can not be blamed on him, however that he influenced Albie's naming foreshadows how Fix will have a small but critical influence on Albie's development. Instead of waxing philosophically or poetically about this, Fix's language is blunt and straight to the point.

## Structure

The novel utilizes a non-linear narrative, which allows Patchett to develop events and characters in greater detail. An event is introduced, often from the point of view of one character, and then dived into again later by a different character who adds different details and a potentially different version of events. This structure also suggests that the nature of memory and storytelling is fluid. To fully understand the main focus of the story, it is often important to revisit past events that strongly influence the event at the



heart of the narrative. These supporting stories can sometimes overtake the main narrative and become stories in and of themselves. Many chapters transition from one event in the present time to a description of an event or time period that has influenced the events transpiring in present time. For instance, in Chapter Two, the initial focus is on Fix and his chemotherapy treatment. However, the chapter later shifts to a narrative focused on Fix's relationship with his onetime partner Lomer. As a policeman who died young and in his prime, his story is vastly different from Fix's story, and the highlighted contrasts between Fix's life and Lomer's life dramatically alter the reader's understanding of Fix's character.

Chapters Five and Nine are additional examples of Chapters starting in present time and then transitioning to the past to give new insight on current events. Chapter Five starts with the reemergence of Albie in New York City before exploring the events of Albie's adolescence that lead to him being a drug-addicted bike messenger. This structuring creates the feeling that Albie is at last building towards maturity and adulthood, which is borne out in later chapters when it is revealed that he has married and started a family. The structuring of Chapter Nine is not as dramatic: it starts with a large family Christmas gathering before flashing back to a seemingly insignificant event from a Christmas past featuring Albie and Franny bonding in the snow while getting stoned.





## Quotes

Fix Keating had fewer children and a nicer watch and a foreign car and a much-better-looking wife. The guy hadn't even made detective. If anyone had bothered to ask him at that moment, Cousins would have said it seemed suspicious.

-- Narrator/Bert (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Much of the character development throughout the novel comes from comparing one character against another. Here, Bert is comparing himself against his foil, Fix, who despite having a less fancy job title and less education, has many things that Bert envies.

This was the deal of taking her father to chemo when none of the doctors spoke in terms of a cure: this was the time she had, these were the stories she was going to get... more than anything it was to have a chance at the stories he was going to take with him.

-- Narrator/Franny (chapter 2 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** With the separation of her parents, Franny and her sister missed out on the stories Fix has to share about his life on the police force. Franny acutely feels the loss of the time and the opportunities it presented to bond with her father and hear his stories and the wisdom they impart.

Half the things in this life I wish I could remember and the other half I wish I could forget.

-- Fix (chapter 2 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** The curse of a long life and good memory is the potential for being haunted by stories from the past. Memory is not infallible however, and even the best memory can have gaps. There is no such thing as a completely accurate narrator.

It was like that for the rest of the summer. It was like that every summer the six of them were together. Not that the days were always fun, most of them weren't, but they did things, real things, and they never got caught.

-- Omnipresent Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** In between the major, pivot events is a seemingly endless stream of days, none of which is particularly memorable, but put together create a sense of an experience. The summers that the children spent together were formative and critical to their development, and while overall the experience was not resoundingly positive, those summers were deeply meaningful.

No," she said, and she would have told him. "I only ever wanted to be a reader.

-- Franny (chapter 4 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Franny is an avid reader and consumer of stories, hence there is an irony that Leo Posen will take her on to be his muse and inspiration for his masterpiece. This



quotes how Franny is, especially in her youth, a receiver of stories rather than a teller of stories.

...Jeanette wrote off both the state and its residents, including, but not limited to, her father, both sets of grandparents, her uncles and aunts, a handful of first cousins, and her two stepsisters. Goodbye to all of that. She hunkered down with what she considered to be her real family: Teresa, Holly, and Albie - the three people who were with her in the house in Torrance when she brushed her teeth at night.

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Commonwealth deals heavily with family bonds. This quote highlights that just as family bonds can be made with non-blood relatives, so too can they be destroyed with blood relatives.

On that worst of all August days in Virginia, Caroline had already decided to become a lawyer, and so she told the other girls - Holly and Franny and Jeanette - exactly what had happened even though they'd been right there.

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** This quote highlights the incredible power of choice and self-determination in both memory and narrative creation. Caroline creates a narrative to protect the kids from any potential consequences (real or imagined) resulting from Cal's death. The other participants - Franny and Jeanette - readily embrace this version of events over how they remember it individually. This points to the willingness many experience to selectively remember events so that they are not so painful or personally damaging.

They bound themselves together with a little tape and soldiered on, and even though their marriage held for nearly six years after Cal's death, neither of them would remember it that way. They would say their separate griefs had broken them apart much earlier.

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Beverly and Bert have created a narrative regarding the events that led to their divorce, and while it has a seed of truth - that Cal's death tore them apart - given the span of years between his death and their divorce, it is clearly not the full story and is purposefully tailored. The unreliability of memory is a motif throughout the novel, and as this quote highlights, it is selective in nature, which adds to its unreliability.

Additionally, this quote highlights how a specific event can take on a much greater significance than entire years with regards how it shapes memory and narrative. This mimics the structure of the novel, which skims over spans of years in order to focus on critical events which direct the course of the narrative.

What happened to Lomer, that's the anomaly. For the vast majority of the people on this planet, the thing that's going to kill them is already on the inside. You understand that, don't you, Franny?

-- Fix (chapter 7 paragraph 6)



**Importance:** Blessed with an excellent memory, it takes many years for Fix to finally stop being haunted by Lomer. Similarly, Franny is haunted by Cal's death, and the feeling that she could have done something differently. Fix is trying to impart the wisdom of his long years, that the way to make peace with the events of a story is to accept the outcome and that there are times when you need realize that nothing could have been done differently.

Teresa was shocked by the roaming idleness of her mind, as if she was sifting through trash on the side of the freeway and was stopped, enchanted by every foil gum wrapper. She came back for a single breath but found herself reflecting on the bean salad they'd had for dinner, some kind of pink beans in there she hadn't seen since childhood.

-- Teresa (chapter 8 paragraph 290)

**Importance:** So much of life involves dealing with the mundane. Teresa has been caught up in the day-to-day of her life for so long that achieving stillness, even for a single breath, is incredibly challenging. This makes it difficult to find meaning in memories, which as the end of Chapter Eight suggests, is absolutely essentially for losing the guilt associated with events in the past and achieving peace with painful memories.

Bert was as old as the rest of them but age arrived at different rates of speed, in different ways. Coming up the walk in the dark, the porch light bright above his head, Franny thought Bert Cousins still looked like himself.

-- Narrator/Franny (chapter 9 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Bert's appearance, like his character is minimally changed by the events of the novel, suggesting that his personal growth and character development were also likewise unchanged. Because he does not feel the guilt or loss that Teresa and Fix have felt, and as such, he does not have that moment of catharsis or release.

Now she understood that at some point far out in the future there would be a night just like tonight, and she would remember the story and know that no else in the world knew it had happened except Albie. She had needed to keep something for herself."

-- Franny (chapter 9 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** After telling the family history to Leo Posen and spending much of the time she has with her father lamenting all of the stories he will take with him, Franny has finally had the realization that there is great value in keeping some stories private.