

# **The Dry Grass of August Study Guide**

**The Dry Grass of August by Anna Jean Mayhew**

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# Plot Summary

The story begins in August 1954. The reader is introduced to the Watts family which consists of Paula Watts and her husband William. Paula and William have four children: Estelle Annette Watts aka Stell or Stell Ann; June Bentley Watts aka Jubie; Carolina Watts aka Puddin; and David William Watts aka Davie. The family is preparing to leave their home in Charlotte, North Carolina to go on a vacation to Pensacola, Florida to visit Paula's brother Taylor.

While the main part of the book takes place in 1954, there are alternating chapters to fill in the backstory. The alternating chapters begin before 1952 but focus mainly on that year. In 1952, the Watts family moved into the house on Queens Road West in Charlotte. That is when things began to change.

At one time Paula and Bill Watts had been happy. Bill began to drink and while his business is successful, he becomes involved in illegal activity that results in a boy's death. He is also part of the White Businessman's Association, a group that intends to prevent blacks from voting. The issue of segregation is a major topic throughout the book, as is racism.

The family lives in a large house on Queen's Road West in Charlotte. The area is peaceful with tree-lined streets.

In the 1950s the South was going through a major upheaval regarding Civil Rights, from the decision on Brown vs. the Board of Education to the integration of schools.

The people in the South have very deeply rooted traditions, customs and belief systems that go back for hundreds of years. The South rebels against change in part because the people are comfortable with what is and believe that the blacks are lesser individuals. Some - black and white - balk at change in general and feel that changing things would be too difficult and not worth the trouble.

The story is told by Jubie, a 13 year old girl who is growing up much too fast. Jubie lives in the shadow of her older sister, Stell. Stell seems to be the golden child while Jubie always seems to be in trouble. However, Mary, the Watts' maid, always looks out for Jubie and is on her side.

The entire family, save Bill, goes to Florida for a vacation. While there, it is clear that something is troubling Paula. The girls learn that their father has had an affair. On the way to Pawleys Island to meet Bill and others, a drunk driver hits the family Packard and causes damage. Even though Paula is angry with Bill, she calls to have him come to oversee the repairs. While in Georgia, Mary is beaten, raped and killed.

Jubie steals the family car to attend Mary's funeral. The people at the church tell Jubie they intend to find Mary's killer. A 19 year old boy is eventually arrested for the crime.



A young boy is killed after a job performed by Bill and his brother falls apart. The brother kills himself. Bill and Paula end up splitting up. Bill leaves Paula and the children behind. A new phase of life is about to begin.



# Chapters 1-8

## Chapters 1-8 Summary

### Chapter 1:

The story begins in August 1954. The reader is introduced to the Watts family which consists of Paula Watts and her husband William. Paula and William have four children: Estelle Annette Watts aka Stell or Stell Ann; June Bentley Watts aka Jubie; Carolina Watts aka Puddin; and David William Watts aka Davie.

The family is preparing to leave their home in Charlotte, North Carolina to go on a vacation to Pensacola, Florida to visit Paula's brother Taylor.

Bill is packing the car and complains about the amount of luggage the females are taking on the trip. Stell has just received her driver's license and is eager to get behind the wheel. Going along with the family on the trip is Mary Luther, the family's black nanny and housekeeper. The trip to Florida is long. Along the way Jubie notices many signs that promote segregation. Jubie hopes that Mary does not see the signs. There are also issues with finding a place to stay that will allow Mary to watch over the children.

### Chapter 2:

Five days before the family leaves for Pensacola, Jubie spots Stell's boyfriend Carter outside. Jubie tells Carter to meet her by the hedge. Jubie tells Carter that she has Stell's diary and will read it to him for one dollar. Carter agrees. Jubie meets Carter in the tree house and reads two pages out of the diary. Carter pays Jubie. Just as the transaction is taking place Puddin enters the tree house. Puddin threatens to tell on Jubie for stealing Stell's diary and reading it to Carter unless Jubie gives her some of the money. Jubie agrees to give Puddin \$.50 if she promises not to tell.

Jubie has big plans with the money she received from Carter plus the money that she stole from Stell's piggy bank. Jubie and her friend Maggie decide to go to the movies to see Marilyn Monroe's new film "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." Paula thinks the movie is racy so Jubie tells her that she and Maggie went to see "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" again.

When Jubie gets home she is sent to see her father. Jubie learns that Puddin told on her. Jubie knows she is going to receive a beating from her father's belt.

"He sat in the upholstered lady's chair in the corner, sunlight streaming in the windows on either side of him, bouncing off the drink in his hand. He took a sip and set glass on the bedside table with a clink that made me jump. My punishment was always worse when he was drinking." (Chap. 2, p. 22)



### Chapter 3:

The family stops in Wickens, Georgia and spends the night at the Sleep Inn Motel. Like most of the places in Georgia, Wickens is segregated and has posted curfews.

"We passed a sign: 'Wickens Town Limits. Ya'll come back now!' Mama said, 'Not likely.' I looked out the back window to see if there was a curfew sign on the side of town. There was." (chap. 3, p. 28)

Jubie talks about driving through Alabama. Paula stops in Andalusia for lunch. Mary takes time to get dressed up before walking down the street to have lunch with the other coloreds. Jubie is impressed at Mary's change.

Jubie thinks about the first time she met Mary.

"Mary came to work for us when I was five, the first colored person I've ever known." (Chap. 3, p. 31)

Jubie was fascinated by Mary and often sat to watch her work.

The family arrives at Taylor's house in Pensacola. Taylor and Sarah are down on the beach. Puddin rings a bell to attract their attention. Paula and Taylor embrace.

### Chapter 4:

"There was a time in my life before Mary, a time when Mama and Daddy weren't fighting, when they still called each other Pauly and Willie. Maybe if I'd known them happy, the trouble between them wouldn't have bothered me so much." (Chap. 4, p. 36)

Jubie thinks back to the days when the family lived in a four bedroom cabin near Rainbow Lake on Shumont Mountain. Bill had said that he wanted to stay there until the war was over and then the family would move back to Charlotte where he could start a business. Jubie recalls it as a pleasant time when her father almost never got drunk.

### Chapter 5:

Stell shows Jubie where they will be staying with their cousin Sarah. It is a cabana located on the beach. Jubie is excited about the arrangements. Stell, who dislikes Sarah, is not nearly as pleased. Puddin comes to the cabana and asks Sarah about her mother. Stell attempts to quiet Puddin and wonders why their mother never explained about Aunt Lily. The girls get dressed and go to the beach.

### Chapter 6:

Jubie thinks back to the time when she was seven years old. It was the first time she had heard her father fire a handgun. Bill's mother, Cordelia, was visiting as she often did.



"Meemaw visit us for weeks at a time, and Mary had a way with her, fixing her coffee or helping her tune the radio to her stories or getting aspirin if Meemaw complained of headache." (Chap. 6, p. 48)

Bill's brother, Stamos and his wife, Rita, had come to visit. Bill and Stamos had started a construction company using \$10,000 of Paula's inheritance from her father. The company is called Watts Concrete Fabrications. The men discussed their plans for a new project.

Later that evening someone threw a rock through the window of the house. Bill took a gun from a desk drawer and shot out into the night.

Chapter 7: Taylor throws a party so that his friends and neighbors can meet Paula. Two of the most notable guests are Mrs. Lula Willingham and Mrs. Kay Macy Cooper. Mrs. Willingham lives next door to Taylor. Jubie finds it interesting that Mrs. Kay Macy Cooper is always addressed by her full name. Apparently, Mrs. Kay Macy Cooper is related to the Macys in New York.

Mrs. Kay Macy Cooper meets Mary and treats her with the utmost respect even going so far as to call her Mrs. Luther.

Chapter 8: In 1952 the Watts family moves to their new house On Queens Road West in Charlotte.

"The house was so big we didn't have enough stuff to fill it - five bedrooms, three bathrooms - four floors and clearly a full attic, a basement comment and a two-car garage with the efficiency apartment above it." (Chap. 8, p. 58)

Mary comments that it is a coincidence that the new house would be ready almost at the same time Paula will be ready to deliver her fourth child. David William Watts is born on September 27, 1952.

Jubie discusses the general dynamic of the family. Stell begins to change when she enters high school.

"The stiffness between Mary and Mama started the last time the bridge luncheon met at our house. I don't think the extra work is what made Mary act strange. But maybe getting ready for the bridge club put her on edge, so when she heard what Mrs. Feaster said to Mama, that was the last straw." (Chap. 8. P. 65)

Mrs. Feaster is talking about a local woman. She makes a comment about the woman being so stupid that she would make a nigger look smart. Mary has been standing in the door and reprimands Mrs. Feaster. Paula becomes angry.



## Chapters 1-8 Analysis

The main part of the book takes place in 1954 but there are alternating chapters to fill in the backstory. The alternating chapters begin before 1952 but focus mainly on that year. In 1952, the Watts family moved into the house on Queens Road West in Charlotte. That is when things began to change.

At one time Paula and Bill Watts were happy. Bill began to drink and while his business is successful, he becomes involved in illegal activity that results in a boy's death. He is also part of the White Businessman's Association, a group that intends to prevent blacks from voting. The issue of segregation is a major topic throughout the book, as is racism.

The family lives in a large house on Queen's Road West in Charlotte. The area is peaceful with tree-lined streets.

In the 1950s the South was going through a major upheaval regarding Civil Rights, from the decision on Brown vs. the Board of Education to the integration of schools.

The people in the South have very deeply rooted traditions, customs and belief systems that go back for hundreds of years. The South rebels against change in part because the people are comfortable with what is and believe that the blacks are lesser individuals. Some - black and white - balk at change in general and feel that changing things would be too difficult and not worth the trouble.

The story is told by Jubie, a 13 year old girl who is growing up much too fast. Jubie lives in the shadow of her older sister, Stell. Stell seems to be the golden child while Jubie always seems to be in trouble. However, Mary, the Watts' maid, always looks out for Jubie and is on her side.

The entire family, save Bill, goes to Florida for a vacation. While there, it is clear that something is troubling Paula. Going to Taylor's house is a reprieve for Paula. She wants to see her baby brother and also needs the support. Because Bill cheated with Lily, Paula and Taylor can also commiserate together. Taylor cannot understand why Paula has not left Bill.

Stell is the oldest of the group so she seems to pick up on some things that others do not. She is often annoyed by the naiveté of her younger siblings. This is especially clear when Puddin tries to question Sarah about Aunt Lily. The girls are stunned by the news that Bill had an affair with Lily but then realize that everything - the fighting and drinking included - begins to make more sense.

Mary is on hand at all times, ever observing the goings on and stepping in when necessary. Mary is a maid but she is not a servant in the way that some might view a maid or in this case, a slave. Mary is smart, wise, and at times, willful.





# Chapters 9-18

## Chapters 9-18 Summary

Chapter 9: Jubie becomes excited when she sees a sign for a traveling Carnival just outside Pensacola. There is a large sign advertising Bryson McCurdy's Traveling Carnival. Mary takes the children to the Carnival. During the freak show a young black man accidentally pulls down the curtain when Mary yells out to him. The boy, Leesum, blogs to Mary's church and had run away from home. Mary insists that Leesum go home with them to Taylor's house. Mary questions Leesum about his work with the Carnival. Leesum says that he ran away from home and that his mother most likely did not care because she was a 'ho' and a drug addict. Mary will not tolerate such disrespect.

That evening Paula realizes that something is out of order with Jubie and Stell. Paula asks Mary what is going on with the girls. Mary says that the girls had no part in it and that she will keep the boy until she can afford to buy a ticket so that he can return to Charlotte.

Chapter 10:

"Mary came to work the day after Mrs. Feaster said what she did, acting like everything was fine, but she and Mama were stiff around each other, saying only what had to be said for Mary to do her work." (Chap. 10, p. 81)

Bill's mother is scheduled to arrive at the new house on Queens Road West for the first time. Jubie discusses Cordelia's arrival and asks Mary if her meemaw had stayed away so long because of an argument with her mother. Mary says that the women argued but not the entire time Cordelia was in residence.

Paula arrives home from the beauty parlor. Mary is baking bread in the kitchen and Jubie is sent to the living room to run the vacuum. Stell is ordered to polish silver. Paula oversees the rest of the preparations.

Cordelia Watts arrives at the house in the afternoon. The woman is civil but cool and seems to disapprove of everything. Jubie finds it strange that her grandmother never uses their nicknames but chooses to refer to them by their full names. Jubie's mother says that old ladies don't use nicknames. Cordelia gives gifts to the children.

Mary prepares a large welcome dinner. Bill begins to drink before dinner to celebrate the occasion. Cordelia claims to be ill and refuses to come downstairs to dinner. Paula is angry. Paula and Bill argue and Bill storms out of the house. Jubie serves dinner.

Chapter 11:



Jubie spends time getting to know Leesum. Jubie is curious about the boy. Leesum is wary of being around Jubie because she is a white girl. Leesum explains various things to Jubie including the situation with his mother.

#### Chapter 12:

Jubie joins Sarah on the beach. Sarah apologizes for being such a pill but says that she does not want to talk about her mother. Sarah and Jubie spy on Mrs. Willingham next door. When Taylor and Paula find out what they have been doing, the girls are assigned to trash patrol. Paula wants to know why Taylor is so nice to Mrs. Willingham. Taylor says that the woman is a narrow-minded old biddy but that her late husband - Skipper Willingham - saved his hide more than once. Taylor feels he owes it to the Skipper to keep an eye on his wife.

That night the entire family goes down to the beach to watch the stars. Jubie wonders what it would be like to be Taylor's daughter.

#### Chapter 13:

Every June Paula made strawberry ice cream. It was a family event. Jubie recalls going to the A&P to get strawberries and to the ice house for ice and rock salt. Jubie also talks about the House of Prayer for All People, the place where Daddy Grace stayed when he came to town.

Daddy Grace is described as an older man with white hair. Bill refers to him as "Daddy Give-Me-All-You-Got" and says that the House of Prayer for All People is not a real church. Stell expresses interest in going to the annual parade. Bill objects at first but Paula permits it as long as Mary goes with Stell and Jubie.

"I've never seen so many colored people in one place, and all of them in their Sunday best - men in suits and ties, women and dresses, hats, and heels." (Chap. 13, p. 113)

During the parade, Jubie gets her period and is unprepared. Mary sends her to a friend's house to get cleaned up. A girl approaches Jubie with a lot of questions. Mary steps in and distracts the girl, saving Jubie from embarrassment.

Daddy Grace finally arrives at the parade.

"A white Cadillac convertible, trimmed in gold instead of chrome, went by so slowly that I could see the crowns on the hubcaps. Daddy Grace sat in the backseat, his arms raised, the same as Jesus blessing the multitudes. I recognized him as the man I'd seen on the front porch of the House of Prayer." (Chap. 13, p. 117)

Jubie wonders why Daddy Grace has bodyguards. Mary explains that not everyone likes Daddy Grace. Someone in Philadelphia had tried to stab him.

Once the girls arrive home, they tell their parents about the parade. Jubie says how much she liked the singing and dancing.



"'Colored people are emotional about religion,' Stell told Mama and Daddy when we got home. 'We should show more feelings in church.'" (Chap. 13, p. 117)

#### Chapter 14:

After a day at the beach, the family returns home. After dinner is over and Puddin and Davie are put to bed, Jubie, Stell and Sarah return to the beach. Stell and Jubie learn the reason that their Aunt Lily had left. Lily had had an affair with Bill. Stell and Jubie are shocked at the thought of their father having an affair with his sister-in-law. Stell proclaims that their mother should have left him.

#### Chapter 15:

Cordelia becomes ill. Bill says that the doctor ordered ten days of bed rest and medication. Someone would have to go to Kentucky to be with her. Rita and Stamos volunteer. Their son, Carly, would stay with Paula and Bill until they return.

Jubie is excited to have Carly at the house. She hasn't seen Carly for a while because he goes to West Point. Stell is also excited at the thought of Carly coming to stay. Carly had always seemed like more of a brother than a cousin.

Carly arrives shortly before Christmas. Paula and Bill are lovely dovey toward one another. Jubie wishes it could be that way all the time.

Jubie notices how much Carly has grown. For the first time Jubie notices how handsome Carly is and tries to keep from staring at him, especially after she sees him wrapped in a towel after a shower.

Bill is also pleased to see Carly, joking that it will be nice to have another man in the house. War is discussed as Carly is planning to go into action after graduation. Bill expresses concern about fighting in Korea. Bill is uneasy, however, when Carly sits with Jubie and Stell Ann in one of the girls' bedrooms. Bill insists that it is not proper.

Carly leaves to return to West Point. Jubie and Stell are sad to see him go.

#### Chapter 16:

The time comes for the family to leave Taylor's house in Pensacola. Stell wants to go directly to Pawleys Island so that she can be with Carter. Paula insists on going to Claxton to buy fruitcakes. Along the way the car runs out of gas. Paula is humiliated and there is a long wait for a line of cars to get off the ferry which seems to make the situation worse.

#### Chapter 17:

It is another hot day. Stell finally convinces Paula to let her drive. As Stell is driving through Claxton, a drunk driver hits the car. There are only minor injuries. The family is forced to rent a cabin for the night.



## Chapter 18:

The kids enjoy staying at the motel. There is a swimming pool which thrills the children, Jubie wishes that Mary could swim with them. Stell says that their father is on his way from Charlotte. He wants to make sure that the car is going to be fixed properly. Jubie wishes he would not come.

## Chapters 9-18 Analysis

Jubie begins to get her first taste of being fawned over by boys. Stell seems to be immune because of her relationship with Carter. There is humor in the scene in which Mary confronts Leesum. Leesum's behavior toward Mary shows the utmost respect, more than he has for his own mother.

Jubie and Leesum become friends. Jubie would like to have Leesum as a boyfriend but knows that it is not possible in North Carolina in 1954. Mary sees the interest and makes it a point to keep a close eye on the pair. When Leesum is finally sent back to Charlotte to stay with Reverend Perkins, Jubie wonders if she will ever see him again. Mary's actions regarding Leesum show her commitment and moral fiber, something that she tries to instill in the children.

Cordelia Watts does not like her daughter-in-law and the feeling is mutual. Cordelia is demanding and unpleasant. It is clear that Paula would have nothing to do with the older woman if it was at all possible. When Cordelia becomes ill, the last thing in the world Paula wants to do is to take care of her. She is relieved when Rita and Stamos volunteer.

Stell and Jubie are thrilled to have Carly in the house. All think it is ridiculous when Bill insists that Carly stay out of the girls' rooms.

Jubie's journey into puberty becomes more pronounced every day with her changing body and the fact that she notices boys more and more.

Stell is shaken when the Packard is hit in Claxton. As a new driver Stell is unable to avoid the accident but it is explained that the other driver was drunk. Paula is just relieved that no one was hurt. However, Paula did have to call Bill which she did not want to do. Paula was not sure what to do and assumed - probably correctly - that the mechanic might try to take advantage of a woman.



# Chapters 19-24

## Chapters 19-24 Summary

### Chapter 19:

Bill arrives. Neither Jubie nor Stell want to see him. He acts as if everything is fine. Stell acts like a wooden doll around her father. Bill does not seem to notice. Jubie also tries to avoid him. At one point Jubie ends up under one of the beds in her mother's cabin. After a short argument outside, Bill and Paula come inside and make love while Jubie is still under the bed. Jubie thinks that she will kill herself if she is discovered. Jubie barely manages to escape without getting caught.

### Chapter 20:

Stell broaches the subject of the tent meeting. Surprisingly, neither Bill nor Paula objects. On the way, Mary, Stell and Jubie discuss Brown vs. The Board of Education. Jubie asks if that's why she sees signs that say: "No browns in our school." Mary says that it will take time but that integration will happen.

Jubie asks Mary if she went to school. Mary says she attended school until she was fifteen when she left to start cleaning houses. Jubie wonders what it would be like to go to school with colored children.

"The rest of the way to the tent meeting, my mind was filled with thoughts of what it would be like to go to school with coloreds. Would they sit beside me? Were they smart enough to learn? Mary was. Leesum was. The way Mama and Daddy talked, mixing blacks and whites in school would be horrible, but then maybe they were wrong." (Chap. 20. P. 173)

Mary and the girls attend the tent revival. Jubie thinks it is strange that Mary speaks differently to the strangers, as if she is less educated and well spoken. Stell and Jubie are interested in everything they see.

### Chapter 21:

Mary, Stell and Jubie are walking home from the meeting, chatting, when there is a strange sound from nearby. Someone starts to shoot at street lights. Mary realizes that someone is shooting at her. Men approach and hit Mary. The men intend to rape Mary and the girls. Mary steps in between the men and the girls. The men beat Mary and throw her into the backseat of their car. The car is gone when the police arrive.

### Chapter 22:



Stell and Jubie are taken to the sheriff's office. They give a good description of what happened. The sheriff sends out his deputy to look for the car, the driver, and the three men that hurt them and took Mary.

Bill arrives at the sheriff's office to retrieve the girls. When they get outside, Bill explodes and shoves Stell.

"It's all your fault, you and that goddamn religious stuff you're always pushing at us. Jesus this and Jesus that!" (Chap. 22, p. 190)

Bill raises his hand as if he is going to hit Stell. Stell stands up to him and Bill backs down.

The family returns to the motel. Jubie is inconsolable and Stell is extremely upset. Bill blames the girls for what happened. Although the sheriff is on the lookout for the car and for Mary, it is clear to Paula and Bill that she is probably already dead.

The next morning, Paula tells Jubie that they are leaving Claxton. Jubie is incredulous that they could even consider leaving while Mary is still missing.

Chapter 23:

The next morning Puddin asks if Mary is dead. Puddin says Mary must be dead or she would have come home. Stell is puffy-eyed and silent. Jubie refuses to eat breakfast and goes to the pool where a woman asks her about the attack. The woman says she is sure Sheriff Higgins is doing all he can to find Mary.

"I had to find somebody who'd know how much Mary mattered, somebody who would do something, go looking for her." (Chap. 23, p. 198)

Jubie returns to the Zion Church Creek Road, the site of the tent revival. Jubie knocks on the door of a small house that belongs to Ezra Travis. Mrs. Travis answers the door. Jubie says she needs to find a colored religious person to help her. Mrs. Travis invites Jubie inside and gives her a cool cloth and some lemonade. Jubie begins to tell her story. Mrs. Travis seems to understand.

"I clenched my hands to keep from crying. We sat there, me staring at my fists and her rocking. At first the silence was awkward, but then it got easier to just sit, tears spotting my shirt. There was only the sound of my hiccuping breaths, the creak of her rocker on the wood floor, the whir of the ceiling fan." (Chap. 23, p. 200)

Mr. Travis comes home and hears Jubie's story. Jubie learns that Mr. Travis is an attorney. Mr. Travis tells Jubie that Mary is dead.

Jubie is in shock. Paula and Bill pick her up from the Travis house. Paula begins to make arrangements and calls Mary's kids. Jubie wants to know when the funeral will be. Bill says they will not go. Jubie refuses to get into the car with him.



Chapter 24:

Mary's coffin is put onto a train to be sent back to Charlotte. Once again Jubie mentions going to the funeral. Paula says they should go back to Charlotte for the funeral and then go to Pawleys Island for the rest of their vacation. Bill says he will not travel 500 miles for an hour long funeral.

Jubie gets into the car and sits in the backseat. She is overwhelmed with grief.

"I sank into the seat where she's sat for all those miles, tall and straight in her cotton dresses. I pressed my face into the upholstery and thought about her until I felt her bosom against my cheek, smelled her. My throat hurt with a knot that got bigger and bigger until I let the tears come, sliding from the corners of my eyes into my hair and ears." (Chap. 24, p. 209)

Stell, Jubie and Puddin are in the Packard while Bill, Paula and Davie take the Chrysler. They are headed for Pawleys Island. Stell is thrilled to see Carter and is somewhat distracted. Jubie is still in shock and inconsolable. Jubie wakes up in the night and realizes that she has to get to Mary. Jubie steals the keys to both cars. She takes Mary's things from the trunk of the Packard and puts them on the front seat. Jubie heads toward Charlotte.

## Chapters 19-24 Analysis

Bill arrives in Claxton and only the small children are happy to see him. It is clear that the affair with Lily was not a one time thing. Paula accuses Bill of having an affair with the next door neighbor. Bill coaxes Paula into forgiving his behavior, at least temporarily. Jubie is sickened by their behavior and her mother's weakness.

Stell Ann is determined to continue to learn as much about various religions as possible. Although it is clear that Bill is prejudiced, Stell always seems to be able to find a way around his beliefs to get what she wants. Stell is able to present her ideas in such a way so that her parents will approve. In this case, taking Mary to the tent revival is a way to ensure the safety of Jubie and herself. The plan backfires when the three are attacked on the street. Mary steps in to protect the children. While the plan is successful, Mary is beaten, kidnapped, raped and killed.

Jubie feels all alone in the world as if no one understands how much Mary meant to her. Paula does understand and in some cases lets it show. Jubie takes action when it seems no one else will.

Jubie is beside herself with grief and does not know how to express it. She tries hard not to cry. Still, Mary is everywhere.

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bigger until I let the tears come, sliding from the corners of my eyes into my hair and ears." (Chap. 24, p. 209)

Jubie is appalled when Bill refuses to return to Charlotte for the funeral.





# Chapters 25-29

## Chapters 25-29 Summary

### Chapter 25:

Jubie arrives home at seven o'clock in the morning. She goes into the house only to find that Bill had left it a complete mess. Jubie wonders what happened to Young Mary. Jubie knows her mother will have a fit if she sees the house in such a horrible state so she cleans the kitchen and living room. Then Jubie calls to find out the time for Mary's funeral. Jubie gets dressed in her navy blue Easter dress, the one that Mary liked. Jubie takes a cab to the church. Jubie is greeted by Mrs. Coley, the woman that helped her at the Daddy Grace parade. Jubie explains that she is representing the family and that she wanted to bring Mary's things to give to Young Mary and Link. Mrs. Coley comforts Jubie when she collapses next to the coffin.

### Chapter 26:

Chapter 26 details the funeral of Mary Luther. Leesum comes to sit with Jubie and to hold her hand through the service. Jubie thinks that with Leesum on one side of her and Mrs. Coley on the other, she may make it through the day.

Jubie returns Mary's things to Link. Jubie learns that the church is going to send someone to Claxton to find out what happened to Mary.

Jubie returns home, changes her clothes, and decides to leave the house. Jubie ignores the neighbor that calls out to her.

### Chapter 27:

Jubie takes the car and parks it five blocks away from the house. Jubie hopes that no one will tell her father that she has been home. Jubie returns to the house. Bill and Stamos arrive. Bill says he knows that Jubie has been home because the house was a mess when he left. Jubie hears the anger in her father's voice and decides to escape through the basement window. She runs to Maggie's house.

Maggie's mother takes Jubie in and feeds her. Paula calls and tells Jubie that what she did was wrong. Still, Paula wishes she had been at the funeral. Paula tells Jubie to stay at Maggie's for the night and to stay away from her father.

Maggie's mother finds a note in Jubie's jeans pocket. It is from Mary. Jubie does not understand. Later, Jubie shows the note to her mother. Paula says that it must have been written by young Mary.

### Chapter 28:



In the weeks after Mary's death, Jubie and Bill hardly speak. Paula focuses on trying to find a new maid but has a difficult time. Most people want too much money. Others seem uppity. Most use poor grammar. In other words, none was Mary.

Chapter 29:

Richard Daniels, the school's champion diver, falls and splits his head open. Richard is dead. Carter calls and tells Stell Ann. Stell and Jubie are extremely upset. So is Puddin although she hardly knew Richard. While the girls are talking about Richard, Uncle Stamos stops at the house looking for Bill. He seems upset.

Paula returns home from the grocery store. Richard's accident is discussed.

## Chapters 25-29 Analysis

Paula understands Jubie's actions. Although Jubie was wrong to take the car, Paula wishes that she had her daughter's courage. Paula regrets not going to the funeral.

Jubie is often so wrapped up in her convictions that she does not realize the potential consequences. In the case of Mary's funeral, Jubie is lucky to be greeted by Mrs. Corley and to have the support of Leesum. Reverend Perkins also supports Jubie's presence at the funeral.

The people in the church are angry about what happened to Mary. While the preacher says that Mary should be thought of only with love, the members of the church insist that something be done about the crime and the way it will most likely be handled.

Paula shows even more of her grief when she tries to replace Mary. It cannot be done.

The death of Richard Daniels is the beginning of the end of Bill Watts and the family unit as a whole.



# Chapters 30-33

## Chapters 30-33 Summary

Chapter 30:

Things become strained at the Watts house. Richard's funeral was private so no one but family attended. Bill and Stamos spend a great deal of time together, usually behind closed doors. There is visible strain on their faces. Snippets of conversation are overheard. It becomes apparent that the reason for Richard's accident was due to the use of substandard rebar. The accident was caused by negligence. The negligence is the fault of Watts Concrete Fabricators. Stamos did not know what was happening at the company, that Bill had been buying cheap rebar and charging for the standard item. The money saved was going to support the White Businessman's Association.

Rita goes to visit Paula. While the women are talking about the situation, Rita's maid calls and tells her to come home immediately. When Rita arrives home, she finds out that Stamos has committed suicide.

Stamos leaves a note for Rita. It reads, in part:

"I cannot face you, Carlisle, or Mother when you find out what Bill and I did. Even as I write that, I want to defend myself, to say I didn't know. I hope you believe me. When I found out, too late to prevent the Daniels boy's death, I was so ashamed. I should have known." (Chap. 30, p. 258)

The note goes on to say that none of it matters now. All information has been turned over to the police.

The funeral is held at Stamos and Rita's home. Carly flies back from Germany to attend the funeral. Now everyone knows what happened to Richard Daniels. Paula says she would like to run away.

Chapter 31:

The police arrive at the Watts house a week after the funeral. The men chat with Bill while they wait for Bill's lawyer to arrive. After the police leave, Paula and Bill have an argument. Paula says she knows that there is more than what Bill has told her. Paula also confronts Bill with the note from Young Mary. Bill says he only made a pass and that the girl asked for it.

Bill moves into the fishing cabin at Lake Wiley.

Paula receives a letter from Sheriff Higgins. The sheriff has found and arrested the man responsible for Mary's death. The man had tried to pawn Mary's wedding ring. The



sheriff promises to return the ring to Paula so that she can give it to Link and Young Mary. Paula shows the letter to Jubie.

Bill returns to the house to pick up his things. Paula tells him that she wants a divorce. Bill talks about moving to Kentucky to start over.

Chapter 32:

Stell brings a copy of The Charlotte News into the kitchen. In the paper is an article about Bill's part in Richard Daniels' death. The article claims that Watts Concrete Fabricators was negligent. If found guilty, other charges will be brought against Bill.

The report also states:

"The commission is also investigating rumors that the Watts brothers diverted corporate funds to support a recently formed White Businessman's Association (W.B.A.), with the intent of restraining Negroes from registering to vote." (Chap. 32, pp. 271-272)

Jubie becomes enraged and blames Paula, saying that it was also her fault. Her daddy was never coming home. Mary was dead. Uncle Stamos was dead. Nothing would ever be the same.

"What I had was Mama and Stell and Puddin and Davie. Maybe they didn't know that as clearly as I did, but I could tell them." (Chap. 32, p. 274)

Chapter 33:

It is January 1955. Jubie wakes up in her bedroom for the last time. The room is empty and Jubie has slept in a sleeping bag on the floor.

It is moving day. Stell and Jubie talk about the new people that will live in the house. Stell does not seem to care.

After everything is packed up, Paula, Stell, Jubie, Puddin and Davie get ready to leave.

Carter says he is glad that Bill is not going to go to jail, that selling the business paid the fine. Carter kisses Stell on the cheek and sees them off.

The family arrives at the new house. Paula thinks it is ugly because it is bright yellow. A plan is made for unloading the car and unpacking. Paula tells the girls that they'd better get used to not having a maid. At least she was able to find a job. Jubie has lots of questions. For once, Paula seems to have all the answers.

## Chapters 30-33 Analysis

Stamos' death could have been predicted. He was obviously much more upset about the boy's death than Bill even though he wasn't directly at fault. Bill seems to be very



cold even in these dire straits. He seems to feel some remorse but nothing like what is expected of him. Bill was directly responsible for the boy's death.

Bill's leaving was also to be expected. Paula had put up with more than could be expected. When Bill returns to get his things, it is obvious that he has no intention of returning to Paula or the children.

The family remains relatively strong through the death of Stamos and the disappearance of Bill. Legal issues are left to the lawyers. In the end, it seems that Paula has been given a new lease on life.



# Characters

## June Bentley Watts

June Bentley Watts aka Jubie, is a thirteen year old girl living in Charlotte, NC in the 1950s. The story is split into two parts - 1952 when Jubie is 11 years old and 1954 when Jubie is 13.

Jubie is much like any other pre-teen/teenage girl. Jubie has begun to notice boys and desperately wants them to notice her. Jubie lives in the shadow of her near-perfect older sister, Stell Ann, who always seems to be properly dressed and who has a handsome boyfriend. Jubie is sometimes jealous of Stell Ann, which is typical of sisters.

Unlike Stell, Jubie is a keen observer. Some of this is most likely gained from the influence of Mary, who always seems to know what is going on in the family.

Jubie has her moments of teenage angst and immaturity. On the other hand, Jubie is also sensitive to the issues that take place around her, such as the presence of segregation and how it impacts the people she loves most - particularly Mary.

Throughout the book Jubie learns that she must grow up and seems to move quickly through childhood into adulthood.

## Mary Luther

Mary Luther is a 48 year old African-American widow. Mary has worked for the Watts family since 1946 when Jubie was only five years old.

"Mary came to work for us when I was five, the first colored person I've ever known."  
(Chap. 3, p. 31)

Jubie was fascinated by Mary and eventually became very close to the woman. Jubie, who is 11-13 throughout the majority of the book, views Mary as a part of her immediate family, despite the color barrier.

Mary is a pragmatic and intelligent woman with a keen sense of observation and wisdom. Mary likes to dress well when she is not working and takes pride in her appearance. Although Mary serves as the Watts family's nanny and housekeeper, Mary will not tolerate being treated like a lesser person. Mary does follow the rules set by the southerners regarding segregation but only because she typically has no choice. Mary does speak up when she feels someone has been mistreated.



## **Estelle Annette Watts**

Estelle Annette Watts aka Stell or Stell Ann, is the eldest of the Watts children. Estelle is 16 years old, a daddy's girl, and highly involved in her own world.

## **Carolina Watts**

Carolina Watts, aka Puddin, is the third child of the Watts family. Puddin is about 5 or 6 years old.

## **William Watts**

William Watts is Jubie's father and husband to Paula. Willie is a mean drunk who often beats the children when they misbehave. This particularly applies to Jubie.

## **Taylor Bentley**

Taylor Bentley is a commander at the Navy base. Bentley, Paula's brother, lives in Pensacola, Florida with his daughter Sarah.

## **Paula Watts**

Paula Watts is Jubie's mother and is married to Willie Watts.

## **Davie Watts**

Davie Watts is the youngest of the Watts children.

## **Cordelia Watts**

Cordelia Watts, 67, is Willie's mother. Cordelia is a strict Baptist who disapproves of Paula and everything she does.



# Objects/Places

## Charlotte, NC

The Dry Grass of August by Anna Jean Mayhew takes place in the South in 1954. More specifically, the main story takes place in Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte is a major city in North Carolina. It is the location chosen by the Watts family after the war ends and Bill wants to start up a business with his brother, Stamos.

The family lives in a large house on Queen's Road West in Charlotte. The area is peaceful with tree-lined streets.

In the 1950s the South is going through a major upheaval regarding Civil Rights, from the decision on Brown vs. the Board of Education to the integration of schools.

The people in the South have very deeply rooted traditions, customs and belief systems that go back for hundreds of years. The South rebels against change in part because the people are comfortable with what is and believe that the blacks are lesser individuals. Some - black and white - balk at change in general and feel that changing things would be too difficult and not worth the trouble.

## Racism

At the time in which A.J. Mayhew's The Dry Grass of August is set, Negroes had often been considered to be less than equal to the Caucasian. This applies in all circumstances, regardless of religion, gender or class. Many of the characters, particularly the older ones, see this as a way of life and see nothing wrong with treating the Negroes as nothing more than fixtures. There are many instances where the Negroes are servants and others where they are seen as those who are trying to rise above the past, and still others who simply accept their lot in life.

Racism is the main theme in the book. In 1954 Charlotte, North Carolina and the rest of the South there are no longer such things as slaves. However, the "help" were not far removed. African-Americans are still considered to be low class if they are considered to be a part of society at all. Some treat them as animals and act as if the people are diseased. This thought permeates the society so strongly that people are installing "colored bathrooms" in their houses so they will not have to share with the help. It is a shock to Paula when Jubie talks about using a bathroom in a colored woman's house.

One of the landmark events mentioned in the story is the Supreme Court ruling on Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, which was handed down on May 17, 1954.

In the eyes of many, racism was simply representative of the times and considered to be just the way things were.





## **Brown vs. The Board of Education**

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the landmark case of Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, declaring it illegal to have segregated public schools. All public school systems were ordered to begin integration within a specific time period. This decision was met with many mixed emotions, including hatred and fear.

## **Queens Road West**

Queens Road West is the location of the Watts home in Charlotte, NC. It is a nice neighborhood with peaceful, tree lined streets.

## **Pensacola, Florida**

Pensacola, Florida is home to Taylor Bentley and the destination for the Watts family vacation in the summer of 1954.

## **Watts House**

The Watts house is located on Queens Road West in Charlotte, NC. It is home to William, Paula, Estelle, June, Carolina and Davie Watts. It is also where Mary Luther works as a nanny and housekeeper.

## **Taylor Bentley's House**

Taylor Bentley's house is the destination of the Watts family vacation in August 1954. The family spends a week with Taylor, whose house is on the beach in Florida.

## **Watts Concrete Fabrications**

Watts Concrete Fabrications is the name of the company started by Bill and Stamos Watts.



# Themes

## Prejudice/Racism

At the time in which A.J. Mayhew's *The Dry Grass of August* is set, Negroes were often considered to be less than equal to the Caucasian. This applies in all circumstances, regardless of religion, gender or class. Many of the characters, particularly the older ones, see this as a way of life and see nothing wrong with treating the Negroes as nothing more than fixtures. There are many instances where the Negroes are servants and others where they are seen as those who are trying to rise above the past, and still others who simply accept their lot in life.

Racism is the main theme in the book. In 1954 Charlotte, North Carolina and the rest of the South there are no longer such things as slaves. However, the "help" are not far removed. African-Americans are still considered to be low class if they are considered to be a part of society at all. Some treat them as animals and act as if the people are diseased. This thought permeates the society so strongly that people install "colored bathrooms" in their houses so they would not have to share with the help. It is a shock to Paula when Jubie talks about using a bathroom in a colored woman's house.

One of the landmark events that is mentioned in the story is the Supreme Court ruling on *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which was handed down on May 17, 1954.

## The South

*The Dry Grass of August* by Anna Jean Mayhew takes place in the South in 1954. More specifically, the main story takes place in Charlotte, North Carolina. In the 1950s the South was going through a major upheaval regarding Civil Rights, from the decision on *Brown vs. the Board of Education* to the integration of schools.

The people in the South have very deeply rooted traditions, customs and belief systems that go back for hundreds of years. Many still bicker over the existence and loss of the Civil War. For the most part, the Southern white women in the book are dignified and delicate; their main goals include belonging to the Junior League, marrying well, and having children. The forward-thinking Jubie does not agree with this mentality and wants to make a mark of her own.

The South rebels against change in part because the people are comfortable with what is and believe that the blacks are lesser individuals. Some - black and white - balk at change in general and feel that changing things would be too difficult and not worth the trouble.



The early part of the book focuses on the fact that segregation is a major part of southern life. Jubie senses that this is morally wrong and often tries to protect Mary from the injustices of others.

## Family relationships

Family relationships are one of the main themes in Anna Jean Mayhew's *The Dry Grass of August*. The author takes an inside, intimate look at the Watts family, a traditional American family living in Charlotte, North Carolina in the 1950s. The family consists of Paula Watts and her husband William. Paula and William have four children: Estelle Annette Watts aka Stell or Stell Ann; June Bentley Watts aka Jubie; Carolina Watts aka Puddin'; and David William Watts aka Davie.

Mary Luther, an African-American woman, has worked for the Watts family since 1946 when Jubie was only five years old.

"Mary came to work for us when I was five, the first colored person I've ever known."  
(Chap. 3, p. 31)

Jubie is fascinated by Mary and eventually becomes very close to the woman. Jubie, who is 11-13 throughout the majority of the book, views Mary as a part of her immediate family, despite the color barrier.

The book shows what it is like to be a part of a large family that has its share of turmoil, which includes an unfaithful husband who drinks too much and a woman who often becomes overwhelmed by the size of her family.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in Anna Jean Mayhew's *The Dry Grass of August* is in the first person, through the eyes of the main character, June Bentley Watts, aka Jubie. Jubie has a unique point of view regarding the workings of the Watts family. Conversely, Jubie has an extremely limited scope in regards to outside relationships or in the way outsiders see the relationships within the Watts family so that it may not be clear to her what kind of behavior takes place from an objective point of view.

Jubie spends a great deal of time with Mary, so the reader is also able to get the perspective of Mary through Jubie. It is clear that Mary accepts her lot in life as a nanny and housekeeper but is not always willing to tolerate the behavior of those who would treat her like a lesser person because she is black.

The first person point of view works well in the book except for those instances when Jubie's naivete colors the story. Although the innocence lends charm to the story, the reader may be better served through a third person omniscient point of view in order to develop a more complete picture.

Overall, the use of first person works well in that it gives the reader a solid sense of Jubie's character.

## Setting

*The Dry Grass of August* by Anna Jean Mayhew takes place in the South in 1954. More specifically, the main story takes place in Charlotte, North Carolina. Charlotte is a major city in North Carolina. It is the location chosen by the Watts family after the war ends and Bill wants to start up a business with his brother, Stamos.

The family lives in a large house on Queen's Road West in Charlotte. The area is peaceful with tree-lined streets.

In the 1950s the South is going through a major upheaval regarding Civil Rights, from the decision on *Brown vs. the Board of Education* to the integration of schools.

The people in the South have very deeply rooted traditions, customs and belief systems that go back for hundreds of years. The South rebels against change in part because the people are comfortable with what is and believe that the blacks are lesser individuals. Some - black and white - balk at change in general and feel that changing things would be too difficult and not worth the trouble.



## Language and Meaning

Anna Jean Mayhew's *The Dry Grass of August* is set in a time period in which the language is regional and rough, with a heavy influence of slang and mispronounced words. The language used is representative of many aspects of southern life, from upbringing, to race, class, and education. Some of the people who are well educated still use the accepted slang which sometimes seems out of place although it would be acceptable in that time and place.

There are many references to various stereotypes and monikers that are representative of the times. The most noticeable of these are "Negro," "nigger," and "darkie," words that are considered highly unacceptable and taboo in modern society. However, in the context of the story, the language is appropriate, if the reader can get past being offended by what are considered to be racial slurs.

The reader will not have great difficulty in understanding most of the language although there are some instances when it seems misused. The language often works well when used in dialogue but may seem frivolous when used elsewhere.

There are some instances where the language does not seem out of the ordinary, even by modern standards. Overall, the use of southern vernacular, both slang and proper, works well in allowing the reader to catch a glimpse into the mind of the reader and the thoughts, feelings, and socially accepted behaviors of the time.

## Structure

*The Dry Grass of August* by Anna Jean Mayhew is a work of nonfiction. It is comprised of 279 pages, broken down in 233 chapters. The shortest chapter is 3 pages in length; the longest chapter is 15 pages in length. The average number of pages per chapter is 8. The book also contains an interview with the author as well as a section devoted to reading and discussion groups.

The book is written in chronological order with every other chapter referring to 1954-55 or 1952.

The story begins in August 1954. The reader is introduced to the Watts family which consists of Paula Watts and her husband William. Paula and William have four children: Estelle Annette Watts aka Stell or Stell Ann; June Bentley Watts aka Jubie; Carolina Watts aka Puddin; and David William Watts aka Davie. The family is preparing to leave their home in Charlotte, North Carolina to go on a vacation to Pensacola, Florida to visit Paula's brother Taylor.

The alternating chapters begin before 1952 but focus mainly on that year. In 1952, the Watts family moved into the house on Queens Road West in Charlotte. That is when things began to change.

## Quotes

"Something important had happened to me and I didn't remember it." (Chap. 1, p. 8)

"He sat in the upholstered lady's chair in the corner, sunlight streaming in the windows on either side of him, bouncing off the drink in his hand. He took a sip and set glass on the bedside table with a clink that made me jump. My punishment was always worse when he was drinking." (Chap. 2, p. 22)

"Mary came to work for us when I was five, the first colored person I've ever known." (Chap. 3, p. 31)

"There was a time in my life before Mary, a time when Mama and Daddy weren't fighting, when they still called each other Pauly and Willie. Maybe if I'd known them happy, the trouble between them wouldn't have bothered me so much." (Chap. 4, p. 36)

"The portrait had been enlarged, tinted, and framed in mahogany to hang over the mantle. I studied it, wondering what people thought about the happy family in the picture." (Chap. 8, p. 61)

"Mary came to work the day after Mrs. Feaster said what she did, acting like everything was fine, but she and Mama were stiff around each other, saying only what had to be said for Mary to do her work." (Chap. 10, p. 81)

"She's only sixty-seven. And she has never liked me. You know it." (Chap. 10, p. 93)

"Mama wouldn't believe how sad I was that Lessum was leaving. All summer I wanted to meet a nice boy, and the ones I'd seen were creeps or stuck-up." (Chap. 12, p. 102)

"I've never seen so many colored people in one place, and all of them in their Sunday best - men in suits and ties, women and dresses, hats, and heels." (Chap. 13, p. 113)

"'Colored people are emotional about religion,' Stell told Mama and Daddy when we got home. 'We should show more feelings in church.'" (Chap. 13, p. 117)

"'I think you grew up while I wasn't looking.'" (Chap. 19, p. 166)

"School would be starting soon, and there was all sorts of speculation about how we'd be affected by something called Brown versus Board of Education." (Chap. 20, p. 172)

"What I had was Mama and Stell and Puddin and Davie. Maybe they didn't know that as clearly as I did, but I could tell them." (Chap. 32, p. 274)

## Topics for Discussion

Why did Jubie get punished for reading Stell's diary but Puddin did not? How did Stell react to the news? What was Jubie's punishment? Do you think that the punishment fit the crime? Do you think Jubie will ever do anything like that again? Do you think that Bill was abusive to Jubie on more than one occasion? Explain.

Examine the relationship between Jubie and Mary Luther. Why did Jubie befriend Mary? Do you think that there was a color barrier between Mary and Jubie? What was Mary's influence on Jubie's life? Explain.

What was the cause of the friction between Paula and Bill? Did it have anything to do with the children? What could have been done to resolve the problems between the couple? What were the factors that created the problems?

Explain the way in which Stell and Jubie found out about their father's affair with Lily. What was the reaction of each girl? Why do you think Paula agreed to take Bill back after he had an affair with Lily? Where did Lily go? Do you think the situation would be handled differently in today's society? What would you do in Paula's shoes?

Explain the role of Daddy Grace. Why did Stell want to go to the parade? Why is Daddy Grace so important to the people in Charlotte? What is Bill's opinion of the pastor? Do you think the opinion is accurate? Why did Mary leave the House of Prayer for All People for the Baptist church?

Examine Jubie's reaction when Mary died. What was Mary's cause of death? What act did Jubie commit that could have caused her to get into a great deal of trouble with her parents? How did Paula handle the situation?

Mary seemed to be all knowing to Jubie. Explain how Mary was able to understand the children better than their own parents. Give examples of incidents that show Mary's understanding and keen observation skills.