

Faithful: A Novel Study Guide

Faithful: A Novel by Alice Hoffman

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Hoffman, Alice. *Faithful*. Simon and Schuster, 2016.

This novel opens with the image of memorial candles being lit along the side of a highway and a girl named Shelby Richmond barely surviving her life as a depressed hermit in her childhood home. She has recently graduated high school, but in her short time as a graduate Shelby has endured a near-death car accident, the loss of her best friend, a suicide attempt, institutionalization, repeated rapes, and the throbbing ache of worthlessness associated with clinical depression. Months prior to the start of the novel's story, Shelby lost control of her car on an icy patch and crashed, resulting in a near death experience for her and an injury for her best friend, Helene, that left her in a vegetative state with no hope for waking up. Shelby is lost and alone. She feels responsible for ruining her friend's life and she intends to spend the rest of her life paying penance for what she has done. People in the town have abandoned her. No one speaks to her now that Helene is sitting motionless in her bed and her classmates have all gone off to college without her. Shelby is at rock bottom. She shaves her head as a sign of her troubled feelings and she only leaves the basement late at night when she is sure to have the entire town all to herself. Shelby's mother, Sue, often drives through the town calling out for her daughter in a desperate attempt to keep her crumbling family of three somewhat together.

Shelby is now at home with her parents, but, prior to the book's opening, she was staying at a mental hospital. Shelby's mother found her with slit wrists and called for help. She decided to leave her daughter in the hospital to receive treatment. However, Shelby found herself unable to speak about her survivor's remorse related to the accident so she does not receive much help after all. While there, an orderly capitalized on her silence by raping her in a storage closet. She was hopeless until the day she received a mysterious postcard in the mail. The card simply stated, "Say something," and Shelby used her newly found smidgen of courage to tell her mother about the sexual assault she was enduring. Sue immediately removed her from the hospital. This calamity of events is what leads Shelby to feeling as depressed and worthless as she does from the start of the book. Besides looking at the stars at night, Shelby's only comfort is in smoking marijuana with her dealer, Ben Mink. They went to elementary school together, but now they spend time talking in private about college and Shelby's messed up psyche.

Ben reveals that he hopes their friendship will blossom into something more. He asks Shelby to be his girlfriend and he eventually asks her to move with him to New York City while he attends pharmacy school. Shelby agrees to go along with him because she is bored and knows that she must get a change of scenery if there is any hope for her recovery. They move to a tiny apartment in the city and live together. Ben is madly in love with Shelby and showers her with encouragement, while Shelby rejects all support and affection he sends her way. Shelby shows gradual signs of improvement in her new life. She gets a job at a pet store, she makes a friend who works with her, and she



allows her hair to grow out. Her hope is slowly restored through a combination of her mother's endless support, Ben's constant encouragement, and the infrequent arrival of the postcards with various messages of instruction.

Shelby discovers that she becomes well enough to focus on wanting to help other living things in need. She comes across two dogs being used as pawns in a scheme that brings homeless beggars more money. They are drugged and starved, and their sad images make Shelby desperate to help. She steals the dogs and brings them home, where Ben reluctantly but happily accepts his new companions, The General and Blinkie. Shelby continues to find her own inner power and satisfaction by helping creatures in need. She babysits her coworkers for a week, completely convinced that she is unqualified to care for young people. However, Shelby does an amazing job and establishes connections with Maravalle's children: Jasmine, Dorian, and Teddy. Shelby is incapable of seeing herself as the capable and healthy woman others see her as, but, despite her personal resistance for self-acceptance, Shelby finds herself surrounded by loved ones who depend on her for strength, support, and wisdom.

Shelby tires of her passionless relationship with Ben Mink and breaks up with him to continue her affair with a married veterinarian named Harper Levy. Harper turns out to be an untrustworthy man with several mistresses, so Shelby winds up single and yearning to be back with Ben who no longer wants a relationship with her. Now she must learn how to be successful on her own. It is during this time period when Shelby attends Hunter College with the secret aim of becoming a veterinarian. She spends her time studying and caring for her dogs, which helps to make her feel like a worthy citizen in the world. Shelby also re-establishes her lifelong affection and respect for Sue. Her mother stood by her through even the darkest times, and Shelby feels that she never fully thanked Sue for her unconditional love and support. She learns that her mother has maintained a positive attitude despite having a daughter with severe depression, a husband who habitually cheats on her, and a form of cancer that is killing her. Shelby puts her fast-paced life on hold to spend the final months of her mother's life with her. The women bond in a closer way than they have ever had the chance to before, and Shelby is finally able to recognize how lucky she has been to have Sue with her throughout her suffering and attempt to control her mental illness.

After Sue dies, Shelby retreats back to a feeling of being lost. She decides to attend veterinary school in California and wants to leave the New York area in the hopes that she will find a fresh start less haunted by her guilt about the car accident with Helene. She impulsively decides to get a tattoo before she leaves, and she enters a tattoo shop in her area only to discover that the artist is James Howard, a former classmate from the fourth grade. Shelby notices that James' tattoo says the same phrase as her last postcard: "Trust someone". She instantly realizes that James is the person who has written her those lifesaving postcards all these years. Shelby considers James to be her angel, and the two fall madly in love with one another in just a short time.

Shelby knows that this is the man she wants to be with, and she has no doubt that the two of them will help one another move on from their past traumas. Like Shelby, James suffered a trauma in his childhood. His brother drowned while they went swimming

together, and James has never been able to forgive himself for what happened. Shelby and James establish a strong bond in their relationship that is based on helping another heal from their past traumas. The novel finishes with Shelby visiting Helene in an effort to find closure and forgiveness. James tries his best to forgive himself for his brother's death, and the two of them begin a cross-country journey from New Jersey to California. These once-burdened souls are now in love and hopeful for their bright futures to come.



Chapter 1

Summary

Shelby and Helene were best friends in their senior year of high school. They planned on attending NYU together until one night when a terrible car crash occurred. Shelby was driving. Helene forced them to go out because she was upset about her boyfriend, Chris, breaking up with her. She managed to survive the crash with minimal physical injuries and several psychological issues. Helene, on the other hand, went into a coma. The accident happened in a spot along Route 110, which is where the town places paper bags with gently lit candles along the road in Helene's honor.

The now 19 year-old Shelby struggles with immense guilt after the accident. She remembers seeing an angel while she was lying on the side of the road. The angel saved her; but it did not save Helene, which is something Shelby struggles with every day. She did not go to NYU, she does not talk much, she cuts herself, and she spent three months in the psych ward of a hospital after the accident. She has been diagnosed with survivor's guilt and deep depression. While in the psych ward, she received a strange postcard. It was adorned with an intricate sketch of Shelby's family and her with tape over her mouth. The card simply read, "Say something" (6). She has never thrown that card away, and she keeps it as a reminder of where she will be sent if she does not act somewhat normal. Shelby did not finish her time in the psych ward. She was not released because she was "healed". Rather, her mother forced her release when Shelby finally uttered the news that an orderly named Martin was repeatedly raping her.

Shelby buys pot from a guy named Ben Mink, who went to high school with Helene and her. Shelby speaks to him more than anyone else. Ben convinces Shelby to walk past Helene's house. The two of them walk while smoking a joint. They reminisce about high school, and Ben tells Shelby that he has a B.S. in science from an accelerated program he started in high school and is leaving for pharmacy school soon. Shelby is not interested in Ben, but she feels cared for with him, which is enough to draw her attention. Ben reveals that he was in love with both Helene and Shelby, and he invites Shelby to move to New York City with him while he attends pharmacy school. Ben approaches Helene's window. He reports to Shelby that Helene looks peaceful in bed, but the truth is that he did not have the courage to open his eyes and look in. He wants to remember Helene the way that she was.

Analysis

Shelby is haunted by her own severe guilt related to Helene's vegetative state and her own worthless survival. The book's omniscient narrator ensures that readers are very much aware of Shelby's self-destructive, self-hating and guilt-ridden psyche. Her therapist diagnosed her with survivor's remorse, which is understandable considering



the fact that she was the person driving the car when the accident occurred. Yet, while Helene is the person who is lying motionless in bed, it is Shelby who feels as if she is in a vegetative state. Shelby feels unworthy of surviving, she feels as if she was not worth the effort the universe took to ensure she left the car with only minor injuries. Late on in this chapter, Shelby reveals to her father that she hated herself even before the accident occurred (18). The result of the accident does not make Shelby feel thankful to be alive, which is how she describes the town's general reaction. While Shelby notices that the town secretly hopes that what happened to Helene will never happen to them (2), it is as if she wishes the opposite. Shelby wants to be dead or in a coma. She wants to replace Helene. Shelby does not see herself living any sort of life and feels as if she has stolen a life from Helene that she is wasting away. This huge burden of guilt weighs down on Shelby and has dire consequences for the potential future she once dreamed of. Shelby thinks of Helene and she imagines all of the great things Helene would be doing with her life if the tables were turned. However, Shelby is fully aware that she is throwing her life away into her parent's basement. This awareness, and the paranoia that the people in town blame her for Helene's state, combine have produced a version of Shelby that hates to be with herself.

Shelby's guilt manifests into her burdened feeling of worthlessness, which is both a common symptom of depression and a theme in this novel: self-worth. In addition to her heavy guilt, Shelby is also burdened with her understanding that she is worthless in the world, which subconsciously lures her into making self-destructive decisions. These decisions allow her to spiral even further downward into a state of depression. At the core, Shelby feels unworthy of being the one who left the accident relatively unharmed. "Why would an angel rescue her," she questions, "when she's worthless and Helene, who was so much better than she could ever be, was right there in desperate need of help?" (4). Shelby feels as though she should sacrifice her life in order to honor the loss of Helene's. Shelby feels as though she should sacrifice her life in order to honor the loss of Helene's, even using the word "penance" (6) to describe how she feels she must live her life from now on. She comments that it has been two years since the accident and yet she has done absolutely nothing with her life. Shelby also believes that, "she [is] worth nothing to herself" (11). Likewise, "She is simply not worthy of her mother's love" (4). Shelby's idea that she is both worthless to herself and to the world at large is something she cannot even fathom overcoming. This worthlessness then feeds itself back into guilt, which leads Shelby to feeling worthless; and, thus, the cycle continues.

Shelby's cyclical depression is similar to her cyclical life—predictable, safe, and close to her family home—but the arrival of that first postcard gives Shelby faith that her cycle of mental struggle can be broken. To Shelby, the postcard represents watchful care, which is something she has been missing since the moment the accident happened two years ago. Shelby unknowingly relishes in her pain and sorrow because no one confronts it. She does not want to fade into nothingness, nor does she actually want to die. Shelby yearns for guidance. She is in dire need of someone who is mentally healthier than her to swoop in and help encourage her healing. The people in Shelby's life all seem mindfully fearful of her severe depression. Shelby's social circle has been reduced to her parents, and neither her mother nor her father seems capable of managing or relieving her mental disorder. The postcard is a symbol to Shelby; it is a sign that



someone, somewhere, is watching and cares about her. The strange arrival was delivered to her while she was in the hospital; trying to get the help she needed while actually becoming more damaged. She felt thrown away. No one visited her in the psych ward and all of her friends from school drifted away after the accident. She felt abandoned at the hospital. When the first postcard arrived, Shelby experienced a tinge of comfort in knowing that there is a person out there who cares enough about her to deliver a message.

What readers can debate is either beneficial or potentially dangerous about the postcard is the immediate emotional dependence Shelby places on an object that may stop being delivered at any time. She received the first postcard while staying the hospital. This was something that gave her the strength to tell her mother about being raped, and, although she did not finish her treatment, it is apparent that Shelby was being damaged more staying in that situation. Shelby needs more encouraging messages now that she is out. She even admits that, "She's been waiting for another card ever since she left the hospital" (18). It is as if she does not want to leave her house because she is waiting for another postcard to arrive. When the second postcard comes, she is closer to happiness than readers have seen her. "She's always excited to read them" (28). Shelby is thankful that someone cares, but, more so, she is thankful that the person who sent the first postcard has not given up on her. Shelby has given up on herself and the people who surround her do not show any indication that they feel Shelby is not a lost cause. This awareness of other people's exasperation and her feeling of worthlessness are combated by these two postcards. When her mother notices Shelby is a tiny image in the photograph on the card, Shelby feels even safer in knowing that someone can see her. She is not invisible. She is not dead. She is not unworthy of being saved. She has the right to live. "There is someone, somewhere, who knows she's alive" (19). However, there is no indication that these postcards will steadily continue. The placement of such importance on a small, unmarked card that arrives sporadically could be potentially dangerous. If Shelby places so much of her hope and potential healing on an anonymous postcard, what can happen if those postcards stop coming? Shelby could wind up feeling more distraught if another card does not arrive. Shelby needs these postcards to continue, and she needs to believe they are something special, so she manifests an improbable belief that they are arriving through divine intervention and being sent by either her angel or by Helene. This is an immense amount of dependence placed on these objects, and Shelby does not seem to realize how fragile this lifeline truly is.

While Shelby looks for miracles within the postcards, her mother goes out in search of a miracle at Helene's house. Sue is drawn to the house on a day she is feeling hopeless. She arrives at the house to find many people in desperate situations, and she finds peace in being surrounded by other people who feel lost in their lives. It is difficult to say exactly what Sue goes in search of because she herself has no idea. Of course she is affected by Helene's state, for she is very well aware that it could have been Shelby in a bed lying motionless for such a long time. She wants to see Helene in order to compare her with Shelby because she, "isn't so sure Shelby has survived" (16). She wants to know if Helene is feeling the same amount of remorse and discomfort that Shelby feels on a daily basis. In a way, Sue goes to Helene to learn how she can help Shelby. She



wants answers and she needs help. Sue's family has fallen apart. Relationships between all three of the Richmonds no longer exist. Like her daughter, Sue is desperate to try any miracle that might help Shelby go back to normal.

It is fairly strange that Helene is being kept alive in a vegetative state so that strangers seeking miracles can find comfort in Helene's supposed healing powers while Shelby, the whole survivor of the crash, is avoided. The two girls experienced the same accident, yet one left bedridden and unconscious. However, it is Helene who is surrounded by people who laud her presumed abilities. It is Helene who does not spend a single day alone. She receives care and attention. Helene is showered in adoration and affection while Shelby rots away in a basement. Readers might assume that this fact would make Shelby resentful of Helene. This may very well be the case if Shelby were aware of this difference. Shelby feels nothing but guilt and pity for how Helene's life has turned out, and yet Shelby receives more love than Shelby despite Shelby's need for it.

Shelby is quick to point out Helene's imperfections while conscious, which is why Helen's transition into quasi sainthood is such a large transition. Shelby describes Helene as being a risk taker, a troublemaker, and rule breaker, and filled with jealousy. While Shelby was driving the car, it was Helene who forced her to leave the house in order to carry out punishment for her ex-boyfriend. This information about how Helene used to be provides readers with a very clear change in how Helene is seen now. Although Helene is nonverbal, unmoving, and uncommunicative she has had more of a positive transformation than Shelby has. It is as if Shelby has withered away in her conscious state while Helene has thrived in her unconscious state. Again, Shelby does not feel jealous of this fact because she is blinded by her own guilt for causing Helene to retreat into her current state.

Shelby lost her best friend in the accident, and, since the incident occurred, she has lost every single social contact that might be able to help her feel better, which is why she continues to be trapped in her depression. Shelby is alone in the world. She is surrounded by people yet cannot talk to any of them. Her father is combative to say the least and her mother avoids all subjects beyond what food she can prepare for her daughter. Her parents do not know what to do so they do nothing, which leads Shelby to her confirmation that she is alone and not worth saving. But Shelby has some power to overcome this situation. She chooses to avoid conversations with people. Shelby chooses to remain quiet when there are so many thoughts colliding in her head. She shares some of these thoughts with Ben, her drug dealer. Shelby finds his company to be a safe space to talk since Ben is not socially connected to anyone Shelby knows. The things she discusses with Ben remain between the two of them, and Shelby feels safe with Ben because he provides her with a bit of comfort. This comfort comes in the form of both conversation and of marijuana. Shelby is in so much pain. She lives in a constant state of confusion where she knows she must live her life yet feels like she must pay penance (6) for what she did to Helene's. She develops a closeness with Ben, unbeknownst to him, because he is one of the only factors in her life that contribute to her improvement.



Discussion Question 1

Why did Shelby not shout to protect herself when being raped by the orderly at the hospital? Yes, he threatened her, but what is at the core of her unwillingness to say something?

Discussion Question 2

The narrator gives readers in-depth information about Shelby's thoughts and feelings, but her father is a bit of a mystery. What can you infer about her father's state of being now as compared to what he is described as being in the past? How has he been affected by Shelby's accident?

Discussion Question 3

Shelby tells her father that she would be dead right now if she wanted to die (23). Why is she still alive? What is keeping her alive? What is she waiting for? What is Shelby hoping for?

Vocabulary

goaded, contempt, waif, pilfering, ensconced, contingent



Chapter 2

Summary

Shelby and Ben date all the way through spring. They have sex in the basement. Ben is sweet and kind and gentle, focused on behaving like a proper boyfriend. He introduces himself to Sue and she hosts in her home. These kind actions annoy Shelby. Shelby moves to NYC with Ben. She moves in with him because she is “haunted” (34) on Long Island. She still feels haunted in New York. She takes Ativan during the day and pretends to be fine when Ben comes home from school, but Shelby does not feel fine. She sees nothing but sadness surrounding her in the city. Ben tells Shelby that he is in love with her, but she gives a callous response. She scolds him by saying, “Love is a false construct. It’s how people convince themselves that life is worth living” (42).

Shelby decides to get her very first job ever. She works at a pet store and enjoys the free air conditioning. She spends her lunch breaks alone eating cracker and cheese in the park. One day, she sees a homeless man with sad-looking dogs. The man reveals that the dogs are for rent in order to get more money from people passing by. This disgusts Shelby, and she steals two dogs and brings them home to Ben. Shelby encourages herself by thinking that this was her moment to listen to the postcard and do something.

Ben encourages her to go to school. City College is affordable and he plans on supporting her when he is finished with school, but Shelby is sure that Ben will break up with her once he is successful. Eventually, she enrolls in two courses at Hunter College. Soon after starting classes, she is promoted to the manager of the store, a title she feels unworthy to possess.

Ben and Shelby each go to their separate home for Christmas. Shelby’s house is dark and void of any decorations, but there is something there that gives her hope: a third postcard. This one states, “want something” and has an intricate picture of a maze drawn on it. Almost immediately after spotting the postcard, Shelby’s mother shares that she is happy there is something Shelby wants (55). This is in reference to Shelby wanting to save up for eye surgery on one of her dog’s infected eyeballs. Shelby perks up at her mother’s wording and asks her if someone told her to say that to her. She questions if Helene was the one who instructed her to say such a thing. Her mother responds by sharing that she still dreams of her own mother from time to time, so she believes that the dead continue to communicate with the living. Her father is distant and bitter during her visit. When Shelby asks him why he does not just leave and make everyone happier he responds by announcing that he is not the type of person who could ever do such a thing. Shelby notes that, if she stays with Ben, she will behave in her marriage like her father behaves in his.



Analysis

Despite her best efforts to deny this, Shelby shows signs of mental health improvement in Chapter 2. Chapter 1 depicts Shelby as a hopeless case. She is a girl who is frozen in time after the car crash, crippled with the guilt of being the one to survive. However, in Chapter 2, readers are treated to slight improvements in Shelby's life. The largest change, of course, being her relationship with Ben. Shelby has found a person whom she can speak with. No, she does not confide in Ben, but she does converse with him, which seems to help her feel less alone. Shelby moves out of her parents' basement and into an apartment, which helps her feel more adult like and independent. Her full independence is not realized until Shelby manages to make her own money and stop accepting Ben's allowance. She even comments that her job at the pet store is so nice because she does not need to take Ben's money any longer. Shelby finds a friend in Maravelle, and she actually enjoys the pizza lunches she rarely attends. Shelby also shows signs of having the mental fortitude to selflessly rescue the dogs she takes home. All of these things seem like trivial, everyday events, but, for Shelby, these small actions are a giant step in the direction of healing. While Shelby may never fully rid herself of her depression, she may be able to learn how to function in society again. After all, on the surface, Shelby has her own job and lives with her boyfriend. She seems relatively stable, and there is no mention of her cutting herself in this chapter. One would hope that she has ceased doing so.

The primary cause of Shelby's improvements is the postcards, which provide Shelby with the goals and milestones she depends on. Shelby seems to place all of her hope and desire for change on the postcards. She listens for people to speak the phrases on the postcard and allows those people to guide her decision-making. Maravelle's choice of words is what leads Shelby to stealing the dogs while her mother's phrasing helps Shelby accept money for the dog's surgery. She feels as if the postcards are creating a path for her and she is wholeheartedly willing to follow the breadcrumbs. Adhering to the instructions on the postcards also allows Shelby to feel as if she is accomplishing something. She begins to consider the messages to be a to-do list she needs to accomplish. Each time she feels as though she has ticked something off of the author's list, she metaphorically pats herself on the back and waits for the next card to arrive. These postcard are helping to relieve her feeling of worthlessness that was explored in Chapter 1. Shelby feels as though she can accomplish something, which makes her feel slightly more worthwhile. Additionally, each postcard confirms that she is not worth giving up on. This sentiment helps her believe that she should not give up on herself either. She has created her own fantasy narrative surrounding these cards. In her mind, "The writer knows her so well" (54), and this is something Shelby needs to feel. Although Ben lives with her, although he sees her and adores her, Shelby needs outside confirmation of her worth from the author of the cards that she admires so much. Her world seems to swirl around the arrival of these cards.

While the postcards give Shelby immense faith, readers would be remiss if they ignored the massive improvements Ben helps Shelby make by simply being his optimistic self. Ben does not seem phased by Shelby's depression. He is not affected by her bald head



or her tendency to live in hoodies. He seems to love Shelby for herself. Of course, the fact that Shelby hates herself and deems herself worthless means that she is cynical and suspicious of Ben's affection. She is annoyed by his happiness and faith and optimism. She cannot understand how or why he is so happy. She even detests his physical changes for the better, commenting that he gets more handsome each and every day. On the surface, this appears as though she does not have feelings for Ben. In fact, Shelby even comments that, "They'd been thrown together by fate and boredom" (34), indicating that she has no deep affection for Ben. But one may argue that this Shelby's defense mechanism to protect herself from heartache. She is confident that Ben will leave her the moment he graduates and finds success (38). She is convinced that he is only with her out of pity or convenience. This coincides with Shelby's feeling of worthlessness. She does not feel worthy of love, so, when Ben displays adoration for her, she rejects it under the assumption that he is using her. After all, why would Ben love something as worthless as she? Shelby does not know how to love Ben because she has no concept of love at all. She lost everything and everyone in the car accident, including herself. "Caring about things doesn't come easy to Shelby" (37). Not only does this include things such as school or jobs, it also includes people. Shelby is unable to accept Ben because she is incapable of accepting herself. The narrator describes Shelby as having, "nothing inside of her. She's a black hole. A sinkhole. A whole lot of nothing. She's told Ben that, but he doesn't want to believe her" (38). Ben sees Shelby as the person Shelby wants to be, but she is not ready to be that person, which is why she considers her relationship with Ben to be a mistake (33).

Shelby's rejection of Ben is more closely connected to her own detest for her father than it is to her personal depression. Dan Richmond disgusts Shelby. She knows he is not happy in his work, his marriage, and his life; yet he stays and makes everyone miserable. At the end of Chapter 2, Shelby comes to the truest revelation she has had yet: she realizes that she will be just like her father in her relationship with Ben, if she stays with him. She will be the sad one. She will be the depressed one. If Shelby stays, she will be the anchor that drags the relationship into unhappiness. This is something Shelby does not want to do to Ben, and she does not want this result because she truly and deeply cares for Ben. She comments that her relationship is a mistake, "Before it's even begun" (33). Shelby does not give her relationship a chance before she deems it a lost cause, and she puts very little effort into keeping their relationship successful and happy. Shelby is so afraid of Ben's affections that she keeps the lights off during sex for fear that she will see him "love struck and dumb" (35). She hates herself so much that she cannot handle watching the face of a person who loves her.

This relationship has a third partner: Shelby's immense guilt and need for life-long repentance. "Who is she to deserve something?" Shelby thinks to herself, "How dare she want anything at all?" (54). Ben is a "something" Shelby wants. Her relationship with Ben is the "anything" she wants, but does not feel worthy of having. Ben tries to help her establish pride. He encourages Shelby to improve, and he openly states that he believes in her (38), but this encouragement falls on deaf ears.

Much of this book is centered on the effects the car accident had on Shelby, but she indicates that much of her current trauma is connected to being raped at the hospital.



Shelby believes that her soul exited her body while she was being raped. She laments, “Somewhere in the hospital her soul is flying above the patients in their beds, trapped inside the ward where Shelby spent those awful months” (35). Readers must remember that Shelby entered that hospital as a young teenager. She was a virgin with very little experience with boys. This was her first interaction with sex, and they were painful events. This trauma has a huge effect on Shelby’s outlook on sex. To begin, she rarely initiates sex (47), and she sees it almost as a required duty. Shelby notices the stark difference in how she was treated in the hospital versus how Ben makes love to her in their apartment, fully realizing that what happened to her with the orderly was assault (35).

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Shelby show signs of her lessening depression in Chapter 2? How is her mental state improving?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Shelby continue to approach her relationship with Ben like it is an impossibility?

Discussion Question 3

Describe how Ben’s attitude both helps and harms Shelby. Use examples from the text to defend your answer.

Vocabulary

litany, skitters, archly, malcontent



Chapter 3

Summary

Shelby is now the store manager, which means that she deals with the weekly work schedule. She allows Maravelle to take a few days off in order to visit her grandmother in Florida. However, Maravelle assumes that Shelby will babysit her kids while she is away. Shelby resists at first because she has never been around kids, and because she assumes that she hates them. During the course of her week at Maravelle's, she becomes attached and enjoys spending time with them, even noting that spending time with them is exactly where she wants to be at that moment (77).

Maravelle's kids are named Jasmine, a teenage girl, Dorian, and Teddy. The boys are twins with very different personalities. The shy twin, Dorian, refuses to go to school on the first day. Shelby learns that he is afraid of going to the bus because a monster lives nearby. Shelby learns that this monster is an abused and starved Great Pyrenees. She teaches Dorian not to fear the dog, and Shelby breaks into the junkyard and steals the dog. She takes it back to the house where she bathes him, names him Pablo, and enjoys gloating in the light of the kids' awe of her actions.

Analysis

The dynamic between Dorian and Teddy is very similar to the dynamic between Shelby and Helene. Both relationships have one person who is wilder, more social, and more of a risk taker while the other person is a subdued, somewhat shy, and studious individual. This parallelism is something to note, seeing as readers already know that Shelby and Helene's friendship ended so badly. In this situation, Dorian is very similar to Shelby. He is studious, quiet, and less social than his outgoing twin brother, Teddy. Teddy is very similar to the way Helene was before the accident. Both are charming, social individuals. However, readers should be wary of a possible sad future ahead for Teddy due to his similarity with Helene and her difficult situation.

Shelby feels an instant connection with both Teddy and Dorian because they remind her so much of the friendship she used to have with Helene. Shelby resists babysitting Maravelle's children because she assumes the worst in herself and she does not trust herself to take care of other people. But Maravelle sees something in Shelby that she does not. Shelby has a terribly negative outlook on herself and on the self she portrays to the outside world. Maravelle's children see the loser in Shelby that she feels like. They see her bald head and her ripped jeans and Maravelle's children have the exact same reaction that Shelby imagines people on the street have when they see her. This confirmation makes Shelby feel incredibly self-conscious and hyper-aware of her looks, which is something she has not dwelled on before.



The fact that Maravelle asks her to watch her children indicates her trust in Shelby as well as Shelby's skewed personal opinion. Shelby cannot understand other people's acceptance of who she is. She feels much more comfortable believing that she is a damaged and ill person who is no good for people. This leads Shelby to reject love and acceptance from the people around her. She tells Ben that only an idiot would love her (71) and she does not understand why Maravelle would trust her enough to care for her children. Other people manage to see Shelby as stable and worthwhile but she is unable to accept this fact in herself. But she wants to let people in. Shelby is well aware that establishing relationships is good for her and yet she pushes people like Ben away from her. After Ben tells Shelby that he is "here" on the phone, she wonders how much longer he will still be there for her, noting that she, "has been pushing Ben away from the start of their relationship." and realizing, "All at once she realizes if she pushes too hard he may no longer be there" (72). Shelby is confusing herself in that she wants to reject relationships while recognizing that she needs them. In fact, while preparing to leave Maravelle's house, Shelby comments that, "It's a good thing she's leaving. She's getting too attached" (76-77). She runs away from relationships that require her to be present and accepting because she does not like spending time with herself.

Readers are beginning to see a pattern in Shelby that she cares for things in need and will go as far as breaking the law in order to help a person or an animal in need. In this chapter, Shelby goes far beyond her normal behavior to help Dorian and her new dog, Pablo. Something triggers inside of Shelby when she sees an animal or a person in need. Perhaps this is because she remembers feeling so hopeless and alone when she was at her lowest point after the accident. Shelby does not want anyone or anything else to ever feel the way she once did. Dorian's fear of walking past the monster on his way to the school bus prompts Shelby to immediately solve the problem and relieve Dorian's stress. Likewise, Shelby is instantly attracted to the dog forgotten in the junkyard. She finds a purpose in her life when she helps others. Shelby does not feel that she can help herself, so she enjoys feeling as though she can assist other living things in need, all the while hoping someone will do the same for her. In a way, Shelby feels as if her time spent moping in her parent's basement is as if she was trapped. This feeling helps Shelby relate to Pablo, and she comments, "When you chain something up, you turn him into something he shouldn't be" (68). Shelby feels as if she has been changed forever because of her period of crippling depression, so she recognizes the fragility of the soul when someone or something is tied down.

Shelby thoroughly enjoys feeling like she is part of a family, which is why she loves spending time with Maravelle's kids so much. She has missed the feeling of a "family". Shelby is an only child and her parents have never been very happy with one another; so Maravelle's loud, chaotic, and loving household is something Shelby is drawn to. For the first time since meeting Shelby, she insinuates a happy and satisfied feeling, commenting that, picking up the kids from the school bus on the corner is exactly where she wants to be at that moment (77). How wonderful for Shelby to finally feel as if she is happy being somewhere, as if she is wanted someplace. This indicates that Shelby will continue to develop a relationship with the family and allow the warmth of Maravelle's children's affection heal her own self-doubt and loneliness.



Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Shelby is drawn to the role of motherhood and care taking? How does this connect to her strong passion for rescuing abused and neglected dogs?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it that her time with the kids causes Shelby to feel self-conscious about her bald head?

Discussion Question 3

What evidence is provided in this chapter to support the idea that Shelby is trying to destroy her relationship with Ben? What self-destructive evidence is there on this subject earlier in the book?

Vocabulary

tentative, poised, ridiculed, conspirator, ambles



Chapter 4

Summary

It is Shelby's 21st birthday, and her mother comes to town for a visit. This is the first time Sue sees their apartment, and Shelby is very embarrassed by their small and dingy home. Sue takes her to a birthday lunch in a very nice restaurant. Here, Sue informs Shelby that her father has sold the family business because he is so unhappy and because he knows Shelby will never run it in the future. Sue hands Shelby \$500 as part of her cut in the family business. She also admits to Shelby that her husband, Dan, has had several affairs on her throughout their marriage. In fact, one of his current girlfriends got him a job in the men's department at Macy's since he no longer owns his own menswear shop. Sue hands her a fourth postcard that reads, "See something." It has a drawing of a woman who is blindfolded. Shelby does not talk about herself much, but she internalizes the thought that, as a Biology major at school, she is seriously thinking about becoming a veterinarian so that she can help animals.

Shortly after her mother's visit, Shelby comes across a man who collapsed on the sidewalk. She stops because of the message on the postcard. The man is almost unresponsive and speaks a few forced phrases in Russian. She stops a passerby and demands that he call 911 to help the fallen gentleman. The man she stops turns out to be a handsome veterinarian named Harper Levy, who stays with Shelby throughout the entire ordeal. Both of them get covered in the stranger's blood so they are taken to the hospital for vaccines. Shelby wants to check on the man she saved. She finds an orderly who knows Russian and convinces him to speak to the man. He agrees under the condition that Shelby grow her hair out. She agrees, and the orderly reports that the man claims he is a wolf. They assume the gentleman is either crazy or affected by the hospital drugs. Shelby leaves the hospital to find Harper waiting. She is instantly and strongly attracted to him. The two spend the rest of the day together, and Shelby makes the conscious decision not to tell him about Ben.

Analysis

Shelby is developing mixed feelings about the sincerity and benefit of her infrequent postcards. She used to yearn for a message from the mystery sender. This time, however, Sue hands her the fourth postcard and Shelby refers to the author as a "stalker" (83). She also comments that, "Lately it feels like someone is playing a game with her" (83). As Shelby's mental strength grows, her need for the letters decreases. She does not want anonymous letters anymore. Instead, she feels that she would benefit by meeting the author or by never getting the cards again. Shelby is developing communication skills she gave up after the car crash. She is establishing close relationships with Ben and Marabelle. As Shelby finds confidants, she depends less on the postcards, making her prideful in her independence.



But despite her initial reaction of annoyance toward the postcard, Shelby is also greatly influenced to follow what the message says. In this case, the postcard encourages her to see something. Almost immediately, Shelby notices her mother's shaky hand and overall anxiety. Addressing this observation leads Shelby to helping her mom share some of her repressed feelings as learning about what a disloyal person her father really is. Shortly after, Shelby follows the postcard again when she decides to stop and help the man who fell. She seems to resent the cards now, yet she still follows them like an obedient disciple. Shelby does not know how she truly feels about the recurrent cards.

The incident with the man on the street leads Shelby to experience what it is like to fall in love with someone. She has never felt passionately about Ben, and Shelby frequently notes that they got together out of boredom. But she instantly feels different upon meeting Harper. Shelby is immediately love struck. She considers this man to be perfect and asks, "Is it possible the perfect man can be found on the street beside a pool of blood?" (87). But Hoffman also includes some foreshadowing here that this affair will end badly. Shelby wonders if her conversations with Harper are anything like the conversations her father has with his affairs (86). Shelby knows she will cheat on Ben with this man. She has no doubt about her decision to be with Harper. This is yet another example of how similar Shelby is to her father, and yet, Shelby dislikes her father very much.

Shelby's dissatisfaction with Ben is something that has been increasing over time, with readers left to wonder if she will stay with Ben and remain unhappy or if she will leave him and break Ben's heart. In previous Chapters, she makes comments about their eventual and upcoming break up. She admits that, "They're like strangers on a train, only they live in the same apartment and sleep together, but they don't know each other in any deep way" (82). In this chapter, the first reaction Shelby has to receiving the \$500 is that she can use it while leaving Ben (82). This is not the reaction one would have if they were in a happy relationship. Right away, Sue understands that they are having problems, so she encourages Shelby to leave any relationship that does not make her happy. Sue does not want her daughter to end up like her. She knows the suffering associated with staying in a relationship where neither party actually cares for the other. The issue here is that Ben very much cares for Shelby. He openly and whole heartedly loves her, but he cannot admit to himself that Shelby feels nothing close to love for him.

Shelby finds strength in herself when she is around people and animals who are weaker than she. While Shelby is seemingly incapable of ever developing deep affection for Ben, she is consistently driven to show affection towards forgotten or abused creatures. Ben is in need of love and care when Shelby buys drugs from him back in her hometown. Ben is a loner then. He is unpopular and awkward. However, as Shelby notes in Chapters 2 and 3, school and living in New York contribute to Ben's personal development. He begins to take care of his body and his clothes. He speaks and walks more confidently. He no longer needs Shelby's assistance or presence, which is a large factor in why Shelby desires being around him less and less. She finds solace in rescuing the dogs used as props for the homeless and she passionately saves Pablo in the previous chapter. Harper appears slightly broken to Shelby. He claims to be sad due



to his unhappy marriage. He seems to need support and love and camaraderie, which Shelby is happy to provide. Going back to her time babysitting Maravelle's children in Chapter 3, Shelby displays her strength when she is around frightened Dorian. She thrives when people around her are shrinking away. It is their weaknesses that seem to give her fortitude. When she comes across the fallen man on the street, it is his current state of weakness that emboldens her to use her strength and save the situation.

There is a strange connection between the Russian-speaking man on the street and the way that Helene and Shelby used to refer to Ben. Shelby jokes with Ben in Chapter 1. She admits that Helene and she used to make fun of Ben and they used to refer to him as a werewolf (8). This was due to his antisocial behavior as well as his hairy body. It is strange, then, that the fallen man claims to be a wolf. While this may be a coincidence, the connection is difficult to ignore. Harper confirms the man's crazy claim early on by noting that he seems to have a third eyelid, which is something canines have. The entire event surrounding the man in the hospital is so strange, it is likely important for readers to remember as the story continues.

Another strange coincidence in Chapter 4 is the recurrence of the color black in Shelby's life, a color used to symbolize Shelby's angel. In Chapter 1, Shelby describes her angel as appearing during the car accident and wearing black. In this chapter, Sue excitedly blurts out that the person who dropped the postcard off was driving a black car. Due to the guidance and helpfulness of the postcards, it is safe to consider the cards as being delivered by her angel. It is not yet clear if her angel is supernatural or just a concerned human who has an affection for the color black.

Discussion Question 1

Explain how Shelby does good using evidence of Shelby's actions in the story thus far.

Discussion Question 2

Use evidence from the novel to help explain Shelby's relationship with her mother, Sue. In what ways has Shelby ignored her mother?

Discussion Question 3

Study Shelby's internal dialogue in this chapter. How do her thoughts exhibit a more confident, self-accepting Shelby than in previous chapters?

Vocabulary

rapt, inoculated



Chapter 5

Summary

Shelby starts an affair with the veterinarian, Harper. He is married, but claims to be in a loveless marriage, and Shelby is, of course, dating Ben. For months, she tries to find the right time to break up with Ben, and she decides to do it the night of his graduation from pharmacy school. Shelby pulls Ben into the women's bathroom at a restaurant while Ben's parents wait at the table. Ben becomes extremely angry at Shelby for how and when she breaks up with him, but the two of them return to the table and finish dinner with his parents anyway.

Ben immediately moves out of the apartment, taking very few things with him. Shelby continues her relationship with Harper and assumes that he will end his marriage soon. The two see one another for close to one year and Harper never goes through with his promises to divorce his wife. Shelby becomes desperate to grow her relationship with Harper, so she takes her dogs for a walk in his neighborhood. She hopes to run into Harper but she runs into his wife, Sarah, instead. The two women walk their dogs and chat, which is when Shelby learns that Sarah is pregnant with a girl. Sarah also informs her that Harper plays tennis on that day, which Shelby finds suspicious because he told her that he walks his dogs during that time. Shelby leaves Sarah and takes a taxi directly to Harper's office where she catches him having sex with another woman. Shelby breaks up with him right there, which causes Harper to become angry and lash out calling her crazy. She takes a painting created by Sarah from his office as payment for her time. Shelby feels terrible that she hurt Ben for a guy like Harper.

During this time period, a fifth postcard arrives. This time, it is an image of a box with something trapped inside, and it reads Save Something.

Analysis

Shelby is to the point now where the postcards mean very little to her. It appears in Chapter 5 almost as a nuisance. Shelby has transitioned from depending on Postcards one and two to being annoyed by postcards three and four. Now, the fifth postcard seems close to meaningless in her life. This may be because Shelby is healing. Her mental health is improving to the point where she does not need this crutch anymore. Shelby used to need the cards in order to feel as if someone was watching. However, now Shelby is to the point where she is confident that a number of people "see" her and care for her. Marabelle is a large factor in Shelby's confidence in being cared for. This seemingly odd friendship has turned into honest communication with exchanges of advice and support. Shelby also knows that she has Ben, despite the fact that he may not like her as a person right now. Mostly, though, Shelby depends on Harper for attention and care. She falls deeply in love with him very quickly, and his presence helps give her strength.



Shelby falls so deeply in love with Harper that she manages to ignore the clear parallels between her father's cheating, which is greatly disapproved of, and Harper's cheating, which she selfishly condones. Harper is portrayed as a manipulator. He says many things similar to what Shelby's father presumably told all of his girlfriends. He drags Shelby along for almost a year, forcing her to meet him after work on Mondays. Unfortunately, Shelby is far too blinded by her infatuation to logically think about how strange it is to have a once-a-week relationship. It is surprising that Shelby did not connect Harper's cheating with her father's past indiscretions. Her mother, Sue, even gives a direct correlation when she tells Shelby that Harper sounds like her father (98). She has been a lifelong witness to her mother's pain associated with being trapped in a loveless marriage. Shelby knows that it is uncommon for a man to actually go through with leaving his wife. And yet, Shelby chooses to ignore her personal past experiences in lieu of a relationship that makes her enjoy sex and feel comforted. Deep down, Shelby knows that he cannot be trusted. She probes Sarah for information about his whereabouts because she already feels that a man like Harper is capable of having a different girl every day of the week. She knows he is bad for her, but she cannot abandon the infatuation and excitement she is feeling for the first time in her life.

For better or for worse, Harper helps Shelby heal some of her relationship issues; but, now that Shelby knows the truth about him, readers must wonder how long her Shelby's progress will continue for. She notes that sex with Harper is much different than anything she has experienced before. The narrator comments that, "Shelby is sometimes catapulted backward in time to the hospital and all that sex she didn't want. But this is different. This is love" (99). She never felt this way while having sex with Ben. With him, sex was a duty, a chore. However, with Harper, Shelby considers sex to be a wonderful experience. She even ignores the parallel between the scent of Lysol in Harper's office and the odor of the cleaners from the hospital storage closet. She is more open with Harper, she discusses things with him and she allows him to teach her about veterinary science. Now that Shelby has learned the truth about Harper, she may either crumble as a reaction or surge into confidence and success.

The final sentence of this chapter indicates that Shelby's reaction to her heartbreak will lead to emboldening her rather than destroying her. Shelby takes Sarah's painting because she wants to look at it and, "Whenever she does, she'll think she couldn't save Helene, and she couldn't save Sarah, but she can save herself" (107). Shelby has a long history of feeling responsible for Helene's current state of being. She spends a lot of time and energy trying to overcome her mental imprisonment related to the car accident. Chapter 5 contains the idea of entrapment. Sue feels as though she has lived her life trapped in a loveless marriage, which is shown in Chapter 4 when Sue gives her the advice to leave anyone she is not in love with. Shelby sees a strong connection between Sue, Sarah, and herself. Her brief conversation with Sarah displayed Sarah to be charming and sweet and lovable. Shelby pities Sarah for being in a marriage with a habitual cheater like Harper. She knows that the introduction of a baby into their marriage will promote Sarah's entrapment even more. But Shelby categorizes herself differently. She considers herself to be strong enough to leave both Ben and Harper. She is learning to value herself by saving herself from years spent in a loveless relationship. Shelby is learning self-respect. She is beginning to understand her worth



and she is not ready to allow a man like Harper take that growth away from her. The indication in the above quote is that Shelby classifies Sarah in the same grouping as Helene. It is odd that Shelby feels any responsibility for Sarah other than the fact that she was one of Harper's affairs. This is the first time Shelby has stood up for herself in a bold and unapologetic manner. She did not devalue herself while ending things with Harper, and Shelby assumes Sarah will never value herself enough to break up with him.

Discussion Question 1

What does the final sentence, "Whenever she does, she'll think she couldn't save Helene, and she couldn't save Sarah, but she can save herself" mean (107)?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think the painful incident between Shelby and Harper will destroy Shelby and revert her back to her old ways or do you think it will teach her a valuable lesson that allows her to grow as a person? Use examples from the novel to defend your answer.

Discussion Question 3

How did Ben's relationship with Shelby alter him? How did he change throughout the course of many years living together?

Vocabulary

troupe



Chapter 6

Summary

Shelby is now in her final semester at Hunter College. She is a successful student, a tutor, an employee at a lab, and a fellowship winner. She quit her job at the pet store and ensured that Maravelle would be the replacement manager. Meanwhile, Maravelle uses her extra income from the pet store to purchase a house in New Jersey. It is the picture of suburbia, which makes Maravelle happy and makes Jasmine extremely disgruntled. The night before the move, Jasmine disappears. She does not return home, but instead arrives at Shelby's house in a taxi. Shelby allows her to spend the night and encourages Jasmine to give her new life a chance.

There is a homeless girl with a large blue tattoo on her face. Shelby is curious about this girl and the pain she carries outwardly. She brings the girl soup on a cold day and notices a cat drugged up and perched on the girl's shoulder. Shelby asks about the cat, but the girl's rude answer prompts Shelby to steal the cat and run away to the nearest train station. She delivers the cat to Jasmine in her new house in New Jersey.

Analysis

Shelby's close friendship with Maravelle is interesting, since the two women desire completely opposite things in their lives. Maravelle is a loyal mother who is willing to move homes as a precaution against hormonal teenagers who might ruin her children's lives. Shelby, on the other hand, is a single woman and city-dweller who thrives on anything that's different from her home town. The two women find solace in their differences. They develop through their mutual, oftentimes brutal, honesty. Best of all, each woman respects the other.

But Shelby's closeness, while deeply rooted with Maravelle herself, is dependent upon Shelby's need to be around Maravelle's children. Shelby feels responsible for these kids. She wants to ensure their happiness, and she wants to make sure they enjoy their childhoods. Shelby's deep need to fix everyone else's lives stems from her residual remorse for what happened to Helene. This is Shelby's greatest failure and her negative memories surrounding the car crash and Helene's vegetative state are what drive her to help anything and everything in need around her. Shelby sees Maravelle as being in constant need of help and support. She experienced motherhood for the brief period of time when she babysat the kids; she feels that she understands Maravelle's troubles much more. This awareness encourages Shelby to be present and available to help, even when Jasmine just needs a place to complain and to sleep. Shelby comments that, "The responsibility of loving someone is too much for anyone to take, which is why she's done her best to avoid it" (116). However, she is not avoiding it. In fact, she is actively seeking time with Maravelle and the kids. She opens her heart to the family each time she visits with them.



Shelby's strong urge to help people and things in need branches out to the bitter homeless girl near Shelby's deli in Union Square because Shelby sees her past pain in the girl's face. Shelby, "knows what it's like when someone is compelled to show her pain" (110), and she wants to help the girls as much as she can. Here, Shelby is trying to make the world a place where no one is left alone to feel the way she used to feel. Shelby recognizes that people go through their lives in immense pain. She used to feel that pain every moment of her waking life. Shelby suffered severe trauma due to her deep depression, and no one directly tried to help her because they were all too frightened to intervene. This homeless reminds Shelby of the way she used to be. Unfortunately, when Shelby tries to help her, the girl responds with a callousness that makes Shelby resent her.

When Shelby steals the white cat from the girl with the blue face tattoo it is as if she is rescuing the cat from the "bad" population of people at large. For Shelby, there are some people like Sarah Levy and Maravelle and Jasmine—people who deserve Shelby's help and attention. But Shelby also recognizes that there are people who aren't as deserving of assistance. She differentiates these populations by remarking that, "People are dangerous, unreliable, stupid, greedy, needy, breakable" (116, 117). There are two types of people battling one another and Shelby wants to stay on the side she deems worthy of saving, deserving of inspirational postcards, and earnest enough to have a life filled with honest love.

Discussion Question 1

What is Maravelle trying to achieve by moving her family home? Why does her home purchase make her so happy?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways has Shelby's friendship with Maravelle benefitted Shelby?

Discussion Question 3

What does Maravelle's new in New Jersey house represent to Shelby? What memories does it stir up?

Vocabulary

happenstance, doppelgänger, abscesses



Chapter 7

Summary

Shelby is now 25 years old and very close to graduation. She attends weekly dinners in the suburbs with Maravelle and her family, but Maravelle's mother, Mrs. Diaz, hates her. Dorian confides in Shelby that Jasmine is being stalked by her ex boyfriend from Queens, Marcus. He tells Shelby that Marcus comes by the house every day, parks in front of the house to taunt Jasmine, and roughs Jasmine up if she tells him to leave. Shelby promises Dorian that she will take care of it. She waits until the kids have gone to a basketball game. Shelby sits in the house until Marcus pulls up in his car. She takes a broom out and threatens that she will call the police if he keeps coming around the house. He yells and Shelby and tells her that she cannot keep them apart. Shelby hits him in the back as he turns away from her, so Marcus punches her in the face. The police arrive almost immediately after Marcus punches Shelby. Mrs. Diaz knows about the car, and she sees Shelby in an altercation with Marcus. She calls her friends at the police station and the cops arrive quickly. Marcus is arrested, and the police find his gun in the glove compartment. Shelby decides to press charges in order to get a retraining order against Marcus. She tells the police that her address is Maravelle's home in order to protect Jasmine.

Analysis

This chapter reinforces the idea that Shelby has the innate desire to help people in need, namely to help Jasmine experience an innocent and enjoyable childhood. Shelby knows how Maravelle feels about her teen years. As a loyal friend, she works hard to ensure that Jasmine will not suffer the same fate (135). On the other hand, Shelby wants to protect Jasmine because it is yet another way that she can pay penance for what she feels she did to Helene. Shelby feels as if her childhood, and her childhood dreams, were lost in that car crash. She lost her friends, her family, and her soul. She remembers the terrible pain she endured, and she does not want that to happen to Jasmine, who she has grown to love very deeply.

Marcus represents a possible end to Jasmine's childhood years, his obsessive actions and bullying behavior has the potential to yank Jasmine out of her happy teens and into an adult world filled with regret and fear. This is something Shelby refuses to happen. However, although Mrs. Diaz seems to hate Shelby, Maravelle's mother feels equally strong about the importance of protecting the family and protecting Jasmine. These women are the watchers; they are the guardian angels of the family. They are part of the unit because they have been adopted in, but they are both outsiders who care very much for Teddy, Dorian, Jasmine, and Maravelle. They are the women trying to make Maravelle's single parenting experience tolerable. When Marcus shows up, he is quickly and quietly dealt with.



Although Shelby is more than willing to protect Jasmine by whatever means necessary, she has never dealt with a confrontation quite so direct while helping, proving that Shelby is unprepared. Marcus is a tough and violent-leaning young man. He is convinced that Jasmine belongs to him (131), so much so that he is willing to punch a perfect stranger in the face simply because he is told to stop stalking Jasmine. Mrs. Diaz is very different from Shelby, but both women consider themselves to be the helpful watchmen of the family. Mrs. Diaz's primary concern is for Jasmine and for keeping her ignorant of how much she is at risk for. The two women find a common bond while fighting for the common good, proving, once again, that Shelby's desire to save people and animals is what also connects her to other humans and allows her to avoid slipping back into depression.

Discussion Question 1

Shelby comments that she feels responsible for ensuring that Jasmine has the childhood she did not (135). Why does Shelby feel that she missed out on a childhood? Why does she feel so responsible for Jasmine's youth?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mrs. Diaz feel a quick and sudden camaraderie with Shelby? What does this tell readers about Mr. Diaz's opinion of Shelby prior to the fight?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Shelby avoiding romantic relationships? How is she finding fulfillment in her life outside of dating?

Vocabulary

shambling, forsythia



Chapter 8

Summary

Shelby is not a college graduate who works at the Humane Society. She loves saving the dogs and she hates seeing the abused animals come in. This chapter takes place in a Chinese restaurant. Shelby has a blind date with a man she met online. The man is late, so Shelby orders her food. Then, a man appears in the doorway: her ex-boyfriend, Ben Mink. He is shocked, disappointed, resentful, and angry; but Ben manages to stay for the entire meal. Shelby is nervous and delighted to see him and hopes he will be interested in rekindling their relationship. Ben has no interest in starting anything up with Shelby. He eats, pays, and leaves the restaurant while claiming that the dating service was wrong (146).

Analysis

Shelby's encounter with Ben in the Chinese restaurant is a play off of the idea that Ben and Shelby are meant for one another. Previously, Ben did not display any doubts that he was in supposed to be with Shelby. He was very much in love with her and he appreciated her for who she was back at that time. Shelby never accepted their relationship as anything close to real. She was never open with him and she can now admit to herself that she never appreciated him (138), thinking to herself that, "The veil will fall from his eyes and he'll see she's the one for him and that she has been all along" (144). This is a thought Ben had years earlier. He was steadfast in his feelings for her. However, Shelby ruined their relationship when she became infatuated with Harper Levy. Shelby has been lost since she broke up with Ben. Yes, she enjoyed a year of great sex with Harper, but she also learned how sleazy and disloyal other men can be whereas Ben was always the paradigm for boyfriend loyalty and support.

Shelby was incapable of accepting Ben's love as genuine because she did not accept herself when she was dating him. But now they have been separated for quite some time. Shelby feels like she has changed a lot; she thinks she has improved greatly since she broke up with him. Shelby has progressed in her healing throughout every chapter in this novel, but it seems as though Ben still has highly unresolved anger to deal with. Ben is snide with Shelby, which is a side of him she is not used to seeing. He gives Shelby no indication that he wants anything to do with her, regardless of how much she has changed since they lived together. Ben tells her, "The dating service was wrong, Shelby. We both know that" (146). But Shelby does not know that. In her mind, this is fate. This is the proof she needed that Ben has been the right partner for her all along. After all, he has seen her at her very worst and still managed to tell her words of encouragement. He never tried to change Shelby, which is most of the reason why she stayed with him for so long while she was stuck in such a dark place. Shelby is not in a dark place anymore, and she feels that she can be a better partner for Ben in her current state. However, this time it is Ben who is disinterested. Shelby hurt him enough



that, years later, Ben is still bitter about her affair with Harper. “She blames herself for her situation” (138), yet she wants to correct things with Ben. Shelby is hopeful that they can be a successful couple now that she sees him for the wonderful man that he has always been.

While Shelby’s progress into happiness and self-acceptance is undeniable, she still has a long way to go until she achieves a state of total self-love. Shelby admits that she, “needs someone to remind her she’s alive” (139). What is interesting about the phrasing here is the fact that the exact same phrasing is used in regards to the lack of postcards. “She hasn’t gotten a postcard in some time, and what she misses most is someone knowing she’s alive” (138). Shelby is a close friend with her dogs, who know she is alive. She spends time with Marabelle’s family, who all know she is alive as well. Yet, Shelby still requires an outside force to prove it to her. She continues to feel unseen and unnoticed despite all of her loved ones and her recent personal success.

Shelby’s success cannot overshadow her dependence on outside forces to source her worth within society. Shelby’s idea of being a worthwhile citizen is to help people and animals in need. This is shown in her tendency to steal dogs and cats from confrontational homeless people. She also comments that, “Her desire to do right for these creatures is what fuels her” (138). Shelby avoids her depression by projecting her sadness into saving things in more dire straits than her at the moment. She admits that she does not seek out love or affection. She has a hard time making friends and she tends to teeter on the side of being a loner (138). Shelby manages to distract herself from knowing this by helping other things. If she is busy helping other’s overcome their struggles, she will be too busy to notice her own issues.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Shelby interested in getting back together with Ben after all this time? Why does she want him now if she had no interest in him when they were dating?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Shelby so fixated on impressing and surprising Ben? What is she trying to accomplish?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it so important to Shelby that someone knows she’s alive? What does Shelby mean by this comment?

Vocabulary

overwrought, intuit, Ponzi scheme, crestfallen



Chapter 9

Summary

Shelby learns that Teddy is in trouble. He is doing drugs and stealing from everyone in the house. Dorian is upset and claims that the family is turning their backs on Teddy. Teddy gets arrested. His whole crew broke into a house and tied up the tenants before robbing them. Marcus was involved. He stays in jails for a few weeks, until his trial date is set. The judge does not sentence him, and Teddy is sent to a correctional high school upstate where he will stay until graduation. Teddy's head is now shaved after being in jail. Shelby encourages Teddy that he will be fine and be able to come back from this. She admits that she "Just about killed someone" (156), which is the first time she has ever referenced the accident so directly. Shelby writes a ten-page letter to Teddy that reveals all of her innermost thoughts, past experiences, and current fears. It's the most honest she has ever been with someone. Teddy writes her a postcard back to tell her that he is doing alright.

Shelby also receives her sixth postcard. This card has an illustration of a tree with a hundred black leaves, each leaf with varying words of sky, cloud, rose, and kiss scribbled on them. This card reads "Believe something".

Analysis

Chapter 9 draws extreme parallels between Shelby's past friendship with Helene and Teddy's current relationship with his brother, Dorian. The two pairs of friends have much in common, which is brought to the forefront of the narrative in this chapter. Shelby subconsciously connects Teddy's plight with Shelby's past issues. The moment she learns that Teddy is arrested and will be spending time in jail her reaction is to tell Teddy that he will be fine because she herself turned out fine. She considers Teddy to be a person who has lost his way, just as Shelby used to define herself after the accident. Even Marabelle understands that Teddy is about to go through something that may bring about depression or psychological issues. Marabelle ties Shelby and Teddy together when she says, "Tell me he'll be fine like you are" (153).

Marabelle's request in the previous paragraph thrusts Shelby into a position of being representative of recovery, normalcy, and resilience. All of a sudden, Shelby is categorized as being "fine". To Marabelle, Shelby is a symbol for the aforementioned things. This is yet another indication of just how well Shelby is doing. She seems to be reformed, she appears to be balanced and successful; yet Shelby feels that she is far from being a paradigm for anything. To Marabelle, Shelby has made a full recovery and yet Shelby does not seem recognize her recovery until she repeats that Teddy will be fine. This seems to be the first time Shelby is admitting that she turned out all right as well.



While the indication that Teddy's future will follow much of the same path that Shelby's has is believable, the actual connections between characters is quite muddled. For instance, Helene is the one described as a troublemaker. It is Helene who falls into a jealous rage and demands that Shelby drive her to her e-boyfriend's house. It is Helene who used to bring drugs and alcohol to Shelby's house. She used to be the rebel who refused to do her homework herself. In this respect, Teddy is more like Helene and less like Shelby. Using this logic, Shelby has much more in common with Dorian, who is described as being the sweet, quiet, and studios member of his brotherhood. Previous chapters have cited Shelby as the friend that did Helene's homework and tried to keep her calm. Both pairs assumed they would grow up together and attend college at the same time. Now there is yet another connection between the pairs and the fact that their dreams of growing up together have been blocked from coming to fruition.

Readers can interpret the convoluted connections between Dorian, Teddy, Shelby, and Helene in a number of ways. Focusing on Shelby's personal self-confidence issues, readers can argue that Shelby instantly forges her past to Teddy's future because she sees parallels between the two of them losing their childhoods. Shelby notes that she feels directly responsible for saving Jasmine's experience with youth. It is plausible then that Shelby feels equally responsible to save Teddy's. She is trying to prepare Teddy for the jolt into adulthood, depression, and isolation she knows he is about to experience. In this way, Shelby's connection to Teddy has much more to do with the experience of a traumatic even than it does with their individual roles in respect to Dorian and Helene. Another perspective on these connections is that this may very well be a form of foreshadowing that connects Helene's past to Teddy's future. While Teddy has his health right now, the connections between Helene and Teddy may allude to a future danger Teddy may fight against. It is possible that Teddy may end up much like Helene or even in a worse condition. The third and final possibility for these interwoven connections may be to draw a close relationship between Dorian and Shelby. While it takes her a while, Shelby finally comes to realize the sever trauma Dorian is experiencing by losing his brother. All of Maravelle's children are experiencing the loss of their childhoods, but Dorian is losing his twin. For him, Teddy has always been the outgoing, successful, loud, and confident twin; leaving Dorian alone to fend for himself.

This is also the loss of Dorian's childhood, and Shelby is unsure of how a sensitive person such as he will recover from his loss.

Shelby seems unsure of Dorian's future but she seems confident that Teddy will recover just like she did, albeit with much difficulty, which is shown in the simple symbol of Teddy's baldhead. This is yet another connection to Shelby's past self. However, the image of bald heads is used as a symbol in this book. The image represents illness, pain, defeat, and the need to heal. Shelby shaves her head shortly after the accident. This is when she is hurting the most. It is not until much later, while living in New York City, when Shelby feels well enough to let her hair grow out. With every inch added to her hair, Shelby feels immensely better. Now it is Teddy's turn to feel loss and regret hence why his head is described as being bald when he departs. She thinks to herself that, "Teddy's fate is unknown, and no one can foretell the future" (154). No one else



recognizes this crucial change in Teddy except for Shelby. To her, she knows this projects his deep sorrow and need for help.

Teddy's pathetic appearance and deep sadness is what gives strength to Shelby, which is in alignment with Shelby's need to help injured and needy creatures. Teddy is no different from the animals Shelby has rescued in the past. She gathers strength from his confusion, and Shelby uses her new strength to try and encourage Teddy. Now Shelby transitions into the position of an "angel" sending postcards to a person in lock-up. Shelby received her first letter in a hospital and Teddy receives his first one in school, but both pained souls used the letters to get through their time being locked away. Even now-- even with Shelby's degree and job and friends—she is still happy that "Her angel hasn't forgotten her after all" (151). Furthermore, Shelby remains a diligent follower of the postcard messages. This card tells Shelby to believe something, and she does so right away. Shelby believes in Teddy. She believes in Teddy's ability to recover and get through this tough time. Shelby believes in herself as a guiding author for Teddy and his letters in the school. Shelby believes in her role as a catalyst in Teddy's recovery from this bump in his life path.

While this is a tough time for Maravalle's family, this is a time for Shelby to reflect on her past mistakes and how her choices negatively affected the people around her. During Shelby's dark years, she was so focused on her pain and her loneliness and her confusion that she never considered the immense ripped effect she had on the people in her life. Sue is described as a steadfast figure in both her husband's and her daughter's lives. Only now is Shelby able to reflect on her selfishness towards her mother and feel remorseful for the things she has done to Sue. Shelby notes that, "She wishes she'd been a better daughter and hadn't caused her mother so much worry" (150). Shelby is leaning away from her self-centered depression because she no longer requires so much attention and energy on getting through the day. Survival is coming easier to Shelby so she is able to change her perspective.

Discussion Question 1

Why doesn't Maravalle's family tell Shelby about the recent changes in Teddy? Why do they keep it a secret from her?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Teddy's situation prompt such immediate and open responses from Shelby?

Discussion Question 3

How will Teddy's new living situation affect Dorian?



Vocabulary

tepid, tubers, wistfully



Chapter 10

Summary

Shelby's father calls her and asks her to come home. Shelby quickly learns that Sue has stage four lung cancer. Her parents decided not to tell Shelby because they wanted to protect her. Dan asks her to take her mother wig shopping because she is bald now, but Sue does not want to buy herself a wig. Sue wants to spend the day outside with Shelby. She forces Shelby to drive for the first time since the car accident with Helene. Shelby takes her to the local pet store branch of the same company she used to work for. Sue falls in love with a tiny white poodle, and Shelby lies to the store employee in order to steal the dog.

At this point in her life, Sue is very reflective. She admits that she was never a good match for Dan, and she does not want Shelby to live her life anything like she did. Sue refers to Shelby as the love of her life and tells her daughter that she was meant to survive the accident. Shelby receives another postcard. This time, the card says, "Love something" (173), and Sue claims she saw a huge man drop it off and wave to her. Shelby decides to stay with her mother as long as she can. She wants to spend every moment possible with Sue and learn to love her more deeply than she ever has before.

Analysis

This chapter is an introduction for readers to bear witness to a beautiful relationship between a mother and a daughter, two opposites who respect each other although they do not understand one another, and two women who want to exchange points on love and lifestyle. The previous chapter showed Shelby finally being capable of understanding how her past actions may have had a negative impact on her mother, but, with Sue's stage four cancer, it is likely that Shelby will lose Sue soon. Sue is in a stage of grief where she is delivering an outpouring of love. Readers can confirm the lack of affection Sue has for her husband, Dan, which is what leads her to her total devotion to Shelby. Sue wants her feelings to be heard, she wants her thoughts listened to. Her visit to Helene's house helps her confirm just how thankful she is for what happened to Shelby. "I went [to Helene's]," Sue says, "to see what my life has been worth, and now I know, I've had you all this time, Shelby. I've realized more than ever what a precious gift that is" (166). Readers can easily infer that Sue has had many struggles with Shelby in the past. Shelby's struggles caused Sue to struggle. Shelby's sadness brought sadness onto Sue. Now Sue's life is even more clearly in perspective. She knows she will die soon. She is making peace with this idea, and Sue seems to want to ensure her daughter will be fine after she dies.

While Sue displays a sort of spiritual awakening in this chapter, Shelby also experiences a huge surge in affection, which is a feeling she has never quite mastered. Sue calls Shelby her "gift" (166), and Shelby realizes that this is the most she has ever loved her



mother before (167). Shortly after noting her deeply rooted love for her mother, Shelby describes her insides altering. For the first time, “She feels her love insides her as if it were as tangible as blood and bones” (174). This is a beautiful change in Shelby, and a change that is welcomed in the direction of the innocent love between a mother and a daughter. Shelby is stepping out of her depression. She is learning to accept that love that has always surrounded her.

Although she is making progress in accepting love, Shelby still cannot manage to love herself. She tells her mother that she wishes she had died in the car accident (166) and continues her self-deprecation by exclaiming to Sue, “I’m nothing, Mom! Don’t you understand that? You gave birth to a nothing!” (168). There is a definite imbalance in Shelby’s life. She struggles to accept herself despite the love she receives from Sue, Marabelle, and Marabelle’s children.

Sue understands that Shelby struggles with self-love, so she focuses her advice on guiding Shelby into accepting love from others. Sue seems very concerned with Shelby’s future love life. She does not want her daughter to turn out like her. Sue does not want Shelby to settle for anything but perfection for her in a partner. Sue has lived her entire life without love. She has survived a life-long marriage with a man for whom she feels no affection. This has been a pathetically lonely existence for Sue. While her lack of personal experience with loves means that she does not know what she likes, it means that Sue knows what she has been missing. “Love is bullshit. It’s knowing someone down to their soul that matters. That’s what love is. It’s difficult and real and it doesn’t change” (166). Although Sue says this in reference to her husband’s most recent affair, one can argue that she is really referring to her love for Shelby. Sue definitely knows Shelby to her core and yet she still loves her immensely.

Perhaps the most beautiful, pertinent, and honest quote within this chapter is Sue’s comment that, “Love has nothing to do with time or space” (172); which can be both a comment on her failed marriage with Dan but also on Shelby’s failure to conjure up love on her own. Sue wants Shelby to know that she will always have love in her life. She especially wants Shelby to believe that she will have her love after she dies. But this can also connection to Shelby’s personal love life, which seems to always be in shambles.

This chapter shows readers a third example of the symbolism related to baldheads as an indicator for pain, illness, and the need to heal. Sue’s head is now bald, though readers are never explicitly told if it is by choice or not, and this is obviously a time when Sue is fighting for her health. Sue comments that Dan is the only person bothered by her baldness. Shelby experienced similar reactions from others, including a strongly negative reaction from Sue back when Shelby first shaved her hair off. It is as though a person’s pain causes more discomfort and a lack of acceptance in others than it does in the person who is experiencing the pain personally.



Discussion Question 1

What could the fact that Helene's hair has never been cut since the accident imply about the way her parents feel about their daughter, the accident, and their life since the accident?

Discussion Question 2

What are some possible reasons for why Shelby drives Sue to the pet store?

Discussion Question 3

How could the quote "Love has nothing to do with time or space" (172) connect to Shelby's relationship with Ben?

Vocabulary

cagey, ESP, muses, wryly



Chapter 11

Summary

Shelby spent the last few months at her mother's house. They spent every minute of every day together. Now Sue is dead, and Shelby does not want to deal with talking to all of the mourners. Dan brings his girlfriend, Patti, to the funeral, which upsets Shelby a lot. Maravella and Mrs. Diaz also attend, and they offer for Shelby to spend the night with them. Shelby avoids the funeral by burning all of her childhood books in the barbecue. Buddy comes outside. He is cold and lonely and grieving. Shelby takes him her arms and holds him tight. As she carries Buddy away from her house, Shelby checks the mailbox and finds another postcard. This time, the card is blue and has an illustration of, what Shelby describes as, heaven. The card simply says, "Remember someone" (179).

Shelby takes Buddy with her to a nearby 7-Eleven. She buys herself a pack of cigarettes and smokes in the parking lot. Ben Mink drives up in a brand new Volvo to offer Shelby his condolences. He drives Shelby to the cemetery because she thinks Buddy needs closure. While there, Ben informs Shelby that he has purchased a house in the area and that he is getting married to another pharmacist named Ana. Shelby is extremely hurt and uses what little energy she has to appear nonchalant about this heartbreaking news. Ben gives Shelby a present—a Burberry raincoat. He remembered Shelby mentioning that she wanted one when they were on their terrible date. Ben tells her that this gift is for old times sake, since he could not afford nice gifts when they were dating. He drops Shelby off at the train station, and Shelby leaves knowing that Ben and her are completely over.

Analysis

Shelby and Sue develop a strong bond over the void of romantic love in each of their lives. They read stories together and each had the message: "What was deep inside could only be deciphered by someone who understood how easily a heart could be broken" (175). Sue lived her entire life without feeling truly loved. She was in a marriage that resembled a partnership more than a passionate love affair. Likewise, Shelby has lived her life without love as well. While Ben was madly in love with her, Shelby spent much of her energy blocking any happiness or comfort that might have come from Ben's adoration. Both of these women know the feeling of living with a broken heart simply for the sake of never having anyone truly love them. Now that Shelby is out of her deep depression, she realizes how much she has loved Ben all along. She still needs and wants him in her life, yet she understands that her foolish actions are the reason they are not together. During the funeral, Shelby thinks about the fact that she wants Ben to be there and yet she would not want to fall apart if he offered her his sympathies for her loss (176). Even now, even after all these years apart, Shelby still needs Ben's comfort.



Shelby did not realize how immensely helpful having Ben's support was because she did not understand how little she supports herself. Ben's presence and support helped Shelby to overcome many obstacles related to her depression. Shelby struggles to feel good about her actions without him being there to provide encouragement. "There's no one to whom she is the most important person in the world" (177), and Shelby did not understand how much she depended on that feeling when she had Ben. Now, she feels as though, "She's empty and she feels like she'll stay that way" (176). There is very little motivation for Shelby to remain healthy and successful. No one is watching and no one is cheering her on. This prompts Shelby to finally realize how much she cares for Ben, but now she does not have him. However, Ben's appearance at her mother's funeral only goes to prove that he still cares for her very much. Shelby is still a person who he wants to take care of, yet he appears to have moved on. Ben informs Shelby of his upcoming wedding in the hopes that she will be crushed. It does not appear as though Ben is truly in love with his fiancée, Ana, nor that he believes the two of them are soul mates. It is as if Ben is getting married just so he does not have to be alone. He proves his continued love for Shelby when he gives her the Burberry raincoat as a symbol for his care and his regret about how things ended. This also proves that Ben was listening to Shelby when they were on their horrible date together. Shelby sarcastically mentions her desire for a Burberry raincoat on that date. Ben appeared that he was disregarding everything Shelby told him, but it turns out that he was not ignoring her. This indicates that his cold reaction to Shelby has more to do with being hurt rather than with falling out of love with Shelby.

Shelby once had constant support from her mother, but now Sue is dead; which leaves Shelby more alone in the world than she has ever been. Like Ben, Sue was an important figure in Shelby's life that she took for granted. She never realized the full impact Sue had on her life nor did she recognize the immense happiness Sue's presence brought her. Now Shelby is stuck with her father, whom she dislikes to the core, and she is coming to terms with the fact that she lacks any semblance of a family unit. Dan is Shelby's only living parent, which is a monumental disappointment to Shelby. She has a low opinion of him largely due to his continuous affairs that hurt her mother but also because Shelby feels that he never shows his care for her. She recalls her mother searching for her right after the accident. Shelby would run off in the middle of the night and it was always Sue who came calling for her. Dan never came to find her (179).

One of the most telling quotes about Shelby's feelings about her father is when Shelby announces that she, "may have screwed up her own life, but she has high standards for everyone else, including her father. She expects people to act like human beings" (177). She wants her father to be a person she can count on. She wanted her father to be a man the family could use for support. Dan was rarely present, and Shelby resents him for his lack of support for both her and for Sue in her final months on earth. Dan's actions, both while Sue was fading away and during her funeral, prove his complete disregard for honoring his wife. As far as Shelby is concerned, Dan is just a guy who lived in her house while she grew up.



Shelby receives another postcard, but this time it seems as though the note is written too late. The message on the card reminds Shelby to remember someone, but it is too late because Shelby's is already remembering, and honoring the memory of, her mother, Sue. In fact, one can make the argument that Shelby is remember Sue so much that it is distracting from her life as a living member of society. Readers witnessed the harmful affects when Shelby focuses too much of her energy on remembering someone. The last time Shelby could not forget was with Helene, whose memory prompted Shelby to spend time in a mental institution. Now Sue has died and Shelby does not have Ben and she feels more alone in the world than ever. Dan may be a figure to help Shelby feel supported, but instead it is Maravelle and Mrs. Diaz who swoop in to support her. The postcards often inspire Shelby to do something she is not already doing, but this message seems to be telling Shelby about something she is already doing: remembering how lucky she is to have met Sue Richmond.

Discussion Question 1

On the surface, it appears that Sue and Shelby are opposite, but how is Shelby similar to Sue?

Discussion Question 2

What is the author's purpose for including Shelby's conversation with Aaron Feinberg?

Discussion Question 3

Is Ben's intention in this chapter to give closure to his relationship with Shelby or to investigate whether Shelby wants him back?

Vocabulary

lepers, deciphered



Chapter 12

Summary

Shelby still feels lost and sullen without her mother in the world. The weather matches her mood, and winter is long and harsh. Another postcard arrives. This time, the card is plain white with no illustration. The card tells Shelby to, "Trust someone. Shelby fears it will be her last card since it is lacking in the usual ornateness her postcards come with. She spends most of her time alone, which gives Shelby time to wonder why she managed to recover while others do not dig themselves out of difficult situations. Shelby gets pneumonia. It is also Ben's wedding day. She has an invitation to the occasion but no intention to attend. Her pneumonia gets bad enough that Shelby goes to the hospital. While there, she comes across the same orderly from years ago, when Shelby rescued the man who collapsed on the street. It is the same orderly who ordered her to grow her hair out years ago, and Shelby kisses him on the cheek as a sign of appreciation for helping her long ago.

Shelby goes to a tattoo shop to get the name "Helene" tattooed on her chest. The artist turns out to be James Howard, a fourth grade classmate of Ben's and Shelby's and Ben's old drug supplier. James warns Shelby against tattooing a name on her body. He shows her the name "Lee" tattooed on his forearm and explains that he still feels guilty for surviving when his brother, Lee, died of Meningitis. Shelby notices that James has two matching tattoos on his wrists. They read "trust someone". Shelby immediately understands that James Howard is her angel who has been writing her postcards all these years.

James explains that he was driving home drunk and high on the night of her accident. Her car was blocking the road, so he got out and helped Shelby out of the vehicle. He has felt responsible for her ever since. He tried to take care of her through the postcards because he was in jail for drug possession, a charge he acquired the night of the accident because he stayed with Shelby and the cops found drugs on him. He gives Shelby a tattoo and sends her home. Later, Shelby removes the bandage and finds the image of a black butterfly. She visits James out of attraction and to talk to him about her tattoo. They go to dinner, take his white German Shepard for a walk, and kiss in James' apartment. Shelby wants him so badly, but she knows she will wind up getting hurt again. She plans on moving to California because she has been accepted to the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. She pulls away from James, and, despite the rejection, offers to walk her home. On the way, Shelby realizes that she cannot let James go. She wants him, and she will have him. She drags him up to her apartment where they make love in the bathroom.

A few days later, Shelby comes home to find Dorian and Teddy sleeping together on her stoop. Shelby is furious, and the boys look desperate. They want Shelby to drive Teddy back to his school in Albany. She agrees, against her better judgment. Shelby drops Teddy off at his school then drives Dorian home without an accident



Analysis

Shelby spends much of her time trying to convince herself that she was alone in her hometown after the accident, but she continues to find people from Huntington who have always loved her and always cared for her. Of course, Sue is the primary caretaker who was eternally supportive of Shelby despite any of her flaws or struggles. However, both Ben and James are from Shelby's hometown, which further displays how differently Shelby views her life compared to how others see herself. Both Ben and James recognized the pain Shelby felt after the accident. Both men cared deeply for her, and yet they each show their care very differently. They are both highly responsible for helping Shelby dig herself out of her parents' basement so many years ago. Ben and James are big factors in what inspired Shelby to start college and to believe she can become a veterinarian. Most importantly, both Ben and James are from a hometown that Shelby has always dwelled upon as being void of any regard in her direction. After the accident, Shelby felt rejected and alone. All of her friends stopped talking to her and she felt as though everyone in town blamed her. Neither Ben nor James nor Sue blame Shelby for what happened that night on the icy highway. This is yet another example of how skewed Shelby's personal outlook is on her character, her accomplishments, and her life as opposed to what the reality is. Much of the love Shelby receives throughout the course of this novel stems from the same hometown she has labeled as rejecting her.

James has been close to Shelby for so many years, but his own cowardice, self-doubt, and guilt have prevented him from surfacing in her life. Much like Shelby, James is plagued by his assumed, and imagined, responsibility over his brother's death. In many ways, James is a great match for Shelby. They are both damaged in similar ways, and they understand one another's never-ending pain as well as their mutual need to move on and heal. James refers to their dark periods after their tragic accidents as creating a monster inside them, a monster James feels is inside both of them (208). This similarity helps both of them find relief in being able to have candid conversations about their remorse for what they think they did to people they love. This is what was missing with Ben, who, despite his deep affection for Shelby, was never fully capable of understanding her feelings and constant sorrow. "Maybe [James] was a monster once," thinks Shelby, "and maybe she was one too. Maybe the only thing they have in common is that they're survivors" (212).

Shelby is not disappointed for one moment that her "angel" is really a tattooed man because he is better than an angel in every way. Shelby feels as though she is allowed to be an angel to James, which satisfies her desire to help others. While thinking about her need to recover and thrive, Shelby thinks, "this is not the past, this is not the icy road. This is what she wants in the here and now" (212)." But Shelby also wants to help James move past his memories. Just as Shelby leans on James, he also finds comfort in spending time with someone like Shelby, a person who does not shy away from mentioning Lee by name and taking James to confront his fears at the scene of his brother's drowning. They can finally speak freely about their fears, their guilt, their memories, and their urgent need to let go of all the negativity. James does a



good job proving himself to be better than an angel. He is determined to help save Shelby and not simply allow her to get by. Shelby visits the tattoo parlor in the hopes that branding Helene's name on her body will reduce the pain she feels for destroying Helene's life (196), but James is quick to give Shelby advice that he himself did not follow. "It doesn't help to carry them around," he tells Shelby. "That's something I know for sure. It helps to let them go" (202). While James is good at spitting out this advice, his tattoo of "Lee" proves he needs his own angel to help him move on, and James finds that support in Shelby.

But readers do not get a perfectly packaged love story thanks to Shelby's deeply-rooted gut reaction to reject any and all affection from people. James makes it very obvious that his helpful postcard messages have morphed into a type of extreme love he feels for Shelby. "She knows she trusted [James] on that night, and that maybe, possibly, she'll trust him again" (206), but she cannot trust him right away. Shelby goes to James' house. She enters his home and she sits on his lap while enjoying a passionate kiss. Then, she jumps out of the situation. This has become a natural reaction for Shelby, who does not even know the reason why she rejects James at his apartment. It takes her a while to ask, "Why would she let him go when she's been waiting for him all this time?" (211). This is a wonderful sign of progress for Shelby, who is used to sloughing off suitors and rejecting anything close to love. This change is due to her recovery but it is also related to Shelby's underlying understanding that this man is the person she wants to be with. She has wanted to meet her "angel" for years. Now she has him in front of her. Shelby must fight her own instincts to reject him and allow him in, and she manages to do that before James gives up. And yet even after Shelby seems to accept James, she admits that she is keeping her distance from him. She chooses to focus on her impending move to California as an eventual breakup. Shelby thinks to herself, "Why would she open herself to him now when she'll soon be leaving?" (210). She wants to reject his love because it scares her. She is still a girl who feels that, "Every time she held her hand over a flame, every time she ruined a relationship, every time she shaved her head, it was proof of who she was. A girl no one could hurt (210). If she is a girl who is in a loving relationship, she may not be able to continue to dwell on those feelings, which is a type of independence that frightens Shelby.

The sudden emergence of Teddy and Dorian in this chapter help to remind readers of the healing that needs to be done in any relationship that is destroyed by a tragedy. Dorian's brother was ripped from his life. He depended on Teddy for support and friendship, and now he feels alone in the world. The two reunite and visit the one person who truly understands what it feels like to lose someone's other half. Shelby is in another phase of her life now. She is ready to heal but Dorian and Teddy have not even completed their grieving process. Luckily for Dorian, he knows his brother is healthy and will return to him one day. This provides much more comfort than Shelby ever got the chance to feel. Teddy makes an interesting comment related to James' graphic novel, *Nevermore*. He notices that, "There's the good brother who is a raven who has to pay for the bad brother's sins" (214). James portrays the raven in his story as his brother who pays for his sins. Shelby dedicates her life to paying for her sins and paying penance in Helene's honor. Now Dorian is paying for his brother's sins. These are three



relationships where responsibility falls on one member because of happenstance, but the characters see it as a fateful punishment.

The title of James' therapeutic graphic novel, *Nevermore*, has a triple meaning related to his brother's death, the theme in the Edgar Allan Poe story the title comes from, and the idea that James will never again allow himself to be responsible for the death of another person. Poe's story, "Nevermore" is a famous American gothic poem centered around a man who is haunted by a tragic memory. A raven visits to remind the man that he will never see his love again nor will the bird cease haunting him. In this instance, James and Shelby are both haunted by the fact that they will never see their loved ones as they were before and that their guilt will never leave them.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the possible meanings behind the title of James' graphic novel, *Nevermore*.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Shelby continue to refer to monsters being inside both James and herself? Is this true? In what ways have each of them demonstrated that they do, in fact, have monsters inside of them?

Discussion Question 3

How has the dynamic between twins Teddy and Dorian changed since Teddy's arrest?

Vocabulary

eludes, cohorts, scrim, hackles, furrows, wearily, arrhythmia, aloof, trestle table, loamy



Chapter 13

Summary

Shelby spots the girl with the face tattoo again. It is been years since she last saw her, but Shelby thinks of her often. She has always wondered if they are the same woman, struggling with the same demons, on different paths of fate. She follows the girl to Strand Book Store, where she works unloading books in the basement. Shelby tries to speak to the girl but quickly realizes they are nothing alike (222). In the bookstore, Shelby notices that her dog, Blinkie, is having a tough time breathing. She whisks him to Harper's veterinary clinic, and Harper informs her that the dog is in renal failure. They both know they need to put the dog down. Shelby says her goodbyes and meets James in a deli as she cries over her loss. James holds her to comfort her.

Analysis

This chapter provides Shelby with a conclusion to her obsession with being similar to the girl with the blue face tattoo, while maintain the theme of Shelby's inability to see herself as the world sees her. In a way, Shelby has been fixated on this homeless girl. She often thinks of her as a twin. Shelby considers herself to be very similar to this tragic, troubled, and angry young woman. Yet it is not until Shelby witnesses the girl up close that she is able to truly recognize their stark differences. Despite Shelby's deep depression, she never turned nasty against people. She disregarded Sue's affection and she ignored Ben, but Shelby never turned mean or insulting against any of the caring people in her life. Unlike the girl with the face tattoo, Shelby has always maintained the ability to see others hurting and help them and she has always kept a sense of humanity within her. The girl with the tattoo has kept neither of those things. This confirmation helps Shelby move on with pride, knowing that she turned out okay and reinforcing Shelby's shaky hope that her life will turn out fine.

The theme of Shelby having a different view of reality than is actually there is transposed in the loss of her dog, Blinkie, in this chapter. Two characters comment that Shelby was in denial and that she did not want to see how old and ill Blinkie was (225). Here again, Shelby has her own personal idea of reality that does not always match what is truly happening. She loves her dogs so much that she is unable to see when they change. On the other hand, Shelby is convinced that she is always ill although she seems to be functioning just fine.

For the first time in Shelby's life she is unapologetically in love with someone who she can be herself with. James is a man whose own tragic background makes Shelby feel comfortable. She loves that he is damaged in the same way as her, and she enjoys the balance in their relationship related to the idea that each of them is helping the other one heal. Shelby has "fallen in love not only with [James] but with his story" (220). It is his similar background, and his unwavering belief in Shelby's potential to succeed, that



has managed to fully capture Shelby. She is publicly affectionate with James and wholeheartedly invested in their relationship. He is her rock. He is there to lean on. Luckily for Shelby's inner-caretaker, James feels comfortable leaning on her as well.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Shelby come to the fast conclusion that she is nothing like the girl with the face tattoo? What does the girl do that sets her so far apart from Shelby?

Discussion Question 2

Shelby claims that her reason for taking Blinkie to Harper's clinic is because she wants the best (224), but what are some other reasons why Shelby goes to Harper at a time like this?

Discussion Question 3

What does Shelby mean when she compares her relationship with Blinkie to her relationship with James? In what ways is James like Blinkie?

Vocabulary

graphic novels, yip, renal failure



Chapter 14

Summary

Shelby's father arrives at her apartment unannounced. He brings a box of Shelby's things along with some her mom's belongings he thinks Shelby will want. He tells her that he married Patti, sold the house, and is moving to Florida with his new wife. He hands Shelby an envelope filled with cash from the home sale and tells her that he loves her. She tells him that she is going to vet school in California.

Shelby attends Jasmine's graduation party. She leaves the party early and takes the train to her hometown of Huntington to see both her old house and James. James visits his mother every weekend to help take care of her. His father died when he was young, so his mother, Liz Howard, is all alone and depends on help from James. This weekend, James visits his mom to inform her that he is moving to California, and Liz does not take the news very well. She approaches Shelby who is waiting outside in the car. Liz tries to scare Shelby away from James, which causes James to shut his mother out. Shelby encourages him to be gentle and understanding with her. They leave Liz at her house and drive to the same beach where Lee died many years ago. Shelby wants to help James "do something" (238).

The next day, Ben shows up at Shelby's apartment. Right away, he notices that Blinkie is gone, and when he learns the dog is dead he is distraught about the fact that Shelby didn't tell him. Then he gets even more upset when she tells him she is moving to California for school. Ben is upset about his marriage. Ana is pregnant, and Ben does not know what to do. He has come back for Shelby. Just then, James arrives at the door with Chinese food. Ben immediately understands the situation and becomes furious. Shelby escorts him out the door. She apologizes for hurting him in the past and tells him she is truly in love with James. Ben leaves the building. Shelby goes back inside and, for the first time in her life, decides to open a fortune cookie. It reads, "What is behind you is gone, what is in front of you awaits" (243).

Analysis

Despite Ben's eternal love for Shelby, he will never be able to provide her with the same comfort and understanding that James does. This is unfortunate for Ben because he makes it apparent that he feels he has a special place in Shelby's life due to his role in her recovery. When Ben discovers Shelby is with James, his immediate reaction is to bring up his personal loyalty during Shelby's darkest time. Of course, James and his postcards played a huge role in Shelby's recovery, but the couple decides that, "neither of them can say anything that will hurt Ben anymore" (241). Ben's assumption that Shelby will always want his support and love is what has misled him into thinking it would be simple to enter her apartment and take her back into his life.



Ben does not expect that Shelby has moved on from him, which leads to an even bigger disappointment than when Shelby cheated on him years ago. Although Ben truly loves Shelby, he also assumes that she will have a lifelong dependence on him. Ben believes he was the sole individual who helped Shelby recover all those years ago. This is the first time Ben has shown a flaw: his inflated ego. He believes himself to be Shelby's personal hero. He has no idea that, although he was a major factor, he was not the only factor in Shelby's recovery. James' passive role as the author of Shelby's lifesaving postcards is something Ben cannot compete with. Shelby tells Ben, very honestly, "I don't know where I would have been without you" (242). However, the truth also includes the fact that she does not know where she would have been without James' postcards, which is something Ben never planned for competing against. Shelby demonstrates a gorgeous commitment to her relationship with James in a way that readers have not seen before. She is confident in her love and unwavering in her faithfulness to James. This is something she never felt for Ben regardless of how nice or supportive or sweet he was. Ben's departure again displays his own ego to be his flaw because he brings up money and buying Shelby the expensive Burberry coat. People like James and Shelby do not care about money or wealth or material things, but Ben is clawing for anything he thinks may give him an advantage over James. The problem is that Ben does not understand that he lost to James years ago. He was never going to win Shelby. It has always been James even when Shelby did not know he was the one writing the letters.

It is now Shelby's turn to act as an angel for James, who has been suffering from guilt and remorse even longer than she has. Shelby tells James to "Do something" (238), just as one of his postcards encouraged. Without judging, Shelby is now capable of recognizing that her support systems have helped her heal much more than James has, and she wants to provide him with relief. She notes that, "[James is] in there somewhere, just as she was when she couldn't say anything or believe in anything or want anything or see anything or be anything. She was hiding inside, waiting for an angel" (238). Now Shelby gets to be the angel James is waiting for. This is a wonderful way for her to pay James back for helping her as much as he did, but it is also a way for Shelby to feel needed as a caretaker.

This chapter closes with Shelby finally reading a fortune cookie, which turns out to be the most spot on message Shelby could possibly receive. It tells her, "What is behind you is gone, what is in front of you awaits" (243). This is a poignant fortune for Shelby both in the fact that Ben, her past boyfriend, just left but also in the way that James will help Shelby move forward away from her guilt over Helene. Perhaps Shelby is less afraid of her future, which is yet another sign that she is healing and improving herself.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ben feel like he knows Shelby better than anyone else? What does his dialogue in this chapter prove about Ben's attitude towards his relationship with Shelby?



Discussion Question 2

In what ways are Shelby and James each other's angels? What do they do to protect and save one another?

Discussion Question 3

What does this chapter reveal about who Dan Richmond is as a person and as a father?

Vocabulary

traipsing, somber, deplorably



Chapter 15

Summary

Shelby buys herself a car and drives it. Shelby drives back to Huntington to visit Helene before she leaves for California with James. She spends time with Helene and brushes her hair. Shelby wants Helene to forgive her, and, although Helene is unable to speak, she gently squeezes Shelby's hand. Shelby takes this as a sign of forgiveness from Helene. She drives James towards California. That night, Shelby wakes up and goes outside to look up at the endless night sky. She is hopeful for her future.

Analysis

Chapter 15 provides readers with closure that leads to confidence in Shelby's healing process and bright future. Shelby is now strong enough to visit Helene's house. She is confident in herself and is able to confront both Helene's parents and Helene herself. Shelby does not enter the home in an overly apologetic manner. She arrives at Helene's humbled but also ready to confront her guilt; she wants to be forgiven (253). Shelby is committed to her life. She is hopeful for her relationship with James and for her future success in veterinary school in California. The car crash occurred when Shelby was a scared girl, which transformed her into a deeply depressed girl. "The girl Shelby once was isn't here" (253) anymore. However, Shelby goes to Helene's house in this chapter as a mature woman who is prepared to face her fears and use the challenging situation as closure in her healing process. "She looks inside, and then she lets herself move forward into whatever fortune awaits" (254). This is a beautiful transformation to celebrate and a huge growth opportunity for Shelby.

Shelby not only receives confirmation that Helen's family does not blame her, but Shelby surprises herself in how very little she needs from Helene in order to feel ready to move on. "For the first time in years [Shelby] is not stuck in that moment inside that snow globe. [Now,] she is right here" (252). All the years of tragedy, sorrow, and guilt leads Shelby to revisit her old friend, yet she only requires a tiny squeeze of Helen's hand to move on. This small act creates a monumental disparity between Shelby's supposed responsibility and Helene's actual blame.

Shelby wants to solidify her personal, emotional change by physically moving to California. The idea of California functions as a symbol for dreams coming to fruition. Sue first mentions her lifelong dream of moving to the Golden State, but, much like many of her desires, Sue never makes it California and never sees her dream come true. Shelby is different, though. She is making her dreams come true. Shelby leaves for California surrounded by a man and by dogs who all love her. She has a family unit, she has a hopeful future, and she has a driving goal to motivate her. This is why Shelby is ready to move to California. She is ready to transform her life and to allow her dreams to come to fruition. Part of achieving this goal, however, is for both James and herself to



be rid of their guilt related to their tragedies. Shelby moves on when she visits Helene in her bedroom, and James manages to move on when he leaves his symbolic black coat on the same beach where his brother drowned years ago. Both of them must leave their guilt behind if they have any chance of success in California.

Although much of this novel swirls in the darkness of Shelby's mind, the ending of this story leaves readers with a new version of Shelby that loves herself and is filled with hope. She comments that, "She tried her best to destroy herself, but she's still here" (247). Her unrecognized resilience never allowed Shelby to fully crumble, and Shelby's quiet support system prohibited herself from ending her life. But beyond her personal recognition of her improvement, Shelby also indicates that she has learned how to love herself. She thinks to herself that she, "would want to put her arms around herself and tell the Shelby she used to be that she has a good heart and that the person who will punish her most in this world is herself" (253). All of these things are traits Shelby's friends and family have seen for years, but Shelby is only just now able to recognize her positive traits within herself. It is sad to think that she has rejected the truth about herself for so long, but it lovely to leave Shelby in such a positive place where she can finally see the truth about her character and strength.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Shelby and James need to be forgiven before leaving for California?

Discussion Question 2

What does the description of Helene's room in this chapter say about Helene's life?

Discussion Question 3

How has Shelby learned to love herself? What indication does this chapter provide to readers about Shelby's personal milestone?

Vocabulary

bower, constitutes, wanly, coltish



Characters

Shelby Richmond

Shelby is the protagonist of this novel and plagued by the guilt of harming her best friend in a car accident when she was seventeen. Shelby lives a lonely childhood because she is an only child and her parents, Dan and Sue, have been in a loveless marriage since their wedding day. Shelby is close with her mother until the day Sue dies from lung cancer. Shelby learns of Sue's condition when she is in her twenties, and she cancels her college classes in order to spend time with the most important person in her life. Shelby's best friend, Helene, is stuck living in a vegetative state after Shelby crashes their car during a snowstorm. After the crash, Shelby feels all alone and rejected. Her guilt tumbles her into a deep state of depression, which leads her parents to institutionalizing her. As a result, Shelby misses going to NYU where she is accepted for college. An orderly rapes her on numerous occasions while she is at the hospital trying to recover. This contributes to Shelby's depression as well as her unwillingness to talk to anyone. A mysterious postcard arrives, which gives her hope that someone in the world cares about her. She finally gathers enough courage to tell her mother about the man raping her, who storms Shelby out of the hospital. While this solves Shelby's sexual assault issue, it removes her from an environment where she is receiving professional help related to her survivor's remorse and depression. As a result, Shelby spends the next few years lying on her parents' couch in their basement and doing anything she can to numb her brain. Occasionally, more encouraging postcards arrive, and they become the only hopeful feelings Shelby has related to her life. One of her methods to numb her brain is smoking marijuana. She buys her weed from Ben Mink, who is a boy she went to school with. Over time, Shelby manages to open up to Ben, who confesses his love for her and asks Shelby to move to New York City with him. She agrees, although she is convinced that she only agreed to go with him because she is so bored in her childhood home.

Living in New York City with Ben proves to be beneficial to Shelby's mental health. He encourages her to go to school and he tells her he believes in her. Shelby gets a job in a pet store near Union Station. Before she realizes it, Shelby is the manager at the store and attending Biology classes at Hunter College. She never allows herself to fall in love with Ben, despite his open profession of love for her. Shelby breaks up with Ben because she is cheating on him with a married veterinarian named Harper Levy, who promises that he will leave his wife for her. Harper never leaves his wife, and Shelby eventually breaks up with him.

She befriends her coworker from the pet store, Maravelle, whose three children become like family to Shelby after a while. Shelby quits her job to attend school full time and she spends her time caring for her three dogs: The General, Blinkie, and Pablo. She stole all three dogs from abusive situations, but Shelby continues resist a label that considers her a "do-gooder." The postcards continue to arrive in Shelby's life. She find immense comfort in knowing that someone still cares enough to write her short yet inspirational



notes. Shelby lifts herself out of depression without even knowing how she does it, and she finds herself single, living as a student in New York City, and getting an acceptance to veterinary school in California. She decides to get a tattoo to remind her how responsible she is for ruining Helene's life at the age of seventeen. The tattoo artist, James, refuses to give her the tattoo and reveals that he is both her friend from elementary school and the author of her postcards. Shelby realizes how much she loves the person who has been encouraging her all these years, and the two begin dating one another. The novel ends with Shelby driving across country to start vet school. She is in a car with James, the love of her life, and their four dogs.

Sue Richmond

Sue Richmond is Shelby's mother. She married Dan Richmond when they were young, but Sue admits that it was never anything close to the love of her life. She has spent her entire life dreaming about living in California, but she is too busy taking care of a broken family. Her husband has cheated on her throughout their marriage yet neither of them leaves the relationship. Sue is known in her town for being a sweet and kind person, traits which are displayed in her relentless love and support for Shelby.

Her daughter goes into a serious depression after getting into a near fatal car accident. This leaves Sue alone in her home and responsible for an unresponsive daughter. She goes driving around town almost every night because Shelby leaves the house and wanders into the early hours of the morning.

Sue is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Shelby learns about her mother's condition and she leaves New York City to live with her. They spend their time laughing and talking and watching the stars at night. Sue goes shopping with Shelby one day and falls instantly in love with a small, white poodle. Shelby steals the dog for her, and Sue spends her last months on earth loving her daughter, Shelby, and her new dog, Buddy. She warns Shelby not to do what she did, and she encourages her daughter to find a person who makes her feel crazy in love.

James (Jimmy) Howard

James grows up to be a tattoo artist in New York City. His professional options become limited after he spends time in jails for distributing and selling drugs. All of this risky behavior is connected to James' deep guilt related to his brother's death. When they were just children, James asked his brother, Lee, to go swimming with him. Something happened that caused Lee to drown, and James has felt terribly guilty ever since. After the accident, he transformed into a person concerned with drugs and money and self-hatred.

He comes across a terrible car accident while driving home on the highway. Although he is drunk and high he stops and approaches the car after reporting the crash to the police. James finds Shelby and Helene lying unconscious in the car. He grabs Shelby, drags her from the vehicle, brings her to consciousness, and tells her to stay there.



While Shelby has no problem waiting where James leaves her, James is taken away from the scene in a police car. The cops find drugs on James because he is at the scene to help Shelby and Helene. James goes to prison. He feels responsible to help Shelby because he knows how she must feel and because he saved her life and he feels that he must watch over her. He sends her anonymous postcards from prison. The cards are meant to be simple inspirations that help Shelby recover and move on.

James is released from prison. He moves to New York City and works in a tattoo shop during the day while drafting a graphic novel that is an homage to his brother, Lee, at night. Shelby enters his shop asking for a tattoo. She sees James' tattoos and realizes that he is the person who has been sending her postcards. The two quickly become a couple and find solace in their similar, traumatic backgrounds. James moves to California with Shelby, where she plans on attending veterinary school.

Ben Mink

Ben Mink went to elementary school with Shelby. He was a sensitive young boy who cried while watching Bambi in the fourth grade. This is the worst thing that happened to him in childhood, which makes him inherently different from Shelby. In high school, he takes college-level biology classes in order to graduate faster. Ben starts buying drugs from James Howard after high school. He is Shelby's pot dealer after she starts doing drugs from all of her guilt related to Helene's condition. Ben spends a lot of time with Shelby and falls in love with her. He finally finishes the biology degree he started in high school and invited Shelby to move to New York City with him while he attends pharmacy school. Shelby agrees, and Ben is ecstatic to live with a woman he is in love with.

Ben is happy in New York City. He begins to mature and is satisfied with his life and hopeful for his future. This happiness irritates Shelby, who does not reciprocate any of the love Ben gives her. She cheats on him with Harper Levy and Shelby breaks up with Ben on his graduation day. Ben moves out of their apartment and works as a pharmacist in the city. He meets another pharmacist named Ana, and the two of them move back to Ben's hometown to buy a house and make a family. Ben hates his marriage. He wants to be back with Shelby. He returns to Shelby's apartment years after their breakup and asks Shelby to take him back. But Shelby is no longer available. She starts dating James Howard and she is in love with him. Ben is forced to leave the apartment and return to his pregnant wife.

Helene Boyd

Helene is a fiery seventeen year old who enjoys breaking the rules. Her best friend is Shelby Richmond. The two of them do everything together. They even plan on attending NYU together after high school. But Helene never gets to finish high school. Months before graduation, her boyfriend, Chris, breaks up with her. Helene is very upset and asks Shelby to drive her to his house in order to taunt him. Shelby agrees with



reluctance, and she crashes the car on the icy road on the way to Chris' house. The accident leaves Helene in a vegetative state for the rest of her life.

She is taken to her parents' home where she rests in bed each and every day. A rumor begins circulating that Helene has developed healing powers, which leads people from all over the region to come and seek her healing touch. Her parents allow visitors, which is something that angers Shelby. She knows Helene would not like tons of people seeing her like that.

Shelby visits Helene almost a decade after the accident. She holds Helene's hand and asks for forgiveness. Although Helene cannot talk, she squeezes Shelby's hand, which Shelby takes as a sign that Helene does not blame her for the accident.

Maravelle Diaz

Maravelle got pregnant at seventeen and was married then divorced by the age of nineteen. She has three children named Jasmine, Teddy, and Dorian; and she lives in Queens, New York. She works at a pet store in New York City and she works hard to provide for her family as a single mother. Maravelle meets Shelby at work and the two develop an unlikely friendship. Shelby becomes a prominent member of Maravelle's family when Maravelle asks Shelby to babysit her kids for the week. This establishes Shelby as a member of the family, and she frequently comes to Maravelle's house to spend time with everyone.

As her children get older, Maravelle wants to protect them from possible illegal activity, so she buys a house in New Jersey and moves her family to the suburbs. She buys the house using her bonus money from her promotion to store manager, and she is thrilled to be a home owner. Despite her efforts to protect her children her son, Teddy, is arrested for burglary. Maravelle is forced to hire a lawyer and send Teddy to a correctional school upstate. She starts dating Teddy's lawyer and is happy with Isaac.

Jasmine Diaz

Jasmine is Maravelle's beautiful, studious, and kind daughter. She first meets Shelby during the time when Shelby has a bald head, and she judges Shelby for being a weirdo. However, this prejudice does not last long, and Jasmine develops a very close relationship with Shelby. She is a hardworking student who accidentally gets caught up dating an older boy who becomes her stalker. This potentially dangerous situation is avoided when Shelby sacrifices herself as a way to get a restraining order for the ex boyfriend.

Jasmine gets into Yale University, and she is equally excited to tell Shelby as she is to tell her own mother. She is a good friend to Shelby and considers Shelby to be a person she can trust and rely on. Shelby finds a neglected cat being used as a prop for homeless people. In an effort to save the cat, she steals it and brings it to Jasmine in her bedroom. The cat remains under Jasmine's care.



Teddy Diaz

Teddy is Maravella's son and Dorian's twin. He is an outgoing troublemaker who is easily swallowed up by the local crime in his area. Teddy gets caught up in a gang and is charged with breaking and entry and burglary. He is arrested, but, because this is his first offense, the judge grants him a sentence in a correctional high school in upstate New York. Shelby is terribly worried for his future, and she sends him long letters of inspiration that are all about her dark past and once depressive thoughts. Teddy graduates from the correctional high school and manages to return safely back to Dorian and everyone else in his family.

Dorian Diaz

Dorian is Maravella's son and Teddy's twin. He is a quiet, shy, and studious boy who constantly covers for his brother's mistakes. Shelby is close to Dorian because of his gentle and honest nature. His childhood is altered when Teddy is arrested and Dorian loses his best friend.

Dan Richmond

Dan is Shelby's father and Sue's husband. He has never shown any true love for his wife and he cheats on Sue throughout his marriage. Despite his apparent indifference for his wife, Dan never leaves his family. He is not close with Shelby nor does he display any affection for her either. Dan starts dating someone while Sue is going through treatments for her lung cancer. He brings his girlfriend, Patti, to the funeral; and, shortly after the funeral, he sells him home in New Jersey so that he can move to Florida with Patti.

Harper Levy

Harper is a veterinarian in New York city who enjoys cheating on his wife. He meets Shelby when she stops him to request that he call 911 for a man who has collapsed on the street. Harper is charming and handsome and Shelby falls instantly in lust with him. The two start a passionate affair centered around spending time at his vet clinic every Monday night. He tells her that he is in a miserable marriage and plans to leave his wife, but Shelby waits a year and Harper makes no effort to start a separation.

Shelby's paranoia drives her to walk her dogs in Harper's neighborhood. It is after a conversation with his wife, Sarah, that Shelby pieces together something very important about Harper: she is not his only mistress. She visits his clinic and finds him having sex with yet another woman. Shelby storms out after insulting him and does not see him again until she brings her dying dog to him. Harper puts the dog to sleep and Shelby leaves his office without paying.



Mrs. Diaz

Mrs. Diaz is Maravelle's mother and the quiet matriarch of the family. She moves in with Maravelle to remain close to the family. She very much dislikes Shelby at first, and it is not until she and Shelby work together to protect Jasmine from her stalker, Marcus, that Mrs. Diaz speaks to Shelby. The two women develop a strange kinship related to protecting the Diaz family, and Mrs. Diaz finally accepts Shelby as being part of the family.

Shawna

Shawna is an angry homeless girl with a giant, blue tribal tattoo on her face. Shelby meets Shawna in Union Station. She has a weak cat with her as a prop to peddle more money. Shelby steals the cat from her, but she is then plagued by the idea that she is very similar to Shawna. To Shelby, Shawna is the exact same person as Shelby might have become if no one saved her.

Years later, Shelby runs into Shawna. She follows her to her work at a bookstore and speaks to Shawna, who remains rude and cold.



Symbols and Symbolism

Fortune Cookies

Fortune cookies symbolize the future, which is why Shelby rejects the messages inside each cookie until she is ready to move on and face her future with hope. During Shelby's lowest points of guilt and anxiety, she wants to avoid any thought of her future. The idea of moving forward or improving herself is overwhelming for Shelby who is trying hard just to survive until the next day. These small fortune cookies become big reminders that Shelby is not moving forward. She is happy in this semi-sedentary life, which is actually what helps her slow down and recuperate. Shelby does not read her fortune until the end of the story when she feels hopeful and ready to accept that there will be a future where she can live happily and successfully. Shelby is so ready for her fortune that she comments, "This is [the fortune] I was waiting for" (243) after she finally opens a cookie in her apartment with James.

Black Butterfly

Physically, the black butterfly comes from Shelby's friendship bracelet she has with Helene (3), but, symbolically, this symbol comes to represent the friendship Shelby once had with Helene. She is wearing the bracelet on the night of the car crash but loses it in the commotion. This image of a black butterfly is a recurring vision that Shelby dreams of when she is experiencing strong memories of Helene and the relationship they once had. She even dreams of black butterflies at night while dreaming of Helene and what she must be thinking at that moment (152). The symbol is solidified as Shelby's lifelong reminder for Helene after James tattoos the dark image on Shelby's chest (206).

The Postcards

Shelby immediately allows the postcards to symbolize hope that she is not alone in the world. These are Shelby's lifelines. She comes to depend on the short messages as signs that someone out there still cares for her. Shelby sees each card as being a lifeline, a beneficial message that keeps her going. These notes inspire Shelby to be active and emotional and empathetic. They encourage her to remember her mother and to be thankful for the life she was given after the accident. They help her feel loved and cared for and noticed, which then in turn help her to feel hopeful for her own future life.

The Illustrated Man

Ray Bradbury's collection of tales comes to symbolize James. "The Illustrated Man" centers around an unnamed narrator who meets a man with several tattoos that tell stories. James has numerous tattoos and all of the images on his body represent vivid stories from his past. These tattoos provide much of the inspiration for the messages



James writes on Shelby's postcards, and it is those messages, and those lively tattoos, that hook Shelby into falling in love with James. It is interesting, then, that it is James' rival, Ben, who introduces the novel to Shelby. It is as if Ben provides Shelby with a hint into her fate and the man she will wind up falling in love with.

Bambi

Bambi seems to be a funny insert about Ben's minor childhood trauma but it morphs into a symbol for the loss of childhood. The story of Bambi is about a young doe who witnesses the death of his mother at the hands of a ruthless hunter. Bambi watches his mother die, and this highly traumatic event yanks Bambi from his innocent, happy childhood and into a life where he must mature faster than he should. Like Bambi, Shelby considers her childhood to have been stolen from her. She denotes the night of the accident as ending her childhood and innocence, and credits that event as the thing that yanked her from satisfaction and plummeted her into depression. Like Shelby, James experiences a traumatic event in his childhood. She often refers to James' loss of his brother as ending his childhood as well. Bambi is an extended symbol in this novel because it also help to explain one of the themes in the book: the terrible effects of losing out on childhood.

California

Both Sue and Shelby view the state of California as symbolizing their dreams coming true. Sue always dreamt of living in California, but she dies before she can see her dream come to fruition. Shelby, on the other hand, heeds her mother's advice and moves forward in life, ensuring that she follows her dreams along the way. Because Shelby is realizing her dreams, she moves to California. This is a new place with high hopes and a location where Shelby's dreams will be actualized.

A Picnic Table

The picnic table is a physical reminder of the wonderful conversations Shelby has with Sue while watching the stars, which makes the table come to represent Shelby's close connection to her mother. Even in Shelby's darkest times, the two women would casually meet at the picnic table in their backyard, look up at the stars, and enjoy talking to one another. After Sue passes away, Shelby looks at a picnic table and is instantly reminded of Sue and all of the happy times they spent together. This becomes a meeting place for their relationship to develop, grow, and sustain.

The Raven

The raven character in James' graphic novel, *Nevermore* is a symbol for his brother, Lee. The character is an innocent bystander that is stuck on the shoulder of a flawed character. The raven must answer for the main characters flaws and struggles, which is



exactly how James feels about his brother Lee being punished for his own foolish ideas when they were children.

Hair

Hair is a huge factor in this novel and serves as a symbol for a person's current wellness. Shelby's first reaction when she is hurting is to shave her head bald. She maintains her bald head during the time in her life when she is at her absolute lowest. Her struggles are made public through her lack of hair. Shelby's hair grows longer as her mental health improves. By page 97, it is at her chin. Then, by page 110, her hair is described as being at her shoulders.

Shelby is not the only one who dons a bald head while struggling. In this novel, Teddy is described as sporting a bald head after he is arrested and imprisoned (155). He is about to embark on a terribly challenging period in his life and he shows that to the world, or more so he shows that to Shelby, by presenting himself without hair. But the symbol of hair and health is not solely related to mental or emotional health. Sue manages to keep her sanity and positivity during her cancer treatments, but she is depicted as having a bald head to symbolize her physical health issues (161).

James' black coat

James wears his black coat for years as his personal symbol for the guilt he carries each and every day related to the death of his brother. He abandons his coat on the beach where Lee died on the same day he leaves for his future life in California. James is ready to move on and he is finally able to accept the fact that Lee's death is not his responsibility.

Settings

Lewiston Street

Helene's parents own a house on Lewiston Street. It is where Shelby used to go and play with Helene in their free time, but it is also now the location where Helene lies motionless and mute. This was once a place Shelby went to for childhood fun, but it is transformed into a tragic place Shelby avoids. But that is due to Shelby's inability to confront her guilt about the accident. Several people flock to Helene's house because of her reputation as a mystical healer. The house is covered with cars and people milling about on their front lawn. Lewiston Street becomes a destination for people to come and search for miracles.

Sue Richmond visits Helen and her family almost every week. Just after Shelby learns her mother has cancer, Sue forces Shelby to drive her around but asks to stop at Helene's house first. Shelby waits in the car and tries her best to forget how close she is sitting to Helene. It is not until Shelby is close to being entirely healed, at the end of the novel, that Shelby manages to drive herself to Lewiston Street and visit Helene in bed, further displaying Shelby's transformation.

Highway 110

Highway 110 is the site of Shelby's accident. Helene forced her to drive her around that night. Shelby hit a patch of ice, lost control of the car, and crashed it into a ditch. Helene was pinned in the car and James pulled Shelby out to save her. The girls remained on the highway until emergency vehicles got to the crash, but it was too late for Helene. She went without oxygen for seven minutes, cementing her future as bed-bound and incapable to speaking or moving. Each year, high schoolers in the area light candles and place them in brown paper bags along the side of the road. This is a form of community healing that Shelby does not take part in.

New York City

Ben asks Shelby to move to the city and live with him while he goes to pharmacy school. Shelby agrees, and the two of them move into a fourth-floor walk-up apartment that is tiny and old and falling apart. Ben moves out of the apartment when Shelby breaks up with him, but she remains in the same place and does not move apartments until she leaves for California.

New York City is where Shelby does most of her personal healing. It is here where Shelby forces herself out of the basement and into the bustling streets of the city. She gets a job, she steals dogs that become part of her family, and she learns how to fall in love. Shelby attends Hunter College and discovers that she wants to be a veterinarian. While Shelby enjoys all of these milestones of growth in the city, it is also here where



she runs into her "angel", James. Shelby meets the person who has been writing her the postcards all these years. She discovers the symmetrical reasoning for James' loyalty, and Shelby is finally able to accept another person into her heart. The city becomes a place where the depressed version of Shelby is allowed to stay guilty and dark. When Shelby gathers enough strength to move on, she decides that it is time to leave the city. New York has been great to her, but it is also the city where Shelby felt terrible for such a long time.

Huntington, New Jersey

Huntington is Shelby's hometown, which means that it is also home to several of the main characters in this novel. Helene, Ben, and James are all from the same city. They attended elementary school together and grew up here. This is also the city that rejected Shelby after the accident while it accepted Helene's tragic new circumstances. Shelby spends a few years in the basement of her parents' home when she is too depressed to move. She finds comfort and friendship with Ben Mink, who sticks around in order to sell people like Shelby drugs. Ben takes Shelby on a walk during a cold snowstorm. He takes her to Helene's house and takes the opportunity to ask Shelby if she would like to date him. The two start dating in Huntington until Ben moves them to New York City.

The characters continue visiting the city on holidays and special occasions. Shelby moves back for a few months in order to spend time with Sue before her cancer takes her away. This time spent with Sue in her hometown helps Shelby gain a perspective about what is truly important and worth fretting over. In order to be fully free, Shelby must leave Huntington and travel to the other side of the country, forgetting about all of the pain and depression she survived while living here.

Queens, New York

Queens is where Maravelle lives when Shelby meets her. Maravelle lives there with her three children: Jasmine, Dorian, and Teddy. Shelby stays with the children for one week while Maravelle visits her grandmother in Florida, and this is where Shelby finds Pablo. He is a Great Pyrenees and he is tied up all alone in a junkyard. Shelby breaks in at night and brings the dog back to Maravelle's before she takes him to her apartment to live with her and her other dogs.

Valley Stream, New Jersey

Valley Stream is where Maravelle moves her family in the hopes of living in a safer neighborhood than Queens. Maravelle wants to protect her family from crime or harm, so she buys herself a home in the suburbs. Shelby hates visiting the neighborhood because it reminds her of her childhood home. Despite her personal dislike for the neighborhood, Maravelle and her family are happy living here, and Shelby frequently visits for family dinners and group celebrations.



Themes and Motifs

Loss of Childhood

When a person's childhood is gone, their hope for the future alters into a state of cynicism and forced independence, resulting in the creation of a total different person; but, when a child's childhood is yanked away from them before they are ready, it can have massive consequences for the rest of that person's life. When Shelby got into her car accident she was a young, bright, and optimistic teenager in high school. She had plans to attend NYU with her best friend and she did not think that anything bad in the world could ever happen. But the car crash changed Shelby down to the core. It took away all of the social comforts she once had. She was left feeling alone and worthless, without a single lifeline in the world. Shelby lost her childhood, which results in her constant state of self-hatred and private self-depreciation. Shelby's loss of childhood comes at her own hands. Helene's state after the crash is what lurches Shelby out of a comfort zone and into the harsh reality that she is alone in the world unless she tries very hard to have connections.

James is another character who loses his childhood at too early of an age as a consequence of a traumatic loss he feels responsible for. His older brother, Lee, drowned on a day when James asked to go swimming, which has led James down a path where he feels guilty for killing his brother. This leads James to developing into an entirely different person than he may have been had it not been for the accident. Shelby describes James as never having the chance to be sixteen. "He went from being ten to being a hundred" (214).

Maravelle's family is riddled with risks of children losing their childhoods and altering their life paths forever. Maravelle herself lost out on her childhood when she became a mother at the young age of seventeen. She never had the chance to experience her teen years as anything but a responsible mother. Now she is obsessed with keeping her children away from anything that may take their innocence away. Shelby is also concerned with maintaining a happy and safe environment for Jasmine, Dorian, and Teddy. Jasmine is at the forefront of both caretakers' minds because they are concerned that men will be the cause of her loss of innocence (135). In the end, it is Teddy who alters his life by getting arrested and spending time in jail. This trauma forces Teddy to grow up in a way that is unnatural to the path he was supposed to be on, and it leaves Dorian all alone to learn how to be more mature as well.

Each time a character loses out on their childhoods before they are ready to be fully independent it alters their life course. Ben, on the other hand, never suffers from a huge trauma. He attends college biology classes while still in high school. His plans to become a pharmacist never change, and he seems to blossom into a mature and confident citizen of New York City. His lack of a life-altering event is what aides Ben in enjoying his smooth ride into adulthood. Nothing ever took the natural transition away from him.



Depression

Depression is classified as a mental illness of varying degrees, and Faithful dissects one person's battle with the illness in a way that helps readers empathize with people suffering from depression. It is often referred to as a condition that many societies steer clear from discussing directly. Shelby is the novel's protagonist. She is at the center of everything that happens in this novel. Her rollercoaster experience with her own depression is something readers have the chance to experience first-hand. The story is told from a perspective that makes it feel as though the narrator is Shelby's subconscious. This allows readers to learn about Shelby's personal struggles with depression, the difficulties she battles to overcome it, and the amazing release she feels when she realizes she is triumphant.

Shelby is at her lowest point at the beginning of the novel. She often describes herself as feeling empty, saying that she has, “. . . nothing inside of her. She's a black hole. A sinkhole. A whole lot of nothing” (38). She also feels worthless and not worth anyone's time, she does not even feel like she is worth anything to herself (11). She hates herself (18) and displays her self-hatred through her willingness to cut herself and attempt to slit her own wrists in order to end her life. Shelby is a resilient character with more strength than anyone gives her credit for. She refuses to completely fold into her depression, but she is not sure how to fight for her life. Oddly enough, it is the simple messages on the postcards that help her. For Shelby, her depression centers around the feeling of abandonment after the accident. She feels that the world, and her family, turned their backs on her. Sue tries to talk to Shelby about what she wants to eat for dinner, but she does not directly speak to Shelby about her mental condition or her lack of responsibility for the accident. These are the simple messages Shelby needs to hear and the messages she only receives through the postcards. The postcards tell Shelby that she is not alone, which is something she often wonders. They help Shelby know that she is not already dead to the world and that she still has value.

Shelby's depression weakens as she allows herself to be cared for. She moves in with Ben Mink whose constant comments of support help Shelby feel slightly more worthwhile than before. Her friendship with Maravelle and her family help Shelby feel like someone would be worried if she faded away. These relationships help Shelby feel less alone, which, in turn, help her dig herself out of her depression little by little. There is much resistance, however. Shelby's brain has reprogrammed to believe that she is a nothing, a nobody. “Caring about things doesn't come easy to Shelby” (37), and getting herself to rewire her brain back to what it was before the accident is something Shelby will never be able to do. She does not want to recede back to her childhood self. Shelby wants to become her own adult in a world that she can feel confident is not rejecting her.

Once Shelby collects enough love to realize that, "she's haunting herself" (39) with her pessimistic thoughts of guilt and anxiety and responsibility; she is able to move on to repairing herself. Ben was able to encourage Shelby, but he would be able to help Shelby fully heal. James is able to play a vital role in Shelby's ability to improve her



mental health because he knows what crippling depression feels like. He can understand Shelby in a way that makes her feel like someone relates to her. James is the first person who makes Shelby feel like her dark thoughts are normal. The plot is driven by Shelby's depression and her efforts to rid herself of the dark cloud weighing her down. Ultimately, it is Shelby who gets herself out, but it is also Ben and Sue and Marabelle and Jasmine and Teddy and Dorian and James who support her when she is not ready to get better.

Survivor's Remorse

Both Shelby and James are forced to live their lives with the heavy feeling that they lived while someone they love died, which causes them to trudge through their lives wondering if things might not be better if they were dead. James lacks any passion in life before he dates Shelby. Lee's death was almost a decade ago, but he has yet to rid himself of the haunting feeling that it should have been him who died. James thinks of death and dying on a daily basis. He feels very little happiness. Each time he feels satisfied with something, he thinks of the fact that Lee will never be able to experience the same feeling. His tattoo of Lee's name proves to be a mistake, and James does not want Shelby to make the same error. This constant battering and physical reminder is something James feels to be related to remorse and self-hatred (202).

Shelby knows that she must find forgiveness for what happened that night. She often refers to her entire life as paying penance for what she did (6). Shelby's survival feels as though it was in place of Helene's, and she wishes she could go back and switch places (166). They know they are alive, but these two lost souls do not feel like they are living. This is largely due to the fact that they are not. Neither Shelby nor James live their lives for themselves until they help each other find forgiveness. What is interesting is that both of them find forgiveness within themselves. James must leave his black coat on the beach where Lee drowned and Shelby feels forgiven after a nonverbal squeeze of the hand from Helene. They did not need forgiveness from the people who did not survive the accidents. They needed to be ready to forgive themselves and recognize their lack of power in those accidents.

The Unbreakable Bond between a Mother and a Daughter

The author uses the strong bond between Sue Richmond and her daughter to convey the idea that a mother's love is a special type of love that is unmatched by any other type of care one can receive. Sue sums up this theme perfectly when she states that, "Love is bullshit. It's knowing someone down to their soul that matters. That's what love is. It's difficult and real and it doesn't change" (166). This is a good interpretation of her love for her daughter. Sue proves herself to be loyal to Shelby even in her darkest hours. She tries her best to comfort Shelby, and she spends hours driving around the town looking for Shelby in the middle of the night. Sue accepts her daughter for who she is and for what she happened the night of the accident. She is thankful for her daughter



regardless of her depression or her guilt. She loves her no matter how bald Shelby gets or how responsible she feels. Sue is there for Shelby and never fails to show up when she is needed. Her love for Shelby runs deep. She tells her, "I've had you all this time, Shelby. I've realized more than ever what a precious gift that is" (166). The time they get to spend together before Sue succumbs to cancer is a magical time when Shelby allows herself to see just how much she needs her mom and just how close her mother has been the whole time.

Another mother dynamic depicted in this novel are the three generations of the Diaz family. Mrs. Diaz is a strong and silent matriarch whose watchful eye spots Jasmine's stalker, Marcus, and is suspicious of Shelby until she proves her loyalty. Her number one concern is the health and well being of her daughter and her grandchildren. Likewise, Maravelle considers her entire life to be about catering to her children's happiness and safety. These two women surround Jasmine with as much love and support as they can muster. These mother-child relationships are strong throughout the novel, and they have nothing but positive impacts on the children who reap the benefits of them.

Misperception

Although Shelby's depression is very much a real mental health problem, she proves her constant skewed vision of herself as a victim results in more harm than any other outside factor she experiences. Shelby does not see herself as others see her. Beginning with Ben, he sees Shelby as a person with untapped potential (38). He is aware of the trauma she endures after the car accident, but he also believes that Shelby's life is not over as a result. He encourages her to change the world and tells her that she can succeed in college courses. Shelby scoffs at this encouragement and takes it as though Ben is being facetious. It seems as though Shelby accidentally improves her mental health and yet remains incapable of celebrating her progress. When she enrolls in school, she does not think that is a sign of improvement. Establishing a relationship with Maravelle and her children has no impact on Shelby's self-esteem. She is shocked when Maravelle asks her to babysit her kids because Shelby considers herself to be too much of a mess to care for children. Other people see Shelby as an independent, hard-working, and charming person; but she only sees herself as being nothing (168). Each time Shelby achieves a personal milestone-- such as growing out her hair, keeping a job, or being awarded a fellowship-- she refuses to celebrate and chooses to put herself down instead.

The novel ends with Shelby finally accepting herself as less of a victim who needs to live her life apologizing for her survival.

The narrator notes that, "The girl Shelby once was isn't here" (253), and Shelby thinks to herself that she, "Would want to put her arms around herself and tell the Shelby she used to be that she has a good heart and that the person who will punish her most in this world is herself" (253). It took Shelby almost a decade to learn how to accept the love, trust, and support her loved ones send her way. Now she is capable of recognizing

the positive image others have about her and is able to see those good qualities in herself.

Styles

Point of View

The perspective of this narrative is unique in the way that it is a superbly deep exploration into the troubled mind of a woman suffering from the mental illnesses of survivor's remorse and depression, yet the book is told in a third person semi-limited point of view. The narration is inside Shelby's head and yet it is never Shelby speaking directly to readers. Shelby's outward dialogue is much different from the thoughts the narrator discusses. This makes it feel as though the story is told by an unmentioned character: Shelby's psyche. It is as if her subconscious brain is openly discussing her deepest thoughts while Shelby herself is unable to identify these feelings. This unique perspective makes readers feel an even deeper connection to Shelby than any of the characters in the novel manage to establish. For example, Shelby is disappointed in her recent lack of postcards. She does not express this empty feeling herself. Instead, the narrator uses the pronoun "she" as if Shelby is a separate entity to share that, "She hasn't gotten a postcard in some time, and what she misses most is someone knowing she's alive" (138). This is a direct and honest message from the part of Shelby's brain she is not yet in tune with.

Language and Meaning

This novel contains lusciously dark, descriptive passages related to Shelby's depression. Most of the imagery and details are included in the sections where readers are allowed into the private recesses of Shelby's fears, anxiety, and guilt. Perhaps the best example of Shelby pouring her thoughts out comes in Chapter 9 when Teddy is in prison and Shelby feels compelled to write him about all of her past feelings of depression and guilt and anxiety and self-hatred. She tells Teddy about, "How she wished she had died on the road. How, on the night of the accident, she bit and kicked whoever tried to save her." She tells Teddy that she feels she is a bad person who stole Helene's life (157). This language reveals much about the Shelby's character. However, the writing style of this novel is quite straightforward. There are very few lengthy sentences and only a handful of obscure language. This makes the story easier to read and intensifies the focus on the main idea of Shelby's struggle to find self-acceptance.

Structure

This novel is divided into 15 chapters which are labeled with numbers. The story starts with a teenage Shelby living in her parents' basement. She is so depressed that she is in a near comatose state. The tale then progresses chronologically through Shelby's life in New Jersey and then New York City. While the novel often alludes to events that happened before readers are introduced to Shelby, the book does not contain flashbacks. Instead, characters remember various traumatic events as simply

memories, and readers are not whisked back in time or submersed in the events being discussed. The novel begins with Shelby Richmond at her lowest point in life. She is cutting herself and often thinks about committing suicide. The story ends with a confirmation that Shelby will be okay as she drives across the United States with the love of her life and a hope for her future. This is in stark contrast to the opening scene where readers meet a tragic girl who seems to dread the future.



Quotes

What is behind you is gone, what is in front of you awaits.

-- A fortune cookie (Chapter 14)

Importance: Finally Shelby opens a fortune cookie! This fortune is perfectly timed. Ben Mink slinks away from Shelby's apartment, rejected and destroyed, while James waits inside for the love of his life to return. Shelby spent many years resenting Ben, just to transition into a place where she obsessed over how much she loves him, and Shelby winds up rejecting him for someone she falls more in love with than she ever knew she could. This fortune comes at an opportune time. It reminds Shelby that she is moving forward. She is advancing away from Ben and from Helene and from her immense guilt for what happened that night on the highway in a snowstorm.

She trusts she'll find her way."

-- Narrator (Chapter 15)

Importance: This simple and honest quote is a wonderful final sentence to end the book with. Shelby's life during this narrative has been a tumultuous one filled with misdirection. She feels her way through every stage, and she is never fully aware of how she does so well in her recovery and milestones. Shelby has never trusted herself to take her own fate into her hands, yet now, as the book closes on Shelby and James going to California, she finally believes that she knows how to get places in life. She has come full circle and is now capable of trusting herself and all of the great things she wants to accomplish in her future. She has learned self-acceptance and self-trust, and Shelby is ready to move on to the next stage in her hopeful life.

Some things are best remembered the way you want to remember them."

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: While the idea of memories is not a theme in this novel, it is something that plagues a number of the characters in the novel at one time or another. Memories of Helene and the accident are the heavy things preventing Shelby from feeling any sort of happiness. Memories are what keep James in his black coat for years. Memories are what inspires Ben to return to Shelby in the hopes that she will take him back. Yet readers are reminded of how much better the characters would feel if they simply let their memories remain memories. Shelby, Ben, and James allow their memories to materialize deeply enough in their guilt and sadness that they transform into something tangible. These characters not only allow their memories to hold them back they also create false memories. They reinvent the time period so that they feel worse than they should. For Shelby and Ben, they feel immensely guilty and responsible for what happened in each of their accidents. For Ben, he allows himself to forget how horrible Shelby was to him while they were together. He allows his memories to materialize a relationship that never existed. When these characters face the reality of their memories, and put their thoughts behind them, they are able to move forward and away from the thoughts holding them down.



Bambi is a cultural signpost for morality.”
-- Ben Mink (Chapter 8)

Importance: Despite this book's dark themes of depression, regret, and guilt; the symbol of Bambi is a recurrent idea throughout most of Ben Mink's scenes. Even here, Ben is chatting with a girl he has matched with online. He refers to Bambi as something one should keep at the forefront of his or her mind. The rubber band incident involving Ben crying during a Bambi showing in the fourth grade was a traumatic experience for him, and it was troubling enough for him to carry the negative memory all the way into adulthood. But Bambi can be considered a rather direct symbol for the characters that lose their childhoods to a trauma. After all, the story of Bambi tells a tale of a doe whose mother is killed early on in his life. He sees his mother die, he even feel responsible, and, as a result, Bambi is lurches out of childhood and into a strange middle phase where he must take care of himself before he is ready. Shelby frequently comments that the car accident took her childhood away. Likewise, she refers to James and his trauma as stealing his childhood from him as well. Shelby is constantly concerned about keeping the childhoods of Jasmine, Teddy, and Dorian in tact and laments the loss of Maravelle's childhood due to her failed marriage and unplanned pregnancy. There is much in common with the occurrence that ends Bambi's happy childhood and the events that steal childhoods from Shelby, James, Maravelle, Teddy, and Dorian.

Everyone should know exactly what everyone else is thinking and then people wouldn't hurt each other so much.”
-- Shelby Richmond (Chapter 10)

Importance: Shelby Richmond is a young lady who is overcome by her personal guilt and paranoia. She cannot explain her feelings to people and she is unable to vocalize her fears and disappointments. Shelby is also deeply affected by her own imagination related to what people think about her. During the time when Shelby has a bald head, she is constantly wondering what people think of her. She notes that people on the street avoid her when they see her walking her dogs down the street. She notices that people react to her scars and her torn jeans. Shelby can decipher what people's sharp looks mean, but she wants people to communicate more. Shelby is strained by her constant need to guess how much people hate her, and she desperately needs to know that other people do not hate her nearly as much as she hates herself.

Maybe that's what love is. Maybe it's like a hit-and-run accident; it smashes you before you can think. You do it no matter the cost and you keep on running.”
-- Narrator (Chapter 6)

Importance: This quote is directly related to Shelby's chance encounter with Harper Levy. She is instantly struck by him and convinced that her true love has just waltzed into her life. Shelby has watched her mother float through life without feeling true love. She has lived with Ben for years without feeling even an inkling of the possibility of true love's magic. Shelby meets Harper and her physical attraction to him is something she wants to desperately to be true. She wants love to be delivered to her, just as she hopes her depression will be carried away from her. However, this quote can also be applied to



Shelby's almost instantaneous relationship bloom with James. While it appears as though James falls in love with Shelby over the years he writes her, Shelby feels quickly and deeply attracted to him. The two partner together and do not waiver in their loyalty for the rest of the story. She is metaphorically hit with the reveal of her "angel", and she falls madly in love without stopping or turning around, much like this quote wonders.

This is the kind of thing you can never repay."
-- Maravelle Diaz (Chapter 7)

Importance: Shelby spends her entire adult life paying penance for things she thinks she is responsible for. Shelby feels as though she owes many people something. She has sex with Ben because she thinks she owes him that much comfort. She speaks to her mother, at first, because she feels that she owes her the courtesy of communication. In this case, Maravelle changes Shelby's position in life. Here, Maravelle insinuates that it is she who owes Shelby. This is a position that Shelby is not well suited to because she rarely allows herself to enter into relationships where she might help a person enough that they owe something to Shelby.

Loneliness can drive even the most alienated person to attempt to make contact with another soul."
-- Narrator (Chapter 8)

Importance: Shelby proves herself to be a resilient, strong, and willful person; but there are many times when readers are left doubting her ability for recovery. The first half of the book seems rather glum for Shelby and her future. She allows herself to get to the lowest possible point she can while remaining alive. Shelby alienates everyone around her. She ignores any possible relationship that may make her feel like she is worth something to the world. She gets to the point where she feels as if she has lost all hope. Then she brings herself back through her own personal strength and motivation. She refuses to let her desire for life die out completely. She makes contact with Maravelle. She allows herself to enter Maravelle's family. She opens her door for abused dogs. Shelby even manages to open her heart up enough to find love.

She thinks of her mother outside alone, staring at the swirling heavens, living with a ghost who doesn't even come home for dinner anymore."
-- Narrator (Chapter 9)

Importance: Shelby finds solace lying on the picnic table in her parents' backyard. She has minor conversations with her mother here and she allows herself to re-examine her dark feelings against herself and her past actions. Shelby loves her mother more than any other person on the planet. Even during her darkest hours, Shelby remains thankful that Sue drives around town looking for her. She is thankful for having such a kind mother who loves her unconditionally. Shelby hates that Sue has allowed herself to remain in a loveless marriage all these years. She sees Sue as being a woman more alone in the world than she is. In a way, Shelby pities her mother, and she sees her mother as being all alone in the universe. It is not until Sue begins succumbing to cancer that Shelby realizes her mother was never alone in the universe. While Sue's



husband, Dan, may have been somewhat of a ghost in her life, Sue has always had her daughter with her.

Love is bullshit. It's knowing someone down to their soul that matters. That's what love is. It's difficult and real and it doesn't change."

-- Sue Richmond (Chapter 10)

Importance: All of the love Sue missed out on in her own marriage helps her achieve a sharp perspective about what she knows she deserves and what she has missed out on. Sue knows that she never had a steamy love affair with her husband, Dan; but that does not mean that Sue feels entirely unloved. Dan has made a life with Sue. He has remained loyal, although never faithful. Sue knows Dan's faults and she chooses to stay with him because they have spent so many years establishing a life together. But this quote also describes Sue's feelings towards her daughter. She remembers Shelby at her lowest point in life. She remembers Shelby immobile and stuck on the couch in the basement. She has the memory of her daughter like this and yet she loves Shelby despite being aware of her daughter's haunted soul. This is a deep understanding that Shelby can not relate to until she meets James. Shelby quickly learns all of James' dark secrets and taunting memories. She does not care and loves him more because of his checkered past. The love Shelby shares with James is exactly the type of love Sue encourages her daughter to find.

Life was beautiful, everyone knew that, but it was also bitter and bleak and unfair as hell and where did that leave a person?

-- Narrator (Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote is placed early on in the story, when Shelby is at her lowest and feels unable to see any positivity in either her present or her future. Shelby remembers being a happy person. She remembers feeling satisfied with life and having the ability to see hope. However, now she is living her life swirling in the underbelly of a happy world. She knows other people feel these things, but she cannot inspire herself to see anything except the "bitter and bleak" occurrences life has to offer. She no longer sees a balance in the universe or in her own life.

Perhaps it's always true that when you wreck your own life you blame everyone else for your misfortune."

-- Narrator (Chapter 12)

Importance: First and foremost, it is important to make the connection between Helene and this quote. Helene is unable to blame anyone for her situation because she cannot talk. This fact does not prevent Shelby from feeling that Helene blames her. She assumes that Helene feels this way because Shelby needs her to feel this way. Shelby needs Helen to justify all of the guilt she feels for the car accident years ago. This quote is related to Shelby's desire for Ben Mink's wedding to be ruined. She knows that she is the reason her relationship ended with Ben, which also means that she is reason Ben has moved on and is marrying someone who is not her. Knowing this does not change the fact that Shelby wants Ben's happiness with his new romantic partner to be ruined.

She feels that, if she cannot have him, no one else should have the comfort and happiness that Ben bring to his relationships.