

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant Study Guide

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant by Anne Tyler

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Contents

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1-2.....	5
Chapter 3-4.....	8
Chapter 5-6.....	12
Chapter 7-8.....	16
Chapter 9-10.....	20
Characters.....	23
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	33
Topics for Discussion.....	34

Plot Summary

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is an American novel by Anne Tyler, published in 1982. It was a finalist in 1983 for both the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award.

The novel tells the story of the Tull family over forty years, and their attempts to deal with the aftermath of their abandonment by Beck Tull. The story begins at 85-year-old Pearl Tull's deathbed, and then rotates from her point of view to that of each of her children, chapter by chapter, ending with her funeral. As each character reveals their memories of many of the same events, the reader gets differing perspectives and understanding of the psychological and emotional consequences of family dysfunction and the impact of memories.

Pearl Tull is a hard-working, emotionally distant woman who has been left abruptly by her husband Beck Tull to raise her three children alone. She is now blind and remembering her life. When she meets Beck, she is thirty years old and well on her way to being an old maid. Beck is 24 years old and a slick, handsome salesman who sweeps her off her feet. Because of his job, Beck moves Pearl and their family often, and as a result they lose contact with extended family and never develop contacts in the places they live.

Pearl and Beck have three children: Cody, Ezra and Jenny. When the children are ages 14, 11 and 9, Beck suddenly abandons the family, moving on to the next job without them, while they remain in Baltimore, Maryland. Pearl never explains Beck's absence to anyone, including the children, except to say he is away on business. She then gets a job and struggles to raise her children, often becoming both physically and verbally abusive to them.

As the point of view changes from character to character, the reader gets a picture of a family in crisis, never feeling their family is normal or connected. Cody is the most affected by his father's abandonment, and becomes an angry youth, obsessively jealous of his younger brother Ezra. Ezra is a softer-hearted boy who takes pleasure in playing music on his wooden recorder, and takes the role of the family healer through his interest in cooking. Jenny is a frequent victim of her mother's abuse, apparently because she is not fulfilling her mother's need for control.

As the children age, they attempt to construct a home and family to replace the one that dissatisfies them as children. Ezra gains a surrogate mother in the owner of a neighborhood restaurant, which he then inherits and transforms into the Homesick Restaurant, a place where food is served to comfort and give the diners what they need most, rather than what they ask for. When Ezra finds a girl named Ruth whose personality is down-to-earth and shares his love of food, Cody swoops in and seduces her away for himself. The result is a cool and awkward marriage, and Ruth tries very hard to fit into Cody's expectations.



Cody's adult life is an echo in some ways of his father's, in that he frequently moves his wife and child in pursuit of jobs, never allowing them to put down roots or get comfortable in a home. He persistently avoids contact with Pearl and his siblings, both because of his continuing jealousy of Ezra and his anger about his abusive childhood. Jenny goes to medical school, and marries three different men, the first of whom is very controlling like her mother. Her second husband abandons her with an infant daughter, and after an emotional breakdown, she moves back to Baltimore to be a pediatrician. She then marries a man with many children of his own.

Ezra never recovers from the loss of Ruth, abandoning the pleasure of making music and sinking himself into the development of his restaurant, which struggles in part because of his radical ideas about how it should be run. He lives with his mother Pearl until her death, caring for her as she loses her sight. He struggles with depression, but enjoys some of the closeness he has with Pearl.

The novel ends with Pearl's funeral, when Ezra attempts to get the entire family to sit down to a meal together finally, a seemingly simple activity that has always been interrupted and unsuccessful due to family discord or eating disorders. After many years of absence, Beck has been invited to attend at Pearl's request, and his appearance has the effect of reconciling Cody to his family and his memories.



Chapter 1-2

Summary

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant is Anne Tyler's ninth novel, published in 1982. As of 2012, she still lives in Baltimore, Maryland, where most of her novels are set.

Chapter 1. "Something You Should Know"

It is the fall of 1979, and 85 year old, nearly blind Pearl Tull is on her deathbed, thinking and dreaming about the past and her children. Her thoughts and memories are intertwined throughout the chapter with the present-day. Ezra is nearby, and when she's awake, they talk about what's on TV or about the family photos she keeps in a drawer. She is worried the family and the doctor will make her go to the hospital, while she prefers to die at home. She tells Ezra to invite everyone in her address book to her funeral, knowing the only person in it who is still alive is the husband who abandoned her.

When quiet or asleep, she remembers various incidents from her life. First, she remembers meeting Beck Tull, who is a slick, handsome salesman six years younger than she is. She is thirty years old, and her family had nearly given up the idea she'd get married. Beck and Pearl marry quickly when he gets transferred to another city.

This first move is only one of many, and this lifestyle leads to a delay in child-bearing, and also causes Pearl to lose touch with her family and have difficulty making social connections. Their marriage suffers because Pearl develops doubts about Beck.

Suddenly, in 1944, Beck announces he is moving to his next job without Pearl and their three children, who will remain in Baltimore, Maryland. He tells her he will send money, but that he won't be visiting the children. This separation happens very quickly, and Pearl is confused, not really believing he is gone. She hides the fact he has left the family, claiming to everyone he is away on business.

Checks from Beck don't cover expenses, so Pearl takes a job at the neighborhood grocery store as a cashier. Sometimes, Pearl receives letters with the child-support checks that include basic information such as where Beck's moving to next. She misses him, and blames herself for his leaving. She is afraid to tell the children the truth about his having left because she doesn't want to get emotional. After work, she spends her time on housework and maintenance, and is too tired to connect with the children.

Though Pearl regrets her anger and edginess as a mother, she feels proud of the fact that she did everything herself, and she kept Beck's absence a secret. Her only real mistake, she thinks, was marrying Beck. She broods on the fact that the children remember their childhoods so negatively.



She remembers a time when Beck returned from a business trip with an archery set for the children, which Pearl thought to be impractical and dangerous. While playing with the bow, Cody accidentally shoots Pearl in the shoulder. She blames Beck for the accident. Instead of taking her to the hospital, Beck pulls the arrow out and drives them home, where Pearl treats the wound herself. While Beck is away, an infection sets in and an allergy to penicillin nearly kills Pearl.

Chapter 2. "Teaching the Cat to Yawn"

The chapter is told from Cody Tull's point of view surrounding incidents when he was 14 years old, the year when Beck leaves them.

First, we revisit the archery accident. His father is disappointed in Cody's archery ability. When Ezra is persuaded to shoot, he miraculously shoots a bullseye that splits the arrow his father has angrily jammed into the target by hand. This upsets Cody, who begins to recklessly aim the bow and arrow at his family members. When Ezra sees what he's doing, he tackles Cody, which causes the arrow to fly and hit Pearl. Cody therefore faults Ezra for the accident.

Throughout the chapter, Cody recounts many incidents when he mistreats Ezra, commits cruel pranks on him, or finds a way to blame him for his own misbehavior. It is apparent that he is obsessively jealous of Ezra, thinking Ezra is Pearl's favorite child.

He remembers when he realized Beck was gone, and how confused he was about possible reasons why. He keeps quiet about it to his brother and sister, and is surprised when Jenny is the first to say out loud Beck has left them. When Cody confronts Pearl, she tries to shift her dependency onto him, which he rejects, reminding her how young he is.

Cody dreams of Beck's return, and frets because he doesn't remember what he looks like. In his dreams, he is a small child who wants desperately to please his father. He wonders how he caused Beck to leave.

Pearl's verbal and physical abuse of Jenny, Ezra and Cody is vicious and unpredictable. It causes the children to stay apart from the neighborhood children, and pull together for support.

When Cody begins to develop an interest in girls, he becomes upset when they are friendly with Ezra. He blames Ezra when his first love rejects him.

Cody's extremely competitive nature comes out when the family plays Monopoly, and he does anything to win, including cheat. He is usually banned from playing with them, as a result.

Cody feels like an outsider in his neighborhood, and blames Beck for the fact that Pearl has no friends or family connections. He wishes he could move to be with his father to escape his bad reputation, but fears he is unable to change or people might compare him unfavorably to Ezra.



Analysis

The title of Chapter 1 is “Something You Should Know,” which refers to how Pearl might begin to tell the children Beck has left permanently. She never does tell them, to the point of absurdity. It is only their isolation that permits the lack of information to continue. There are no other adult family members or even friends to assist her or tell the truth.

The reader’s first impression of Pearl is that she is strong, but as seen from Cody’s point of view, her strength looks more like denial and a hidden neediness that turns her against her children with violence and cruelty.

On her deathbed, Pearl is tired of being the bastion of the family, and the loss of her sight symbolizes a deeper blindness that never allows her to see how deeply her abusiveness and denial has hurt her family. She persistently avoids blaming herself, putting it all on Beck for having left. She seems to be truly puzzled about why her children turned out the way they did. She thinks of Jenny as detached, Ezra as too soft, and Cody as mean and angry. The reader never sees Pearl thinking of her children’s positive qualities.

The title of Chapter 2, “Teaching the Cat to Yawn,” refers to an incident when Cody is attempting to take photographs of a sleeping Ezra surrounded by incriminating magazines and liquor bottles. He gets distracted by Ezra’s cat, and tries to make her yawn for the camera, failing. When Ezra wakes, the cat yawns.

Cody is painfully, cripplingly jealous of Ezra, which leads him to perform everything from minor pranks to quite cruel acts in an attempt to make Ezra look bad in front of his friends and, especially, Pearl. Not only do these acts not appear to affect Ezra very deeply, they also don’t appear to change Pearl’s attitude toward Ezra. All Cody succeeds in doing is cause his mother to see him as petty and mean.

In the incident referred to by the Chapter title, Pearl reacts to Ezra’s supposed crime by reaching out to Cody for support, telling him how difficult it is to be a single parent. He rejects her by confessing his prank. He agrees with her that he is cruel. In some ways, he is defending himself against inappropriate responsibility for his age, but it also seems as if he keeps his distance from Pearl out of anger.

Vocabulary

croup, suffice, tactful, millstone, spinster, flamboyant, luster, pompadour, belligerent, infinite, reproaches, offhandedly, tranquil, competent, indulgent, pungent, obstinate, inadequate, borne, translucent, impulsive, furrowed, exasperated, unwieldy, composure, aligned, wistfully, tediously, rampages, meticulously, simpering, defiant, cosmopolitan, cajoled, dogged, gaudiest, radiant



Chapter 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3 “Destroyed by Love”

This chapter is told from Jenny’s point of view, starting at age seventeen. She is described as skinny, wearing out-of-fashion clothes and socially isolated. Cody is away at college, and Ezra has his first job at Scarlatti’s Restaurant, but has just been drafted by the army. Ezra asks Jenny to look in on Mrs. Scarlatti, his boss, and Josiah Payson, his childhood friend, because he is concerned for their well-being without him.

Pearl had planned to rent out the boys’ empty room, but she changes her mind because she misses Ezra. Jenny and her mother achieve a sort of truce, but only if Jenny does exactly as expected. She studies very hard, and the house seems to be haunted by the absence of the missing family members, including Beck. Their relationship is also haunted by Pearl’s past abuse of Jenny. Jenny has frequent nightmares about her mother.

When Cody writes letters home, they are short and to the point. Ezra’s, on the other hand, are long rambling letters that avoid saying anything meaningful. Jenny fails to fulfill her promise to visit Mrs. Scarlatti, but does go and visit Josiah. Josiah shares with Jenny Ezra’s plans for opening a restaurant, which comes to a complete surprise to her, as she knows her mother expects Ezra to go to college and become a teacher.

Jenny meets with Josiah two more times, the last time having dinner with him and his mother. When he walks her home, he kisses her unexpectedly, and when Pearl sees this, she gets verbally and physically abusive. Ezra returns home from the army unexpectedly, discharged for sleepwalking. He returns to his job at the restaurant, much to Pearl’s disappointment.

Jenny succeeds at college, and has plans to become a doctor. Cody, meanwhile, has succeeded as an efficiency expert. Ezra does well at Scarlatti’s, soon becoming the kitchen manager at the restaurant. Jenny avoids visiting home, and develops into a constantly busy person avoiding thoughts of her family.

In her senior year of college, Jenny falls in love with Harley Baines, who will be attending the same graduate school. Their relationship is awkward and businesslike, and she accepts his proposal of marriage by letter without knowing him well.

When she returns home to Baltimore to announce their engagement, she finds herself as the first of Ezra’s attempts to get the family together for dinner at the restaurant. Cody is there, bragging about his career success, and informs the family he’s been hired to shake up and streamline the Tanner Corporation, which Beck had worked for. The dinner is ruined by Pearl, because she gets upset with Cody’s insulting view of



Beck's company, and then leaves in a huff when Ezra announces he's been made a full partner in the restaurant, which she sees as a personal betrayal.

Jenny's marriage to Harley is an unhappy one, because he is insanely controlling and freakishly neat, criticizing her constantly. His obsession with Jenny's weight affects Jenny deeply. Pearl thinks Harley is perfect. Jenny returns to Baltimore to evaluate whether to stay married to him, but doesn't tell Ezra and Pearl about why she's there.

She visits Ezra at the restaurant, and discovers Josiah Payson is working there. Jenny realizes she's been thinking about him frequently. The next day, Jenny goes to visit Josiah and confesses her mistake in marrying Harley, and apologizes to Josiah.

There is another attempt at a family dinner at the restaurant, but things don't go well. Cody makes crude and jealous comments about Ezra, Ezra is busy with the food, and Pearl keeps going to the powder room. When Jenny goes to find her, she runs into Josiah. When Pearl sees them talking, she loses her temper and accuses Jenny of being a tramp, and only visiting Baltimore to see him. Though Jenny has told Josiah she feels badly for not standing up for herself, she fails to do so once again.

Chapter 4 "Heart Rumors"

This chapter is from Ezra's point of view, and starts when Mrs. Scarlatti is dying in the hospital. He is her only visitor, bringing her soup despite the fact she can't eat it. His relationship with Mrs. Scarlatti is as a replacement son for the one she lost in the Korean War. He likes being with her because she depends upon him, whereas his brother and sister do not. He finds Pearl's dependency on him disturbing.

Ezra has dreams of how to run Scarlatti's, like serving food only when it's in season and tastes best, but doesn't think his dreams are possible. He begins to make changes to the restaurant, starting with the menu, and hiring waitresses instead of waiters.

As Ezra continues to visit Mrs. Scarlatti in the hospital, he remembers the arrow accident as his fault, and because Cody and Beck got all the blame, he was never cleared of the burden of his guilt.

At Scarlatti's, Ezra replaces most of the staff, and scraps the menu completely. He wants to change its name to the Homesick Restaurant. Soon, he begins to do radical remodeling, and when Mrs. Scarlatti unexpectedly returns to her apartment above the restaurant, she is shocked by what he has done.

When Mrs. Scarlatti finally dies, the nurse tells him one thing she said toward the end was he should change the sign, because it wasn't Scarlatti's anymore. Ezra takes this as a slap in the face, and is both angry and relieved. He arranges the funeral, and is disappointed with the mourners' lack of emotion.



Analysis

The title of Chapter 3, “Destroyed by Love,” refers to the aftermath of two attempted family dinners at the restaurant. When the first dinner is ruined by Pearl storming out, Jenny walks home alone, wondering whether or not she should marry Harley, since she barely knows him. She goes to a palm reader, and asks whether she should get married. The woman tells her if she doesn’t, she’ll be “destroyed by love” and encounter much heartbreak.

Years later, when Jenny has returned home to mull over her unhappy marriage, another dinner is ruined by Pearl’s walking out. This time, it is Jenny who has angered Pearl, and so she sacrifices her own feelings to appease Pearl, and they walk home together. As they pass the fortuneteller’s window, Jenny thinks the woman must have been a fake, because she was wrong about her being destroyed by love.

The irony is Jenny has in fact been destroyed by her self-sacrificing love for her mother, and her efforts to please her. Though she considers herself distanced from her family by her marriage and miles, she is all too affected. Not only is Harley an extreme version of Pearl’s hypercritical nature, Jenny has become completely subverted in her need to be perfect, right down to becoming afraid to eat even the smallest amounts of real food. Even as she denies the fortuneteller’s accuracy, she is allying herself with her mother, rather than standing up to her and confessing her love for Josiah.

The title of Chapter 4, “Heart Rumors” alludes to a quote from a child that Ezra meets in the hospital while he is visiting Mrs. Scarlatti. The child is a member of a large foreign family that appears to be very comfortable showing their emotions and love. The child tells him his relative is sick with a “heart rumor,” and when Ezra corrects him with “heart murmur,” the child is offended and insists upon the former. He is deeply envious of the family and awkwardly seeks to connect with them, appreciating they respect the healing nature of food like he does.

Ezra’s desire to become part of this family of strangers is poignant and somewhat embarrassing. The reader sees the depths to which Ezra misses having a truly expressive and loving family, to the point he would insert himself into their midst inappropriately. He doesn’t even speak the family’s language, but he feels like he knows them, even thinking he should have invited them to Mrs. Scarlatti’s funeral.

The idea of “heart rumors” has a symbolic meaning. Ezra never fully expresses his affection for Mrs. Scarlatti, because their relationship is somewhat stilted. When he starts drastically changing the restaurant before she’s died, they never talk about it. Jenny’s marriage troubles are also never fully expressed. Pearl never asks Jenny directly what’s happening, and when she presses Ezra to do it, he finds that he can’t. He tells Pearl he doesn’t know how to connect with people, and tells her Jenny cares quite a bit about what Pearl thinks of her, even too much. Ironically enough, Pearl dismisses him completely when he tries to talk with her about these very real issues.



Vocabulary

placid, bleak, conscientious, conflagration, decorously, tremulous, curt, incompetence, dismal, elongated, chilblains, incongruous, loped, primness, docility, ponderous, meddlesome, impervious, noncommittal, pragmatic, angularity, asymmetrical, methodical, opaque, slipshod, pretentious, pompous, censorious, emaciated, dejectedly, perseverance, pallid, petrifying, languid, commiserative, nonchalant



Chapter 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5, "The Country Cook"

This chapter is told from Cody's point of view. Cody is now thirty years old and lives in New York City. He has many girlfriends, but drops them if they are nice to Ezra when Cody brings them to Baltimore. The fact that Ezra doesn't notice or seem interested in women only makes Cody more angry and jealous. The one time a girlfriend dislikes Ezra, Cody loses interest in her immediately.

Cody has bought a farm in Maryland, planning to raise his family there once he gets married. He pities Ezra and his restaurant, and is impatient with him for his awkwardness. He finds Ezra's wooden recorder playing annoying, as he has since they were young. He blames Ezra for his anxiety problems.

Jenny's divorce has now been finalized, and she is about to marry Sam Wiley. She also is debating dropping out of medical school, and complains about her weight, despite the fact she is too thin. Cody hears from Jenny Ezra might marry a woman named Ruth, which makes him uneasy. He thinks Ezra would flub up the wedding because he is so clumsy and air-headed. He then begins obsessively fantasizing about Ruth, imagining her appearance as exactly the sort of woman he likes.

Ezra invites him to a family dinner at the restaurant, and Cody anticipates he will meet Ruth. Cody thinks the Homesick Restaurant is low class and Ezra's ideas are bad for business. Ezra's emphasis on serving comforting, down-home food has lost him his old clientele, but brought new, loyal customers.

This attempt at having a family dinner is ruined by an argument between Jenny and Pearl, which causes Pearl to leave before it begins. Cody and Jenny both refuse to eat. When Ezra introduces them to Ruth and announces their engagement, Cody is disappointed to find she is nothing like he has pictured.

When Cody goes to talk to Pearl, she tells him she wants her children to be happy, but is frustrated by Ezra and Ruth's naïveté about marriage. Their happiness makes her feel her own marriage experience was unfair.

Cody continues to fantasize about Ruth, and plots to woo her away from Ezra. Ruth is oblivious and somewhat irritated by his attention, as he pretends to be getting to know her as his future sister-in-law. When Cody watches Ezra and Ruth at the restaurant, he sees they are perfect for one another, bonding over their mutual love of food preparation. When either of them offers Cody food, however, he refuses to eat it.

Cody visits Ruth often, repeatedly trying to put down Ezra to her and make her see how much better he is. He takes her out to see his farm in an attempt to impress her,



explaining that is where he wants to live someday. Being a country girl, Ruth knows Cody is not up to the task of being a farmer, and notices all the flaws in the old farmhouse. When he tells her she is beautiful, she thinks he is mocking her.

Cody is conscious of the fact he is interested in Ruth because it puts him in competition with Ezra, even though Ezra is oblivious and Ruth doesn't appreciate his gifts. Pearl confronts Cody on his behavior, pointing out Ruth is nowhere near his type and his motives are transparent.

Ezra plans to have a wedding celebration dinner for Jenny and Sam Wiley, but it is disrupted by an argument between Sam and Pearl. As a result, Jenny and Sam elope and leave town. Cody wonders if Ezra has noticed the pattern of failed family dinners.

Cody continues to try to win Ruth away from Ezra, and she finally confronts him at the restaurant, thinking he is trying to stop her marriage to Ezra because she isn't good enough. Cody confesses his love for her, but she doesn't believe him. When he points out he's lost weight because of his lovesickness, she pushes him to eat her food, which he does for the first time. He realizes as he eats his family members including himself have a disordered relationship to food, except for Ezra.

Cody and Ruth begin their affair, and when they break it to Ezra, he is heartbroken and disbelieving. They run off to New York, and on the train ride, Cody feels guilty about what he's done to Ezra, realizing he only wants things he cannot have.

Chapter 6, "Beaches on the Moon"

This chapter is from Pearl's perspective, and takes place several years after Cody and Ruth's marriage. Cody's farm is now completely ramshackle, and Pearl and Ezra visit it seasonally to clean and do maintenance.

Pearl remembers Ezra telling her about Cody's betrayal. She responds as she always has, telling Ezra that Cody is just mean. When the couple returns from their honeymoon, Pearl notices Ruth looks awkward in her new clothes.

Ezra has stopped playing his music. Pearl feels guilty because she didn't stop Cody's scheme when she had the opportunity, thinking if she'd done something, things might have been different. She reassures herself, however, that she is not ultimately at fault. She tries to get Ezra and Ruth together to talk, but it only makes Cody jealous and causes him to abandon the farm, taking Ruth with him on all his business moves.

When Ezra invites Cody and Ruth to Thanksgiving dinner at the restaurant, the dinner is ruined by Cody's irrational jealousy, and he demands that Ruth leave with him. They are now moving from job to job and town to town, renting places to live.

Pearl feels that Ezra, Ruth and Cody have suffered a tragic loss. Cody and Ruth don't stay in much contact with the family, and they visit Baltimore very seldom. It seems to Pearl the main reason is Cody's desire to keep Ruth and Ezra apart.



The one time Pearl is invited to visit Cody and Ruth, their child Luke is two years old. Pearl bonds with her grandchild, but sees he is quiet and somewhat grim. She believes Cody and Ruth are unhappy in their marriage, and she finds their house cold and uncomfortable. Ruth cooks wonderful meals, but Cody barely eats them.

When she returns to Baltimore, Pearl notices the similarity between Luke and Ezra. When she asks Ezra whether he's ever thought of trying to get Ruth back, he tells her it would be wrong.

Cody refuses to sell the farm, despite the fact they are obviously never going to live there, and the house is falling apart. Pearl feels alienated from her grandson Luke, never seeming to get a handle on his personality or his interests since she sees him so seldom. When Cody and family visit Baltimore, Ezra attempts to give Luke his old wooden recorder. When Ezra leaves the house with Luke to get oil to repair the instrument, Cody gets very upset and jealous, and when they return he accuses Ezra of trying to steal his son. He refuses to let Ezra give Luke the recorder as a gift.

Pearl once again thinks she might blame herself for the unhappiness of her children, but then convinces herself it's just fate, and there's nothing she could have done. She feels very envious of other families who are close and doesn't understand how they achieved it.

Analysis

The title of Chapter 5 is a reference to Ruth, a bit of a hillbilly and tomboy, who Ezra hires to work at his restaurant because of her country cooking. Ezra falls in love with her in part because she sees food as he does--a source of nurturing, and nourishment for the soul as well as the body. When Cody wins her away from Ezra, it is ironic he then seeks to destroy not only who she was, but also deprives her of the pleasure of feeding him. The only time we ever see him take any pleasure in food is the moment after he confesses to Ruth he loves her, and she responds by feeding him. His acceptance of her food appears to be the only time he truly accepts her for who she is, and in Chapter 6 we see he has reverted back to his indifferent attitude, which the reader can imagine is a painful rejection for Ruth.

Cody's extremely obsessive jealousy hits a peak in these two chapters, and it brings home to the reader his stunted personality, and how trapped he is within it. He is the one who destroys Ezra's one love, and yet he is the one who is jealous. He is the only one who has acted cruelly while Ezra remains kind to him, and yet after he marries he accuses Ezra of trying to steal away his wife or his son Luke.

Pearl thinks Ezra and she are bonded in their mutual loneliness and loss. Basically, the alienation of the family is complete. Cody has become an echo of Beck, repeating the constant movement that broke the family in the first place. There is a scene in Chapter 6 when Pearl and Ezra see a man jogging along the road, and they mistake him for Cody.



Cody is such a stranger they not only don't recognize him, but Pearl imagines them driving right on by and leaving him behind.

The title of Chapter 6 is a reminder of Pearl's aging, and a reference to Luke's statement to Pearl he wants to be an astronaut when he grows up. He tells her by the time he's an adult, spending summers on Venus or going to beaches on the Moon will be commonplace. The alien nature of that possibility brings home how quickly things change in a person's lifetime, and how getting older makes the world strange.

Vocabulary

monkish, contemplate, stunted, desolate, unkempt, immobile, calibrated, metamorphosed, riveted, blithe, chortling, infuriating, tumult, inertia, callously, jonquils, perversely, evasive, credulous, bemused, impishly, deranged, benignly, impervious, gullible, evasive, presentiment, somber, depreciating, incongruous, tenuous, cordial, averting, laboriously, preordained, lenient, tedious



Chapter 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7, “Dr. Tull Is Not a Toy”

This chapter is from Jenny’s point of view. She is now six months into her third marriage to Joe St. Ambrose, who has six children of his own. Jenny was left by her second husband, Sam Wiley, when she was eight months pregnant with their daughter Becky. Joe’s former wife left him as well. Jenny meets him soon after as his children’s pediatrician. They marry quickly, and now Jenny and her daughter Becky have welcomed Joe’s family into their home.

Joe’s son Slevin has been having behavioral and academic problems obviously related to his mother’s abandonment, and both a priest and a teacher have been trying to get Jenny and Joe to pay attention to what’s happening. Though Jenny and Slevin get along pretty well, his obvious calls for help are discounted. She thinks since she left her unhappy childhood behind, Slevin should have no problem doing the same. She often responds to a discussion of his problems with jokes.

Jenny and Pearl both think Jenny no longer cares enough about her appearance. However, Jenny doesn’t mind that much, and spends her energy on working and being a mother. In both her job and her home, Jenny is always surrounded by children’s chaos.

Their household is full of life, and loosely controlled.

When Sam left Jenny, she felt it was like it confirmed that she was unlovable. Because Jenny was finishing her medical residency then, dealing with Becky’s infancy at the same time was exhausting. Jenny remembers physically abusing Becky, and connects it with the way Pearl treated her as a child. Her own childhood memories come back to her, and she has a nervous breakdown. Pearl gives up her two weeks of vacation without being asked to care for Jenny. Both Ezra and Cody also help—Ezra by his presence and Cody by hiring a full time sitter for Becky.

After she recovers from her breakdown, Jenny takes a job in Baltimore. She focuses on detaching from the seriousness of life. Her quick marriage to Joe allows her to have a family without having the time to reflect too deeply on things.

Chapter 8 “This Really Happened”

From Luke Tull’s point of view, the chapter takes place in 1975, when Luke is 13 years old. Cody is nearly killed in a factory accident, which affects Ruth deeply. She loses her spiritedness, and Luke is no longer her focus. She stops cooking good meals, and tends to Cody. Cody, on the other hand, does not appear to be changed much by his brush with death.



Ruth tells Luke a story about how she came to be married to Cody--how he swept her off her feet despite the fact that she was set to marry Ezra. She says that Ezra was plain, and more like her, but that Cody was more vibrant. She blames herself for any problems in their marriage, because of her lack of experience and education. She confesses she left Cody once, when Luke was small, and accused Cody of only marrying her to hurt Ezra. The reason she'd come back is that a Marine at the train station had vomited into her purse and ruined their train tickets, and she hadn't enough money for more. She tells Luke the reason Cody takes them to every new job is not because he's untrusting, but because he loves them so much.

Luke remembers how Ruth used to play with him in backyard sports, but that it always seemed as if it was practice for Cody's judgment. Ruth stops wearing pantsuits because Cody disapproves. The family has trouble making friends because they move so often.

Luke resents the change in family dynamic—how Cody is now always around, and Ruth no longer pays attention to him. As Cody recovers, he talks to Luke about work, and how much he loves time. He tells Luke if there were such a thing as a time machine, he would take it no matter where it would go, as long as it was somewhere else. Luke sees this wish as a rejection of him.

They play Monopoly, which Cody always wins. When Luke accepts his loss without complaint, Cody is disappointed in him and compares him to Ezra. Since Luke knows Cody dislikes Ezra, this hurts his feelings. When Luke plays an old plastic whistle, Cody accuses him of tormenting him. He then accuses Ruth of always loving Ezra more than him, and says Ezra must be Luke's real father. When Cody goes on to say Ezra always wins in the end, Luke shouts at Cody that he always wins at Monopoly.

Luke feels Ruth is now weak and stupid, and thinks if Ezra is his real father, he could go live in Baltimore and have a bigger family. Luke then runs away to Baltimore. His doesn't know Pearl's address, but finds his way to the Homesick Restaurant.

The restaurant feels familiar, despite the fact that Luke rarely visits. He goes into the kitchen, where Ezra doesn't recognize him at first, only doing so when he sees Luke's similarity to Cody. When Luke confesses to having run away, Ezra tries to comfort him by saying Cody didn't mean whatever he said. When he calls Cody and Ruth, he hopes they will let Luke stay awhile, but they respond by coming to get him immediately. While they wait for Cody and Ruth to arrive, Luke enjoys spending time with Pearl and Ezra. He doesn't understand why Cody doesn't like Pearl. Both Pearl and Ezra assume that Cody and Ruth will stay overnight when they arrive, but once again Cody refuses any food, and only allows a short visit and no serious conversation. When Cody is civil with Pearl, it makes Luke think his father has been lying to him about their past.

On the drive home, while Ruth sleeps, Cody tells his own version of the time Ruth left him, saying that they'd had a minor fight and she'd run off to be with Ezra. Luke gets upset and insists on waking Ruth to correct Cody's story, and Luke points out Cody hangs on to the wrong things. It seems like Cody will say something important, but instead he reverts to talking about the importance of time.



Analysis

The title of Chapter 7 refers to a plaque Jenny has on the wall of her office. Joe made it for her because of the minor injuries Jenny frequently gets from her young patients. She has thrown herself completely into being a caretaker of children, with no regard for her own self or interests. The reason seems apparent—she thinks it's a way for her to remain detached enough from her feelings so she never has another nervous breakdown.

During her second divorce Jenny, like Pearl, completely loses her sense of self-worth. She becomes abusive toward her child the same way Pearl was. And when she falls apart emotionally, Pearl comes through to help her. This is the only obvious crisis that ever occurs during the book, and the family does pull together as a result.

It is Ezra's gift of childhood pictures that shows the reader the distance Jenny has put between herself and her childhood. Her stepson Slevin looks at a photo of Jenny as a child and sees a sad picture of a concentration camp victim, while Jenny doesn't seem to have any connection to it at all. She repeatedly ignores Slevin's issues in a way that makes her look almost callous, though she does it while laughing. She believes she has recovered just fine from her childhood, and so Slevin should do so as well.

Jenny and Joe's household is the complete opposite of Pearl's. Their ready-made huge family is a source of chaos and as parents they don't even attempt to impose control over it. In essence, Jenny has invented the family she never had, and though there are problems, there is no time to take them seriously.

The title of Chapter 8 refers to the way Cody prefaces any stories about his upbringing with Pearl. He never passes an opportunity to tell Luke how terrible a mother she was, but the reader sees Luke progressively begin to distrust whether these things "really happened" or not. His suspicions are only confirmed when he runs away and he witnesses Cody and Pearl speaking to one another normally. He also begins to see the insanity and illogic present in Cody's jealousy of Ezra. Luke does not seem afraid to contradict and point out the difference between reality and Cody's stories.

In this chapter, we see Cody's now familiar jealousy placed alongside his affection and even obsession with the concept of time. He is a time-and-motion expert, someone whose job it is to make things run efficiently, no matter what sacrifices must be made along the way. He appears to have a deep desire to step outside of time, to reach backward and re-do the things that have happened in the past. The reader is left to wonder what Cody would redo given a time machine. Would he stop Beck from leaving them? Would he stop himself from developing this debilitating rivalry with Ezra? Would he stop himself from taking Ruth away from Ezra and marrying her? The reader can only imagine how much better things would be if he could.

On the other hand, Ezra's restaurant and bedroom seem stuck in time. From Luke's eyes, we see Ezra never throws anything away—the restaurant is full of dusty mementos, and his bedroom hasn't changed a bit since he was a boy.



Vocabulary

imperceptibly, instability, propelled, wary, wheezed, garishly, pittance, lolled, dislocated, lucrative, obliqueness, bereft, guilt, brazen, bereavement, sauntering, notion, menagerie, caftan, bulbous, bantering, sooty, genially, jocular, soberness, marooned, placidly, gratifying, oscillating, reproach



Chapter 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9, "Apple Apple"

This chapter is from Ezra's point of view. It is now 1979, and Ezra is struggling with depression and loneliness. He finds a lump on his thigh, and though he immediately assumes it is cancer, he doesn't go to the doctor to deal with it. The restaurant isn't doing very well, and there's a heat wave on.

Pearl and Ezra have settled into a routine that doesn't change. Pearl has no friends or visitors, and Ezra's only friends are people he works with at the restaurant. Pearl does not accept the reality of her blindness. Their favorite activity is to look over Pearl's family photos and mementos.

When Jenny visits, it's like a whirlwind of children and competence. Pearl criticizes Jenny for her appearance and her too-big family, but Jenny seems to be happy, and the children fill the house temporarily with life. Jenny tells Ezra to go to the doctor, and that he probably just has a hernia.

As Ezra helps his mother go through the family photographs and mementos, he notices she appears to be seeking something. When Ezra reads to her a diary entry from when she was young and unmarried in which she describes being truly happy and in the moment, she is finally satisfied. This leads to Ezra feeling some comfort in his connection with Pearl.

Chapter 10, "Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant"

This final chapter is told from Cody's perspective. It's just after Pearl has died. Once again, Cody has been so detached from the family that he doesn't immediately hear of her death. Luke is now a senior in high school, and Cody has been trying to bond with him, somewhat unsuccessfully. He once again discourages Luke from connecting with the family by going to the funeral.

When they arrive at the house, Cody finds Ezra has been waiting for them, hoping to have coffee and pastries. As usual, Cody has not planned to spend any time with the family. Ezra announces he has invited Beck to the funeral at Pearl's request. Ezra is surprised she knew all this time where he was, and Cody informs him about the letters Beck sent. At first Cody assumes inviting Beck is a sign of Ezra's soft-hearted nature, but he soon sees Ezra doesn't feel much about it at all. Jenny, meanwhile, claims to have no memory of Beck whatsoever.

The funeral is impersonal and small, and it makes Cody feel Pearl's life was stunted. Cody imagines Ezra's life will be completely empty without Pearl. Outside, he meets a stranger who turns out to be Beck. The meeting is extremely awkward and Beck of



course doesn't recognize or know anyone. He is surprised to be invited to the restaurant for dinner.

When they get there, the family avoids sitting next to Beck, though he seems unaffected and happy to see the success his family has enjoyed in his absence. Cody feels satisfied his career has finally fulfilled its purpose.

Beck tells them about his present life. He lives in a hotel, playing cards with buddies. He notes now that Pearl has died he can marry his companion, though he doesn't really want to. The family is shocked to hear Pearl and he had never divorced.

The discomfort in all this discussion is covered by the arrival of Jenny and Joe's children. Beck announces they look like a real family. Cody discounts Beck's admiration, insisting many of them aren't even really related. Then he gets angry and tells Beck about Pearl's abuse. Ezra counters with recalling good times. The food before them is perfect, but no one is eating.

Cody tells a story clearly meant to insult Beck. Jenny's baby starts choking, and during the commotion, Beck disappears. Ezra insists the family go after him, but they are reluctant. It is only to fulfill Ezra's deeply held wish they finally finish dinner as a family that causes them to go out and find Beck. Cody is the last to go, and he is the one who finds Beck. Cody again accuses Beck of abandoning them to an abuser. Beck confesses he has always been eager to please women, but when they see his faults, he can't bear it and has to leave. He recalls how he was always screwing things up, and Pearl's near-death experience with the arrow was the last straw that made him leave. He tells Cody he always felt they were fine without him.

The rest of the family finds Cody and Beck, and together the family walks back to the restaurant to eat dinner. On the way, Cody recalls pleasant memories of his childhood.

Analysis

The title of the chapter refers to Pearl's youthful diaries. She doesn't write anything with much depth, mostly recounting a series of dates with boys that go nowhere. But occasionally, there are bits that have been crossed out so thoroughly they are unreadable, and Pearl tells Ezra she did this by writing "apple apple" over and over again over the offending passage.

This crossing out of something Pearl wants lost to time is symbolic of what Ezra does with his mystery-lump, what Pearl does by denying her blindness, and what Jenny does by acquiring so many children. Cody is the only family member that seems deeply attached to the past, but his memories too are rewrites of what really happened. He remembers things the way he wants to, focusing on the worst possible interpretation.

As Ezra goes over Pearl's collection of photos and the diaries, he sees Pearl is trying to figure out something about herself. Pearl remains unsatisfied in their search until Ezra



reads her a passage where she tells of a moment when she is completely happy and in the moment.

It is apparent that Pearl, with Ezra along for the ride, has been seeking to understand what it is to be truly happy, and she finds it with a singular realization: Happiness is being present and noticing the beauty in the moment. A small moment of enlightenment is all it takes. This journey with Pearl helps Ezra connect with her finally.

Ezra chooses to name his restaurant the Homesick Restaurant. One can interpret this two ways: sick of home and sick for home. The family struggles between these two sides of homesickness. They are trying to escape the sickness in their family, but also longing for the home they never had. Ezra's desire to comfort and heal people with food is illustrated by his repeated effort to heal his family by making them sit down to a meal together. It is only after Pearl's death they might finally succeed at doing so, though the novel ends before the reader actually sees it happen.

Beck's return doesn't seem to be important for anyone except for Cody. He needs to have his whole existence validated by his father's presence. He finally confronts his anger at Beck's abandonment, and sees how empty Beck's life has been without them, how he has chosen to alienate himself from family and connections with people. It is only after his confrontation with Beck that Cody can finally see happiness in his past. Just as Pearl sees happiness is about seeing the beauty in the moment, Cody sees the beauty in his past, including the moment when the arrow that changes everything lets fly toward Pearl.

Vocabulary

stupefying, inconsequential, hydrangea, consorted, bridle, diligently, momentous, heliotrope, unwieldy, poultice, jauntily, receptive, instantaneously, raucous, dithering, puckish, solicitously, vitality, amiable, pinafore, gauge, wan, eulogy, wizened, contemptuous, tributaries, intimation, compensation, assemblage



Characters

Pearl Cody Tull

Pearl is the matriarch of the Tull family, who has raised her three children mostly alone. She is described as average looking with an air of worry. She marries Beck Tull at thirty years old, and has her first child at age 36. Her life is deeply affected by her husband's abandonment, and it leads her to experience severe self-doubt, and become extremely controlling and needy toward her children. When they don't submit to her control, she abuses them both physically and verbally. As the children grow up and move away, she gradually stops her abusiveness, though never quite releases her dissatisfaction in who they become. She alternately blames herself and absolves herself of blame for their faults and unhappiness. As she gets close to death, she spends her time trying to find out when she was truly happy. The novel plot pivots on her death.

Cody Tull

Pearl's oldest son, he is 14 when Beck leaves the family. He is described as handsome and dark. Right before Beck leaves the family, Cody accidentally shoots his mother with an arrow, which nearly causes her death. His rage over his father's leaving turns to a lifetime of resentment and jealousy toward his younger brother Ezra, who he sees as his mother's favorite. This rivalry leads him to an unhappy marriage, and to detach himself completely from the rest of the family. His career as a time-and-motion expert is symbolic of his desire to go back and repair things that have happened in the past. It is only when he confronts Beck at Pearl's funeral that he is able to let go of the past and be reconciled to his family.

Ezra Tull

Pearl's middle child, Ezra is 11 years old when his father leaves the family. He is described as blond and soft-bodied with a tender heart. He finds happiness in playing music on his wooden recorder, and doesn't seem deeply affected by the loss of his father, or his older brother's constant cruelty. When Cody steals his one true love and marries her, Ezra never recovers from it, and ends up living with his mother until her death. His first job is working at Scarlatti's Restaurant, which he transforms into the Homesick Restaurant. He is portrayed as a believer in the healing power of food. He repeatedly tries to heal the sickness in his family by getting them to sit down for a meal at the Homesick Restaurant. It is only with Pearl's death and Beck's return that this becomes possible.



Jenny Tull

Pearl's youngest child and her only daughter, she is nine years old when Beck leaves. She appears to suffer most from Pearl's abuse. As a result, she becomes a perfectionist, obsessed with dieting and self-denial. She is awkward and painfully thin until she leaves for college, when she becomes elegant and pretty. She marries three times--once to a control freak like her mother, once to a romantic like her father, and finally to man who gives her an instant family that will, if not heal her, distract her from her past. She becomes a pediatrician, and spends her adult life surrounded by children.

Beck Tull

Pearl's husband, who is a slick, flamboyant salesman for the Tanner Corporation. His working life is punctuated by constant movement, which leads to Pearl's lifetime disconnection from her family of origin and the community.

He leaves the family because he doesn't like to be seen as a real person with flaws. He abandons them completely, sending them small checks but never visiting. He does send Pearl letters in which he informs her about his career or tells her his latest address. At the end of the novel, the reader sees that his life has been empty, deprived of family and any sense of connectedness.

Ruth Spivey

Ruth is a country girl Ezra hires as a cook at the Homesick Restaurant, with whom he then falls in love. She is red-headed, and very tomboyish. She and Ezra seem to be made for one another, bonding over their mutual, soulful love of cooking for others. When Cody hears of Ezra's engagement, he immediately becomes obsessed with her, and eventually manages to woo her away from Ezra. Her marriage to Cody is not happy or warm, and though he originally plans to create a country life with her and their future children, he ends up transforming her into a suburban housewife who is constantly expected to move to accommodate her husband's job. Everything from her style of dress to her personality is subverted by Cody's dominance. She reveres Cody and remembers their courtship as romantic.

Luke Tull

Ruth and Cody's only child, Luke is sometimes compared to Ezra and sometimes to Cody in appearance and demeanor. After Cody jealously decides Luke looks like Ezra, and might even be Ezra's son, Luke runs away to Baltimore, seeking to connect with the rest of his family. He has great insight about his father's jealousy and obsessive re-telling of his past.



Harley Baines

Jenny's first husband, Harley is a fellow graduate student described as a socially awkward genius. He proposes to Jenny without dating her, almost as if he's proposing a business arrangement. She discovers after marrying him that he is incredibly controlling and freakishly neat. He also turns out to be hyper-critical of everything she does. His obsession with Jenny's weight contributes to her self-esteem issues and problematic dieting. They divorce in 1960.

Sam Wiley

Jenny's second husband, Sam is an artist who ends up leaving her before their daughter Becky is even born. Jenny was very much in love with him, and his abandonment leads to her having a severe emotional breakdown.

Joe St. Ambrose

Jenny's third husband, Joe is easy-going despite the fact he and his six children have been left by their mother. Jenny meets him when she is called upon as a pediatrician when his baby is ill. They marry soon after, and their blended family becomes enough of a distraction to keep Jenny from suffering from her painful childhood.

Slevin St. Ambrose

Joe's son, Slevin is in his early teens when Jenny becomes his stepmother. He suffers from his mother's abandonment, which causes him to skip school and steal items that remind him of her. His troubles are mostly ignored and discounted by Jenny.

Becky

Jenny's eldest biological daughter. Becky is physically abused by Jenny when she's small. When she reaches adolescence, she develops anorexia.

Josiah Payson

Ezra's very tall and kind best friend, Josiah is incorrectly thought by his schoolmates to be mentally disabled. Ezra hires him to work in the restaurant. Jenny likes him because he's comforting to her, though she abandons pursuing him because of Pearl's disapproval. When Ezra and he are in their forties, Josiah receives semi-yearly mystery gifts from L.L. Bean that seem designed to make him an outdoorsman, though he's always been a city boy.

Mrs. Scarlatti

A fashionable divorcée who owns Scarlatti's Restaurant, Mrs. Scarlatti becomes not just Ezra's first and only employer, but also a surrogate mother. She is affectionate with him, but also somewhat distant. She makes Ezra a partner in the restaurant, and leaves it to him when she dies.

Emmeline

Pearl's only friend, who attends the Baptist church where Pearl and Beck meet. After Beck leaves Pearl, Emmeline visits, but Pearl never tells her the truth about what has happened.



Objects/Places

Raleigh, North Carolina

This is where Pearl grew up.

Calvert Street, Baltimore, Maryland

This is where Beck and Pearl happened to be living when Beck leaves her to move on to his next job. Pearl remains in the same house for the rest of her life, first raising her children, and then sharing the home with her son Ezra. After renting the place for years, Cody buys the house for her.

Sweeney Bros. Grocery and Fine Produce

This is the neighborhood store where Pearl takes a job working the cash register after Beck leaves her. Cody says the neighborhood refers to her as “the Sweeney Meanie” because she is not a pleasant or easy-going cashier. She works there until her blindness makes it impossible to continue.

Tanner Corporation

This is where Beck works as a salesman for his entire life, never seeming to get ahead. Cody is eventually hired by them as an efficiency expert, which he sees as a sign that he’s become successful.

Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina

This is where the family including Beck had once spent a summer vacation. Pearl remembers it as “that beautiful shore” sung of in the hymn “In the Sweet Bye and Bye.” To her, it symbolizes heaven, when the family was young, happy and together.

Richmond, Virginia

This is where Beck ends up retiring.

Scarlatti’s Restaurant/The Homesick Restaurant

This is where Ezra gets his first job. He moves quickly from kitchen manager to full partner, and when Mrs. Scarlatti dies, the restaurant becomes his. He completely



transforms it into a place that is nostalgic and represents Ezra's desires for a comforting home and family healing.

Ezra's bamboo whistle/pearwood recorder

This is an object that symbolizes Ezra's youthful happy-go-lucky nature, which he stops playing after losing Ruth. When he later tries to give the recorder to his nephew Luke as a gift, Cody doesn't allow it.

Songs

Beck's favorite song is "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." Pearl associates the family's one good vacation with the hymn "In the Sweet By and By," but requests "We'll Understand it All By and By" to be played at her funeral, which is about forgiveness. Ezra repeatedly plays the same songs on his pear-wood recorder: "The Ash Grove," "Greensleeves," and "Le Godiveau de Poisson." "The Ash Grove" is a folksong about nostalgia for home, and "Le Godiveau de Poisson" is a recipe for fish.

The Farm

The farm represents Cody's longing for a real family life. He buys it as soon as he can afford to, leaving it undecorated until he gets married. When he finally does move Ruth into the place, he only visits on weekends, and they abandon it soon after. It becomes derelict, maintained seasonally by Pearl and Ezra, but Cody never sells it.

Photographs/Mementos

Pearl keeps a drawer full of old family photos and her youthful diaries. She and Ezra go through them often, which appears to be their favorite bonding activity. It is where Pearl finally figures out the true source of happiness.



Themes

Memory

The primary method of delivery for this novel is through the memories of the various Tull family members. Through the rotation of perspective, the reader sees how memories can differ from person to person, and have differing effects on one's psychological development. Beck is absent physically, but he is ever-present in the minds of the family he's left behind. Beck in turn never forgets Pearl or the idea of impressing her. Jenny seeks to forget her childhood with distractions, while Pearl wallows in her memories of Beck. Cody hangs onto the past only through bad memories. Ezra appears to have amnesia, dwelling almost exclusively in his adult present and his nostalgic restaurant, visiting the past only through Pearl. At the end of the novel, Pearl and Beck exchange places, and Pearl becomes the absent one, living on in the family's memory. With Beck's return, Cody is finally able to remember some positive memories of his childhood.

Food

The Tull family's relationship to food symbolizes illness and it is only through finally completing a meal together that they can be healed. Throughout the novel, Ezra attempts to bring about this healing, but it is rejected over and over by the family.

Pearl is neither a good cook nor thoughtful about food, and much of her abuse of the children takes place around the kitchen table. As a young woman, Pearl is obsessed with her weight, and passes that along to Jenny and her daughter, who both develop eating disorders characterized by extreme self-denial. Cody is completely indifferent to food, and only appears to enjoy it once: when he wins Ruth away from Ezra. He soon reverts to his indifference, however, denying Ruth the pleasure of cooking for him.

Ezra rejoices in food. For him, it's about serving it to others, and the satisfaction he gets from nourishing people in body and soul. His only obsession in life is his desire to feed people, healing them by serving them good food—and not the food they ask for, but what his intuition says they need.

Over and over again throughout the novel, the family sits down to a dinner served by Ezra that is interrupted by one or more family members leaving the table. It is only at Pearl's funeral dinner, when Beck returns, that the family can finally sit down together and eat, though the reader never gets to witness if the healing is complete.

Family and Alienation

The Tull family's alienation from each other and from their community is a recurrent theme in the novel. Beck severs Pearl's connection to her family of origin by moving the



family repeatedly. They never get a chance to feel at home and develop social connections, and Cody repeats this pattern by doing the same thing to Ruth and Luke. Jenny moves away from Baltimore at first, but after her breakdown, she returns, covering her alienation by distracting herself with a large family. Ezra and Pearl stay together in the family home, but never become well connected to their community.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written from a third-person subjective limited point of view, rotating through the perspectives of various Tull family members, starting with Pearl and then rotating amongst her children Ezra, Cody, Jenny, and her grandchild Luke.

The narration begins in each chapter at a certain point in time for its respective character, but then looks backward, and the reader is a witness to memory after memory connecting just as they do in one's mind. Because the perspective varies from character to character, the same events are sometimes retold several times from that character's vantage point.

Setting

Most of the novel centers on Baltimore, Maryland; however, some of the characters' experiences take place elsewhere. Baltimore is the home place, where Pearl and Ezra always reside after Beck's leaving. Cody escapes it completely and visits rarely. Jenny leaves but then returns there for a less-lucrative job as a pediatrician, eventually creating a home there with her third marriage.

The time period ranges from 1944 (when Beck leaves the family) to 1979 (when Pearl dies).

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is modern, natural and akin to an internal monologue, moving fluidly along the paths of the various characters' memories, with few transitions or separations between them.

The language of the novel allows the reader to be a rotating observer of the thought processes of each character in turn, watching them grow and develop in their internal storytelling. This technique gives readers a uniquely omniscient view of the psychological development of an entire family, in all its pain and trauma, progressing through the years to a place of healing.

Structure

The novel is divided into ten chapters, each bearing a title with symbolic significance found within. Each chapter varies in length, and is told from the perspective of a single Tull family member. The rotation is as follows: Pearl, Cody, Jenny, Ezra, Cody, Pearl,

Jenny, Luke, Ezra, and Cody. Though Cody is the least likeable character, his story commands the most pages.



Quotes

It was peculiar how her memory seemed to be going blind with the rest of her. (Chapter 1)

They never asked about him. Didn't that show how little importance a father has? The invisible man. The absent presence. Pearl felt a twinge of angry joy. Apparently she had carried this off—made the transition so smoothly that not a single person guessed. It was the greatest triumph of her life. (Chapter 1)

In the kitchen, as nowhere else, Ezra came into his own like someone crippled on dry land but effortlessly graceful once he takes to water. However, Mrs. Scarlatti still wasn't eating. There was nothing he could offer her. (Chapter 4)

It's not only pot roast... This is something more. I mean, pot roast is really not the right name; it's more like... what you long for when you're sad and everyone's been wearing you down. (Chapter 5)

Often, like a child peering over the fence at somebody else's party, she gazes wistfully at other families and wonders what their secret is. They seem so close. Is it that they're more religious? Or stricter, or more lenient? Could it be the fact that they participate in sports? Read books together? Have some common hobby? (Chapter 6)

It felt strange to be sitting alone. Always there was someone—children, patients, colleagues. The empty space on either side of her gave her an echoing, weightless feeling, as if she lacked ballast and might at any moment float upward. (Chapter 7)

Everything I've ever wanted, Ezra got it. Anything in life I wanted. Even things I thought I had won, Ezra won in the end. And he didn't even seem to be trying; that's the hell of it. (Chapter 8)

Anything that makes you happy or sad, isn't it all based on minutes going by? Isn't happiness expecting something time is going to bring you? Isn't sadness wishing time back again? ... If only you could turn it back again, you think. If only you could change this or that, undo what you have done, if only you could roll the minutes the other way, for once. (Chapter 8)

Her favorite expression, it seemed to Ezra: I wouldn't know you if I saw you on the street. She used it when referring to Jenny's poor grooming, to Cody's sparse visits, to Ezra's tendency to put on weight. Ezra caught a sudden glimpse of a wide, vacant sidewalk and his various family members strolling down it, their faces averted from one another. (Chapter 9)

You think we're a family," Cody said, turning back. "You think we're some jolly, situation-comedy family when we're in particles, torn apart, torn all over the place, and our mother was a witch. (Chapter 10)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Pearl? How does her marriage to Beck affect her relationship to her family of origin? How does Beck's leaving affect her? What does she do to cope? What is some evidence that she's not coping well? What does she think of her children? How does she deal with her approaching death? How does Pearl find a sense of satisfaction by looking through her drawer of mementos with Ezra?

Topic 2

Who is Cody? What kind of person is he at age 14? How does Beck's abandonment affect him? How does he feel about his brother Ezra? Describe some of the ways he shows his feelings. Why does he pursue Ruth, and how does he feel when he's successful? What are some ways his lifestyle is similar to his father's? What does he end up doing for a living? How does this job title symbolize his feelings about life? How does he react to meeting Beck again at Pearl's funeral?

Topic 3

Who is Jenny? What does she do for a living? How is she similar to her mother? Describe her three marriages and how they reflect the different stages of her life. When she has a nervous breakdown, how does the family react?

Topic 4

Who is Ezra? What is his most prized possession? What makes him stop using it? What does Pearl hope he will do with his life? How does she respond when he chooses to work in the restaurant business? What are some of the changes he makes to the restaurant when he takes over the business? What happens every time he tries to serve his family a meal? How does losing Ruth to Cody affect his life?

Topic 5

Who is Beck? What kind of person is Beck? What does he do for a living? How has his abandonment of the family affected his life? How does he view the Tull family at Pearl's funeral? What did he wish to include in the letters to Pearl, but was never able?



Topic 6

Who is Luke? What is Cody's relationship with his son Luke like? What does Ruth think about her and Cody's courtship? What are the differences between Ruth's and Cody's stories about the time Ruth left Cody?

Topic 7

Who is Mrs. Scarlatti? What does she think of Ezra? What does she think of the changes he makes to the restaurant in her absence? What is the name Ezra picks for his restaurant after Mrs. Scarlatti dies? What is the significance of that name? Describe some of the ways Ezra's ideas about food are reflected in the way he runs his restaurant.