

# **Everything on a Waffle Study Guide**

**Everything on a Waffle by Polly Horvath**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Everything on a Waffle Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 2 and 3.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4 and 5.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 6 and 7.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9 and 10.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 11 and 12.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13 and 14.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 15.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>



# Plot Summary

This novel for young adults is the story of an eventful year in the life of eleven-year-old Primrose Squarp, who's forced to cope with the apparent loss of her seafaring parents after they go missing in a storm. As Primrose struggles to convince others that her belief that they're not dead is valid, she also struggles with interfering guidance counselors, a distracted uncle, and a tendency towards self-injury. In addition to questions about the nature and value of belief, the narrative also explores themes concerned with the importance of self-identity and the value of travel.

The novel begins with Primrose's physical description of herself and commentary on her situation - how her parents separately disappeared during a storm at sea, and how she stayed for a while with the elderly, absent-minded Miss Perfidy. She also describes how she remained convinced, in spite of what almost everyone in her small home town of Coal Harbor thought, that her parents were not dead, but were instead simply missing. The school guidance counselor, the aristocratic Miss Honeycut, intervenes with the town council to move Primrose out of Miss Perfidy's and in with her only known living relative, her Uncle Jack, now working for the navy on the east coast but transferred to the west coast (where Primrose lives) in order to take care of her.

Although Primrose moves most of her things into the home she now shares with Uncle Jack, she leaves her sweaters behind at Miss Perfidy's, where all the mothballs used by Miss Perfidy will, Primrose believes, keep them safe from moths. Meanwhile, Primrose adjusts to a life without her parents, taking refuge from both the taunts and the sympathy of her classmates by spending time with Miss Bowzer, the eccentric owner/head chef of a local restaurant who serves everything from eggs to steak and lasagna on a waffle.

Over the next several weeks, as Miss Honeycut makes it increasingly clear that she is romantically interested in Uncle Jack, and as Primrose continues her nightly, ocean-side vigil for her parents, Primrose has a series of accidents. When she is hit by a truck, one of her little toes is cut off. Then she gets the tip of her finger caught in a fishing net, and it too comes off. Finally, she accidentally singes the hair off a guinea pig entrusted to her care. Miss Honeycut sees all these incidents as a sign that Primrose isn't being appropriately cared for at home, and has her moved (by Child and Family Services) into a foster home, where she meets the friendly and supportive Evie and Bert.

One night Evie and Bert, who can see that Primrose is upset and homesick, take her into town for dinner at Miss Bowzer's restaurant, where they meet Uncle Jack (who has been fighting the decision by Child and Family Services). Their meal is interrupted by cries of fire - the brand new townhouse complex down the street, in which Uncle Jack is an investor, is ablaze. Jack, a volunteer firefighter, rushes out, followed by the others, who watch as the building burns and Jack rescues Miss Honeycut who, on Jack's advice, had purchased a unit in the complex. As Jack recovers in hospital from injuries he suffered while fighting the fire, rumors begin to surface that suggest he cut corners in the construction of the complex, which is why the fire started. Meanwhile, Primrose



continues to stay with Evie and Bert, taking comfort from them when Miss Perfidy (who had absent-mindedly mislaid Primrose's sweaters) suddenly passes away.

A short while after Jack is released from hospital, he, Primrose, Evie and Bert are all walking along the beach when suddenly Primrose's dog starts running madly towards an arriving boat. Primrose, the others, and the entire community are shocked to discover that among the passengers on the boat are Primrose's parents, picked up by a passing ship after being stranded on an isolated island. As the family is reunited, Primrose draws the narrative to a close by revealing that shortly after her parents returned, Miss Honeycut returned to her home in England, and also commenting (in a now more adult narrative voice) that she was, and is, happy to spend the rest of her life in Coal Harbor.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

"My Parents are Lost at Sea": As she introduces herself, eleven-year-old narrator Primrose Squarp describes herself as having "hair the color of carrots in an apricot glaze", and comments that the recipe is to follow. She then describes how her parents separately disappeared during a storm at sea, leaving her with the mothball-infested, disapproving Miss Perfidy. Primrose also comments that while everyone around her in her home town of Coal Harbor, British Columbia, seems convinced that her parents are dead, she remains sure that they are simply lost on an island somewhere. She adds that every time she mentions this, Miss Perfidy simply walks away. Miss Perfidy, it turns out, is being paid three dollars an hour out of the estate of Primrose's parents to look after her, money that is quickly running out. At a special meeting of the town council, called to decide what to do with her, Primrose uses the time taken up by boring, self-important speakers to look through a notebook left behind by her mother. "There wasn't much there", Primrose comments in narration. "Just her recipe for carrots in an apricot glaze and an old grocery list. The rest of the pages were blank".

Eventually, Primrose learns of a plan devised by Miss Honeycut, the aristocratic school guidance counselor, to have Primrose move in with her nearest living relative, her Uncle Jack, currently in the navy and posted on the other side of the country. The council agrees, and Uncle Jack initially refuses, saying he can't leave the navy - which, upon hearing of his situation, posts him to Coal Harbor. At another town council meeting, he is surprised to learn that the plan to have Primrose move in with him is going ahead in spite of his refusal. He learns this, Primrose says, primarily from Miss Honeycut, who she says behaves in a strangely attentive way when she's around him. At one point, Primrose says, Miss Honeycut suggests that Primrose move into a foster home, but Uncle Jack puts his arm around her and says she will be staying with him. Primrose comments that this was the first person-to-person contact she'd had since her parents disappeared. Later, when the navy decides to move out of Coal Harbor, Uncle Jack decides to stay and run the base's gym, living with Primrose in a house attached to it. This, Primrose comments, leaves her things in three places - Miss Perfidy's (where her sweaters are kept safe because of all the mothballs), her parents' old house (now being rented out by Uncle Jack) and Uncle Jack's. This, she says, leaves her feeling somewhat adrift. The chapter concludes with the recipe for carrots in an apricot glaze, which concludes with the direction that "the liquid should boil down and turn into a glaze just as the carrots become tender."

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The character of Primrose, as has been noted elsewhere, shares several inescapably familiar characteristics with another, albeit more famous, red-headed heroine of young adult fiction - Anne of Green Gables. Both have red hair, both are parentless (at least,



Primrose is at the start of the novel), both have the tendency to get into trouble, and both live in Canadian ocean-front communities, albeit on opposite coasts - Primrose lives on the west coast, Anne on the east. Also, both are profound optimists, with Primrose's optimism focused on the return of her parents from what so many people around her seem convinced is their watery grave. Finally, the narratives built around their adventures stories are also similar. Both characters, as mentioned, tend to get into trouble, both characters discover allies and enemies in unexpected places, and both characters have a happy ending of sorts. The primary difference between the two characters, aside from the time period in which their respective narratives are set and the style in which those narratives are told is that Primrose's happy ending involves the return of her parents, while Anne remains an orphan. Meanwhile, a rather obvious difference between the two narratives is that Anne of Green Gables is not also a cookbook, as Everything on a Waffle is.

Food is clearly intended to have some kind of symbolic meaning in this book. The fact that Primrose records recipes, even those from people she can't stand, is a manifestation of her essential optimism - she is, as she says later, saving them for when her mother comes home. There are also occasions when how Primrose phrases the recipes can be seen as metaphorically echoing events. The recipe here (carrots in an apricot glaze) can, for example, be seen as symbolically foreshadowing the outcome of the book - after a series of troubles (boiling down), life for Primrose takes on a sweet flavor (glazing) just as her circumstances become "tender" (her parents return).

Other important elements introduced in chapter one include the strangeness of Miss Perfidy (which foreshadows her increasing strangeness throughout the narrative) and the reference to Primrose's sweaters, the disappearance of which plays a significant role in Primrose's coming to understand Miss Perfidy more. Meanwhile, the portrayal of Miss Honeycut as romantically pursuing Uncle Jack foreshadows events later in the novel when that particular aspect of their relationship plays an important role in plot developments.



# Chapters 2 and 3

## Chapters 2 and 3 Summary

"I Move to Uncle Jack's": At the end of the summer, Primrose moves in with Uncle Jack and starts school. She reveals in narration that Miss Honeycut had been counseling all the other kids about how to deal with Primrose in her grief, except she's not grieving - she still believes her parents are alive. One day, on her way home from school, Primrose is taunted by several of the other kids (who remind her of a clutch of asparagus - "recipe to follow") about her lack of grief and about her Uncle Jack being a "developer". As she runs away, Primrose makes her escape down the alley behind The Girl on the Red Swing Restaurant, where she is pulled aside by restaurant owner Kate Bowzer. Primrose explains in narration that everything in the restaurant is served on a waffle - Miss Bowzer, Primrose says, likes giving her customers something a little extra. When Primrose explains why she was running, Miss Bowzer tells her that what really bothers the children (and the town) is the fact that Primrose's mother loved her father enough to go out in the storm looking for him. Primrose spends the rest of the day with Miss Bowzer, commenting in narration that was when she decided to collect her mother's favorite recipes in the notebook and add any new ones she might like for when she returns. Primrose also reflects on how she and her parents used to make time to spend together, but that it became boring after a while. The chapter concludes with the recipe for preparing asparagus used by Primrose's mother.

"The Dead Whalers": Later that day, Primrose arrives home to find Miss Honeycut waiting with a plate of lemon cookies for Uncle Jack ("recipe to follow"). Primrose listens with barely concealed boredom as Miss Honeycut speaks of the strangely high number of dying friends and relatives she has and of her connections with royalty (her cookie recipe, she says, came from someone who got it from someone who worked for the Queen). Primrose is relieved when Uncle Jack finally arrives, speaks politely to Miss Honeycut, and even more politely gets her to go. That night over dinner, Primrose tells her uncle about his being called a "developer", and he explains that's what he is and what he plans to do - develop Coal Harbor into a tourist community, thereby filling the economic gap left by the eventual (and inevitable) departure of the whaling industry, which is dying because the whales are endangered. He also tells Primrose a long story of his earlier adventures as a developer, leaving her intrigued by his excitement. That night, Uncle Jack goes out to try to sell "the cinnamon house", leaving Primrose alone with her thoughts, her homework, and the sounds from the gym next door, which she says (in narration) makes her think of "the ghosts of dead whalers playing hockey". After going to bed, Primrose lies awake worrying about whether her parents are too cold and getting enough to eat. The chapter concludes with Miss Honeycut's Lemon Sugar Cookie recipe.



## Chapters 2 and 3 Analysis

Chapter two introduces another manifestation of the narrative's focus on food - specifically, Kate Bowzer's practice of serving all the meals in her restaurant on a waffle. Again, there is the clear sense about the book that this is intended to represent something about the story and its central character. The most obvious possibility is how Miss Bowzer's free spirited insistence on serving food her way no matter what can be seen as having a clear resemblance to Primrose's equally determined insistence on believing what she wants to believe about her parents. Both aspects of the book have echoes in other characters as well - Uncle Jack's determination to go about doing business on his terms and, on the darker side, Miss Honeycut's determination to both see Primrose's situation as she (Miss Honeycut) wants to see them and to engage Jack in something like a relationship.

Meanwhile, chapter two contains a pair of quotes that seem intended to be regarded as significant but don't really seem integrated into the novel's thematic and/or narrative lines. These are Miss Bowzer's references to true love and Primrose's reflection on the nature of enforced family time. Both stand out from the narrative around them because they seem more thoughtful and reflective, phrased in such a way as to suggest that they are somehow important components of Primrose's story. But because issues of true love and enforced time together never really come up again, there is the sense that while these sentiments are engagingly expressed, they have little or no connection to the story as a whole. In other words, Primrose doesn't really learn, grow, or change as the result of hearing these words/ideas, their inclusion ultimately coming across as set-up without payoff.

Other elements introduced in this section include the reference to Uncle Jack being a developer, which comes as something of a surprise since nothing about the way his character is described to this point suggests this aspect of his life. That said, his enthusiasm for business and real estate development (including "the cinnamon house") plays an important role in defining and/or motivating events throughout the narrative. It can also be seen as being another manifestation of the narrative's thematic interest in free spiritedness and/or independence.





# Chapters 4 and 5

## Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

"I Am Almost Incarcerated": Primrose describes, in narration, how heavy rain made it difficult for her to make her daily trip to the pier to watch for her parents' return. She also describes how one day she avoided again being taunted by her schoolmates by taking refuge in the drugstore run by the watchful, generally angry Mr. and Mrs. Cantina, who is eating a caramel apple ("recipe to follow"). As Primrose wanders the aisles, she suddenly hears Mr. Cantina cry out angrily - someone has cut his dog's leash, enabling it to run into the street. As Mrs. Cantina calls the sheriff, Mr. Cantina grabs Primrose and accuses her of cutting the leash. The confused Primrose is unable to answer and is taken out of the shop by Sheriff Peters, who seems distracted. At his office, Sheriff Peters sits Primrose at his desk and produces a large package, which contains Primrose's mother's raincoat, found near an island where there is no sign of any human life. Primrose comments in narration that it didn't make her believe her mother was dead, only that she was alive but just didn't have her coat. She describes the feeling of joy sweeping through her, and then asks the sheriff whether he has ever believed anything strongly in spite of there being evidence to the contrary. The sheriff thoughtfully refers to his intuitive belief that a convicted criminal was, in fact, innocent, a belief that, to him, was completely irrational. They "looked at each other knowingly", Primrose comments, and then she went home. The chapter closes with the recipe for caramel apples, which Primrose says should be kept simple.

"Lena's Boiled Potatoes": That night, when Primrose gets home, she finds that Uncle Jack has made her favorite dinner, has bought her a puppy, and that he knows about the found raincoat. Without saying any more about the coat, and after telling Primrose she can name the puppy whatever she wants, Uncle Jack says he has plans to go out to the cinnamon house again. He explains that he gave it that name because the owner, who read somewhere that potential homebuyers like a smell of cinnamon in the air, has making the whole house stink with burned cinnamon. Primrose asks whether she can come along with him, offering to explain her intention with the story of Lena and the boiled potatoes ("recipe to follow"). Before he can hear the story, Uncle Jack has to run off. Primrose then spends the evening helping Miss Bowzer at the restaurant.

The next day, Primrose goes with Uncle Jack to the beach with the puppy, now named Mallomar after Primrose's favorite cookie. Primrose then tells Uncle Jack the story of Lena and the potatoes, explaining that Lena was an over-active, somewhat obsessive neighbor who got herself over-involved in a potato cooking contest and was eventually moved out of town by her concerned husband. Primrose explains that the whole situation could have been avoided if her mother, who had ignored Primrose's suggestion that Lena enter another sort of contest, had just followed her advice. She also says that Uncle Jack could probably sell the cinnamon house if he followed Primrose's advice about the people of the town, whom she says she knows pretty well. Uncle Jack



suddenly says that if she promises to make him cinnamon buns, she can come with him. She agrees. The chapter ends with a recipe for boiled potatoes.

## Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

Primrose's misadventures begin in earnest in chapter four, with the misunderstanding at the Cantina's drugstore (which foreshadows events in chapter seven - specifically, the selling of the store to Uncle Jack as part of his development plans). It's interesting to note, however, that this example of her getting into trouble is juxtaposed with the first example of her finding support from another person for her belief that her parents are alive. Specifically, the comment by Sheriff Peters that he too has had a positive experience of instinct and faith indicates to Primrose that she is not alone in having faith in her instincts (e.g., that her parents are alive). Another important element in this section is Primrose's reference to her experience of feeling a sweeping surge of joy, which foreshadows conversations in chapter twelve in which she discovers that she is not alone in that kind of experience either. Finally, the appearance of the raincoat, while providing a challenging obstacle for Primrose and her faith to overcome, also foreshadows events in chapter fifteen, when Primrose's returned parents explain how the raincoat got lost in the first place.

Meanwhile, chapter five is taken up with Primrose's efforts to become involved with Uncle Jack's work. She says in the following section that she wants to do so in order to avoid any future bullying by her classmates, which on some level makes sense. She also says, again in the following section, that she doesn't want to be alone at home. While it's possible to take this statement at face value, it's also possible to interpret it as a manifestation of reluctance to be alone with her thoughts, worries and fears - in other words, possible doubts that her parents are still alive. This theory is supported by two narrative facts - by Primrose says she's lying, which suggests she has something important to accomplish by getting involved with Uncle Jack, and by her telling the story of Lena and her potatoes. While it does seem to go on a bit longer than necessary or relevant to the narrative, ultimately there is the clear implication that Primrose doesn't want to become as obsessive (i.e., about her parents and/or about not being bullied) as Lena got. In other words, she doesn't want to be alone so long that such an obsession has room to grow.

Finally, there is one last point to note about this section. With her determination to get involved with Uncle Jack, Primrose displays yet another characteristic she shares with Anne of Green Gables - the desire to help, to make things better. Unfortunately, Primrose also shares with Anne the circumstance that all her good intentions tend to result in trouble, a situation that comes to fruition in the following section.



# Chapters 6 and 7

## Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

"What Miss Bowzer Knew": Primrose's first few attempts at making cinnamon rolls end in dismal failure. Uncle Jack suggests she ask someone for help, so she goes to Miss Bowzer, saying she needs to know how to bake cinnamon rolls so she can accompany Uncle Jack after school and therefore avoid both her taunting classmates and being alone at home. Miss Bowzer grumbles about kids not knowing how to cook but helps anyway. Miss Bowzer also grumbles about what Jack is doing to the town, jacking up rents and buying out small businesses like the Cantinas' Drugstore to make room for bigger companies that don't really care about people. He is even, she adds, trying to buy her out. Meanwhile, watching Miss Bowzer smoke while they work reminds Primrose of her mother who, she says, also smoked and who she tried to make quit by sabotaging her cigarettes. She was, Primrose says, worried that her mother would get cancer and die. Miss Bowzer also hints that Primrose is deluding herself about her parents being alive. Primrose asks whether she ever believed anything "just because you knew it was true?" Miss Bowzer answers with a story of how she had a strange feeling about a whaling trip her father was to go out on, how the morning he was due to leave she convinced him to stay, and how the ship he was to be on was sunk on that very trip. A more subdued Miss Bowzer helps Primrose put her cinnamon buns in a pan, and then invites her to come back anytime so they can keep cooking together. The chapter concludes with Primrose's recipe for cinnamon rolls, which she says is both "tricky" and "messy".

"I Lose All My Sweaters": Following the successful completion of a batch of cinnamon rolls, and in preparation for her first sales outing with Uncle Jack, Primrose goes back over to Miss Perfidy's to get one of her sweaters. When she arrives, she is surprised to see that Miss Perfidy has her dress on backwards and becomes worried when Miss Perfidy seems more and more confused - for example, saying she remembers things that she later found out never happened. Eventually, after eating one of Miss Perfidy's stale tea biscuits ("recipe to follow") and after Miss Perfidy goes out to keep an appointment she may not actually have, Primrose goes in search of her sweaters - and is surprised to find they're all gone.

## Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

This section has several noteworthy elements. These include the revelation that Uncle Jack is trying to buy out Miss Bowzer (establishing a degree of tension between him and Primrose, as well as setting up a conflict between him and Miss Bowzer that continues until the last pages of the book), and Primrose's comment about her mother smoking. This comment, like those about true love and family time in chapter two, seems on the one hand to be given a disproportionate amount of emotional weight when compared to the relative lack of narrative weight it receives. In other words, these



comments seem important to the character but less so to the story, unless the fact that they seem so isolated in the narrative is intended to be a manifestation of something else. Possibilities include Primrose feeling emotionally isolated from the people around her, or deliberately intending to keep feelings of loss and grief as isolated as she can, in order to preserve her idealistic faith that her parents are still alive.

This idea, that on some level Primrose is struggling to keep her faith and/or her identity intact, can be seen as being symbolically associated with the series of misadventures she is beginning to experience. Her sweaters, for example: they were knitted for her, as she later reveals, by her mother, and as such are an important part of her identity. They disappear, and an important part of herself goes away. She loses a toe in the next chapter and a bit of a finger later on (in chapter twelve), illustrating that more parts of herself go away. Throughout the narrative, Miss Honeycut continually tries to break down her faith and her sense of home, trying to make them go away. In other words, Primrose is literally and metaphorically under attack and losing parts of herself. Her identity is being picked away bit by bit, meaning that the relative brevity and/or narrative isolation of her memories of her family can be seen as an effort to keep them private and safe in the face of increasingly challenging circumstances that seem to be mobilizing against her.

This sense of attack, however, is juxtaposed with, and perhaps countered by, the support Primrose and her faith receive from Miss Bowzer, who answers the same question she asked the sheriff (and which she will ask several other characters) with an answer that Primrose longs to hear. Yes, Miss Bowzer's comment suggests, it's possible to have faith and belief even when circumstances suggest neither makes sense. Meanwhile, other important elements of this section include the obviously increasing deterioration of Miss Perfidy's state of mind, foreshadowing her eventual disintegration in later chapters. This could be seen as an indication of the fate that Primrose is trying so desperately to avoid - the same loss of self and identity that Miss Perfidy is experiencing.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

"I Lose a Toe": On her way to the cinnamon house with Uncle Jack, Primrose learns that he has been trying very hard to get Miss Bowzer to sell her restaurant, but that she has continually and firmly refused. At the cinnamon house, just as its owner is about to leave and the prospective buyers are arriving, Primrose falls and scrapes her knee quite badly. There is no time to put a bandage on it, so she merely presses Jack's handkerchief to it and waits while he shows the house. He is gone a long time, so Primrose amuses herself in the street, where she is hit by a truck. She wakes up in a hospital, where she is eventually told that the truck took off her little toe and that she has to stay in hospital for a couple of days before she can go home. While there, she is sent gifts of chocolate dipped nuts ("recipe to follow") from the apologetic wife of the trucker who hit her. The nuts, Primrose comments in narration, look like little toes.

While in the hospital, Primrose also receives some visitors. First is Miss Honeycut, who brings cards from Primrose's classmates and hints that she would like to invite Uncle Jack for dinner, an idea that Primrose impulsively rejects. She also tells Primrose that it's time to stop believing that her parents are still alive. When Primrose asks whether she has ever believed something to be true without evidence, Miss Honeycut goes into a long story about a faked séance, but eventually confesses that she and her sister share an unusual bond; they can tell what the other is thinking. When Primrose says that's exactly what she's talking about, Miss Honeycut says she doesn't know what Primrose means and leaves. Shortly afterwards, Miss Perfidy arrives, untidily dressed and absent-minded. Convoluting conversation reveals that according to Miss Perfidy, Primrose is suspected of trying to kill herself after finally realizing that her parents are dead. Primrose says she still believes they're alive, and then asks Miss Perfidy the same question she asked Miss Honeycut - did she ever believe in something without evidence? To Primrose's surprise, Miss Perfidy answers with a flat no. She also tells Primrose that she would have appreciated a warning that she (Primrose) was coming to reclaim her sweaters. When Primrose explains that the sweaters were gone when she arrived, hinting that Miss Perfidy might have gotten rid of them and forgotten, Miss Perfidy says she has no difficulty remembering things she had done - the trouble is she remembers things she hadn't done. She then goes, leaving Primrose to wonder what happened to her sweaters. Later, Uncle Jack comes by, and Primrose remembers to ask why he's "trying so hard to sell the cinnamon house when he had much more expensive listings". He tells her it will be the hardest to sell. After he's gone, Primrose lies awake thinking. The chapter concludes with the recipe for dipped nuts.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

The novel's thematic interest in the power and presence of faith continues in this section, as Primrose once again seeks support for her belief that her parents are still



alive. It's important to note that, here as on the other occasions when she asks the other characters about belief without evidence, that she asks for support not for the specific idea, but for the principle ... of having faith.

Other important elements in this section include the portrayal of Miss Perfidy's increasing strangeness and/or absent mindedness, the deepening mystery of the missing sweaters, and the incident of the missing toe. This last seems, at least in the author's mind, to be of particular importance, and to the reader it probably seems as though it's a substantially challenging situation to be in. But while it, and the second injury Primrose suffers (in the following section), are physically challenging, there is little or no sense that they actually have anything to do with the story, with the overall narrative. Primrose doesn't seem at all slowed down by them. Yes, she has to stay in the hospital for a couple of days, yes each injury does have its repercussions, and yes they both contribute to the file of "evidence" that Miss Honeycut puts forth in order to get Primrose out of Jack's care and therefore out of her way. But in terms of the narrative's larger thematic and narrative focus, and in terms of Primrose's struggle to maintain her faith (with that struggle's simultaneous thematic and plotting implications), the injuries here and in the following section seem to have little connection to what the book is actually about.



# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

"Uncle Jack's Idea": When she comes home from the hospital, Primrose discovers that Uncle Jack had accepted Miss Honeycut's invitation to dinner, where he had pear soup ("recipe to follow") and tried to interest her in investing in some of his developments. Miss Honeycut, on the other hand, tried to interest Uncle Jack in herself, talking about how difficult it must be to have relationships with so many responsibilities (meaning Primrose). Jack then tells Primrose that he told Miss Honeycut he was going to keep Primrose with him no matter what, leading Primrose to comment in narration that she believed Miss Honeycut was going to try even harder to get her out of the way.

The next day, Miss Honeycut calls Primrose into the office for a chat, giving voice to her belief that Primrose needs activities outside the house to help her deal with her "issues". After returning to her classroom, Primrose is given the responsibility for caring for the class's guinea pig every weekend. It will, the teacher says, help her get a sense of herself. Primrose, much to her surprise, gets willing help with the guinea pig (she is still on crutches) from a pair of hockey playing boys who, to her further surprise, go straight into the gym after dropping her and the guinea pig off. That night, Uncle Jack reveals that he invited the boys to use the gym on condition that they engage a "disabled" goalie onto their team, meaning Primrose. He wanted, he says, to follow Miss Honeycut's suggestion and keep her busy. For the rest of the week, Primrose waits to be invited to play, and is eventually not too surprised to learn that the team has found another goalie - an adopted Cambodian orphan with a missing foot. The chapter ends with the recipe for pear soup, one borrowed from Miss Bowzer - neither Primrose nor her uncle, Primrose comments in narration, wanted to talk with Miss Honeycut to get hers.

"I Set Fire to a Guinea Pig"; Mallomar plays on the beach as Primrose looks out at the ocean, watching a line of seals swimming and remembering a time when she and her father watched a pod of orcas swimming by, a pod that her father was familiar with, telling her they swam even while asleep. Her reverie is interrupted by the arrival of Miss Honeycut and Miss Perfidy, gathering with a group of other women for a rummage sale at the church. Both women pass on comments about Primrose's strangeness to the other women, but eventually take Primrose and Mallomar home, where the boys are still playing hockey. There, Miss Perfidy insists it's inappropriate for Primrose to be alone with so many boys close by, so Primrose takes the guinea pig with her to the restaurant. After hearing that Uncle Jack eats more casual food at home than the upscale food he suggests Miss Bowzer sell, Miss Bowzer teaches Primrose to make tuna casserole ("recipe to follow"). They both forget about the guinea pig, eventually realizing that some of the shavings in his cage are on fire.



## Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the development of the Miss Honeycut/Uncle Jack relationship which, as Primrose points out, seems to be more and more focused (at least at this stage) on getting rid of her. Her comments foreshadow later incidents when Miss Honeycut takes direct, some might say extreme, action to do exactly that (see chapter twelve). The second noteworthy point here is the opening imagery/narrative of chapter ten, the first glimpse of Primrose's relationship with her father. This is particularly important, in that the narrative includes so few references to Primrose's parents - or more specifically, her memories of her parents. On the one hand, this may come across as unusual or surprising, given just how much she longs for (and believes in) their return. On another level, however, this relative lack of introspection and/or remembering could also be seen as a manifestation of Primrose's determination to focus on the future (i.e., her faith that her parents are coming home) rather than on the past.

The final point to note about this section is the incident with the guinea pig, which frankly makes no sense. There is no good reason, in terms of character, situation or realism, for Primrose to take the guinea pig anywhere after she brings it home - why could it not be left there on its own? That kind of thing happens to pets all the time. Yes, Primrose comments (very briefly) in narration that Mallomar was barking at the guinea pig, but that doesn't seem like a good enough reason for Primrose to take the guinea pig out of the house - why didn't she simply leave the guinea pig in her bedroom and close the door so Mallomar couldn't get in? In any case, there is the strong sense about this particular moment in the book that it was added by the author solely to make Primrose's life and circumstances even more difficult, rather than as the result of any kind of organic, natural narrative movement.





# Chapters 11 and 12

## Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

"Dinner at The Girl on the Red Swing": Primrose tries to cut the guinea pig's hair to conceal the singe marks from the fire. When her teacher notices, she sends Primrose to Miss Honeycut, who asks why she attacked "a small helpless animal". When Primrose tries to explain, Miss Honeycut starts telling a long story, leading Primrose to start daydreaming. Their session is interrupted by a crisis with another student, leaving Primrose free to go home. That night, she and Uncle Jack go to dinner at Miss Bowzer's restaurant, since Uncle Jack wants to sample the food. There they meet Miss Honeycut, who suggests that she and Jack should get together to talk about Primrose. He, in turn, makes a sales pitch, telling her that he can, and will, sell her a high end property for cheap. After Miss Honeycut rejoins her friends, Jack comments that she's probably thinking about it. Meanwhile, Primrose orders shepherd's pie ("recipe to follow") and Jack orders swordfish, "the most upscale thing on the menu". As they eat, Jack complains about how everything is served on a waffle, but Primrose reminds him that's what makes the restaurant different and special. Conversation turns to how uncomfortable Primrose is getting taking Mallomar to the dock, given that so many people seem to be watching her. Jack tells her she should do what the boys do - catch the fish that follow the whales and sell them to the nearby mink farm. This kind of activity, he says, will make people believe she's actually doing something, rather than watching for her parents. Primrose agrees, but then comments in narration on how acting on his idea went wrong and ended up with her in a foster home. The chapter concludes with a shepherd's pie recipe.

"I Lose Another Digit": This chapter begins with Primrose commenting in narration on how nice her foster parents, Evie and Bert were, but adding that their house didn't feel like home. She also comments that it took two weeks for her to feel comfortable enough to tell them her story, and in particular, the story of how she came to be with them. Through several excited interruptions from Evie and calmer comments from Bert, Primrose tells her story - how she took a net to the dock, and how she would sit with it dangling in the water while she watched for her parents (but looking like she was fishing). She describes how the net got caught in a wave and how her hand got caught in the net, and how she almost drowned. She then describes how Miss Honeycut then put together a file with reports of everything that had gone wrong, suggested that Primrose was not being properly supervised, and had her moved by Child and Family Services into Evie and Bert's. For their part, Evie and Bert are sympathetic, identifying with the dreaminess and imagining that led Primrose to being injured as well as with both her grief at missing her family and her sudden surges of joy. As they eat butterscotch chow mein noodle cookies ("recipe to follow"), Evie and Bert resolve to take Primrose to dinner at The Girl on the Red Swing, saying she needs some comfort and assuring her everything will be fine. "And, of course," Primrose comments in narration, "eventually she was right." The chapter concludes with the recipe for the cookies.



## Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

There are several important points to note about this section. The first is how Miss Honeycut does exactly as Primrose said she would, taking even more extreme action to get Primrose out of the way. Miss Honeycut, at this point, comes across as behaving quite reprehensibly, with her actions throughout the narrative portraying her as actually being quite nasty, self-interested and self-serving. The second noteworthy point in this section is its shifting narrative style - the overt and perhaps heavy-handed foreshadowings at the end of both chapters, and more importantly, the shift in time frame at the beginning of chapter twelve. Whereas up to this point the narrative has been essentially linear, moving in a fundamentally straightforward fashion from event and circumstance to event and circumstance, the narrative here leaps forward by a significant portion of time into a new environment and introducing important new characters. The narrative advantage here is how it builds on the foreshadowing of the previous chapter, triggering an even stronger sense narrative suspense (i.e., making the reader wanting to know how things turned out the way they did).

The third key point about this section is that it introduces another set of allies for Primrose, the eccentric but colorful Evie and Bert. They are essentially similar, in both character and narrative function, to Miss Bowzer - all three do things their own way, all three believe that Primrose should do the same, and all three unconditionally support her in her belief (Miss Bowzer worries that she's setting herself up for failure, but nevertheless gives her the room to believe what she believes). In other words, all three characters manifest and/or embody the narrative's thematic focus on having faith and on the value of living an individual life. This last can also be seen as manifesting in the recipe that concludes the chapter, in that the cookies described can be seen as being somewhat eccentric and unlikely (in terms of their ingredients) in the same way as Evie and Bert can be seen as eccentric and somewhat unlikely (in terms of their support).



# Chapters 13 and 14

## Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

"Fire!": Before describing events at the restaurant that night, Primrose says that while she was away, Uncle Jack had been working hard to bring her back home. He was, she added, actually eager to go to The Girl on the Red Swing to meet them. When they arrive, Evie and Bert notice "the mannequin hanging from the trapeze in the middle of the restaurant", the decoration that gave the place its name. As they're being seated, Jack attempts to get Miss Bowzer to consider a fancier recipe, but she flat out refuses. Then Miss Honeycut comes up to them as she's leaving and demands to be introduced to Evie and Bert, who take her to task for what she's been doing to Primrose. Miss Honeycut says that she's not doing anything, it's the government. After she goes and as the food arrives, Evie and Bert comment again on how awful they think the situation is, making Jack feel a bit guilty for not having resolved it sooner, but then they change the subject, commenting on how much they enjoy having all their food on a waffle. The next morning, after spending the night in a motel with Evie and Bert, Primrose helps Jack take them on a tour of the town. Evie and Bert like it so much that they immediately resolve to move, Jack promising them the same sort of deal he offered Miss Honeycut. Eventually, their house sells and they move to Coal Harbor, into the same townhouse complex as Miss Honeycut and with Primrose still with them. The night they move in, they go to The Girl on the Red Swing for pork chops ("recipe to follow"), but their meal is interrupted by shouts of "fire"! The chapter concludes with a recipe for pork chops topped with cherry pie filling.

"Miss Perfidy Leaves": The people in the restaurant rush out into the street and discover that the townhouse complex is on fire. Jack, a volunteer fireman, rushes to help, followed by Evie, Bert and Primrose. They and the rest of the community watch as the firefighters fight the blaze and Jack, while rescuing the hysterical Miss Honeycut, is injured. When the fire is out, Evie, Bert and Primrose spend the next night at Jack's house, visiting him in hospital the next day. Conversations about what might have caused the fire reveal that there is suspicion that Jack cut corners on the wiring in order to get the building up sooner. Evie and Bert assure a worried Primrose that Jack is not that kind of man, and Jack swears it didn't happen that way. As the days pass, however, rumors spread that this is exactly what happened, and Miss Honeycut even starts a lawsuit against him, leading Primrose to come to an even clearer understanding of what she's really like. She later reveals her insights to Miss Bowzer as they are making Polynesian skewers ("recipe to follow") and Miss Bowzer says nothing, but cuts up her vegetables with extra violence.

One day, a few weeks later, on her way for a walk on the beach with Mallomar, Primrose drops in to visit Miss Perfidy, who seems even stranger than usual, commenting that Primrose has quite a year - "first your parents die, then your uncle Jack goes to jail". Primrose reminds her that Uncle Jack is in the hospital and that her parents didn't die, asking again whether there's something Miss Perfidy just knows in her heart for no



reason. Miss Perfidy again says there isn't and goes back to her ironing, which she remembers just doing. Primrose again asks what happened to her sweaters (which she now reveals were knitted by her mother), but Miss Perfidy doesn't respond, apparently both remembering something and feeling unwell. Primrose expresses her concern, but Miss Perfidy briskly shows her out. The next day, while visiting Uncle Jack in the hospital with Evie and Bert, Primrose learns that Miss Perfidy has fallen seriously ill and is in intensive care. Conversation with her sister (Mrs. Witherspoon) in the cafeteria reveals that she (Mrs. Witherspoon) had been packing up and giving away things that Miss Perfidy had been hoarding, including Primrose's sweaters. When she realizes her mistake, Mrs. Witherspoon apologizes, and Evie promises to take Primrose to Goodwill to look for the sweaters. Mrs. Witherspoon then invites Primrose to visit Miss Perfidy in intensive care. Primrose is nervous, but goes ahead. Her attempt to say something to the unconscious patient ends abruptly when Miss Perfidy quietly dies. As nurses surround her, Primrose whispers a comment that Miss Perfidy "knew things too. You just wouldn't believe that you knew them". The chapter concludes with the recipe for Polynesian skewers.

## Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

In this section, events that take place over a time span of a few weeks unfold in what feels like a rushed narrative pace, as though event is less important than relationship. It could be argued that in many ways, all the relationships are where they need to be and don't need to be developed any further. Protagonist Primrose has her friends (Evie, Bert, Miss Bowzer), her ally (Uncle Jack) and her antagonist (Miss Bowzer), and her essential situation (her missing parents combined with her tendency to be accident prone). None of these relationships are challenged or changed by the fire - even though Jack falls under suspicion, Primrose's feelings for him don't become any different. In fact, it could also be argued that the fire and its fallout are similar in narrative impact (or lack thereof) to the loss of the toe and the fingertip, and are perhaps even less relevant to Primrose's story. What is clearly relevant to that story, however, is Evie's comment while having dinner that she likes having things on a waffle. Here again, the narrative makes the clear thematic statement that individuality and independence are to be valued, as opposed to, for example, doing things the way Uncle Jack says he thinks people want them to be done.

By far the more important narrative element in this section is the deterioration of Miss Perfidy and her eventual death, triggering Primrose to make yet another declaration of personal faith - specifically, that Miss Perfidy had faith, but never knew it. Meanwhile, the revelation that the sweaters were made were Primrose's mother might be taken by some readers as foreshadowing of her parents' death. But as events in the following chapter make clear (and as Primrose herself commented earlier), everything turns out all right in the end.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

"Everybody Goes Home": Primrose, Evie and Bert accompany Mrs. Witherspoon home, keeping her company for a while but leaving when more family arrives. On their way home, they stop at Goodwill to see if any of Primrose's sisters are there. They aren't, which doesn't surprise Primrose, as they were good sweaters. She comments that she "hoped the children wearing them appreciated that they were hand-knit."

The week before Christmas, Jack gets out of the hospital. While on a careful walk on the beach with Primrose, he reveals that the electrician who wired the townhouses has confessed to cutting corners, which was the reason for the fire. He remains in positive spirits, however, commenting that Mallomar runs the way she does "for the sheer joy of the motion". They are joined by Evie and Bert, who have just found a mobile home they would like to purchase. They see Miss Honeycut bump into Miss Bowzer on the street, a near altercation averted by the presence of Sheriff Peters.

At that moment, a boat pulls up along shore, its two passengers waving frantically. Primrose realizes its her parents and runs towards them, registering the varied reactions of the other people around and realizing an important truth about Jack even while she's running. She then comments that her parents ended up in hospital for observation, and that they eventually told her what happened. Her mother did find her father's boat, but it was damaged and sinking. Together they managed to get into a dinghy and survival suits (throwing the raincoat away while doing so), but the dinghy was blown onto an island, where they had survived for the last few months. Eventually they were taken off the island by people on a boat on their way to search for grizzly bears.

The day after her parents are released from hospital, and on the day when the whole family (now including Evie and Bert) is planning to go out for dinner, Primrose meets Miss Honeycut, who says that her father has died and that she is moving back to Europe right away. She then gives Primrose's hand "a cold, hard, lifeless shake and turned around ..." Primrose comments that she never saw Miss Honeycut again, and as a result of their encounter realized that she didn't really want to travel any more. That night at dinner at The Girl on the Red Swing, everyone is surprised to see that Miss Bowzer has added one of Jack's trendy food ideas to her menu, but they are not surprised to see that the meal comes served on a waffle. The chapter and the book ends with Primrose's commentary, apparently written from her perspective as an adult, that Coal Harbor changed a little but remained mostly the same, in the same way as Miss Bowzer's cooking style changed a little but stayed essentially the same. The final entry in the book is a waffle recipe.



## Chapter 15 Analysis

There are several key elements of this section. The first is the return of Primrose's parents, a situation which, in addition to resolving the narrative question of where Primrose is going to live, also manifests the thematic question of the value of faith. In other words, the return of Primrose's parents proves that she was right in believing so strongly and so thoroughly in their return, thereby defining the book's central thematic statement as one in favor of the value of faith, even when there's no evidence.

The second key element of this closing section is stylistic, in that the narrative subtly but clearly shifts perspective. Whereas up to this point, the novel's language and point of view have, to all intents and purposes, been those of the eleven-year-old Primrose, with this chapter, both shift to become those of a much older Primrose. The narrative doesn't make clear just how old this narrator is, but there is definitely an adult sensibility about her, in terms of both language and point of view.

The third key element here is the reference to traveling. Throughout the narrative, Primrose has commented (mostly in narration, and mostly in passing) that she wanted to travel the world, to see more and learn more and understand more. By the end of the book, however, and as she herself comments, she has discovered that she no longer wants to do so - that she really wants to stay close to home and learn all about life and relationships and people through what she can see there. The narrative never really makes it clear why her perspective changed, suggesting that it's because she doesn't want to become as shallow and pretentious as Miss Honeycut. If that really is the reason, then it doesn't come across as being all that strong, or sufficiently motivated. Then there is the comment at the end of the quote on p. 176, referring to how "the important things that happen to you will happen ... even in the smallest places". While it could be argued, that this is on some level true, it could also be argued that there is the possibility of learning even more in other places. To look at it another way, if Primrose doesn't want to be like Miss Honeycut, surely that depends more on how she responds to travel rather than on whether she traveled at all.

Finally, there are the final, pre-recipe lines of the narrative. On one level, this can be seen as summing up the book's primary theme - that living life based on individuality and independence, on what one wants and believes and feels and has faith in, is the ideal (i.e., "everything on a waffle"). On the other hand, it could be argued that the sentiment here is simplistic and reductive - was it really possible for Primrose to have everything she wanted in Coal Harbor? What does this suggest about what she wanted? Is the author really suggesting that staying home is the truest way to live one's life? Granted, the suggestion has been thematically made before (most notably, in the famous closing lines of "The Wizard of Oz", another work of art from which this particular book borrows liberally), and regarded as a truism. But is it really a truth? Or is it a rationalization?



# Characters

## Primrose Squarp

Primrose is the narrative's central character, an independent, strong willed, red-headed heroine who, as previously discussed, bears a strong resemblance to a similar Canadian heroine, Anne of Green Gables. Primrose has a spirited, independent, somewhat prickly, and occasionally reckless personality, but is at her core a compassionate, sensitive human being. Although the point must be made that the glimpses of that core in the narrative are relatively few, this is in fact a point in the narrative's favor, suggesting as it does an aspect of young adult life that rings quite true - a reluctance to admit vulnerability, loneliness and pain. In other words, young adults tend to want to be perceived as being independent, able to function on their own and deal with their own emerging feelings, beliefs and attitudes in their own way. This is absolutely Primrose, keeping her true feelings secret (most of the time) from everybody, including the reader and, in many ways, herself. Reading between the lines, however, and interpreting Primrose's actions (i.e., writing in the notebook, collecting recipes), the reader can come to at least some understanding of how lonely, frightened and desperate Primrose truly is, and how much she hopes that her increasingly challenged faith (that her parents will return home alive) will actually, eventually, be rewarded.

It's important to note, meanwhile, that while the narrative presents itself for almost its entire length as being written by a young Primrose, its final paragraphs suggest that it was, in fact, written from the perspective of the adult Primrose, who has (it seems) been commenting on the experiences of her younger self with the advantage of years of perspective.

## Primrose's Parents

Although they don't physically appear in the narrative until its final two chapters, Primrose's parents are significant in both her life and in her story of this phase of her life. That significance is essentially defined by their being, in fact, absent (i.e., believed to be lost at sea), a situation that triggers, in Primrose, the narrative's central struggle - that is, to maintain faith and instinctive hope in the face of evidence suggesting that, at the least, that hope is misplaced. Their return triggers Primrose's realization, and the novel's thematic statement, that such hope was not misplaced. In other words, they are essentially catalytic characters, triggering transformation rather than with active participation.

## Miss Perfidy

Miss Perfidy is the elderly woman with whom Primrose is left when her mother goes out searching for her father and who, for a short time, provides Primrose with a home when her parents disappear. Spirited and outspoken, even as her mental faculties are



deteriorating, the vinegary Miss Perfidy is, like Primrose's parents, a triggering and/or catalytic character along Primrose's path towards self-trust and self-faith.

## Miss Honeycut

Miss Honeycut is the aristocratic, British-born guidance counselor at Primrose's school. She at first gives the impression of being well meaning and sophisticated, but as Primrose's narrative reveals, is actually selfish, destructive, and somewhat deluded. Her self-serving attitude is a direct, vivid contrast to Miss Bowzer.

## Miss Bowzer

The eccentric Miss Bowzer runs "The Girl on the Red Swing", a quirky restaurant in Coal Harbor. Miss Bowzer is opinionated but compassionate, a friendly ear for Primrose to talk to and a helpful source of support, both for Primrose's efforts at cooking and her ongoing struggle to keep her faith in her parents alive. It's important to note that Miss Bowzer, like Uncle Jack keeps her beliefs about Primrose's parents (that they're dead) to herself. In other words, she (again, like Uncle Jack) is essentially selfless, choosing to behave in a supportive and constructive manner, as opposed to Miss Honeycut who is selfish and destructive. Another important point to note about Miss Bowzer is that she, more than any of the other supporting characters, embodies the narrative's central theme about being oneself. This refers specifically to her unique style of food service - everything, as the title says, on a waffle.

## Uncle Jack

Uncle Jack is Primrose's mother's brother. When he's first referred to in the narrative, there is the sense that he has something of a bad reputation as a rebel, and over the rest of the narrative he certainly comes across as independent and self-motivated. Unlike Miss Honeycut, however, who comes across as entirely self-interested, Uncle Jack is portrayed as having substantial reserves of compassion and selflessness, particularly when it comes to providing a home for the apparently orphaned Primrose. In other words, he is a character of contradictions and contrasts, an effective example of how characters (arguably in any sort of creative writing) are particularly effective if they have more than side to their personalities and/or narrative purposes.

## Sherriff Peters

Although glimpsed only once (in chapter four) and referred to only occasionally, the sheriff plays an important role in Primrose's story. He is the first adult, of the several that Primrose asks, to respond to her question about believing in something without evidence (i.e., faith) with an affirmation - in other words, he's experienced what she's experiencing and believes she's right to believe and act the way she does. In doing so,





in supporting her emotional independence, he manifests the narrative's two central thematic considerations.

## Lena

Lena is the central character in a story Primrose tells her Uncle Jack in chapter five. Primrose comments in narration that she tells the story in order to convince Jack that he should listen to her when it comes to getting to know the community. On another level, the story of Lena's drive to cook perfect potatoes can be seen as a kind of thematic warning, a suggestion that paying too much attention to what one wants and believes can lead to confusion and to taking life and its vagaries too seriously (i.e., obsession)

## Evie and Bert

Primrose moves in with foster parents Evie and Bert as the result of Miss Honeycut giving her overly negative report on her life with Uncle Jack to Child and Family Services. The chatty Evie and quieter (but warm-hearted) Bert are immediately and totally on Primrose's side, supporting her in her faith that her parents will return and in her determination to move back to Coal Harbor and be with Uncle Jack. Even when the townhouse complex into which they've only recently moved burns down, they remain positive and non-judgmental. They are, in other words, able to see the big picture, to see past their own circumstances and into the vulnerable heart of the situations of others (particularly Primrose, but also Uncle Jack and the failing Miss Perfidy).

## Mallomar

Mallomar is the puppy given to Primrose by Uncle Jack, named because he is the color of her favorite cookie (brown and white). A generous, loving, playful companion to Primrose, Mallomar's sudden excitement one day on the beach is the trigger for Primrose to realize that something's up - specifically, that her parents are finally, at long last, coming home.



# Objects/Places

## British Columbia

The novel is set in this province, the westernmost province in Canada bordering on the Pacific Ocean.

## Coal Harbor

This small coastal community in British Columbia is where Primrose and her family make their home.

## Primrose's Notebook

Throughout the narrative, Primrose writes in a notebook left behind by her mother. There is the sense that for Primrose, her attachment to the notebook (and to writing in it) is a metaphoric manifestation of her attachment to her parents and to her faith that they will return.

## The Recipes

Each chapter of the book refers to a recipe that Primrose writes into the back of her notebook. While the notebook metaphorically represents Primrose's hope/faith that her parents are alive, the recipes are fairly literal manifestations of that hope/faith. She writes them down knowing her parents will be coming home.

## The Girl on the Red Swing

This is the name of the restaurant run by Miss Bowzer, where everything is served on a waffle. The restaurant gets its name from a decoration that hangs from the ceiling in the middle of the room - a girl on a trapeze.

## Waffles

Miss Bowzer, the owner and proprietor of The Girl on the Red Swing, serves everything she cooks on a waffle. The fact that she does this is a clear manifestation of the narrative's central thematic statement in favor of acting from a place of clear self-identity. Meanwhile, at the novel's conclusion, Primrose relates her newly discovered belief that everything one needs to know about life and relationships can be learned at home to Miss Bowzer's style of food service. In this context, the metaphoric value of waffles manifests on another level - as the standard of personal truth and individual



integrity/independence against which any/all non-home experiences ought to be measured.

## **Uncle Jack's House**

After her parents go missing, Primrose eventually moves into a house she shares with her Uncle Jack, a house built next to a gymnasium on an abandoned military base. While she is glad to have a home, Primrose remains troubled by the house's proximity to the gym - specifically, to the noise made by those who use it.

## **The Raincoat**

The raincoat worn by Primrose's mother when she went out to sea to search for Primrose's father is found, empty, on the beach. While most in Primrose's situation might see such a discovery as an indication of something gone wrong, Primrose (and the sheriff who shows her the coat) instead choose to believe that all it means is that Primrose's mother doesn't have her coat any more. In other words, the appearance of the raincoat is a catalyst for further narrative commentary on the necessity for having faith, particularly when evidence suggests such faith is misplaced.

## **The Townhouse Complex**

Real estate developer Uncle Jack puts a lot of time, money and effort into the construction and marketing of a high-end townhouse/condominium project, the destruction of which is a high point in the narrative and which serves as a catalyst for the revelation of Miss Honeycut's true character.

## **Primrose's Sweaters**

Primrose owns several beautiful sweaters hand knit by her mother which she keeps safe in the mothball-filled home of Miss Perfidy. Later, the sweaters disappear, partly the result of Miss Perfidy's absent minded-ness and partly the result of her sister's (perhaps over-eager) determination to tidy Miss Perfidy's home.

## **The Beach**

Throughout the narrative, Primrose goes to the beach (at first on her own, later with new puppy Mallomar) to watch for her parents. The beach is also the setting for two contrasting (but important) moments - Primrose's loss of the tip of her finger, and her parents' return.



# Themes

## Instinct and Faith

This is one of the narrative's primary themes, defining the essential intentions and experiences of the central character (Primrose) who, in spite of all evidence to the contrary and the often negative opinions of those around her, continues to have faith that her parents are alive. This thematic also defines her journey of transformation, in that she begins the narrative in a place of desperately clinging to her instinctive faith (as, perhaps, her parents desperately clung to the dinghy that saved their lives) and ends in a place of having that faith rewarded (as her parents' faith is rewarded by being rescued and eventually returned home). The question of how people experience instinct and faith also manifests in Primrose's experience with the other characters, most of whom are asked about whether they've ever (to paraphrase Primrose) trusted their instincts and who, for the most part, respond with affirmative answers that support Primrose in her struggle to maintain her own faith. In short, the narrative repeatedly and consistently makes the thematic suggestion that having, maintaining, and acting upon a faith defined by instinct is ultimately both positive and rewarding. The clarity of this thematic statement is heightened by the contrasting portrayal of Miss Honeycut, who acts in clearly calculated, manipulative and self serving ways that leave her, at least in Primrose's view (and probably in the reader's) ultimately unhappy. It's important to note, meanwhile, that a key component of the novel's exploration of this theme is how it's tied to its second primary theme - the value of being oneself, in many ways a way of acting and believing entirely defined, albeit to individual degrees, by how much instinct for/faith in oneself one actually has.

## Being Oneself

This is the second of the narrative's major themes, manifesting on several levels. Most importantly, it manifests in Primrose, specifically in her determination to believe what she wants about her parents and act on that belief, also in the way she wants. This theme also manifests, in one way or another, in just about every one of the supporting characters. Miss Bowzer runs her restaurant in the way she wants and the way she believes is right. Uncle Jack does business as he wants, Evie and Bert live as they want, and Primrose's mother expresses her love for Primrose's father the way she wants - and Primrose admires them all for it. Even Miss Honeycut, to look at a contrasting, negative aspect of the theme, lives her life according to what she wants, what she believes is right, and what she believes is the way things should be. For a while, Primrose even admires her, but then she realizes that Miss Honeycut's sense of self has become somewhat twisted, self-absorbed and judgmental, and chooses to follow the more positively independent example of Miss Bowzer, her mother, and even Uncle Jack. Unlike Miss Honeycut, these characters are much more live and let live, respectful of those who live with the same spirit of/drive towards independence as they do. They show Primrose a way she wants to live, a path in life she wants to take, while



Miss Honeycut clearly shows Primrose a path not to take. The narrative clearly and vividly makes the thematic statement that an individual can only be fulfilled, and will only be fulfilled, if one lives a life solely defined by what one believes to be true.

## The Value of Travel

Throughout the narrative, Primrose speaks of herself as having a desire to travel, referring to Miss Honeycut as having been well traveled and as having seen the kinds of different places and different lives that Primrose longs to see. As the narrative closes, however, and as a clear reaction to what she has discovered about the sort of person Miss Honeycut actually is, Primrose comments negatively on travel - specifically, on how she's come to realize that travel isn't necessary when it comes to understanding people and understanding oneself. Combine this perspective (which, because it's at the end of the novel, is given significant thematic weight) with the portrayal of Miss Honeycut (as essentially pretentious and self-interested - see "Characters"), and the narrative seems to be making the thematic suggestion that travel isn't all it's cracked up to be, that it is actually dangerous and corruptive. It could be argued that this thematic point is reinforced, at least to some degree, by what happens to Primrose's parents, who essentially go out into dangerous, unprotected, unknown situations (i.e., travel), get lost, have difficulty surviving, and safely return home. In other words, they get into trouble when they go out into the unknown, but are safe when they return. For her part, Miss Honeycut returns from exploring the unknown (i.e., traveling) thinking she's much better than those who haven't (there are other reasons for her pretentiousness, but her pride in travel is a substantial part of it). These three characters go away, and as a result, either return having suffered or return to cause suffering. Primrose, as a result, never wants to leave home again.

# Style

## Point of View

For the most part, the narrative is written from the first person, past tense perspective of its young central character, Primrose Squarp. This draws the reader thoroughly and effectively into Primrose's experiences, seeing events, characters and situations from her point of view as she struggles to hold on to her faith and habits in the face of some pretty challenging opposition. It's important to note, however, that for the most part, Primrose is a reactive central character, or protagonist. In other words, she doesn't make things happen in the way many protagonists do, but instead reacts to what's going on around her/to her. Yes, she takes some important actions (such as, for example, running away from her tormentors in school), but for the most part she is responsive to what's going on, rather than creative. The point is not made to suggest that this is a bad thing. On the contrary, Primrose's reactive positioning, and the sensibility of her narrative (i.e., referring to events and characters almost "in passing") can be seen as manifesting a significant aspect of her character - her determination to maintain her faith about her parents, her almost willing them to return. In other words, she is so focused on her parents that she's not particularly interested in anything else - things happen to her and she reacts, at times with a degree of interest, but for the most part she (and the narrative playing out her story) is essentially unaffected by events. She's on a mission, and nothing's going to distract her from it.

Meanwhile, it's important to note that in the narrative's final paragraphs, it's revealed that Primrose is actually writing from the perspective of herself as an adult. This shift is surprising and jarring. One could be forgiven for feeling confused, as this shift makes one feel almost misled for the rest of the book. On the other hand, this shift in perspective does explain a certain sense of incongruity about much of the narrative's vocabulary.

## Setting

The narrative is set in a small coastal community (Coal Harbor) in British Columbia. Several times throughout the narrative, the community is referred to as on the verge of an economic downturn, according to Uncle Jack the result of the impending failure of the whaling industry which once provided income (either directly or indirectly) for most of its citizens but is, at the point the narrative begins, beginning to die out. This element of impending socio-economic troubles plays an important role in development of one of the narrative's main sub-plots - specifically, Jack's work as a developer and his efforts to help diversify the community's economy.

Another value brought to the narrative by the setting has to do with Coal Harbor being a small community. Small towns are notoriously, often accurately, portrayed as communities where everyone knows, and often interferes in, the business of other



people. Coal Harbor is no exception, in that its population is portrayed as having interest in, and knowledge of, their neighbors' situations that otherwise might not exist in larger communities where people have more to occupy their time. In other words, Primrose might not have the problems she does with bullying and teasing from her classmates (resulting from the attitudes and actions of those children's gossipy parents), not to mention the well-meaning interference of the town council, if she was living in or going to school in a larger city.

Finally, the end of the narrative (in which the now adult Primrose writes about how she's learned so much as the result of staying in Coal Harbor), portrays the town as a model of community and/or human interaction. Primrose seems to be suggesting that, by living in Coal Harbor, she has developed insight into humanity that might not have been made available to her elsewhere. In short, she seems to be saying that she has learned all she needs, and/or wants, to know as the result of staying in her small home town.

## Language and Meaning

While the overall language of the book comes across as typical for someone of the narrator's age and character (i.e., an eleven-year-old girl), there is frequently the sense about the way that narrator expresses herself that her vocabulary and sentence structure are slightly more advanced than seems appropriate. Words, concepts and perspectives seem, at times, a little too mature for the character's age and education. It could be argued that, given the narrative's concluding paragraphs (in which it becomes clear that the adult Primrose is telling a story about her younger self), such relative sophistication in language and meaning is appropriate. But when the third sentence of the book is "I am eleven years old", the reader could be reasonably forgiven for thinking that what is unfolding is being narrated from that perspective, and for becoming confused when words like "perpendicular", "fortuitous", "convalesce" and "reverie" appear. It could also be argued that stating age in the way the opening lines do is a kind of incantation, an evocation of the world, experiences and perspectives of a long time ago - an invocation, a calling for memory to be present in the telling of the story. Well and good. But again, language (i.e., word choice) is a powerful tool for defining both perspective and character, and when language sends mixed messages, the reader is at risk of becoming confused rather than intrigued, jarred out of the story by a sense that something about the way it's being told is not quite as one has been led to believe.

## Structure

For the most part, the narrative unfolds in a linear, straightforward fashion, moving from event to reaction, from beginning to climax, in what might be argued is a traditional line of plot development. It must be pointed out, however, that very often events of the story are episodic rather than linked - in other words, events happen one after the other as opposed to one happening because of the other. Granted, there are certain points where events do have a more structured sensibility - for example, Primrose goes to live with Evie and Bert because of the series of accidents she has suffered and because

Miss Honeycut sees those accidents as a doorway to opportunity for her to get Primrose out of Jack's house. For the most part, though, the book's structure is defined more by a sense of narrative randomness than by a sense of narrative purpose.

That said, there is one noteworthy detour from the narrative's generally linear sensibility. This can be found at the beginning of chapter eleven, in which the narrative jumps ahead a few weeks to when Primrose has been moved in to Evie and Bert's and then returns to recount the events that brought her there. In other words, this chapter opens with a flashback, a deliberate navigational technique employed by this and many other writers to provide information in an intriguing way. In this case, starting the chapter in a situation and circumstances with which the reader is not familiar makes one wonder what happened to get Primrose into that situation, drawing one further into the narrative as the flashback progresses.





## Quotes

"I called the last few words out in the direction Miss Perfidy had gone. She often stalked off when I was in the middle of a sentence. It didn't encourage many heartfelt confidences."

Chap. 1, p. 10

"I do not live anywhere anymore, I said to myself on one of my walks down to the pier to wait for my parents. I am not in the body of life. I hover on the extremities. I float."

Chap. 1, p. 20

"Now, that's true love and it's rare as rare can be. Most of the kids in this town don't have two parents ... they got one dead one and one alive one. Or they got two divorced ones who don't talk to each other. Or they've got a mom and a bird-of-the-night dad who sang one sweet song and never appeared again."

Chap. 2, p. 24

"Being together, like being able to see certain stars only with your peripheral vision, isn't something you can create. It's just something that happens to you."

Chap. 2, p. 26

"Before that evening I'd thought business the dullest thing you could go into and the only people who went into it did so because they were so dull and unimaginative themselves. I never thought it was something that could make someone's eyes sparkle."

Chap. 3, p. 39

"Sometimes you get tempted to make something wonderful even better but in doing so you lose what was so wonderful to begin with."

Chap. 4, p. 49

"I was lying. Mostly I kept to myself and I thought people were extremely unpredictable."

Chap. 5, p. 59

"Now what you do with them [once they're done] is a matter of taste ... Miss Bowzer says it is nobody's business but your own what you do with your potatoes."

Chap. 5, p. 60.

"I did it because I didn't want my mother to get lung cancer and die, but when she found out it was me doing it ... she got very angry and wasn't touched at all by my concern. And then this storm thing came up, so I guess you can't really protect people anyhow. Or if you protect them from one thing, up and comes another."

Chap. 6, p. 68

"I wanted to see Miss Perfidy now and then. We had a peculiar relationship. We didn't like each other much but had lived through my parents' disappearance together. It gave



us a kind of melancholy bond."  
Chap. 7, pp. 73-74

"Later, as I lay in the dark, looking at the one star that shone through my window, with my foot throbbing ... worried about how I would be taunted at school if the rumor was that I was suicidal, I felt a little rush of joy. I didn't know where this joy came from. It didn't seem to need parents or ten toes or the things you think you need. It seemed to have a life of its own."  
Chap. 8, p. 99

"[N]one of us had any idea what we were talking about. It was just one of those situations where everyone involved feels compelled to say something, anything at all."  
Chap. 9, p. 103

"It amazed me that [whales] could keep moving like this even when they were sound asleep. It was as if they had been wound up at the beginning of time and then let go into eternity."  
Chap. 10, p. 109

"I started to cry. I knew my parents were coming home someday but in the meantime I did miss my home. Not my home with Uncle Jack, nice as he was, but my own home with the sound of my mother's footsteps in the morning as I lay still in bed and the sound of my father's coming up the front walk at night."  
Chap. 11, p. 137

"Here you have it: something that is exactly what it says it is."  
Chap. 12, p. 140

"[T]hat's when I realized that my mother had been right all along about Miss Honeycut and I had been wrong. Miss Honeycut didn't tell anecdotes because she was interesting; she told them because she wasn't."  
Chap. 14, p. 156

"[B]ut now I knew that all along he had been certain they were dead and, as happy as I was to see my parents again, the most prominent emotion I had at that moment was just overwhelming gratitude because he had stood at my side all those months keeping the faith even when he didn't believe it himself."  
Chap. 15, p. 172

"I was, [grateful] not just for their return but for their absence too, and where it had taken me and who I had met there. I would never go home again in quite the same way, but that was okay too."  
Chap. 15, pp. 174-75

"All my life I had wanted to travel but what I discovered that year was that the things that you find out become the places that you go and sometimes you find them out by being jettisoned off alone and other times it is the people who choose to stand by your side who give you the clues. But the important things that happen to you will happen to you



even in the smallest places, like Coal Harbor."  
Chap. 15, p. 176

"Coal Harbor never became a big resort or swank tourist spot or anything, but I didn't care because I knew that as long as you lived there you could get anything you wanted. And it always came on a waffle ("recipe to follow")."  
Chap. 15, p. 178



## Topics for Discussion

Consider the quotes from the recipes included in the summary. In what ways can they be seen as reflecting and/or commenting on events in the narrative? Consider particularly the quotes from pp. 49, 60, 140, and the end of chapter six.

Research the meaning of the word "perfidy". In what way does the word reflect the character and function of Miss Perfidy? In what way does the name reflect thematic and/or metaphoric aspects of the novel?

What do you think is the metaphoric meaning of "The Girl on the Red Swing" (the object, not the restaurant)? In what ways might, for example, the girl and her situation represent Primrose and hers?

Discuss the metaphoric value of Primrose's sweaters - the fact that they were made by her mother, the fact that she makes a particular effort to keep them "safe", the fact that they disappear. In what ways might they reflect Primrose's situation and/or story, and/or foreshadow (either accurately or otherwise) developments in that story?

Have you ever had an experience like the one Primrose had and asks people about (i.e., believing strongly in something even though evidence suggested something else)? Have you ever known someone who believed in something that way? Describe the experience - did the believed-in event come to pass? What was the reaction?

What experiences have you had with facing a choice between being yourself and doing something you believe in and doing what someone else asks you to do even though you don't necessarily believe in it? What choice did you make, and why? What were the results of that choice for you?

What experiences do you have of travel? Do you agree or disagree with Primrose's (and the novel's) contention that all you need to know, you can learn at home? Explain your answer.