

# **Fall on Your Knees Study Guide**

**Fall on Your Knees by Ann-Marie MacDonald**

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# Plot Summary

Fall on Your Knees is the story of the Piper family. Based in a small Canadian town in the late 1800s through the mid-twentieth century, the novel tells the story of the relationships between the father James, his wife Materia, and their three daughters, Kathleen, Mercedes, and Frances. James' obsession with his eldest child Kathleen affects the entire family for many years to come.

James meets Materia Mahmoud when he goes to fix her family's piano. The two fall in love and elope, much to the dismay of Materia's father, who disowns her. They move into a home and quickly have their first child, Kathleen. James grows enchanted with his young daughter and her singing ability. He quickly devotes a lot of time in preparing her to become a famous singer. Materia feels no motherly love for Kathleen, no matter how much she tries, and worries about the amount of attention James pays to their daughter. They have two more daughters, Mercedes and Frances, who bond much more easily with Materia. After beating Kathleen and then becoming aroused by her, James decides to leave home until Kathleen is old enough to go to New York for voice lessons. He enlists in the military and is shipped overseas to France. When he returns from the front, he sends Kathleen to New York and has her stay with Giles, a spinster cousin. After several months in New York, Kathleen falls in love and James finds out by way of an anonymous letter. He brings her back home. Nine months later, she dies while giving birth to twins.

Frances takes the newborn babies and baptizes them in the creek, only to have one baby, a boy, drown. The daughter, Lily, survives but contracts polio. Two days after Kathleen is buried, Materia dies as well, leaving Mercedes to help James raise Frances and Lily. Lily is being passed off as James' and Materia's child. Frances and Lily spend hours playing together and Frances tells Lily stories about Ambrose, her twin brother who died and is now her guardian angel. Mercedes graduates from high school but stays home instead of going away to college. Frances is expelled from school and winds up working at a speakeasy run by her uncle Jameel. She spies Leo Taylor, Kathleen's former driver, working with James and decides he must be the father of Kathleen's children. Frances sets up an elaborate plot to seduce Leo and become pregnant by him. His wife, Adelaide, threatens Frances but she tricks Leo into taking her to an abandoned mine where she seduces him. When Teresa, the Mahmoud's former maid and Leo's sister, finds out what Frances has done, she shoots her in the stomach. Frances survives and forgives Teresa. She has a baby boy who she is told has died a few days after birth. Instead, Mercedes sends the infant away to be raised in an orphanage. When Frances returns, home she and James become closer and he tells her the truth about what happened to Kathleen. Before he dies, James gives her Kathleen's diary, which tells the story of Kathleen's adventures in New York. Frances gives the diary to Lily along with cash so she can find out what happened to Rose Lacroix, Kathleen's friend and lover in New York. Lily makes the long journey to New York and finds Rose, who lives as a man and has become a famous musician. After Frances' death from a long illness, Mercedes leaves information for Anthony, Frances' son, so that he can find Lily and Rose and find out more about the Piper family. When

he arrives in New York, Lily instantly knows who he is and begins to tell him all about Frances.



# Prologue: Silent Pictures

## Prologue: Silent Pictures Summary

Fall on Your Knees is the story of the Piper family. Based in a small Canadian town in the late 1800s through the mid-twentieth century, the novel tells the story of the relationships between the father James, his wife Matera, and their three daughters, Kathleen, Mercedes, and Frances. James' obsession with his eldest child, Kathleen affects the entire family for many years to come.

The prologue gives brief accounts of each of the characters in the novel by way of old photographs. The house in New Waterford, a town on Cape Breton Island, is also mentioned.

## Prologue: Silent Pictures Analysis

The prologue sets the stage for the novel by introducing the reader to the characters. The opening line "They're all dead now," suggests that some of the characters may have died too soon. It also gives the reader a sense of the narrator as someone intimately familiar with the Piper family who is recounting the tale to someone else.



# Book 1: The Garden; Chapters 1-5

## Book 1: The Garden; Chapters 1-5 Summary

Chapter 1, To Seek His Fortune, introduces James Piper, who grew up on Cape Breton Island, the only child of a shoemaker. When James turns fifteen years old, he rebuilds his mother's piano after his father leaves. As a result of this experience, James becomes a piano tuner. He relocates to Sydney, the only city on Cape Breton Island, to find work. He turns down manual labor, knowing he can do better. Eventually he will earn enough money to buy a nice house and have a family.

In Chapter 2, His Left Eye, James meets the twelve-year-old Materia Mahmoud when he visits her family's home to tune their piano. Materia's mother reads his fortune in tea leaves. On New Year's Eve in 1898, Materia gets James' attention by hitting a key on the piano. They make plans to secretly meet. When Materia turns thirteen, she elopes with James. The couple is found and dragged back to Sydney, where they are wed in a Catholic church. Mahmoud purges all traces of Materia from the house, much to the dismay of his younger daughter, Camille. He builds a house near Low Point for the young couple to ensure that they have someplace to live in case James turns out to be poor. Materia never sees her family again.

In Chapter 3, Low Point, James works two jobs while Materia stays at home. She wants to go to New York but James wants to prove himself to Mahmoud. He takes correspondence courses to earn a college degree and buys classic literature. Materia mopes around the house, refusing to do anything. When she becomes pregnant, she gets more emotional, taking to musical experiments on the piano. James comes home one evening to find Materia ill and unresponsive. He locks the piano and tells her to start cooking and cleaning.

In Chapter 4, The Jewish Lady, Mrs. Luvovitz, a local woman who sells eggs, sees Materia sitting at the cliff. She takes in Materia and teaches her how to cook. James begins purchasing meat from Benny Luvovitz, the husband. He is suspicious of the neighbors but is glad that Materia is finally behaving as a wife should.

In Chapter 5, 1900, Materia gives birth to a girl and James names her Kathleen after his mother. She is baptized by a Presbyterian minister, even though Materia will raise Kathleen as Catholic. Proud of his new status, James quits both jobs and becomes a piano teacher. After a month, James has enough piano students to make a living. Materia wants to get pregnant again in order to have a son, but James refuses to touch her. As Kathleen gets older, she becomes more connected to her father, who believes she can do no wrong.



## Book 1: The Garden; Chapters 1-5 Analysis

The first chapter introduces the reader to James Piper, the patriarch of the family. It gives some background on his home life as a child and young man. His wish at fifteen to belt his father suggests to the reader that James grew up in an abusive household and foreshadows his struggles with his own children. The reader learns that his connection to his mother is very strong and that they both share a love of music. His mother's broken piano prompts James to become a piano tuner.

In Chapter 2, the reader meets Materia Mahmoud as a young twelve-year-old girl. Through James' eyes, however, she is a beautiful young woman, and she experiences a sexual awakening through her marriage to him. Mahmoud's curse on Materia's womb foreshadows her future problems with her children and the loss of her daughter, Lily, shortly after childbirth. Mrs. Mahmoud's tea leaves reading also serves to foreshadow the pain and suffering that will come to her daughter and her new husband. She only tells James about the happiness she sees in the cup.

The significance of New York comes up here for the first time when James talks to Materia about his desire to go to New York City. She picks up on it, claiming it is the only place she wants to go with him. It becomes an imagined place of rescue and escape for Materia and other characters in the novel as well.

James' abusive tendencies show themselves in Chapter 3. It becomes obvious that Materia is too young to marry, as her desires to go dancing or flee to New York show that she is unaware of the responsibilities as a wife. James' realization that his co-workers "might think he married a child" foreshadows his later obsession with his daughter Kathleen and his attempts to control it.

In Chapter 4, the reader learns more about the marriage between James and Materia. Even though she is not yet fourteen years old, Materia is forced to learn how to grow up. Mrs. Luvovitz takes on the role of foster mother to Materia as it becomes apparent that she needs guidance in how to be a wife. James' distrust of outsiders is something typically seen in abusers, so his reluctance to have Materia connect with the Luvovitzes suggests that he will cut her off from anyone who shows too much interest in his affairs.

The title of Chapter 5, 1900, is the only one in the novel that references the year, which is important as it is the turn of the century and symbolizes the Piper family's shift into new relationships with each other. If this story was set in the late twentieth century, a doctor would diagnose Materia with postpartum depression. The fact that Materia turns to her religion to help her through her depression goes back to the theme of devotion. The reader sees the beginnings of James' obsession with Kathleen. His demand that Materia speak only English to Kathleen is reminiscent of his own father's hatred for James' and his mother's connection via Gaelic. James sets it up so that Materia never really connects to her daughter, in much the same way he never connected with his father.





# Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 6-10

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 6-10 Summary

In Chapter 6, A Miner Forty-Niner, a town is established at Low Point around the mine. Kathleen sings before she can even talk. James starts giving her singing lessons. He allows Materia to play the piano again, provided that she only play the sheet music that he buys to teach Kathleen. James and Kathleen are almost constant companions, turning heads wherever they go. Materia unsuccessfully tries to bond with Kathleen. James enrolls her at Holy Angels School in Sydney and plants a garden to help save money for Kathleen's schooling.

In Chapter 7, The Pit, James continues to bond with Kathleen. He resents a number of his students, but is willing to sacrifice if it means Kathleen will become a famous singer. James tells Materia to get a job and she finds work as an accompanist at the Empire Theatre. The miners go on strike and disease takes the lives of many Low Point children. Fearful that Kathleen will get sick, James boards her at Holy Angels, much to her dismay. To pay the boarding fees, James becomes a scab worker at the mine.

In Chapter 8, The Price of a Song, Benny Luvovitz is acting as the go-between for Mrs. Mahmoud and Materia, passing along stories and recipes. Her reputation as the theatre's accompanist gets Materia a lot of attention, which bothers James and he demands Materia quit her job. With nothing to do but cook, eat, and clean the house, Materia becomes depressed again.

In Chapter 9, Quanto Dolor, the coal miners' strike ends in April 1910. As a reward for his hard work, James gets a job as a check-weighman. He hires Leo Taylor, a sixteen-year-old black man, to drive Kathleen to and from school but forbids him from talking or having any contact with her. Kathleen has no friends at school and is fine with it, as she has a singing career ahead of her. In the fall of 1911, Kathleen performs a recital. She is growing aware of her beauty and her effect on people. In March 1912, Kathleen sneaks up on her father as he works on the piano and hits a key. James hits her twice before realizing what he has done. When she cries, James comforts her, until he becomes aroused and runs away.

In Chapter 10, The First Solution, Mercedes is born in late 1912 and Materia loves the child without having to try. She has Mercedes baptized by a Catholic priest and starts attending mass again. Eleven months later, Materia gives birth to Frances. The town is renamed New Waterford in 1913. James is glad to see his wife has gotten back to normal, even if she is extremely religious.

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 6-10 Analysis

In Chapter 6, the relationships between father and daughter, and mother and daughter, are even more clearly defined. Materia still struggles to connect with Kathleen and



resorts to baptizing the child herself in secret, illustrating the power of her devotion. James' devotion manifests itself in his determination to make Kathleen a musical prodigy. He permits Materia to use the piano again, but only as it relates to their child. Kathleen's nightmare is never completely explained, but the reader can infer from the story that she has a deep-seated fear of her mother, who is represented by the scarecrow in her dream. James' act of having Kathleen beat the scarecrow is a metaphor for his abuse of Materia.

James' devotion to Kathleen is evident in his willingness to do anything to keep her from getting sick. His mother makes him promise to never work in the mines, and he breaks that promise in order to pay for Kathleen's room and board. Materia's job playing piano gives her an opportunity to express herself freely once again.

Chapter 8 gives the reader added insight into James and Materia. She is very talented in her own right and is getting a lot of attention for her work. James is also getting attention, but for different reasons. He is a scab at the mines and has crossed picket lines. Since she is dark-skinned, she should be the one who is the outcast in the community in his view. His anger and resentment, coupled with his jealousy over her popularity, leads him to insist she quit her job. He is so disconnected from Materia that he does not even realize her work is the only thing that makes her happy. As for Materia, she wants to reconnect with her husband and finds it easier to do so without Kathleen around. It is too late for reconciliation however. James has cut himself off from her. It is Materia's devotion to her husband that makes her willing to give up her job that she loves.

Chapter 9 marks the first time Kathleen receives formal recognition of her singing ability. She is only eleven years old at the time. While James' decision to wait and not rush her is good on a practical level, it would have been better for the Piper family if Kathleen goes away to study voice at this point. Materia realizes that her husband is obsessed with their child and decides that this is God's punishment for her not being able to love her own child. It is interesting to note that while Materia has never really loved Kathleen, she will go to extreme lengths to protect her. In striking the chord on the piano, Kathleen has unwittingly re-enacted the moment when James fell in love with Materia, which explains his violent reaction. The reader can infer from his attack on Kathleen that James assumes it is Materia who, once again, struck the key. Kathleen is around the same age that Materia was when she met James, and once again, he is aroused by a young girl. This scene foreshadows future events between James and Kathleen.

Both James and Materia refer to James' latent pedophilia as "the demon," even though they never discuss it openly. It is Materia's lack of maternal love for Kathleen that leads her to sacrifice her eldest child to "the demon," a move that will prove to be fatal for Kathleen. As a small child, Mercedes also shows the same devotion as her mother.



# Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 11-15

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 11-15 Summary

In Chapter 11, *The Third Secret of Fatima*, Kathleen sings publicly for the first time in the summer of 1914. Having heard from Benny Luvovitz about the show, Mrs. Mahmoud comes to hear her granddaughter sing. Kathleen receives a standing ovation prior to the theatre owner's announcement that Great Britain has declared war on Germany. At home that evening, Kathleen imagines she sees Pete the scarecrow. She runs to James for comfort. The next day he enlists in the military.

In Chapter 12, *Moving Picture*, James arranges to have Kathleen's picture taken. After several tries to take a good picture, the photographer gives up, telling James he did not get anything. James asks for the last photo to be printed. Leo observes James' behavior with Kathleen and is surprised at how he treats his daughter so casually.

In Chapter 13, *Limbo*, Materia gives birth to a fourth child, a girl named Lily. The baby lives three days and is not baptized before her death. Materia attempts to get over the loss by cleaning the house and baking. James joins the 94th Victoria Regiment Argyll Highlanders and volunteers for overseas duty. If James returns after two years of serving in the army, Kathleen will be old enough to leave home. In December 1914, he ships out. As he says goodbye, Kathleen becomes distraught, angry that he is leaving her with Materia.

In Chapter 14, *Over Here*, Materia takes charge of the household. Kathleen grows difficult and refuses to eat. Materia speaks less and less English, using simple Arabic with Mercedes and Frances. She tells them stories of Lebanon and teaches them an Arabic dance.

In Chapter 15, *Holy Angels*, Sister Saint Monica catches Kathleen reading a novel. She takes away the book and forces Kathleen to sing while wearing a garbage can on her head. Kathleen has been at Holy Angels for five years and does not have any friends, nor does she know how to make friends. There are Mahmoud cousins at the school with her, but James has told Kathleen the true story behind his and Materia's elopement and the Mahmouds' reaction. He has instructed Kathleen to ignore her cousins, who are all popular girls that believe Kathleen is the devil's child.

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 11-15 Analysis

Pete symbolizes the "demon" that overtakes James. Kathleen does not fully comprehend the effect she has on her father, and since they are so close she automatically looks to him for comfort. Materia's devotion proves to be useful, for she believes her prayers have manifested a reason for James to defeat his demon once again. Kathleen's first public performance proves to be a success. The audience is

smitten with her talent and her grandmother is compelled to finally have contact with her, even if from a distance.

The inability of the photographer to capture a good photo of Kathleen is symbolic of how no one will be able to hold her for long. Leo's observations that something is not quite right with James shows the reader that outsiders are also well aware that the relationship between father and daughter is unusual at best.

Kathleen's response to the loss of Lily foreshadows her future pregnancy and subsequent death. The author foreshadows the pregnancy by mentioning how Materia's physical appearance will "come in handy," and from this the reader can infer that Kathleen's children will be passed off as Materia's offspring. Materia knows that the only way James will ever overcome his demon is if he is dead.

With James far away, Materia finally feels safe to explore her heritage. Camille's secret package aids Materia in sharing her Arabic background with her two younger daughters, who are glad to have this connection with their mother. The divide between Materia and Kathleen is even stronger, now that James is not around to bridge the gap. Neither mother nor daughter seem interested in making their relationship better, which is not surprising considering the lack of familial love between them since Kathleen's birth.

In Chapter 15, the reader sees that Kathleen has been ostracized by her peers. Her father's instruction and obsession have made her the difficult, proud, and vain young woman that she is. The reader also sees that the Mahmouds are well aware of the family connection to Kathleen, but they too have been told she is untouchable.



# Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 16-20

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 16-20 Summary

In Chapter 16, Three Sisters, Kathleen starts spending time with Mercedes and Frances, reading to them and playing games. The little girls are enthralled with Kathleen and listen to everything she tells them about famous musicians and singers. Kathleen declares that she will not get married and have children, for it will ruin her career.

In Chapter 17, Women of Canada Say, "Go," James regularly writes to the family to let them know he is okay, yet Maria continually waits for his death notice. Mrs. Luvovitz's sons, Abe and Rudy, are both killed in battle. Maria tries to absolve her guilt over wishing James dead by confessing to the priest, and even considers suicide. However, she thinks about her children and the fact that suicide is an unforgivable sin. She refrains from taking that ultimate act.

In Chapter 18, Dulce et Decorum, James has been collecting war casualties from the fields in Flanders and France for the last three years. He somehow manages to avoid being hit by sniper fire, making his fellow soldiers wonder if he has a death wish or if he is lucky. James' secret to staying alive is that he does not try to get killed, nor does he try to survive.

In Chapter 19, The Bobbseys at Home, Kathleen writes a letter to James while Mercedes and Frances play in her room. When the girls mention going to visit their grandparents in the Old Country, Kathleen tells them that the Mahmouds actually live in Sydney and they are better off not knowing them. She distracts her sisters by reading to them. Downstairs, Maria distracts herself with cleaning and baking, as she has found out that James is coming home.

In Chapter 20, Boots, James is attacked by a French soldier trying to steal his boots. He decides to go into the bootmaking business, for having high-quality boots will keep soldiers fighting and winning wars. He fantasizes about becoming rich with his business and sending Kathleen to the Halifax conservatory for a year, and then to New York to study. James' obsessive cleaning of his boots leads his superiors to believe he has gone crazy. He is discharged soon after. He receives the Distinguished Service Order for his devotion to duty. When he arrives in Halifax Harbor, he sees the town has been ravaged by the war and decides to send Kathleen straight to New York.

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 16-20 Analysis

Despite Kathleen's resentment of her mother, she plays the role of big sister very well. Her treatment of her sisters suggests to the reader that while she may claim she will never marry and have children, she would do a fine job as a mother.



It is Materia's devotion to her faith, as well as her two young daughters, that keeps her from killing herself. Her suicidal thoughts foreshadow her death in Book 2.

The author's account of the Great War, later referred to as World War I, from James' perspective gives the reader a clear sense of place. James' decision to not think about living or dying while in the battlefield is a curious one.

Kathleen's revelation that the Mahmouds are still in Canada is very distressing to Mercedes and France. Materia had crafted a wonderful story about their grandparents being far away. Materia is upset for different reasons, as James is coming home and she can no longer keep him from Kathleen and "his demon."

The theme of devotion comes up in Chapter 20 in two ways. James' devotion to his work in the battlefield earns him a medal. However, it is his bizarre devotion to his boots and his business idea that gets him discharged from the military. James' decision to send Kathleen directly to New York foreshadows later events, as well as their fate.



# Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 21-23

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 21-23 Summary

In Chapter 21, The Candy of Strangers, James returns and builds a workshop for making boots. He makes a deal with Mahmoud to supply him with boots for the Dominion Coal and Steel Company in exchange for a start-up loan. Mahmoud and James exchange messages via Leo Taylor, but the men do not have direct contact. Once James starts making money, he arranges for Kathleen to meet with a vocal teacher in New York, and live with his cousin Giles. He appeals to Mahmoud for more money to send Kathleen to New York. His wife, Giselle, convinces Mahmoud to give James the money. Teresa Taylor, the Mahmoud's maid, delivers the check to James. She gives Frances a piece of candy, but Kathleen throws it away, saying she should never take candy from strangers.

In Chapter 22, Lady Liberty, Kathleen arrives in New York and feels as if her life has started. Her chaperone, Giles, is a meek woman who is not shocked by anything. Kathleen meets with the vocal coach, a European maestro. He hears her raw talent and works her hard in order to get her voice well trained. He hires Rose, a young black woman, as Kathleen's accompanist. As time goes by, Kathleen falls in love with New York, and then with a New Yorker.

In Chapter 23, The Children's Hour, James finally feels safe enough to be around the family. He begins spending time with Mercedes and Frances. Kathleen rarely writes home, but the reports from Giles satisfy James. In November 1918, James receives an anonymous letter from New York that disturbs him greatly. He heads to New York and brings Kathleen back to New Waterford.

## Book 1: The Garden, Chapters 21-23 Analysis

James has found a new calling by making boots for the miners. He has opened communication with Mahmoud, but only as it relates to business, until he decides to ask for financial assistance for Kathleen. It is important to note that Mahmoud would have never given him the money if Giselle Mahmoud had not attended Kathleen's performance. By convincing her husband to give James the money, she finally makes things right with Matera. Kathleen's words to Frances about accepting things from colored strangers foreshadows her relationship with Rose Lacroix, the colored accompanist, later in the novel.

Kathleen's devotion to her craft is tested once she arrives in New York. Meeting Rose is a pivotal moment in the novel, as the reader will discover in later chapters.

It is interesting to note the parallels between James' and Kathleen's relationship with Mercedes and Frances. Both feel compelled to connect with the two young girls only when the other is not around, which suggests the obsession is mutual. Both James and



Kathleen read and play with the girls. While James takes a more educational approach, Kathleen is more casual and worldly. The appearance of the anonymous letter is important to the story, as it is the inciting incident that forces James to bring Kathleen back from New York. The reader only finds out that the letter is written in a "lady-like hand."





## Book 2: No Man's Land, Chapters 1-3

### Book 2: No Man's Land, Chapters 1-3 Summary

In Chapter 1, O Holy Night, Kathleen is dying at home while giving birth. James pounds on the door of the room as Materia delivers twins, a boy and a girl. Before dying, Kathleen has a vision of Pete the scarecrow standing in the doorway, but it is James who stands there, watching for a moment before turning away. Materia struggles with guilt over Kathleen's death. She dies while cleaning the stove. James discovers her and assumes Materia has killed herself, but puts his wife's body in her bed so that she can be buried in the churchyard.

In Chapter 2, The Mass Card, the Luvovitzes and the MacIsaacs are in attendance at Materia's funeral. Some of the Mahmouds attend, as well as Teresa Taylor. Frances sees the name Ambrose on the mass card and assigns it to the baby boy who died in her arms.

In Chapter 3, Cave Paintings, James sees Kathleen's abdomen torn open and Materia holding up the two newborns. When Materia leaves to get a priest, he refuses and she beats him. He picks up Materia and locks her in the coal cellar, then leaves to go get drunk. Frances goes to Kathleen's room and picks up the babies. She takes them to the creek. She baptizes the girl but has just dropped the boy in the water when she hears James yell. He curses at Frances and pulls her out of the water while carrying the baby girl in his other arm. He is drunk and does not see the baby in the creek. James drags her off toward the house but Frances breaks free, grabbing the baby boy from the water. James attempts to resuscitate the boy but cannot do so, as the child has been underwater too long.

### Book 2: No Man's Land, Chapters 1-3 Analysis

This short chapter covers three important events in the Piper family history: the birth of Kathleen's children, her subsequent death, and the death of Materia. While the reader does not know who the father of Kathleen's children is, Materia's observations that her daughter "was better off" dead suggest that James may be the father. Kathleen's dying vision of her nightmare figure, Pete, superimposed over her father, support this idea. It is interesting to note that James makes the assumption that Materia has committed suicide. Considering her history of talking to herself, her religious zeal and other behavior, this could be a valid conclusion. Even though he has not felt attached to Materia for many years, or supported her Catholicism, James still honors her devotion by making her death appear to be from natural causes.

Materia's funeral is described through the eyes of six-year-old Frances. It is important to note that Frances recognizes Teresa, the Mahmouds' maid, in attendance, for this suggests to the reader that Teresa will play an important role in Frances' life. Frances



reveals that one of Kathleen's babies, Ambrose, has died, and that he died in her arms. This information sets up the question of what happened to Ambrose. Her accounting of the week's activity gives the reader additional information as to events at the Piper household. Until this point, the reader has only been told about the circumstances of two deaths, Kathleen's and Materia's. The reader should note Frances' new understanding of how truth works, as this foreshadows her behavior over the course of the novel.

Chapter 3 provides some explanation for Frances' thoughts in the previous section. The reader also sees some of James' perspective of the events surrounding Kathleen giving birth and her death. While he sees many horrible things in battle, his lack of devotion to the people around him allows him to get through the war without being affected by it. The death of his beloved daughter, however, completely shatters him. Frances' efforts, while sweet and noble, are doomed to fail because of her youth and inexperience. Her baptism of the babies parallels the scene in which Materia baptizes Kathleen while bathing her.



## Book 2: No Man's Land, Chapters 4-7

### Book 2: No Man's Land, Chapters 4-7 Summary

In Chapter 4, Blancmange, Frances does not eat for the next two days. She does not remember what happened in the creek. The day after Kathleen's funeral, Frances makes a mixture of flour and water to soothe herself. Mercedes comes in and takes the dough from Frances, planning to bake it for her. When she gets to the kitchen, she finds Materia using the oven.

In Chapter 5, See No Evil, Mercedes is woken up by all the commotion in the house. She looks for her parents but cannot find them. She looks out the window and sees Frances in the creek holding a bundle. Mercedes watches as Frances lowers the bundle, which looks like a kitten, under the water. She sees Frances pick up the other kitten on the grass and put it in the water. When Frances returns to their bedroom, Mercedes pretends to be asleep. In the morning, Mercedes washes out the blood she finds in her slipper and notices the scarecrow is gone from the garden.

In Chapter 6, The Adoration of the Body, James takes the baby boy out of the water. Frances holds the girl and watches as James rips Pete the scarecrow off his perch. James digs in the garden, sobbing loudly. He buries the baby in Frances' soiled nightgown. In the coal cellar, Materia watches as James goes to the furnace and burns a pile of bloody linens.

Frances wakes up to see a black woman staring at her. She strokes Frances' forehead and then Mercedes' forehead. She leaves soon after. In the morning, Mercedes wakes to find a dark smudge on Frances' forehead as well as her own. Frances tells Mercedes that she dreamed that Teresa visited their room and touched her. She says Teresa is her fairy godmother. When Mercedes goes downstairs for breakfast, James tells her that Kathleen has "gone to God." James says that he needs her to look after Materia and the new baby, which he refers to as Mercedes' new baby sister.

In Chapter 7, The Official Version, the local gossip is that Kathleen died of influenza. Everyone is well aware however that she was pregnant and died in childbirth.

In Sub-Chapter 1, Mahmoud Mourns, Mahmoud wants no further contact with the Pipers after Kathleen's death. He had made an exception for Kathleen because of her talent, but she turned out to be no better than her parents. At her funeral, Mahmoud is angry and sad. He curses himself for not killing James years earlier.

In Sub-Chapter 2, The Rocking Chair, James quits drinking on the night of Kathleen's funeral. Mercedes finds Frances sitting in the rocking chair with James. She tells Mercedes that "it doesn't hurt" but Mercedes does not know what Frances means.

In Sub-Chapter 3, The First Holy Sacrament, James takes Materia's body to the bedroom and calls a priest for the baby girl and then a doctor. The baby has



poliomyelitis and the house must be quarantined. The priest baptizes the baby with James and Mercedes acting as godparents for her. The baby is named Lily.

In Sub-Chapter 4, Babes in the Wood, Mercedes and Frances pray for their new baby sister Lily to be healed. Frances starts to worry that her father will die. She cries for her mother and Mercedes attempts to console her by saying she is now Frances' mother. After that night Frances does not cry for Materia anymore.

In Sub-Chapter 5, Lily Who Lived, the Pipers wake up to find Lily doing better. Frances believes something is wrong with the baby, but James insists that she is perfect.

## Book 2: No Man's Land, Chapters 4-7 Analysis

The title of Chapter 4 "Blancmange" comes from a phrase in books that Kathleen would read to her sisters. They did not know what blancmange was, but it seemed to be the remedy for ailing young women in novels of the time. Frances makes her own version of blancmange and it soothes her. In the last paragraph of this section, the reader discovers that it is Mercedes who finds her mother dead in the kitchen.

Chapter 5 provides the reader with Mercedes' version of events from the night Kathleen died and the babies were born. It is obvious how much she takes after Materia with her devotion. It is interesting to consider what might have happened if Mercedes had assisted Frances with the rudimentary baptism of the babies. This section also suggests that Mercedes is much more naive and trusting than Frances, for she assumes Frances is out in the creek bathing kittens. She is also more attached to her parents, for her mission is to find them and not seek out Kathleen or Frances. The title of the section symbolizes Mercedes' reluctance to see anything evil in the world, which will prove to be a marked personality trait of hers in the rest of the novel.

The aftermath of the birth and Kathleen's death are dealt with in Chapter 6. Pete the scarecrow is destroyed, which is a symbolic act by James signifying that his demon has been conquered through horrible means. Materia's night-time visit to her young daughters where she touches their foreheads is an act of blessing them, which is significant because this will be her last loving act toward them. Teresa is now set up as a new mother figure for Frances, foreshadowing her future relationship with Frances. James lies to Mercedes and tells her the new baby is her sister.

Chapter 7 covers the aftermath of the deaths of both Kathleen and Materia. The title refers to what the community at large will know about the circumstances of both deaths and Lily's birth. It is interesting to note that for the first time since he was forcefully baptized a Catholic, James shows some respect for the religion and its rituals.



# Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves, Chapters 1-4

## Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves, Chapters 1-4 Summary

In Chapter 1, Bootleg, Frances is eleven years old and Lily is nearly six. Frances concocts a story for Lily about James making whiskey in the shed along with the boots. Mercedes is twelve years old and takes care of the family, doing the cooking and grocery shopping. She enjoys reading books and spending time with her best friend, Helen Frye.

In Chapter 2, The Demon Rum, James becomes a bootlegger. He works late at night, locking his children in the house and driving off to meet the boats carrying barrels of liquor. The town of Cape Breton has been struggling since the Great War, with several coal strikes taking place over the course of three years. James is a skilled bootlegger and only sells to those who can afford to pay. He does not drink at all. During the day he teaches Lily, who loves to learn and spend time with him. James does not approve of Lily spending so much time with Frances and does his best to keep track of them. He occasionally visits Kathleen's grave on his way home from work, pulling out any weeds covering up her name.

In Chapter 3, Little Women, Mercedes and Helen fantasize about their film star crushes, Rudolph Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks. Occasionally Mercedes brings Frances along on her outings with Helen, because she feels guilty that Frances does not have any friends. Frances' movie idol is Lillian Gish and she teases Lily for liking Mary Pickford. Mercedes does not play with Frances and Lily as much as she used to. This bothers Frances.

In Chapter 4, Cat's Cradle, Frances removes the christening gown from the hope chest and tells Lily that all the children were baptized in it, including Ambrose, who was Lily's brother that died. After dinner, Mercedes works on the Piper family tree. Lily sees it and asks why Ambrose is not on the family tree. When Mercedes goes to bed that night, she sees an apparition of a creature in a christening gown. Down in the cellar, Frances attempts to capture Trixie the cat, which she dressed up in the gown before the cat went into Mercedes' room. After punishing Frances for scaring her sister, James takes her upstairs to apologize to Mercedes, who has already calmed down enough to realize the apparition was Trixie.



## Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Frances is the troublemaker in the family, as evidenced by the story she tells Lily and her skipping school. The dinner scene parallels previous dinner scenes in the novel, except this time Mercedes makes the sandwich for Lily instead of James making one for Kathleen. James shows preferential treatment to Lily, which is not surprising considering she is Kathleen's child. James has finally beat his demon, for he finds Lily to be precious "in the right way." The relationship between the Piper sisters as well as their relationships with James is illustrated in this section. Frances loves Lily dearly but also tortures her with tall tales. Mercedes has taken on a maternal role, but does not get much attention or appreciation for her efforts. Frances and Mercedes are still very close but have taken radically different paths.

Once again, James is doing what he feels he must do in order to take care of his family and once again, it makes him an outcast in the community. His removal of any weeds covering the name on Kathleen's headstone is symbolic of the desire he had to make her famous. It is interesting to note that he remembers the incident at the creek when Frances attempted to drown Lily. Since Frances does not remember what happened, she cannot explain what happened. The reader can infer that it is James' assumption that is the root of his dislike and mistrust of Frances.

Frances' viewpoint is used for this section of the novel. She is resistant to growing up, as seen in her annoyance with Mercedes' behavior. It is obvious that Frances has a very active imagination, based on her play-acting as a child. This foreshadows her later activities in the novel.

Mercedes tries very hard to get her father's attention. It is possible that her devotion to the Catholic faith is too reminiscent of Matera for James, so his feelings for Mercedes are neutral. He also places Mercedes in the same role that Matera had, where she accompanies his fun with his favorite child, instead of being a participant herself. Lily's inquiries about the family tree receive the responses that Mercedes is most comfortable with sharing. Frances, on the other hand, makes up fantastical tales that actually have a shred of truth to them. The deception surrounding Kathleen and her children continues here. Lily finally learns for the first time about baby Ambrose. Lily's questions about the family tree foreshadow events in the next section of the book.



## **Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves, Chapters 5-8**

### **Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves, Chapters 5-8 Summary**

In Chapter 5, The Family Tree, Mercedes discovers Lily has drawn all over the family tree. Sobbing, Mercedes tells Frances that she hates Lily. Frances takes Lily to the garden to bury the family tree and tells her more stories about Ambrose.

In Chapter 6, Porridge, James discovers that the girls were digging around the rock in the garden. He asks what they were doing and Lily tells him they planted a tree under the rock. James wonders if he should exhume the remains of Ambrose. Frances says that she told Lily they might find buried treasure in the garden but found nothing.

In Chapter 7, Water Babies, Lily has a nightmare about Frances standing in the creek, holding a bundle. After the family comforts her, Lily has another dream in which Ambrose comes to her as a grown man, although she does not recognize him as her brother. When she asks him who he is, water gushes from his mouth. Lily tells no one about the dream.

In Chapter 8, A Child's Prayer for a Happy Death, the miners' strike has gotten worse, with rioting and children dying of disease. Mercedes goes to play with Helen Frye but is told by Helen's father that the girls can no longer be friends because of James' reputation in the community. Mercedes decides that she will take food and donations to the hospital so that people will think better of James.

### **Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves, Chapters 5-8 Analysis**

Chapter 5 marks the first instance where the reader sees Mercedes' resentment of Lily. Mercedes is upset because the expectations of her are much greater than they are for Frances or Lily. The deception continues regarding Ambrose. It is unclear whether or not Frances actually remembers Ambrose's burial in the garden.

Even in difficult situations, the bond between Mercedes, Frances and Lily is very strong. Each girl attempts to appease their father by claiming responsibility for the rock being moved. Frances is still punished for her behavior in relation to watching over Lily. The exchange between James and Frances over the rock's significance suggests that Frances does remember what happened to Ambrose.

Lily's dreams suggest that she is subconsciously aware of the events surrounding her birth, lending a mystical quality to the novel. It is important to note that she does not tell anyone of her dream about Ambrose.

Frances' tears when talking about Ambrose suggest to the reader that her memories are starting to come back. Even though her relationship with her father is not as warm as she would like it to be, Mercedes is still devastated over losing her friend Helen because of James' activities. Mercedes will continue to attempt to earn her father's approval and love by interceding on his behalf.





# Book 4: The Old French Mine, Chapters 1-3

## Book 4: The Old French Mine, Chapters 1-3 Summary

In Chapter 1, Lest We Forget, it is Armistice Day, 1929. Lily marches in the New Waterford parade, carrying the Nova Scotia flag. The town has not changed much, although the company stores are gone and many miners have left for Boston and New England. James is a decorated veteran but he has no desire to remember the day the war ended. That day was the same day he was in New York City looking for Kathleen.

In Chapter 2, Sweet Sixteen, Frances is old enough to quit school, but James will not let her. Frances has done everything she possibly can in order to be expelled from Mount Carmel. However, Sister Saint Eustace, the principal, believes in Frances and refuses to kick her out. Lily is the only reason why Frances does not run away. One night Frances sneaks into the backseat of James' car to find out where he goes at night. When he stops, she peeks out and sees a shack with a smoking chimney. James speaks with a man driving a truck labeled "Leo Taylor Transport."

In Chapter 3, Let Me Call You Sweetheart, Frances tells Lily that James is not actually her father. Instead, both Lily and Ambrose are the children of a black man from a neighboring town. She claims that Matera attempted to drown Lily at birth. Mercedes volunteers at the hospital and church in addition to taking care of the family. A good student, she longs to attend university and prays that James will let her go. She puts up a picture of Kathleen on the piano, which upsets James. Frances takes the blame for it and says nasty things about Kathleen. James beats her. Lily asks why she has never seen Kathleen's picture before. Mercedes tells her that it is because James gets upset when he thinks about Kathleen.

## Book 4: The Old French Mine, Chapters 1-3 Analysis

James' reluctance to address where he was when the war ended suggests to the reader that what happened in New York concerning Kathleen was very traumatic for him. The strong bond between the sisters Mercedes and Frances is illustrated by the use of Arabic between them. Even though Lily was not exposed to the language, she finds it comforting, probably due to the fact that Frances associates the language with the loving comfort of her mother.

The reappearance of Leo Taylor and Frances' fondness for him, even though she does not remember him, foreshadows her later involvement with him. Her fantasy life is just as rich now as it was when she was little. Frances' response to the principal and her continued belief that she is a "bad apple" imply that she is carrying the guilt over what happened with Ambrose and Lily.



Once again, Frances' tall tales show some elements of truth even if they are designed to hurt Lily. It is obvious that Frances takes some sick pleasure in upsetting Lily. Perhaps it is a way of assuaging her own guilt. In this section, the reader sees the parallels between Mercedes and Kathleen in terms of their ambition. While Kathleen was focused on going to New York and becoming famous for her singing, Mercedes is focused on being an excellent student and attending the university. The sisters are also similar in their lack of friendships outside their family. James' response to seeing Kathleen's photo is not unexpected, nor is his extreme reaction to Frances' disrespectful questions, based on what the reader already knows of his character. Mercedes' relationship with Lily is similar to the relationship between Maria and Kathleen. There is some affection but it does not come naturally.



## Book 4: The Old French Mine, Chapters 4-5

### Book 4: The Old French Mine, Chapters 4-5 Summary

In Chapter 4, We Are the Dead, Frances and Lily explore the old French mine. She tells Lily that Ambrose lives in there. Frightened, Lily passes out and Frances carries her out of the mine. She asks Frances if Ambrose is the devil and Frances says no but that she is the devil. Lily takes her hand and tells her it is okay. Frances sobs and apologizes to Lily.

In Chapter 5, The First Miracle, Mercedes has set up a fund for Lily so that she can go to Lourdes and have her leg healed. Lily feels somewhat frightened of Mercedes as her behavior has changed. Lily falls gravely ill and after she recovers, she tells Mercedes that her guardian angel Ambrose cured her. Based on this miracle and other signs, Mercedes believes that her sister might be a saint. Frances stops telling Lily stories about Ambrose now that Lily has accepted his presence. She raids the Lourdes fund and escapes by hiding on Leo Taylor's truck to the Coke Ovens.

### Book 4: The Old French Mine, Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Frances embellishes the legend of Ambrose the angel in this section. Her stories are once again responsible for scaring Lily, although this is the first time that Lily becomes ill as a result. Her forgiveness of Frances is remarkable in its innocence and proves to be the only thing that causes Frances to second-guess her treatment of her sister.

Mercedes' devotion to the Catholic faith has now become similar to her mother's faith, as evidenced by her rituals in the cellar. She takes personal responsibility for everything that is going wrong with Lily. Ambrose in his angel form becomes even more real to Lily, who has now moved past her fear into trust. Frances believes that she has fulfilled her obligations to Lily and now it is okay for her to go. So she sneaks off to the Coke Ovens.

Kathleen's entry in her diary suggests that what has happened to her in New York would be considered wrong and shameful by others. The reader can infer from this brief entry that Kathleen's tale will likely focus on her sexual awakening and the events leading up to her pregnancy.



# Book 5: Diary of a Lost Girl, Chapters 1-2

## Book 5: Diary of a Lost Girl, Chapters 1-2 Summary

In Chapter 1, Baby Burlesque, Frances gets a job performing at the speakeasy run by her uncle Jameel and his son Boutros. On her first night at work, no one in the room notices her. At school, Frances assaults one of the boys and is expelled. When James finds out, he tells Frances that whatever she does away from home must be kept away from Lily.

In Chapter 2, Cheap Women 'n Cheatin' Men, business at the speakeasy is picking up for Frances. She makes more money by allowing the men to touch her chest or by bouncing on their laps, yet Frances remains a virgin. She saves her earnings for Lily. James does not want to know where Frances goes and often expects to find that she has run off. Occasionally Mercedes forces Frances into the tub, sometimes even completely clothed, in order to wash her.

## Book 5: Diary of a Lost Girl, Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The reader sees the lengths that Frances will go to in order to get out of school. Her sexual awakening comes through rather extreme means. James has finally given up on disciplining Frances, telling her merely to "keep it away from Lily." She takes on the persona of her favorite film star, Louise Brooks.

Frances' behavior at the speakeasy showcase her self-destructive behavior. The revelation that she is still a virgin and is waiting for something else foreshadow the events that will lead to her first sexual intercourse.



# **Book 5: Diary of a Lost Girl, Chapters 3-4**

## **Book 5: Diary of a Lost Girl, Chapters 3-4 Summary**

In Chapter 3, Lady Bountiful, Mercedes graduates at the top of her class in 1930. After the ceremony, Ralph Luvovitz, Mercedes' classmate, kisses her and promises to keep in touch while she is at college. She turns down her scholarship to Saint Francis Xavier University because she cannot leave Lily.

In Chapter 4, The Ginger Man, Jameel has made improvements to the speakeasy. Frances demands half of the cover charge and a new piano in the bar. Leo Taylor delivers the piano and tries to avoid looking at Frances, who is just a child. He now delivers lobster and liquor to New York to make money for his wife and family. His wife calls him Ginger because of his talent in brewing real ginger beer like his mother once did.

## **Book 5: Diary of a Lost Girl, Chapters 3-4 Analysis**

Lily's supposed healing abilities are apparent to others as well, as evidenced by Mr. MacIsaac's "healing." Mercedes' willingness to sacrifice her scholarship is strange, considering her commitment to her studies.

Frances' act draws in crowds at the speakeasy, which builds up her confidence enough to ask for more money and better equipment. She is growing up, and yet she is still very child-like, as evidenced by her fear of the attic stairs. The memories of what happened the night Kathleen died start to come back.



## Book 6: The Girl Guide, Chapters 1-4

### Book 6: The Girl Guide, Chapters 1-4 Summary

In Chapter 1, Don't Whine, Mercedes has not heard from Ralph in two months. She goes to Luvovitz's store to find out if they know anything, but they have not heard from Ralph either. Three weeks later, she receives a letter from Ralph. He apologizes for leading her on all this time.

In Chapter 2, Dark Ladies, Frances' aunt Camille verbally abuses her as punishment for dishonoring Materia's memory. Frances starts breaking into the Mahmoud household and stealing jewelry. She watches Teresa working in the kitchen and learns more about Leo Taylor, Teresa's brother. She remembers that Leo drove Kathleen to school and concludes that Leo, who goes by Ginger with his family, is the father of Kathleen's children. She decides that she will find out where Leo lives and buy a case of ginger beer from him. Leo keeps seeing a girl in a Girl Guide uniform and considers offering her a ride. When Frances shows up at their back door asking for ginger beer, wearing her Girl Guide uniform, Ginger is spooked while his wife Adelaide is annoyed.

In Chapter 3, Salt, Mahmoud notices that items are missing from his late wife's jewelry. He fires Teresa, assuming she has been stealing from him. It is now up to Camille to do the housekeeping for her father. When the thefts continue, Mahmoud assumes that Camille has resorted to petty theft because of Jameel's influence. Jameel's son, Boutros, has fallen madly in love with Frances and dreams of marrying her. When Leo drops off some ginger beer at the speakeasy, he discovers that Frances works there. He tells Adelaide that Jameel has a young girl prostitute at his speakeasy, but forgets to mention that it is Frances, the same girl who showed up at their door.

In Chapter 4, Harem Scarem, Frances wonders what has happened to Teresa. She realizes that Mahmoud may have fired her, thinking she was the thief. Leo gives her a ride and discovers she is eighteen years old and Kathleen's younger sister.

Camille has figured out that Frances is the thief, based on the jewels she wears during her shows at the speakeasy. She seals off the place where Frances sneaks in but does not tell anyone that Frances is the thief. Already in the house for the evening, Frances watches Camille and plans what she will do for her last night in the house. That night, Mahmoud sees a vision of Giselle in her wedding gown, dancing in candlelight.

### Book 6: The Girl Guide, Chapters 1-4 Analysis

In Chapter 1 the reader sees that Mercedes' personal ambitions do not come to fruition. Mercedes' hopes for a life with Ralph fall apart after she receives his letter. It is ironic that although the Luvovitz family is somewhat concerned about their son marrying a non-Jew, they are okay with the idea of him marrying a Catholic girl, especially



Mercedes. He does end up marrying a Catholic girl. It is unclear whether or not Ralph told Mercedes about his marriage and impending fatherhood.

Frances starts bridging the gap between her fantastical stories about Lily's origins, Kathleen's pregnancy, and the truth. It is possible that her recollection of what happened will prove to be her undoing. She also reopens communication with the Mahmoud family.

In Chapter 3, the reader finds out more about the Taylor family and their connection to the Pipers and the Mahmonds. In much the same way that the Mahmonds are judged for their ethnicity, so are the Taylors, as evidenced by Mahmoud's response when his wife's jewelry is missing. He has no reason to mistrust Teresa but his racism takes over. Adelaide Taylor is extremely intuitive as it relates to Frances, Jameel, and the Mahmonds. She knows that her husband is too trusting of people and so she acts as his conscience when needed. Her statements foreshadow later events in the novel.

The father-daughter relationship between Mahmoud and Camille parallels the relationship between James and Frances. Both fathers have little affection to give their daughters. The difference is that Camille wants a better relationship with her father and acts accordingly, while Frances does everything she can to alienate her father. Frances torments Mahmoud with a vision of his dead wife. Her plans regarding Leo Taylor are clarified in this section. Believing that he is the father of Kathleen's children, she plans on seducing him as a way of punishing him. She notes that he is a "good man" and that it may be difficult to execute her plans. It is unclear however, how the seduction will serve as punishment. It is interesting to note that Leo is referred to by different names in this section, based on the type of interaction he is involved in.



# Book 6: The Girl Guide, Chapters 5-8

## Book 6: The Girl Guide, Chapters 5-8 Summary

In Chapter 5, *Thief in the Night*, Frances stops drinking as part of her plan to turn Leo bad. She wants \$3,000 saved up for Lily and therefore she increases her prices. When Leo returns home from a trip, Adelaide discovers that Frances is spying on them during a family party. Although Leo denies knowing who Frances is, Adelaide threatens to kill Frances if she comes around her house, children, or Leo. Leo tries twice to tell Frances to leave him alone, even following her home from the speakeasy, but is beaten by Boutros when he attempts to get near her.

In Chapter 6, *Via Dolorosa*, Ginger comes clean with Adelaide about Frances and says he wants to help the girl. She says the Pipers are trouble and tells him about their past. Teresa and her crippled husband Hector come over for tea and Adelaide tells her what has happened. Teresa realizes that Frances was the one who was stealing from the Mahmouds. Leo quits working for Jameel and James, leaving them to figure out deliveries between them. He finds Frances hiding in his truck. She is badly beaten. She asks him to take her to the old mine where she can hide out before leaving town. When they get there, Frances seduces Leo. While delivering barrels for James, Boutros sees Frances with Leo and follows her in the car, angering Jameel. The car goes over a cliff and both men are killed. Mercedes pushes James down the stairs when he attempts to go after Frances and Leo. Lily and Mercedes head to the mine to find Frances, who tells Leo she has gotten what she needed from him. Adelaide and Teresa search for Frances and Leo but do not find them, and return home to see Leo is back.

In Chapter 7, *A New and Glorious Morn*, Camille moves back to her father's house after hearing Jameel has died. Mercedes wakes up an unconscious James and recounts her version of what happened the previous night. He got drunk and fell down. Then James tried to touch Lily.

Addy and Teresa discuss what happened with Frances and Leo. Addy says Frances will not accuse Leo of rape, because she told him she got what she wanted, which was a baby. She goes to the Piper home to convince Mercedes to let her and Leo raise the child, but Mercedes refuses.

Frances goes for a walk by the ocean. As she relishes the happiness she feels, she is shot by Teresa standing on the ridge above her.

In Chapter 8, *Precious Blood*, Hector realizes that his rifle is missing and goes to tell Adelaide and Leo. At the beach they find Frances and rush her to the hospital. When Mercedes arrives, she prays with Teresa, not realizing Teresa was the one who shot Frances. When Frances regains consciousness, she asks for Teresa. Frances asks Teresa about Matera, and reminds her of the time when she gave her some candy. She relates the story of Teresa coming to her bedside and touching her head. When Teresa





says it was not her, but Matera instead, Frances smiles and thanks her. Mercedes calls the police and finally realizes that Teresa was the shooter. Frances tells the police she shot herself because she was pregnant and unmarried. Nine months later, Teresa and Hector have their first child, a girl.

## Book 6: The Girl Guide, Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Adelaide is well aware of Frances' sexual manipulation of Leo, even if Leo is clueless about what Frances is doing. Frances' plan to become pregnant by Leo is revealed here. Leo's pity of Frances makes him susceptible to her. While Frances uses a crude and world-weary approach toward sex with her customers at the speakeasy, it is her helplessness and sorrow that seduces Leo.

The longest chapter in Book 6, *Via Dolorosa*, covers a period of several hours in the lives of the Pipers, Taylors, and Mahmonds. Through Mercedes' memories of her childhood, it is revealed that James sexually abused Frances as well, which explains the tense nature of their relationship. Frances' actions confirm that she is trying to get pregnant by Leo Taylor. It is possible that she picked Leo Taylor because of his connection to Kathleen, knowing this would be retribution for the abuse she suffered at James' hand. Even though her sexual awakening is seemingly complete, Frances is unaware of Boutros' feelings for her, merely assuming that he intended to attack her. In Frances' mind, sex is associated with pain and ugliness.

Frances has shifted from the tough-talking performer to an earth mother, already imagining herself as full with child. Adelaide's response is chilling but still very much in character for her. What is surprising to the reader is the depth of Teresa's rage at the world. Considering Adelaide's previous demand for their gun, the reader anticipates that it is she has once again taken the weapon in order to kill Frances.

Mercedes shows her devotion to her faith as well as her sisters in three ways in this section. First Mercedes speaks with the priest again about Lily's "miracles." Then she willingly lies to James in order to protect Frances, despite her fear of divine punishment. Finally, she works with Sister Saint Monica to make arrangements for Frances' unborn child. While Adelaide may say "duty is your problem," Mercedes is well aware of this fact and will go to extreme lengths to take responsibility for her family.

The theme of devotion can even be seen in Trixie the cat, who does not leave Frances' side when she is wounded by Teresa's bullet. It is suggested that Teresa's anger and hate is what has kept her childless all these years. After meeting Frances however, Teresa is able to release her anger and become pregnant.



# Book 7: The Bullet, Chapters 1-2

## Book 7: The Bullet, Chapters 1-2 Summary

In Chapter 1, Blessed Art Thou amongst Women, Frances' pregnancy is starting to show after four months. She is eating well and smiling. Mercedes does not believe that Frances can still be pregnant after the shooting, but Frances is very sure of it. James has a stroke but is unaware of it. He rests for a week and frequently speaks of Materia, which troubles Mercedes. He starts a new project in his shed but refuses to tell anyone what he is doing.

In Chapter 2, Sisters of Mercy, Mercedes talks to Sister Saint Monica regarding Frances' child. She makes a poor attempt to tell Lily about sex, using Frances' pregnancy as an example. Lily reveals that Frances became pregnant after her night in the mine with Leo, but she miscarried after the shooting. It was the bullet that got her pregnant again. Dumbfounded, Mercedes says Frances lied, but Lily insists that Frances believes that the story is true. She confronts Frances later, who says the story is true. Frances is full of happiness and love and tells Mercedes not to be worried or sad.

## Book 7: The Bullet, Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Chapter 1 continues to show Frances' transition into a maternal role. She has filled out and become more beautiful. Mercedes' intense dislike of her father becomes even more apparent in this section. She becomes almost happy when he is very sick to think that he might die. It is reminiscent of Materia's desire to hear of James' death during the war. Both women believed with good reason that James is the source of all the pain and suffering in the family. Whether or not that is a fair assessment, his stroke makes him more agreeable as a parent, which benefits everyone, especially Frances.

The Piper family falls into new patterns, becoming more comfortable with each other and taking on new roles. Mercedes finally goes to work but struggles to relinquish her role as main provider, as evidenced by her reaction to James' compliments of Frances' cooking. She still has not received the approval that she desperately craves. Lily's sexual awakening is beginning, including her awareness of how babies are made and how menstruation works. Frances has given her the real-world tools she needs to understand these natural processes, much to Mercedes' dismay. Lily is able to wed her Catholic background with reality in a way that she is comfortable with.



## Book 7: The Bullet, Chapters 3-4

### Book 7: The Bullet, Chapters 3-4 Summary

In Chapter 3, Certain Effects, James gives Frances a packet containing Kathleen's things. Frances reads through Kathleen's diary and puts it in the hope chest. Over the next several days, James and Frances talk at length.

At Christmas time, Mercedes is embarrassed by Frances' friendliness with everyone in town. She no longer needs mothering by Mercedes as has finally come into her own.

On April Fool's Day, Frances pulls out the photograph of Kathleen and tells Lily she was her mother. She relates that Kathleen went to New York to be an opera singer, but something happened and James brought her home. Ambrose drowned in the creek in an accident, while Lily wound up with polio. She tells Lily that she does not know why she brought her to the creek, but she held her and prayed over her. Outside, Mercedes waits to take Frances to Mabou have her baby.

In Chapter 4, "Blue Dress," Lily and James receive a telegram saying that Frances has had a boy. Lily names him Aloysius. A month later she and James prepare to welcome Frances and Aloysius home, but find out that the baby has died in his sleep.

Frightened by Mercedes' insistence that Lily speak with the bishop about her visions, Lily refuses to go to Lourdes. She says that she does not need to be cured. Instead, Lily explores the house and finds Trixie's body in the attic. She buries the cat in the garden, where she finds Ambrose's remains. James dies in his chair before Lily can ask him anything about her past, so she goes to Frances.

Frances hands Lily the money she has saved and tells her that there is a present for her in the hope chest. Early the next morning, Lily removes Kathleen's green silk dress and diary from the hope chest. In the shed she finds James' surprise, a new pair of boots, and puts them on, stuffing the money from Frances around her ankles. She puts on Kathleen's dress and heads down Shore Road, looking back only once.

### Book 7: The Bullet, Chapters 3-4 Analysis

James' ailing health leads him to confess about what happened with Kathleen and the babies to Frances. Her pregnancy has made her much more human and accessible to the community. She accepts this role gracefully. Once again, Mercedes feels left out. Her devotion to Frances is being tested because it appears that Frances appears no longer needs her.

The death of Frances' baby is suspicious, considering the plans that Mercedes made with Sister Saint Monica and her insistence on using Mabou for the child's birth. Mercedes' devotion to her faith and to Lily takes a dangerous turn, with her adamant

stance that Lily be healed. It is obvious that she has never fully accepted Lily as she is. The timing of James' death with Frances' return and the loss of her child represents another shift within the Piper family, where the women are in charge. The truth of Ambrose's existence is finally revealed with Lily's discovery of his remains. It is interesting to note that Mercedes takes this concrete evidence as a sign that Lily is actually possessed by a demon. Her response suggests that Mercedes is much more comfortable living in the fantasy world she has created over the course of her lifetime.



## Book 8: Hejira

### Book 8: Hejira Summary

Kathleen's diary begins on February 29, 1918 in New York City. She is in love with her life and feels an intense burning to sing. Kathleen refers to her voice teacher as Herr Blutwurst, who says there is much work to be done to improve her singing. In mid-April Kathleen sneaks out at midnight and goes to Harlem, where the streets are bustling with activity. She longs to go inside the clubs so she can hear the music. The Kaiser brings in an accompanist, Miss Rose Lacroix, a young black woman who plays her own compositions in her free time. He sets up a November audition for Kathleen with the head of the Metropolitan Opera. He tells her that if she is lucky she will get a place in the Met chorus.

After she has been in New York for a few months, Kathleen meets David, a 19-year-old soldier who is on his way to the war front. They become lovers shortly before he leaves for France. Kathleen and Rose strike up a friendship and Kathleen's singing improves as a result of listening to Rose's thoughts on music. Since Rose refuses to tell Kathleen about her home life, Kathleen follows her home and meets Jeanne Burgess, Rose's mother. Jeanne is a white woman who is addicted to morphine and works as a prostitute. When Kathleen and Rose have a fight, Rose quits working as her accompanist. Kathleen convinces the Kaiser to hire her back. The girls renew their friendship and when Kathleen sees Rose wearing her father's fedora, she persuades her to dress in his old clothes and go with her to Club Mecca. Before leaving for the club, Kathleen says that her guardian angel guided her to New York and to Rose. She claims they will know each other for the rest of their lives and should she die first, she will return to Rose. At Club Mecca, Kathleen dances with several men, but Rose refuses to dance with her. When the band takes a break, Rose asks Kathleen to show her how to dance. She kisses Rose and they leave the club, stopping to share an intimate moment in a nearby alley. Kathleen and Rose fall deeply in love, spending all their time together and promising their eternal devotion to each other. In November, Kathleen stops writing in her diary, for she is too happy to write anymore.

Lily is on the ferry from Cape Breton, reading Kathleen's diary along her journey to the United States. It has been twenty-eight days since she left New Waterford. After a few detours, Lily finally arrives in New York wearing her mother's green silk dress.

### Book 8: Hejira Analysis

Book 8 contains Kathleen's diary in its entirety, as read by her daughter Lily, who is on her way to New York. The reader is not told exactly why Lily is making this journey, but it can be inferred from Kathleen's promise to Rose to return "should I die first" that Lily is spiritually compelled to go and look for Rose.



Kathleen's transformation from self-involved diva to loving young singer is outlined in this section in her own words. She becomes sexually active for the first time with David, the young soldier she meets, yet feels no connection to him.

The similarities and differences between Kathleen and Rose are illustrated in Book 8. Both are talented young women who are seen as misfits or out of place. Both are the product of racially mixed unions and both feel some shame over this fact. Rose, however, feels more shame since she is dark and has been growing up in a black community, unlike Kathleen who looks nothing like her Lebanese mother and has grown up in a diverse environment. Kathleen is spoiled by James whereas all Rose has to remember her father are some items of clothing. The fedora that Rose wears to help her feel a connection to the father she never knew is reminiscent of the fedora worn by Pete the scarecrow. It is interesting to see the difference in Kathleen's response to the same hat in a new context.

Kathleen's devotion to music takes a new turn when she discovers jazz music, which feels more powerful to her and more alive than the opera she has studied for many years. Her exposure to jazz is symbolic of her sexual awakening. Soon after she explores jazz, Kathleen meets David and has sex for the first time. It is with Rose however, that her sexuality truly blossoms.

Rose's mother, Jeanne, is introduced as a somewhat ominous figure. Rose hides her from Kathleen for a long time, and with obvious reason, for Jeanne is a prostitute and a morphine addict. When Kathleen encounters Jeanne for the first time, she is shocked to find out that Jeanne is white and questions Rose about it. For the novel's time period, a friendship between people of two different races is unusual and frowned upon in many social settings. Hence the discussion of race between the two young women may strike the reader as being rather modern. Jeanne does prove herself to be untrustworthy, as seen in Book 9 in the events surrounding Kathleen's departure from New York.



# Book 9: The Family Tree, Chapters 1-3

## Book 9: The Family Tree, Chapters 1-3 Summary

In Chapter 1, titled "The sands of Mecca shape a rose," Lily arrives at Rose Lacroix's building in Harlem. After knocking on Rose's door several times, the door finally opens and a slim man stares at her. He allows Lily to come inside and she greets the man as Rose. They embrace and Lily holds Rose as she sobs. Rose says that she wrote Kathleen many times but her unopened letters were returned. When Kathleen did not return after a few months, Rose planned to travel to Cape Breton to find her, but found out from Giles that Kathleen had died of the flu.

In Chapter 2, titled "St. Anthony, Patron Saint of Lost Objects," Mercedes arrives at the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children and meets with Anthony, a six-year-old resident. When he asks who Mercedes is, the matron says that Mercedes ensures that he is clothed and fed.

Chapter 3, "Armistice Day," takes place on November 11, 1918, when James arrives at Grand Central Station in New York. He arrives at Giles' apartment looking for Kathleen. James finds her with a man. Enraged, he yanks the man off Kathleen only to discover that it is a woman. He throws her from the room, locking the door. Kathleen cries while James hits her. She keeps crying and he comforts her, eventually pushing her onto the bed and raping her. Giles returns home and goes to check on Kathleen but James stops her, saying she is resting.

Rose heads home, her face bloody and bruised. She later returns to Giles' home, only to find out that James has taken Kathleen back to Cape Breton Island. Giles tells her that Kathleen did not say anything so she does not know what happened. Rose returns home and tells Jeanne that she is leaving. She will send money and will return to the apartment after Jeanne dies. Rose starts living as a man and goes on to perform at clubs as Doc Rose.

## Book 9: The Family Tree, Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Lily's search for Rose is symbolic of Kathleen's promise to return to Rose should she die first. Rose remembers this promise quite clearly, as evidenced by her tearful reaction to Lily's arrival. The response of the neighborhood women in the church also indicate to the reader just how much Lily resembles her mother. Rose explains why she did not attempt to rescue Kathleen, and she alludes to seeing James in a way that suggests intense dislike.

In Chapter 2 the reader finds out what happened to Frances' son, named Aloysius by Lily and James. He is named Anthony and lives in an orphanage in Halifax. Mercedes' devotion to her family, religion, and duties are evident here. She would not allow Frances keep the child but she was also committed to Aloysius' welfare.



The true story about what happened to Kathleen in New York is revealed in Chapter 3. Even though the author is not explicit in the recounting, it is heavily implied that James raped Kathleen and was, in fact, the father of her twins. She is punished for her sexuality. Based on Giles' response, the reader can infer that she was well aware of the sexual relationship between Rose and Kathleen. It is quite possible that Giles too was a lesbian, hence her permissiveness with Kathleen. The identity of the "Anonymous Well Wisher" who wrote to James about Kathleen's association with black people is also revealed in this section. Jeanne was the author of the anonymous letter to James. While her behavior seems rather malicious in nature, it is important to remember that Jeanne, as the mother of a mixed-race daughter, is well aware of the consequences of having a sexual relationship with someone of another race. There was no way she could have foreseen James' rape of Kathleen.





## Book 9: The Family Tree, Chapters 4-5

### Book 9: The Family Tree, Chapters 4-5 Summary

In Chapter 4, "a garden inclosed is my sister...a spring shut up, a fountain sealed," the day before Frances dies, she asks Mercedes if she ever wonders where Lily is. She tells Mercedes that James confessed to her and she forgave him. Later that day, Mercedes holds Frances as she wheezes and coughs, and is next to her when she dies. There are few people at Frances' funeral. Mrs. Luvovitz, who is now a widow, attends along with her son Ralph, who is an obstetrician and a veteran of World War II. Teresa Taylor also attends the funeral and prays for Mercedes, even though Mercedes refuses to acknowledge her presence.

In Chapter 5, Sudden Light, Rose is sixty-five years old and known to jazz fans as Doc Rose. She lives with Lily in New York. Lily is now forty-five years old and cleans churches to earn money. One night, Anthony knocks on the door. He introduces himself as Anthony Piper and says he knew Mercedes. Lily invites him inside and asks Anthony if he ever got to see Frances, but he does not know who Frances is. He tells them that Mercedes gave him her house in her will. She also gave him instructions to bring something to Lily. She opens the package and withdraws the family tree, pointing out all the connections to Anthony. He sits down, overwhelmed. Lily offers him a cup of tea and begins to tell him about his mother.

### Book 9: The Family Tree, Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Based on Mercedes' actions, it is apparent that Frances is never told what really happened to her son. However, Frances is well aware of what happened to Kathleen in New York. This is symbolized by her act of handing the Doc Rose record to Mercedes and insisting that Mercedes hear about Lily's parentage. Mercedes' devotion has proven to be her downfall, as she has relied more on herself than on God, which upsets her greatly. The final sentence of this section, "That night, the Virgin Mary tells her what to do," foreshadows the events of the last section of the novel.

The final chapter of the book brings the novel full circle, as symbolized by a new and accurate family tree constructed by Mercedes. She accounts for all the relationships, even though some of them are quite scandalous. The truth has finally won out over her devotion to family. Anthony has grown up to be an intelligent and articulate young man. His response indicates that he had no idea that Mercedes was actually his aunt. Through telling Anthony the truth about Frances, Lily shows her devotion to truth and compassion above all things.



# Characters

## James Piper

The son of a shoemaker and a musician, James Piper grew up in an abusive home. His short temper and strange disposition quickly makes him into the main abuser in his family.

Early in the novel, it is obvious that James is attracted to a young woman Materia, a thirteen-year-old daughter of one of his piano tuning customers. He seduces her and they elope together. However, after his first child, Kathleen is born, he quickly becomes obsessed with her. When she reaches the same age Materia was when they met, James finds himself aroused by Kathleen. He realizes that he must do something to conquer his "demon," which is how he refers to his sexual desire for Kathleen. His first idea is to enlist in the military as the Great War has just started. When he comes back from the war front earlier than he anticipated, James decides to send Kathleen away to New York to keep her safe. Sadly, his demon is not so easily deterred. When James goes to New York to get Kathleen that he finally rapes her.

James' career choices are savvy ones, proving to be successful time and again. Not interested in heavy manual labor as a young man, he takes up piano tuning as his trade, which is how he meets Materia. After Kathleen is born, he quits both of his jobs and goes to work as a piano teacher, knowing that many parents in the community will want their children to know how to play. When the coal miners go on strike and their families can no longer afford music lessons, he takes a job as a scab at the mines. While this career move makes him hated in the community, he is able to provide for his growing family while others go hungry and contract deadly diseases. While on the front lines, James realizes that there is a vast market for well-crafted boots and he returns home to start a career as a boot maker. During the Prohibition, he becomes a bootlegger as well, crafting some of the finest liquor in town and selling it to locals, including the speakeasy owned by Jameel.

After Kathleen dies, James fixates on Lily, but never once touches her inappropriately. He tutors her at home, convinced that she could never handle school because of her disability. He is easily frustrated by Frances, who seems to go out of her way to annoy him. He repeatedly beats her when she misbehaves, especially when she has done something to her sisters. It is only after many years when Frances becomes a parent as well, that he and Frances are able to heal from their past. He confesses everything to her, confirming her stories surrounding the night of Kathleen's death and Frances absolves him of his guilt.



## Materia Mahmoud Piper

Materia Mahmoud marries James Piper when she is barely thirteen years old. She is of Lebanese descent and has dark hair, eyes, and skin. She is a skilled piano player who enjoys mixing up songs to amuse herself.

Knowing nothing about how to please a man or much less be a wife, Materia struggles for the first few months of her marriage. When she is pregnant with Kathleen, James is repulsed by her behavior and physical appearance. He refuses to touch her. After Kathleen is born, Materia tries to bond with the infant but just cannot find a way to love her child, no matter how much she tries or prays about it. Her neighbor, Mrs. Luvovitz, provides some guidance with child rearing and cooking. Only after Materia has Mercedes and Frances does she finally become more comfortable in the role of wife and mother.

Materia struggles with depression throughout her life. Her depressive episodes involve feeling limited in some way. She grows despondent when James forbids her to play the piano and after he forces her to quit her job at the Empire Theatre. A modern doctor might have diagnosed Materia with postpartum depression, based on her behavior after Kathleen's birth. Interestingly enough, she is at her happiest when James is off fighting the war, for now she can run the household the way she sees fit.

Materia's religious faith is of paramount importance in her life and influences many of her decisions. She becomes convinced that Kathleen needs to be baptized a Catholic in order to receive God's love, so she performs the honors by baptizing her in the tub. When she sees evidence of James' "demon," she prays for the demon to leave. When that does not seem to work, she prays that the demon will leave her other two daughters alone. It is her insistence that Kathleen's babies be baptized that leads to tragedy.

Soon after Kathleen dies, Materia dies while cleaning the oven. It is unclear whether her death is a suicide or an accident, but those who are close to the family assume that it was a suicide. James' last loving act toward Materia involves putting her in her bed so as to make it look like she died in her sleep. This way Materia can be buried next to Kathleen in the churchyard .

## Kathleen Piper

Born at the turn of the century, Kathleen is the eldest daughter of James and Materia. She does not resemble her mother at all, with her red hair, pale skin, and green eyes. James is enamored by Kathleen as soon as she comes into the world. He dotes on her and she receives everything. Her connection to her mother however, is close to non-existent because Materia never bonds with Kathleen when she was little.

From an early age Kathleen shows much promise, singing before she can talk. James instills a love of learning by reading to her and sends her to Holy Angels School in



Sydney. His excessive attention ends up making Kathleen extremely vain and proud. As a result of her pride, she never makes friends in school and is mocked by one of her teachers. Rather than trying to get along, however, the poor treatment only strengthens Kathleen's resolve to become famous and leave everyone behind.

It is when Kathleen leaves home at eighteen to receive voice lessons in New York that she finally learns humility. Her voice teacher makes her stop singing altogether while he retrains her voice, which makes Kathleen crazy but the process makes her a better singer. She also learns humility through her connection with Rose Lacroix, her accompanist, who tells her when she is flat and gives her suggestions on songs. It is Rose who encourages Kathleen to expand her vocal range and sing mezzo-soprano.

As much as Kathleen loves her father, she does not seem to consciously realize that his obsession with her is unnatural. Her nightmares about Pete the scarecrow suggest she is aware the relationship is inappropriate. Sadly, it is not until James rapes her that it becomes very clear just how inappropriate that relationship truly is.

While living in New York, Kathleen has a romantic relationship with Rose. She becomes pregnant and dies, giving birth to twins.

## Mercedes Piper

Mercedes Piper is the second daughter born to James and Matera. While Matera could not love or bond with Kathleen, she discovers that she is able to love Mercedes without even trying.

Mercedes is similar to her mother in her devotion to Catholicism. She prays and says her rosary often, even using other objects as a way to say the rosary. As a young woman, her faith is tested by Frances' wild phase and subsequent pregnancy. At times she seems to trust in God more than her own common sense, as evidenced by her deception of Frances when she has her son. She believes she is doing the right thing by God, Frances, and by the child. Later she is provided with divine guidance to legitimately bring Anthony, Frances' son, into the Piper family. Her faith also leads her to believe that Lily may be a saint, as she finds Lily's experiences and stories to be rather miraculous. She saves money so that Lily can go to Lourdes and be cured of her withered leg. When Lily rejects her plan to go to Lourdes, Mercedes declares that Lily is selfish. Later she realizes it is her own despair and loss of hope that has led her to have such high expectations of other people.

Mercedes probably experiences the childhood closest to "normal" out of all the Piper girls. She plays with her sisters and has a school friend, Helen Frye. She falls in love with movie stars and reads novels, fantasizing about romance. She studies hard in school and plans on attending university. She falls in love with Ralph Luvovitz, who talks of marrying her once he graduates from college. However, her sense of duty and responsibility to her family, combined with bad luck, lead Mercedes to lose her friend, not attend college, and lose the young man's affections.



Her biggest failure, however, lies in not winning her father's love. James never shows the same attention or affection to Mercedes that he does to his other children, including Frances. She attempts several things to gain James' approval. Mercedes cooks, volunteers at the hospital, and manages the household. None of these things create the closeness she craves, however. Eventually she gives up on James and sees him for what he really is, which is a sick and selfish man. The shift in her attitude is most apparent when she pushes him down the attic stairs and claims he attempted to sexually assault Lily.

Once Frances has her baby, Mercedes goes into teaching but has a reputation of being a strict teacher. As a result, she is not well liked by her students. Her final act, however, shows her compassion and love for all of her kin. She directs Anthony to where Lily lives so he can know more about his heritage.

## Frances Piper

Frances Piper is the third daughter born to James and Matera Piper. With her wild curls and mischievous nature, she is the most entertaining of all the Piper children, even if she is also behaves in the worst manner. When Kathleen's babies are born, it is Frances who takes it upon herself to baptize the infants in the creek. She inadvertently drops both babies in the creek but only manages to rescue one of them, Lily, from drowning. She watches as James buries the dead baby boy Ambrose, in the family garden. Her suppression of this memory haunts her for many years. When she finally allows herself to remember what happened, Frances is finally set free.

Frances quickly differentiates herself from the other Piper girls by being bad. She repeatedly gets into trouble for dragging Lily along on her adventures or saying inappropriate things. James takes out the brunt of his rage on Frances. As a young woman, Frances' behavior gets worse when she is expelled from school for sexually assaulting a classmate. She winds up going to work as a performer at Jameel's speakeasy, where she finally has the opportunity to play the role of a tough-talking broad, just like the film stars she loved as a child. Even when she is being bad, she still does good things such as look out for her family. She saves up \$3,000 for Lily from her earnings at the speakeasy. Frances gives Lily the money when she leaves for New York.

Her plan to seduce Leo Taylor and become pregnant with his child comes as a result of her presumption that Leo had an affair with Kathleen. It is unclear whom Frances believes she is punishing and what she expects will happen after she gives birth. It is interesting to note that Frances does not seem particularly devastated by her son's death.

It is not until Frances becomes pregnant with Leo Taylor's child that she finally calms down. Moving into the role of mother comes very naturally for Frances somehow. She enjoys cooking and baking constantly to the point that she starts giving food away to



people in the community. However, it is this phase of her life that is of most concern to Mercedes since Frances no longer needs her care.

## Lily Piper

Lily Piper is Kathleen's daughter. However, since Kathleen was unwed at the time of Lily's birth, she is passed off as James and Matera's daughter. She resembles Kathleen in her physical appearance, aside from her withered leg. She is a sweet and trusting child who becomes the new family favorite.

Her appearance in the novel is marked by tragedy because Kathleen dies soon after giving birth to Lily and her twin brother Ambrose. Frances takes it upon herself to baptize Lily, nearly drowning her in the process. It is the near-drowning experience that brings on Lily's bout of polio which leaves her crippled, forcing her to use a iron brace on her leg and special boots in order to walk.

Lily becomes James' new favorite child, and he treats her in nearly the same way as he did Kathleen, without the obsessive sexual element. Since Lily is crippled, he insists that she is home-schooled and takes full responsibility for her education. He worries about Lily spending too much time with Frances, who he believes is a bad influence. Even though Frances tortures Lily with horrible stories about the family and gets her into sticky situations, Lily never uses the stories as a reason to misbehave or rebel. In fact, Lily's most serious act of misbehavior is not prompted by Frances at all. She colors over the Piper family tree created by Mercedes of her own volition.

Lily is not told about her true parentage until she is thirteen years old. Frances tells her about Kathleen and gives her Kathleen's diary. Lily makes a long journey to New York, using money Frances gives her in order to find out more about Kathleen. She also wants to find Rose, her mother's true love. She finds Rose, who instantly recognizes her as being related to Kathleen. Rose comforts her.

Out of all the Piper girls, Lily is the most loving and compassionate. She repeatedly forgives Frances for telling her lies and ridiculous stories about the family. She offers her love and support to Mr. Mac Isaac, which affects him so deeply that he finally stops drinking. It is this same compassion that allows Lily to welcome Anthony Piper, Frances' son, when he arrives at Rose's home.

## Ambrose Piper

Ambrose Piper is the baby boy born to Kathleen, along with his twin sister, Lily. He drowns when Frances takes him to the creek for baptism and falls into the water. She is unable to rescue him in time and he dies in her arms as James watches. James buries Ambrose's body in the garden and marks his grave with a rock.

Ambrose reappears as a ghost in Frances' stories. He is a way for her to both torment and comfort Lily. He begins to appear in Lily's dreams. After Frances takes her to the old



mine, Lily starts to see Ambrose as more of a protector and guide. She begins referring to him as her guardian angel. Since Frances is the only family member who will talk about Ambrose with her, Lily has no way of knowing for sure that he actually existed. She confirms his human existence when she finds his remains in the Piper garden.

## Mr. Mahmoud

Mr. Mahmoud is the patriarch of the Mahmoud family and the father of Materia and Camille. A successful merchant based in Sydney, he is horrified when Materia elopes with James. He makes sure the two are remarried by a priest. Then he disowns Materia and curses James. His desire to ensure his daughter's comfort and security are intact, as seen in his gift of a home to the young couple. While his motivations may not be completely pure, he is still tied to his daughter even if he refuses to acknowledge her existence.

When Kathleen dies, he attends the funeral, mainly because he is angry that she did not fulfill the expectations he had for her. His wife, Giselle, had convinced him to finance Kathleen's studies in New York, so with her death he sees no return on his investment. He does not attend Materia's funeral however since she has already been dead for many years in his mind.

As an old man, Mahmoud appreciates his creature comforts, including Teresa's ministrations. Teresa has been with his family for many years and knows him almost better than he knows himself. When Giselle's jewelry goes missing, however, he is quick to point the finger at Teresa and he fires her. When Frances, the real thief, discovers Teresa was fired, she torments Mahmoud. She appears to him in his wife's bridal gown, stirring up his longing for Giselle and his deep sadness at the loss.

Like James Piper, Mahmoud also has his favorite children. Camille, Materia's younger sister, tries to be the daughter that Mahmoud wants, but her poor cooking skills and her choice of a husband make it next to impossible for Mahmoud to accept her. He tolerates Camille as best he can but secretly wishes Teresa was still around to make him dinner.

## Giselle Mahmoud

Giselle Mahmoud is Materia's mother. She is the first Mahmoud to have contact with James Piper when he comes to tune their piano. She chats with him in Gaelic because she does not know English and reads his tea leaves. She accurately predicts James' future, seeing a daughter, a house and water, but also sees something in the cup that troubles her. Giselle never tells anyone what she saw but remembers it when she attends Kathleen's funeral.

When her husband cuts Materia off from the family after she elopes with James, Giselle mourns the loss of her daughter. When she learns that Benny Luvovitz is close to the Pipers, she manages to get family recipes to Materia. Thus she is able to provide some maternal guidance to her daughter.



Through Benny she also finds out about her grandchildren whom she has never met. When she hears about Kathleen's performance at the Lyceum in Sydney, Giselle attends along with her maid Teresa. Impressed by Kathleen's talent, she convinces her husband to help the Pipers pay for the girl to study in New York.

## **Mrs. Luvovitz**

This is the Jewish neighbor of the Piper family. She sells eggs in Sydney. She befriends Materia Piper when she finds her sitting by the cliffside, pregnant and alone. She becomes a surrogate mother to Materia, teaching her how to cook and take care of her family. Mrs. Luvovitz delivers all of Materia's daughters and loves them almost as much as she does her own sons. Two of her three sons are killed in the Great War.

## **Benny Luvovitz**

Benny Luvovitz is a Jewish neighbor of the Pipers. He is a farmer and eventually owns a kosher butcher shop in town. His wife, Mrs. Luvovitz, becomes very close to Materia and her children. He frequently helps the family by offering good deals on meat and other items from the shop.

## **Teresa Taylor**

Teresa Taylor is Leo Taylor's sister. She also works as the housekeeper for the Mahmonds for many years. Teresa is married to Hector, who has been in a wheelchair for many years as the result of a horrible accident in the steel mill. He is confined to a wheelchair and cannot speak. They have no children.

She is fired by Mr. Mahmoud when he suspects her of stealing from him. Being fired has a strange effect on Teresa. She finally sees that her race has always been an issue, even if she was able to cook delicious versions of all the Lebanese foods Mahmoud loved. Her deep-seated resentment and anger reaches its peak when she shoots Frances.

It is ironic that she is the one to shoot Frances. Frances has idolized Teresa ever since the woman gave her candy when she was small. When Frances wakes up in the hospital, she asks for Teresa and the two women clear up the mysteries surrounding each other. When Frances lies on Teresa's behalf regarding the shooting, Teresa is relieved of all her hatred and pain. Soon after, she finally gets pregnant by Hector and has a daughter, whom she names Adele Clare.





## Leo/Ginger Taylor

Leo Taylor, also known by the nickname of Ginger in his family, is hired by James Piper to drive Kathleen to and from school. He is instructed to never speak or have any contact with her. He follows the rules closely.

Years later, he works for James again, but this time as a delivery man for James' bootlegging operation of selling liquor. It is while working as a delivery man that Frances sees Leo and remembers his connection to Kathleen. He does not remember Frances very well and perceives her as being much younger. Even after she tells him she is eighteen years old, Leo still only sees Frances as a sad child who needs his help.

Leo is a very trusting and compassionate man. His big heart makes it easy for him to be manipulated and seduced by Frances. Fortunately, his wife, Adelaide, understands this about Leo and makes the situation as clear as possible to him. His pity for Frances is much stronger, however, and she ends up pregnant with Leo's child.

## Adelaide Taylor

Adelaide Taylor is the wife of Leo Taylor. She is very intuitive. Soon after seeing Frances for the first time, she picks up that the girl has designs on Leo. Protecting her family is of paramount importance to her and she twice threatens to kill Frances if she comes near them. However, when Frances is critically wounded by Teresa, it is Adelaide who rushes Frances to the hospital.

She forgives Leo for having sex with Frances, for she knows how he is easily manipulated. She struggles to forgive Frances, however, since Frances was well aware of the possible consequences of seducing Leo.

Despite her family's view of her as a hot-headed woman, Adelaide is also full of surprises. Before it is even clear that Frances is indeed pregnant, Adelaide goes to Mercedes to propose that she and Leo raise Frances' baby as their own child. When Mercedes refuses, she is angry and offers one last threat for Frances. However, she no longer pushes the issue.

## Camille Mahmoud Jameel

Camille Mahmoud Jameel is the younger sister of Materia. The sisters are very close until Materia elopes with James and is disowned by the Mahmouds. They establish contact again via Benny Luvovitz, who pretends not to know about the family relationship as he passes along information and packages. Camille sends an Arabic record to Materia, which pleases her sister immensely.



As much as she loves her sister, Camille hates her niece, Frances. When Frances comes to work at the speakeasy, Camille is verbally abusive to her. She cannot find any love in her heart for a girl who so willfully insults her mother's memory.

Camille is also a selfish woman, especially as it relates to her father. When he fires Teresa for stealing, she gladly takes on the role of caregiver, not knowing that her father has never really loved her. She finds out that Frances has been the one stealing from Mahmoud instead of Teresa. She does not clear up the woman's name, because it means she will be forced to spend more time with her own husband.

Her marriage to Tommy Jameel is not a happy one because he is a rude and vulgar man. When she finds out that he has died, she quickly packs her bags and moves back to her father's home.

## Tommy Jameel

Tommy Jameel owns the speakeasy at the Coke Ovens. He marries Camille Mahmoud, Materia's younger sister, and had several sons by her. He is a coarse and vulgar man who is not loved by anyone. Mr. Mahmoud chose Jameel for Camille because he knew the man's father when they both emigrated to America. When he found out later that the senior Jameel was running away from bad debts, it was too late. Camille despises Jameel for choosing such a horrible business and avoids him as much as possible. James does business with Jameel but is disgusted by the man. Jameel does not understand Frances' desire to work at the speakeasy but takes full advantage of it because she brings him additional business. He is killed in a car accident when his son Boutros drives their car off a cliff while chasing after Frances and Leo Taylor.

## Boutros Jameel

Boutros is the son of Tommy and Camille Jameel. A simple young man, he works as a bouncer at his father's speakeasy. When he meets his cousin Frances, he develops a crush on her and plans on marrying her someday. He secretly follows Frances home from the speakeasy to make sure no one tries to attack her. Jameel beats him frequently and harasses him into doing what he wants. When Boutros mentions that he is going to get married, Jameel smacks him and tells him to shut up. On the night Frances seduces Leo Taylor, Boutros spots them together in Leo's truck and follows them in his father's car instead of delivering liquor, much to the displeasure of Jameel. When Jameel teases Boutros excessively about his love of Frances, Boutros smashes his head against the windshield. He loses control of the car and crashes it off the cliff. Both he and his father die instantly.

## Helen Frye

Helen is Mercedes' friend at school. The two girls spend time fantasizing about their favorite movie stars. During one of the miners' strikes, Helen's father tells Mercedes that



she can no longer play with Helen because James has a bad reputation in town. In later years, Frances stops by Helen's house to wish her a merry Christmas.

## **Giles M. MacVicar**

Giles is James' spinster cousin who lives in New York. She works with dying nuns and asks few questions. She acts as a chaperone to Kathleen. However, she appears to have no idea of what Kathleen is up to when she is not with her voice teacher. When Kathleen introduces her to Rose, Giles is both hospitable and welcoming. She encourages Kathleen to bring Rose over rather than stay out late at night. When James takes Kathleen back to New Waterford, Rose comes over to find out what happened but Giles is not able to offer much information. She offers Rose a place to stay but she declines.

## **Aloysius/Anthony Piper**

Anthony Piper is the son of Frances Piper and Leo Taylor. He is born at Mabou, a Catholic facility, and is "killed" by Mercedes, who does not want Frances raising a child of mixed race. She tells Frances that the child died a few days after birth, but instead sends him away to an orphanage for colored children. Lily gives him the name Aloysius but he is named Anthony by the orphanage. He is raised Catholic even though the orphanage is run by Baptists and is given music lessons thanks to Mercedes' generous donations. She visits him when he is six and is impressed by his intelligence and manners, but never tells Frances that he is still alive. When Mercedes dies, she leaves Lily's contact information for him, along with a new family tree. Anthony finds Lily living with Rose in New York and she instantly recognizes him as Aloysius. When she starts telling him about his true connection to the Piper family, he is overwhelmed.

## **Rose Lacroix/Doc Rose**

Rose Lacroix is Kathleen's accompanist in New York. She is a young woman of mixed heritage, with a slim build and angular features. She dresses in rather dowdy and dated clothing. When she is not accompanying Kathleen on the piano, Rose's musical style is experimental and misunderstood by people in her community. In order to gain acceptance for her music, Rose must leave the community and forge her own way.

Rose's first meeting with Kathleen is tense. She informs Kathleen that Kathleen's voice is flat. Her honesty with Kathleen about her talent eventually leads to a friendship and then a romantic relationship. She struggles to be honest however about her mother, Jeanne, who is a white woman, a prostitute, and also a morphine addict. While Rose can deal with the fact that she is the child of a white woman and a black man, dealing with Jeanne's addiction and occupation is much more difficult for Rose. Once Kathleen leaves New York, Rose leaves her mother to find her own way.



Rose has never known her father aside from a fedora and a suit that he left behind. She wears the fedora to feel closer to him and is wearing the hat when Kathleen mistakes her for a man. It is this mistake that leads to Rose's cross-dressing, which comes fairly naturally for Rose. The affair between Rose and Kathleen starts when Rose dresses as a man for the first time because it appears more acceptable for the two women to be intimate. Their relationship is loving and romantic. It is their carelessness in their lovemaking that results in James discovering them in the throes of their passion.

After Kathleen leaves, Rose chooses to live as a man. She goes by the name Doc Rose and becomes a famous musician.

## Herr Kaiser

Herr Kaiser is the nickname Kathleen Piper gives to her vocal teacher. He is a German man who lives in New York. Kaiser is a hard taskmaster with Kathleen but also has some compassion, as evidenced by his willingness to hire Rose Lacroix back at Kathleen's insistence. He arranges for Kathleen to audition for the Metropolitan Opera but James takes her back to New Waterford before the audition.

## Jeanne Burgess

Jeanne Burgess is Rose Lacroix's mother. She is a white woman who is addicted to morphine and works as a prostitute. Rose lives with her in an apartment in Harlem, making sure Jeanne gets her morphine injections. It is Jeanne who writes the anonymous letter to James regarding Kathleen's relationship with Rose. After Kathleen is dragged back to New Waterford by James, Rose moves out. She tells Jeanne that she will send money when she can and will only move back into the apartment after Jeanne dies.

## Mr. MacIsaac

Mr. MacIsaac is the proprietor of the drugstore and confectionery in New Waterford. He is an alcoholic for many years until Lily "heals" him through her offering to be his child and saying prayers for him as she walks by his store.

## David

David is a nineteen-year-old soldier preparing to leave for the war front. He meets Kathleen Piper in New York and they begin dating. When he tells her he does not want to die in the war "never knowing love," she has sex with him. He proposes marriage to her in a letter after he is deployed to France.



# Objects/Places

## Low Point/New Waterford

Low Point is a small town on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, Canada. The town becomes more populated and developed as men come to work in the coal mines. It is later named New Waterford. When James and Materia are first married, Mr. Mahmoud builds them a house in Low Point so that they will not be homeless should James fail in business. The majority of the novel takes place in and around New Waterford.

## New York City, New York

New York City is where Kathleen goes to study voice when she is eighteen years old. It is also the place where James and Materia initially dream of going someday. New York City symbolizes success for them. It is in New York that Kathleen meets and falls in love with Rose Lacroix, her accompanist.

## Number 12 Colliery

The Number 12 Colliery is the main coal mine on Cape Breton Island. The town of New Waterford is built up due to the success of this mine. James goes to work at the colliery for several years when the miners go on strike because he needs to feed his family. After the strike is over, he is given a job in the offices.

## Empire Theatre

The Empire Theatre is the main movie theater in New Waterford. When James tells Materia to get a job to help support the family, she goes to work at the theater for a short period as an accompanist. The theater is also the place where Frances spends a lot of time as a child, watching movies.

## Pete

Pete is the scarecrow that James places in the garden. He dresses Pete in Materia's old clothes and puts a fedora on his head. Both Kathleen and Frances have nightmares about Pete at different points in the story. When Kathleen has her first nightmare about Pete, James takes her outside and has her beat up the scarecrow so she will stop being afraid of it. For Kathleen, Pete symbolizes her father's abusive side.



## **Trixie**

Trixie is the stray cat that Frances adopts. She is black with golden eyes and misses a paw. When Frances dresses Trixie up in the family gown used for baptisms, she runs off and scares Mercedes. Trixie's faithfulness to Frances helps save Frances' life when she is shot by Teresa Taylor. Trixie stays with Frances, pawing at her head, and runs back to the Piper house when Frances is taken to the hospital. It is the blood on Trixie's fur that alerts Mercedes and Lily to go find Frances. Trixie ends up dying of suffocation in the hope chest, when she gets trapped inside the folds of the family gown.

## **The Piper Garden and Creek**

The Piper garden is started by James in order to save money by growing food at home. James wants to cut living expenses so he can afford to send Kathleen to the Holy Angels Catholic School. He sets up Pete the scarecrow in the garden. It is also the location for Ambrose' burial. Frances baptizes Lily and Ambrose in the creek nearby.

## **The Old French Mine**

The old French mine is the first coal mine excavated in New Waterford. Frances believes that she finds it one day while out with Lily and convinces her that Ambrose lives there. She ends up making the mine the scene of her seduction of Leo Taylor.

## **Kathleen Piper's Diary**

Kathleen Piper's diary covers the period when she lives in New York City and takes voice lessons. The diary is the only record the family has of what happened to Kathleen during that time.

## **The Grey Fedora**

The grey fedora owned by Rose Lacroix is one of the only things that her father left behind. She wears it to feel closer to him, even though she never knew the man. When Kathleen sees Rose wearing the hat, she sees how much Rose looks like a man in it and convinces her to go out in public with her dressed as a man. She takes the green sash from a silk dress of hers and wraps it around the hat to show her affection for Rose. In later years, the hat with its green sash becomes Rose's trademark as a famous singer.

## **The Hope Chest**

The hope chest in the Piper family attic belong to Materia. Over the years, its contents change but always reflect the items most treasured by the family. Materia finds comfort



in sniffing the cedar panels of the chest, while Mercedes, Frances, and Lily keep their dolls inside. The family gown used for the baptisms of all of the Piper children, except for Ambrose and Lily, is kept there until Trixie the cat is smothered in it. James stores his bayonet from the Great War in the bottom of the chest. Frances keeps Kathleen's diary and dress inside this chest until it is time to pass them on to Lily.

## **Giles MacVicar's Apartment**

Giles MacVicar's apartment is where Kathleen lives while studying in New York. It is also the scene of Kathleen's rape by James.

## **Harlem**

Harlem is the neighborhood in New York City where Rose Lacroix and her mother Jeanne Burgess live. Kathleen wanders through Harlem at night sometimes, listening to the music coming from the clubs. She eventually finds where Rose lives in Harlem and spends time with her at her apartment.

## **Club Mecca**

Club Mecca is the first nightclub that Kathleen visits when she lives in New York. She hears jazz for the first time there and convinces Rose to go with her to the club. It is while they are at Mecca that Kathleen and Rose share their first kiss.

## **The Speakeasy**

The speakeasy is out near the Coke Ovens, a seedy part of New Waterford. It is owned by Tommy Jameel, Materia Mahmoud Piper's brother-in-law. He runs it with his son Boutros. Boutros acts as the bouncer. Frances goes to work here as a singer, dancer, and stripper.

## **Holy Angels School**

Holy Angels School is a Catholic school in Sydney, the closest city to New Waterford. Materia attends school here as a young girl. Later, Kathleen, Mercedes and Frances all attend school here as well.

## **Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church**

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church is the Catholic church built in New Waterford. Materia goes here often to pray and worship.



## Catholicism

Catholicism is an important part of the Pipers' lives. While James is forcibly baptized a Catholic after marrying Materia, he grows more accepting of the faith in his later years. Materia and Mercedes are the most devout Catholics in the family, saying their rosaries often and praying to the Virgin Mary for guidance. Even though Lily is respectful of the Catholic faith, she does not subscribe to Mercedes' belief that she is a saint or that she needs to go to Lourdes, a sacred place for Catholics, to have her leg healed.

## The Baptismal/Christening Gown

The baptismal or christening gown is kept in Materia's hope chest in the attic. All the Piper children are baptized in it, except for Lily.

## The Family Tree

Mercedes draws up a Piper family tree to surprise James, but it is destroyed by Lily when she draws all over it. Frances buries the family tree in the garden so that Mercedes will not have to see it anymore. When Anthony arrives at Rose and Lily's apartment in New York, he brings with him a revised family tree, also drawn by Mercedes. The new family tree covers all the family relationships, including the secret ones.





# Themes

## Devotion

Devotion to people, religion, causes, and ideals is a key theme in the novel.

Most of the characters in the novel are devoted to their families. In the Piper family, James' devotion leads him to take a job at the colliery, which he has promised his mother he would never do. Mercedes' devotion leads her to sacrifice her college education in order to ensure Frances and Lily are taken care of. Lily's devotion is probably the most grounded of all the Pipers, because she is able to accept the truth without passing judgment. Adelaide Taylor is willing to kill Frances for the sake of keeping her own family together, yet it is Teresa's devotion that actually leads to Frances being shot. The Mahmoud family might not seem devoted to each other, based on Mr. Mahmoud's disinheritance of Materia. He does however give money to James so that Kathleen can go to New York, because he believes Kathleen's talent came from the Mahmonds.

Religious devotion also plays a role. Materia and Mercedes are devoted to religion, praying often for guidance. Materia looks to her religious beliefs to help her love Kathleen as well as to get James killed. Mercedes focuses her religious fervor on Lily, probably because she resents her the most.

Devotion can be swayed, however. When Kathleen becomes sexually involved with David, she loses some of her devotion to honing her craft and does not sing as well. It is when she becomes involved with Rose that she becomes a better singer, suggesting that the depth of affection between them is much healthier for Kathleen. It is not until Frances comes home from having Anthony that Mercedes finally devotes herself to education again, getting a job as a teacher at Holy Angels.

In several of the characters, their devotion leads to their destruction. James' devotion to Kathleen quickly turns into an unhealthy obsession, leading him to rape her. Teresa nearly destroys everything when she shoots Frances, but is saved by Frances' claim that she shot herself. Kathleen's devotion to Rose leads to carelessness, when they are caught by James.

## Fantasy Versus Reality

The differences between fantasy and reality play a key role in the story. Frances is the master of mixing fantasy and reality, as evidenced by the stories she tells Lily. All of her stories involve the Piper family history, as she twists memories and reality to create incredible tales to entertain and torture Lily. She also uses fantastical elements in her shows at the speakeasy, which brings her more money and more customers for Jameel. To help keep her in the fantasy, Frances drinks heavily while she works. Sober reality is too much for her to bear.



James occasionally struggles to live in the real world. His dreams about Kathleen's fame have a fantastical quality to them but he is able to ground them in reality, such as sending her to New York for singing lessons. It can be suggested that his "demon" makes it difficult for him to remember that Kathleen is his daughter. Like Frances, he also turns to alcohol to help combat reality. It is only when Kathleen is dead that he stops drinking, for he no longer has to avoid the reality of her existence.

## The Power of Music

Music is a powerful force in the lives of several characters. James' love of music leads him into two different jobs, as a piano tuner and piano teacher. It leads him to Materia and later to a means for taking care of his family. It is also his love of music that leads him to encourage Kathleen's innate singing talent.

Music transforms Materia's life several times over, starting with the first time she meets James and ending with the Lebanese record she receives from her sister. When James forbids her to play the piano, Materia falls into a depression which is only alleviated when he allows her to accompany Kathleen's singing lessons. Her first paying job finds Materia playing music to accompany silent movies at the Empire Theatre, allowing her to finally mix musical genres and songs in a way that upset James but amuses the theater audience.

The transformative power of music is also seen in Rose's life, as she mixes songs and composes her own tunes. After Kathleen's abrupt departure, she finally takes the opportunity to make her own way in the music business. Rose becomes very famous as a result. It is likely, however, that Rose would not have become as famous had she been performing as a woman instead of as "Doc Rose."

Kathleen takes her love of music to a different level when she gets to New York. While living there, she is exposed to jazz and blues music, as well as Rose's free-form piano playing. She would probably never have expanded her musical knowledge that far if it had not been for her time in New York.

## Sexual Awakening

Sexual awakening happens for several characters in the novel. It is first seen in the relationship between James and Materia, but is only briefly described as a way of illustrating that their sex life will not be very good. Indeed, Materia feels she must seduce James in order to distract him from his obsession with Kathleen. After they first become involved, it is rare that James approaches Materia romantically or sexually, suggesting that he actually is attracted to young children.

Kathleen's sexual awakening comes once she is away from her family. Her first sexual experience with David, a young soldier she meets in New York, does not seem to be particularly romantic or loving. However, she learns to enjoy sex and even credits it with improving her singing. She experiences a second sexual awakening of sorts when she



falls in love with Rose. It may be the taboo nature of their relationship that arouses Kathleen, but it is obvious that their friendship and sexual relationship have a profound effect on Kathleen.

Frances' sexual awakening takes a cruder route with her selling sexual services to customers at Jameel's speakeasy. She has grown up watching and enjoying movies where the heroine uses her sexuality to control men. It is obvious that Frances will do the same. The reader sees this in Frances' carefully planned seduction of Leo Taylor. It is important to note that Frances waits to lose her virginity to Leo, suggesting she may value it much more than she would admit to anyone.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written from the point of view of a third person, shifting between the perspectives of the characters. Kathleen's diary excerpts are in first-person, just as she would have written them. Even when the action is being narrated from the viewpoint of one of the characters, there are moments when an omniscient voice provides commentary. This third-person perspective focuses on future events surrounding the character in question.

The last line of the novel suggests that Lily Piper is actually the main narrator, switching points of view as the need arises, as she tells Anthony about the Piper family. With this in mind, the book's prologue about the family photographs takes on a new meaning. While the other characters might be seen as unreliable narrators, Lily is the most grounded in reality and therefore her version of the story can be considered very accurate.

## Setting

The majority of the story is set in New Waterford, a small town on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada. In Books 1 through 7, the action takes place in and around New Waterford, with brief references to Kathleen's time in New York City. When James goes off to fight in the war, the author includes scenes from the front lines in France and Flanders, giving the reader a sense of historical perspective. Book 8, which is Kathleen's diary interspersed with brief scenes from Lily's journey, is set in New York City.

While in Nova Scotia, the scenes focus mainly around the Piper home, but also include the school, church, and shops where the Pipers spend time.

Historical events, such as the end of the war and the election of Franklin Roosevelt, provide a real-world context for the fictional events.

## Language and Meaning

Even though the novel is set in the early 1900s, the language is more modern. The author has likely done this in order to make readers feel more comfortable. The characters still use terminology that would be common to the time period, such as Kathleen's reference to "frillery and foppery" when reading fashion magazines. There is some cursing but it is infrequent and is confined to only rough characters such as Jameel.



As the characters age, especially the Piper girls, the language changes to reflect their maturity and awareness of the world. In Book 2, for example, the chapters related to Frances and Mercedes' experiences when Kathleen dies are written in a somewhat child-like voice, using simple language. James' chapter, on the other hand, uses rougher language and symbolizes his disconnection and drunkenness during that time.

## Structure

The novel is divided into nine books. All the books except Book 8 are broken down into chapters. Book 1 brings the reader into the lives of the Piper family, and while it is not necessarily the happiest section of the novel, it is probably the most honest of all the books. Book 2 focuses solely on three pivotal events that affect the Piper family. They are Kathleen's death, Matera's death, and the birth of Lily and Ambrose. Book 3 picks up on the family's restructuring after the loss of Kathleen and Matera. Books 4 through 7 focus heavily on Frances and provide information about the Taylor and Jameel families that Frances comes to know through her rebellious phase. In Book 7, the Piper family shifts yet again and there is some closure related to James. Book 8 is Kathleen's diary and is set up accordingly with notations indicating the day and time the entry was written. Book 9 wraps up the remaining story lines and includes the first and only full account of the events surrounding Kathleen's return to New Waterford.

After Books 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, a short section related to Kathleen Piper is included, which give the reader little teasers about what happened to Kathleen. It also confirms that she is the focal point of the novel. The titles of these Kathleen-related sections are taken from a song titled "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen."

Each book and chapter is given a title relevant to its content. Many of the chapter titles are related to popular music and films from the period, as popular culture does play an important role in shaping the novel's characters.

## Quotes

"There are no pictures of Ambrose, there wasn't time for that. Here's a picture of his crib still warm" (Prologue: Silent Pictures, pg. 10.)

"All the pictures of Kathleen were destroyed. All except one. And it's been put away" (Prologue: Silent Pictures, pg. 11.)

"He would have enough money to buy a great house; for ready-made things, and a wife with soft hands; for a family that would fill his house with beautiful music and the silence of good books" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 1: To Seek His Fortune, pg. 17.)

"It's a terrible thing for a mother to know that her daughter will not have the happiness she herself has had" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 2: His Left Eye, pg. 24)

"It wasn't that he didn't love her anymore, he did. It was just that, recently, it had struck him that other people might think there was something strange. They might think he'd married a child" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 3: Low Point, pg. 30.)

"James rode home high on his rickety horse, he was going to give that girl everything. She was going to grow up a lady. She'd have accomplishments. Everyone would see" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 5: 1900, pg. 38.)

"How had he been ensnared by a child? There was something not right about Materia. Normal children didn't run away with men. He knew from his reading that clinical simpletons necessarily had an overdeveloped animal nature. She had seduced him. That was why he hadn't noticed she was a child. Because she wasn't one. Not a real one. It was queer" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 5: 1900, pg. 40.)

"Kathleen sang before she talked. Perfect pitch" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 6: A Miner Forty-Niner, pg. 41.)

"Initially, her schoolmates had vied for Kathleen's friendship—she was so pretty, so smart. But she failed to decode pecking orders, declined gracious invitations to braid other girls' hair and made a lasso of the skipping rope. They put her down as odd until, finally, they shunned her altogether" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 9: Quanto Dolor, pg. 61.)



"If James has forgotten the demon, Materia hasn't. She saw it. It looked at her. She knows it's coming back" -(Book 1: The Garden; Section 10: The First Solution, pg. 68.)

"In the fall of 1917, Our Lady appears to three children in Fatima, Portugal, and tells them three secrets, the third of which remains a Vatican secret to this day. But Materia knows what the third secret was. It was this: 'Dear children; I sent the Great War in order to shield, a little longer, the body and soul of Kathleen Piper'" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 17: Women of Canada Say, "Go!", pg. 103.)

"Boots are what count. More than weapons, food or strategy. We will win because we have more and better boots, boots determine history" (Book 1: The Garden; Section 20: Boots, pg. 110.)

"The real reason I let my daughter die is because I knew she was better off that way. I didn't know her well, but I knew she didn't want to live anymore. She preferred to die and I allowed her to do so" (Book 2: No Man's Land; Section 1: O Holy Night, pg. 134.)

"Frances learns something in this moment that will allow her to survive and function for the rest of her life. She finds out that one thing can look like another. That the facts of a situation don't necessarily indicate anything about the truth of a situation" (Book 2: No Man's Land; Section 2: The Mass Card, pg. 137.)

"Yes, in an emergency you can say the rosary anywhere, provided you have faith" (Book 2: No Man's Land; Section 5: See No Evil, pg. 148)

"Everyone knew that Kathleen was pregnant and that she died of the child. You'd have to be an idiot not to have figured that out, what with the girl's hasty home-coming and incarceration in the house. But the thing you do in a case like this is go along with the idea that the child is the offspring of its grandparents. Everyone agrees to this fiction, and the only people who'd breathe a word of the actual facts to the illegitimate child are those who are so malicious to begin with that they are easily dismissed as liars" (Book 2: No Man's Land; Section 7: The Official Version, pg. 158-159.)

"No one knows it yet, but Cape Breton is a dress rehearsal for the Great Depression" (Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves; Section 2: The Demon Rum, pg. 183.)

"' She wrecked everything,' says Mercedes, 'everyone was happy before she came along, everyone died, everything went wrong when she was born, she's spoiled rotten and I'm going to have to look after her for the rest of her life because she's a cripple, oh



God I hate my life, I hate my life" (Book 3: The Shoemaker and His Elves; Section 5: The Family Tree, pg. 203.)

"You think you're safe. Until you see a picture like that. And then you know you'll always be a slave to the present because the present is more powerful than the past, no matter how long ago the present happened" (Book 4: The Old French Mine; Section 3: Let Me Call You Sweetheart, pg. 246.)

"Memory is another word for story, and nothing is more unreliable" (Book 4: The Old French Mine; Section 4: We Are the Dead, pg. 255.)

"Besides, there are some things that are right to tell a woman friend, but otherwise indecent to repeat. Some things, when discussed with a dear husband or brother, are only poison. Good women discuss these things the way epidemiologists identify and track disease without alarming the public. This is woman's work" (Book 6: The Girl Guide; Section 6: Via Dolorosa, pg. 331.)

"Mercedes is neither a saint nor a sinner. She is somewhere in between. She is why purgatory was invented" (Book 6: The Girl Guide; Section 7: A New and Glorious Morn, pg. 361.)

"The one thing Mercedes hadn't counted on was that her father might return a penitent. Such a thing might interfere with her plans. She had no energy left to be the daughter of a good man. She had only energy enough to be the head of this family" (Book 7: The Bullet; Section 1: Blessed Art Thou amongst Women, pg. 389.)

"It's important to attend funerals. It is important to view the body, they say, and to see it committed to earth or fire because unless you do that, the loved one dies for you again and again" (Book 9: The Family Tree; Section 1: "The sands of Mecca shape a rose," pg. 487.)

"She wonders when it was that she began to despair. All these years she mistook it for pious resignation. Now she sees the difference. Such a fine line between a state of grace and a state of mortal sin" (Book 9: The Family Tree; Section 4: "a garden inclosed is my sister...," pg. 504.)





## Topics for Discussion

How can life be different for the Pipers if Kathleen survives childbirth?

Each member of the Piper family has a different experience of the Catholic faith. Which family member seems to be the most devout and why? Which family member has the least attachment to the church and why?

From the time she goes to work at the speakeasy to the moment she seduces Leo Taylor, Frances has carefully plotted everything she does. Explain her motivation for her actions during that period of time. Why does she believe that she is doing it for Lily's benefit?

Do you believe that Matera committed suicide? Why or why not?

Kathleen is often described as preternatural or not human. She has a hard time relating to anyone other than her father. Discuss whether her experiences prior to leaving for New York made her more inclined to become involved with David as well as Rose Lacroix.

Mercedes goes from being a devout Catholic, grounded in her faith to a zealot who is convinced that Lily is possessed by a demon. Does Mercedes' circumstances affect her faith in God? Is her faith the reason why she goes through so many difficult situations?

What is Jeanne's motivation for telling James about Kathleen's relationship with Rose? Do you think she is aware of the sexual nature of the girls' relationship? Why or why not?

Ghosts and visions frequently come up in the novel. For example, Ambrose is first described as a ghost and then takes on the form of an angel. How does this plot device help or hinder the story?

Do you feel the author is fair and impartial in her handling of the sexual abuse that takes place in the story? Does James seem more or less sympathetic in light of her depiction of him?

Racial tensions are rampant throughout the novel. If all the characters are of the same race, how will it change the story?