

Floating in My Mother's Palm Study Guide

Floating in My Mother's Palm by Ursula Hegi

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Plot Summary

Floating in my Mother's Palm is a novel by Ursula Hegi. This novel is a collection of parables that tell the story of life in one small German town. The stories are all written in the voice of a young woman who is looking back on her childhood and the people who impacted her life. Floating in my Mother's Palm is a sweet remembrance of childhood that includes poignant glances of tragedy as seen through the eyes of a child.

The novel begins with the story of the narrator's birth, a story that must have been told to her often. The narrator's mother went into labor and was told the baby had died, so she left a place filled with people she had once trusted explicitly and went to a midwife who helped her deliver a healthy child. The novel continues with a story of the local gossip who has a form of dwarfism that the locals in their superstition believes stems from her mother dropping her on her head. This idea of superstition continues with the story of how a faith healer saved Hanna's grandmother from death by removing the poisons from her body to heal a blood clot in her leg.

The author continues her story by introducing Klara Blocker, the family maid who was once in love with an American soldier at the end of the war. This soldier fathered Klara's son, Rolf. However, Klara rarely speaks of this man and has not told her son about him. From Klara, Hanna tells the story of how she used the idea of her grandmother's experience with the faith healer to attempt to heal her friend, Renate's leg that was affected by polio, only to heal the friendship rather than the leg.

The narrator tells the story of how her father has always behave cautiously except in the fact that he married a wild woman who won his heart while he was engaged to another woman. This was the only reckless act that Hanna can recall her father ever committing and it makes her think that her father married her mother so that they might balance one another out. Then Hanna tells the story of a damaged young man living in her family's home as well as several stories of murder and death that impacted some of the people living in town.

Toward the end of the novel, the narrator takes a more serious bent as she approaches the truth of her mother's death. The narrator's mother was killed in a car accident that was more than likely caused by her mother's habit of speeding. The narrator discusses how she wanted to save a life in the aftermath of her mother's death and ended up saving herself in more ways than one.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary

This novel is a collection of parables that can be read as a sequel to the author's novel, *Stones from the River*.

White Lilacs: The narrator's mother is entering her tenth month of pregnancy when she realizes that she can no longer feel the baby moving. The mother goes to the convent nearby where she intends to give birth under the care of the nuns there and asks if she should be concerned. The nun reassures her that the baby is simply resting up for the birth. For three days the mother worries, but trusts the nuns. When she goes into labor early on the third day, the mother quickly returns to the convent where she is forced to wait for the nuns to finish their morning worship. When the nun examines her, she tells the young mother that her baby has died because she has remained in utero too long. The young mother becomes enraged and goes to the local midwife.

Trudi Montag's Romantic Episode: Trudi Montag is the daughter of the local pay librarian. It is said that Trudi's mother dropped her on her head as a child, causing her to become a dwarf. This act left the mother so filled with guilt that she went insane, eventually dying in a distant hospital. Trudi is treated with extreme care throughout her childhood with neighbors heaping pity on her and her father becoming overprotective. One day Trudi met a man by the river and was nearly tempted into skinny dipping with him until her father found them and stopped it. Some say that this was Trudi's one opportunity for love and it was destroyed by her father. At any rate, Trudi grows into an old maid, running the library and spending her days spreading gossip.

Oma: Hanna's paternal grandmother lost her leg to a blood clot and as a result walks with the help of a crutch, or more often, with the help of a chair she drags across the floor. When Oma begins to feel the same symptoms she had before in her one good leg, she immediately asks her family to take her to the hospital. The doctors attempt to help Oma, but the antibiotics have little impact on the clot. Finally Hanna's father takes his mother home to die. In a last attempt to save her life, Hanna's mother takes Oma to a faith healer. Each visit the faith healer works the darkness and pain out of Oma's body, often massaging parts of her body that have no impact on her current illness. Eventually Oma recovers from her blood clot.

Women in Distress: Klara Blocker is the maid to Hanna's family. Klara lives with her mother in the same small apartment where she lived during the war. As Klara watches the potato delivery, she remembers a time at the end of the war when she would come down into the basement with an American soldier living in their building whom she and her mother befriended. Klara and the American became lovers. However, the day after Klara told her married lover that she was pregnant, he disappeared, reportedly reassigned to another area. Klara never saw him again. After the birth of her son, Klara vowed to forget her American lover and destroy his picture, but found she could not.



Props for Faith: Hanna has a girlfriend who is the daughter of the local midwife. It is rumored that the child does not belong to the midwife, who did not appear pregnant in the months before she returned from another town with her newborn daughter. However, most people accept Renate as the midwife's daughter despite the rumors. Renate suffered polio as a small child and has one leg that is smaller than the other. During an argument, Hanna called Renate an unkind name that referenced that leg. The midwife told Hanna she could no longer be friends with Renate. In an attempt to regain their friendship, Hanna steals some holy water from the local church and uses it to massage Renate's leg, hoping that it will encourage the leg to grow to normal proportions. This helps to repair the friendship but does little for the leg.

Chapters 1-5 Analysis

This book is a collection of parables rather than a cohesive novel. All the stories, however, are told in the first person point of view of one girl, Hanna. The first story is of Hanna's own birth as she remembers it from what her mother told her. For days Hanna's mother could not feel her move and was frightened, but believed the nun who told her not to worry. However, that nun quickly changed her opinion on the day Hanna's mother went into labor, causing Hanna's mother to no longer trust her. This shows the reader the kind of person Hanna's mother was and the personality that would soon shape young Hanna.

The next couple of stories are about the people in Hanna's life. Trudi Montag is a dwarf who is thought to have been damaged by her mother when she was an infant. This is an old wives tale, it is not what caused Trudi's physical stature, but it is something that Hanna, even as an educated woman, continues to cling to in fear as she raises her own child. It is a quaint, if ignorant element of small town life. This connects as well with the next story in which Hanna's grandmother is saved from death by a faith healer who massages darkness and pain out of her body that has little to do with the blood clot that is threatening her life. In this case, however, believing in something spiritual, in something impossible, seems to have spared Oma's life. Connected to this story is the story of Renate, the young friend of Hanna's with a polio damaged leg. Hanna uses Oma's story of the faith healer to attempt to fix Renate's leg. While the treatment does not change Renate's leg, it repairs their friendship which adds to Hanna's belief in the practice.

Klara Blocker is a young woman who suffered in the war like hundreds of other girls just like her. Klara suffered through the bombings and the fear of death, or worse. In the end, Klara came to trust an American soldier and he used her in the worst way, stealing her heart. Klara is left with a son to raise without a man. In the time period in which this novel is set, being a single mother is not something women aspire to. Klara must deal with the fallout of her perceived disgrace while also suffering from a broken heart. It is a difficult situation, but one that took place many times during war. It also plays on a theme introduced in Props for Faith, the idea of single motherhood as Hanna discusses Renate's unusual circumstances of birth.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary

My Father's Reckless Act: Hanna learns from Trudi Montag that her father was engaged to another woman before he met her mother. Trudi says that Hanna's father was engaged to an older woman, one closer in age to him, who taught school in a nearby town. Hanna's father met Hanna's mother one afternoon when she came to have her tooth worked on. It is said that Hanna's father saw one of her mother's paintings that afternoon and fell in love. Trudi calls Hanna's father's actions that day reckless. That night Hanna thinks about what Trudi said and thinks of all the times her father has reminded her mother not to be reckless. She believes that her mother and father balance one another.

The Order of Punishment: Hanna befriends a man who moves into the apartment on the third floor of their house next to her mother's art studio. Hanna learns that Matthias was once in training to become a priest. When Hanna asks why he quit, Matthias tells her it is because he discovered it was not for him. Hanna notes the man who comes to visit Matthias often leaves him with bruises. Hanna does not understand this and tries to encourage Matthias to quit inviting him over, even trying to break in on their meetings. Matthias seems to finally hear Hanna and stops seeing this man. However, some weeks later another man takes his place.

Floating in my Mother's Palm: Hanna's mother liked to swim in thunderstorms. Whenever the clouds would roll in, her mother would grab Hanna and head to the river or the old stone quarry. Hanna's mother taught Hanna how to swim and they would often go off together during these storms. People in town think Hanna's mother is odd. For a long time Hanna's mother did not show people her paintings. One day the local pastor's sister came and asked Hanna's mother to show her paintings in a church fair. People criticize the paintings, but the soon stop talking about them.

Dogs of Fear: Siegfried Tegern was an architect who lived near the river. One day Siegfried had a dream in which he was killed in a meadow. The dream was so vivid and reoccurred so often that Siegfried decided to buy a dog to protect him. Soon one dog became seven. Siegfried then began walking with his dogs in the evenings, searching for the meadow where he died in his dream. When he found the meadow, Siegfried began going there often, playing with his dogs there. Soon Siegfried began to feel better about the dream. Then one day the dogs turned on their master and killed him in the meadow.

The Thread of his Grieving: Hanna once had a little brother, but he died as an infant. Hanna has been told that the baby died in his mother's arms, but she refused to let him go for hours after his last breath. Hanna was told that her father was asked by the doctors to take the baby from his wife, but he wrapped his arms around his rocking wife and insisted that she be allowed to keep the baby as long as she wanted. Now Hanna



often visits her brother's grave, stealing a flower here and there to place on his grave. Hanna wants to grieve for her lost brother and often imagines what it would be like if he had lived, but Hanna never knew the infant and cannot honestly cry for him.

Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Hanna learns more about her parents as she grows older. This collection of stories tells the reader some of the things she learned about her parents as a young girl. Hanna learned that her father is a conservative man who often does not act impetuously. However, Hanna's father was engaged to another woman when he met and decided to marry her reckless mother. Hanna studies her parents' relationship and sees them as balancing one another out, her father keeping her mother safe and her mother injecting some happiness and excitement into her father's life. This idea continues as Hanna discusses the death of her baby brother and the way in which her father allowed her mother to grieve as long as she needed as well as the story about her mother's paintings and the way in which the people in town perceived her mother.

The story in which Hanna's mother taught her to swim is a poignant story that is filled with beautifully drawn images of someone the narrator clearly loves very deeply. While the story has a simple plot, the relationship it illustrates speaks of a deep and complicated human emotion that is as unique as it is common.

The story of the architect and his dogs is a story that seems to have no relationship with the other stories, but there is a common thread in this story. Several of the previous stories that appear in this novel discuss the supernatural and a belief in healing by faith. The author seems to ask the question in this story if the death of the architect was brought on by him buying the seven dogs due to the dream or if the dream simply foretold of something the architect could not escape. It is an interesting question that will have an impact on later stories in the novel as well.



Chapters 11-15

Chapters 11-15 Summary

Through the Dance of her Hands: The pastor's sister was a single woman who gave up a career as a social worker to come take care of her brother and his home. Quiet and unobtrusive, Hannelore Beier only seemed to come to life when she read to the children of the church. Otherwise, no one seemed to notice Hannelore, simply taking her presence for granted. One day a new teacher came to town who immediately noticed Hannelore's hands during a dinner at the rectory. In a short time the pastor was forced to fire the new teacher due to his inappropriate relationship with Hannelore. When the teacher left town, Hannelore went with him.

Of Weaker Stock: Anton Immers was a retired butcher who lived in the house above the butcher shop with his son and daughter-in-law. Anton spent all his days in his room, tending to his violets. Anton had a habit of weeding out the orchids that he considered of weaker stock in order to allow the stronger ones more space to grow. Anton's violets were prize winners. One day, a man came to paint the house. Anton sat at his window and criticized the man incessantly. Grown annoyed, the man painted over Anton's windows, blocking out the light. So traumatized by this, Anton died a few months later. People in town suggest that perhaps someone had decided Anton was of weaker stock as well.

A Crime of Passion: A young couple was shot in town while parking in their car. Everyone in town believed that it was Hans-Jurgen Braunmeier, a young man who went crazy some time before and killed his girlfriend and another young man in the same situation. Hans-Jurgen went to an insane asylum for his crime but recently escaped. Hanna and Renate decide to go looking for Hans-Jurgen in several places, finally focusing on the abandoned flour mill. Hanna and Renate go their many times searching for Hans-Jurgen. When Hans-Jurgen is finally caught by the police, Hanna and Renate are surprised to discover he was hiding at the flour mill the whole time.

Veronika: Veronika is a friend of Hanna's mother with whom she went to art school. When Veronika comes to visit, Hanna is shocked when she eats all the pastries in one mouthful. Later Hanna's mother explains that Veronika thinks she is saving Hanna because she thinks the food is poisoned. Hanna learns that Veronika has hallucinations of poison falling from the sky onto food and that she is the only one who cannot die from the poisons.

Baby Mansion: Hanna's friend, Karin Baum, becomes pregnant after being molested by her grandfather. Hanna's mother feels guilty when she hears the news because the old man once touched Hanna and her mother confronted him, but did not warn Karin's parents. Now Karin lives in a house where unwed mothers await the births of their babies. Hanna goes to visit her and at first it is awkward. However, over time Hanna and Karin grow closer. Hanna and Karin work in the newborn nursery with the babies. When



Karin has her baby, Hanna instantly falls in love with her, even naming her. Unfortunately, Karin's parents force her to give the baby up for adoption. Hanna schemes to adopt the baby herself, but over time she begins to forget her.

Chapters 11-15 Analysis

These chapters seem to have one common thread in that they all have something to do with love. In the first story, the pastor's sister, who seems to have given up on the idea of having a family of her own, falls in love with the young teacher who has come to teach fourth grade. So deeply in love, they do not mind that he has lost his job. The lovers run off together. The next story is about a man's love of the one thing he seems to have left to give him pleasure, his violets. However, the man's spirit is broken in an argument with a painter and he slips away, dying like one the weaker of his violets.

Veronika tells the story of the eccentric friend of Hanna's mother. Veronika is clearly struggling with her mental health, but Hanna's mother and father treat her as though her delusions are perfectly normal. This seems to express a love that is unlimited, a love that wants to heal even as Veronika's condition continues to persist.

A Crime of Passion adds a sense of danger into the plot. All the stories up to this point have been light, injecting into the novel a sense of humor and innocence. However, as the novel continues to develop, the narrator grows older and more aware of the world around her. This story seems to be the first to note this change in the narrator, showing the reader the dangers that surround Hanna that even she does not fully understand. This seems to continue with the Baby Mansion. In Baby Mansion, the reader learns that Hanna was once inappropriately touched by the local bike store owner and that this man made his own granddaughter pregnant with his child. This also follows with the theme of danger. However, this also touches the theme of love as Hanna embraces both Karin and her infant daughter, trying in her innocent way to find a way to keep them together but failing.



Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary

The Woman Who Would Not Speak: Manfred Weiler's family lives in Hanna's house in an apartment in the back of the building. On New Year's Eve 1952 Manfred's father hung himself. Manfred's father often drank to excess and when he drank he became violent. On that fateful night, Manfred's father held him out the window until his mother told where the grocery money was. Manfred's father took the money and drank at a nearby bar. When he returned home, Manfred's father felt guilty and asked for forgiveness from his wife. The wife refused to speak, refusing even as her husband tied a noose and slipped his neck into it. The man begged his wife to speak, aware that he would soon after to remove his neck from the noose and admit he was too weak to kill himself for her. However, his chair slipped and the man died as his wife silently watched.

The Truth About the American Soldier: Rolf tells Hanna not to play any more practical jokes on his mother, Klara Brocker, Hanna's family maid. However, Hanna plays another joke on her just the same. This joke seems to go too far, though, and Hanna immediately feels bad. The next day, Rolf confronts Hanna about the joke. Hanna becomes angry and tells him that his father abandoned him because he did not want him. Rolf has never been told the truth about his father, therefore he is deeply upset by Hanna's words. When Rolf does not return home that night, a search is organized. The following morning Hanna finds Rolf near the river. Hanna tells him all she knows about his American soldier father. Rolf sends Hanna to learn more. Finally Rolf agrees to go home.

Saving a Life: When Hanna was fourteen, her mother died in a car accident. Hanna became deeply upset when her father began dating again six months later. One day, trying to escape her father's new girlfriend, Hanna goes down to the river to swim. There are barges going by and Hanna thinks that she might be pulled to a new town if she could hold on to the chain on the back of one of the barges. Hanna swims out and grabs the chain, but she is caught in the whirlpool from the barges' engines and the chain whips against her, tearing into her skin. Hanna eventually frees herself and returns to shore. As she recovers, Hanna thinks of a time when she and her mother floated in the river to a fancy restaurant where they went inside wet and asked to use the phone. Hanna's mother was a unique person who did not always fit in, but her father's new girlfriend is a conventional woman that everyone seems to like. When her father marries this new woman, Hanna is upset, but soothed a little when her father assures her he will never forget her mother.



Chapters 16-18 Analysis

Again a darker theme seems to be present in these stories. The first is the story of how an abusive husband took his own life as his wife watched. The story is fictional because Hanna admits she was not there and cannot know for sure what happened, but she has guessed due to what she knew of the couple. It is a sad ending to a sad life, showing the reader how difficult life could be in the town where Hanna grew up.

In the next story, the reader learns how one young man took the news of his birth when his mother refused to tell him the truth. While the truth hurts the young man and leaves him with a sense of having not been wanted, it also draws him closer to young Hanna who describes their changing relationship as a more romantic one after she inadvertently told him the truth of his birth. This shows Hanna growing up as she slowly leaves her childish behaviors behind her.

Finally, the last story tells how Hanna's mother died and left her behind due to one of her many reckless habits. Hanna's mother often drove too fast and this finally killed her. Hanna is devastated by the loss of her mother, as is her father. However, they both grieve in different ways. Hanna is shocked by how quickly her father seems to get past the death and turn to a new relationship. In the end, the reader can see that moving on is just the way her father was dealing with the loss. Hanna deals with it in her own way as well, separating herself from her father and her hometown by going to boarding school. This also may seem harsh, but it saves Hanna's life and her relationship with her father, making it purposeful and the right thing for her.



Characters

Hanna

Hanna is a German girl growing up in the town of Burgdorf in the fifties and sixties. Hanna is the daughter of an eccentric artist and a dentist. The stories in this novel are from Hanna's point of view and are from a mature woman looking back on her childhood. Hanna often places herself in the story as a grown woman, discussing how the events of her story have impacted her life. Hanna also tells the stories in order to show how she grew up, to review her childhood and find the things that made her into the person she became.

Hanna is a gentle young girl who is as mischievous as she is kind. While Hanna respects her mother and looks up to the librarian who is the town gossip, she looks down on the woman who raised her as the family maid, often pulling cruel jokes on her to the point where the maid's son interferes. This shows the reader that Hanna had a sense of privilege as a child, but also reflects the attitudes toward the maid because she had a child out of wedlock. In the end, however, the reader can see how Hanna was just like any little girl growing up in any small community.

Renate

Renate is the daughter of the local midwife. The midwife lost her husband in the war and did not appear pregnant in the weeks before her daughter was born, therefore many assume that the midwife took Renate in payment for her services at her birth. Renate suffered from polio as a small child and has one leg that is smaller than the other. For this reason, Renate is slower than the other children when it comes to physical activity. Renate is Hanna's best friend when they are younger.

Hanna's Mother

Hanna's mother is a wild spirit. Hanna's mother is an artist who is often gossiped about in their small town because she does not display or share her work often. Hanna's mother is also a bit of an oddity in that she likes to swim in thunderstorms and to drive too fast. Hanna's mother seems almost reckless, but also the kind of woman who is not tethered by popular expectations. Hanna clearly is devoted to her mother and admires the relationship between her caring parents. Hanna's mother dies when Hanna is only fourteen, a moment that alters Hanna's view of the world having the largest impact on her life.



Hanna's Father

Hanna's father is a kind, gentle man who is much older than his young, impetuous wife. Hanna's father is a dentist who is well respected in town and for this reason his wife and child are also treated with respect. Hanna's father is deeply cautious and often warns his wife to be more careful in her reckless ways, but also finds amusement in her actions. When his wife dies, Hanna's father grieves for a short time, but soon finds another woman to make his wife. This causes Hanna some moments of unhappiness, but it seems to be the way in which this man heals.

Rolf Blocker

Rolf Blocker is Klara Blocker's son. Hanna and Rolf grow up together sworn enemies. However, when they become teenagers and Hanna inadvertently tells Rolf the truth about his American soldier father, they are drawn closer together. Rolf is the first boy that Hanna ever kisses and they are romantically linked for a time in their teen years.

Klara Blocker

Klara Blocker is Hanna's family maid, hired to look after Hanna and the house so that Hanna's mother might concentrate on her art. Klara was only nineteen when the war came to an end. During the final months of the war, Americans occupied Burgdorf and the apartment building where Klara lived with her mother. Klara became involved with one of these soldiers, eventually giving birth to his son out of wedlock. Klara never married and continued to dream of her American soldier even after he clearly deserted her in favor of returning to his American wife.

Trudi Montag

Trudi Montag is the town's pay librarian. Trudi is also the town gossip, often the source of all the information the people of Burgdorf have about their neighbors. Trudi is a dwarf whom the townspeople believe was made that way due to her mother dropping her on her head. As a result of the accident, Trudi's mother went insane and died in an insane asylum. Trudi, however, does not seem otherwise affected by her small stature except that it has left her without a husband and family to call her own.

Karin Baum

Karin Baum is a girl the same age as Hanna. Karin and Hanna were friends as children, but an incident with Karin's grandfather left Hanna unable to play at Karin's house. This caused a rift in their relationship. However, in the seventh grade Karin became pregnant with her grandfather's baby. Hanna went to see Karin often at the home for unwed mothers and they became good friends again.



Anton Immers

Anton Immers was the local butcher. Anton is an unpleasant man who often has little or nothing nice to say to people. One day Anton gets into a fight with the painter sent to paint his son's house. After losing the argument, Anton becomes weak and dies months later.

Matthias Berger

Matthias Berger is a tenant in Hanna's family home. Matthias was once studying to become a priest, but decided he was not cut out for the priesthood. Hanna notes that Matthias has male friends over and often sports bruises afterward. Although Hanna does not fully appreciate what is happening in Matthias's life, the reader sees that Matthias is accepting punishment for something he cannot control.



Objects/Places

White Lilacs

There is a lilac bush outside the bedroom window belonging to Hanna's mother. Hanna imagines her mother staring at the flowers while in late pregnancy with her. Hanna also recalls placing some of the flowers in her mother's grave.

Pay-Library

Trudi Montag runs the pay-library in the town where Hanna lives.

Trashy Romance Novels

Klara Blocker reads trashy romance books she takes out from the pay-library. Hanna often finds the books in Klara's hiding place and reads them late at night.

Holy Water

Hanna steals holy water from the church and uses it to massage Renate's leg in the hopes that it will help the leg grow to normal size. The leg does not change, but Renate and Hanna's friendship is rekindled.

Bicycle

Hanna has a bicycle that she has blessed in a yearly ceremony to bless vehicles against damage and accidents.

Hansen Bakery Truck

The Hansen Bakery truck parks near the convent to sell its wares in the town where Hanna grows up. The bakery truck is backdrop to several of the parables in this novel.

Joachim's Grave

Hanna often visits the grave of her infant brother Joachim in an attempt to feel some of the tragedy that surrounded his early death.



Piano

Matthias has a piano that causes some damage to the walls when he moves into Hanna's family home. Throughout their friendship Hanna often listens to him play.

Paintings

Hanna's mother is an artist who paints daily in her studio. When Hanna is an adult, she returns to the family home and finds several of her mother's paintings in the attic, taking two back to her home to display.

Oma's Chair

Oma has had a leg amputated. Oma often uses a chair to help her move around the house because she prefers that over the crutches she is supposed to use.

Baby Mansion

There is a home for unwed mothers near the town where Hanna grows up. Hanna visits her friend Karin there after Karin becomes pregnant after abuse by her grandfather.

Rhein

The Rhein River runs close to the town where Hanna grows up. Hanna and her mother often swim in the Rhein.



Themes

Love

Multiple chapters in this novel use the theme of love. There is a strong love between Hanna and her mother that she describes multiple times, but never as clearly as in the chapter Floating in my Mother's Palm. In this chapter, Hanna describes how her mother taught her to swim, often allowing her to simply float on the water as she guided her with her hand on her belly. In this way, Hanna learned to float in her mother's palm. However, this is not simply the story of how Hanna learned to swim, but a story that describes the rare spirit of Hanna's mother and the love they clearly shared for one another.

There are also stories of romantic love in this novel. Trudi Montag came close to romantic love once, but the opportunity was disrupted by her father. Later, the pastor's sister found love at a time when she thought love would never come into her life. Hanna herself also found love, first in the young, innocent arms of Rolf Blocker and later when she gave birth to her own child. Finally, the author discusses romantic love when she describes the marriage between Hanna's parents, a love that overshadowed her father's previous engagement and led to a relationship that was both volatile and strong; a love that balanced two diametrically opposed personalities and make them whole.

Family

Family is an important theme in this novel. The novel is set in a time period in which society expected certain things of its people, including the idea that women should be married before having children. This novel shows proper families, such as Hanna's, but it also makes note of other more unique families that were created in different circumstances despite the pressures of social norms.

Klara Blocker fell in love and became pregnant with an American soldier even though she knew he was married. In her naivety, Klara hoped the young man would abandon his American wife in favor of her, but he left her alone upon learning of her pregnancy. Klara soldiered on, raising the boy on her own despite the disapproval of the people around her. At the same time, the midwife is raising a child who is clearly not her own, content in the love of a parent for a child that comes even when that child has not come from her own body.

Loss

There are several stories of death in this book. One discusses the hanging death of an alcoholic whose violence had so impacted his wife that she did not say a word to stop him from death. Another is of an architect who dreamed of his own death and created

the circumstances from the dream unwittingly, causing his own death. Another is of a killer who came to town and murdered young people in their cars.

The early stories of death and murder in this book are tragic, but told with such a lightness that the reader finds them almost amusing. However, these stories of loss lead up to the largest loss of all to the narrator, the loss of her mother. The narrator is deeply impacted by her mother's death and finds herself desperate to save a life in order to recover from her loss. In the end, the narrator saves her own life and supports her father as he attempts to save his own.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is the first person. The story is told from the point of view of Hanna, a young girl growing up in a small German community in the years after World War II. Hanna is a gentle young girl who observes a great deal about the community around her, some of it far beyond her own comprehension at the time she observes it but coming to make sense as she grows older.

The point of view of this novel is a viewpoint that pulls the reader in close to the narrator and creates an intimate relationship that helps the reader feel almost as though part of the action. The author of this book uses her narrator to keep the reader close to the stories while keeping the reader in the dark about some truths that the narrator herself does not fully understand. It is a well written novel that inspires, using its point of view to help the reader become intimately drawn into the stories of a simply German girl's life.

Setting

The novel is set in Burgdorf, Germany. The events in the novel take place in the fifties and sixties, mere years since the end of World War II. The events of World War II continue to have an impact on the people in the novel, leaving the reader aware of just how far reaching the events of a single war can be to the people who survived its devastation.

The setting of this novel is interesting in that it is set so close to the end of World War II. While many of the stories have a very light tone, the setting impacts the characters in the novel in negative ways, leaving the reader with a clear look at devastation without the dark emotions that can often color such an experience. Instead, the reader sees the devastation through the eyes of an innocent who sees hope in everything around her.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The novel is written in the voice of a young girl, but the stories are clearly written by an adult who is looking back on her childhood and recalling events that impacted her life. For this reason, the language tends to be simple but of a level of education above that of the perceived narrator.

The language reflects the narrator of the novel, often using foreign phrases that the modern reader might not be accustomed to as well as strange grammar that stems from the author's primary language. This does not impede the comprehension of the story, however, but enhances the background of the main character by using examples of her native language to make her more authentic.

Structure

The novel is divided into eighteen chapters. Each chapter is a unique story within itself, telling an anecdote that has its own particular morale of lesson for the main character. All the stories add up to tell the story of one little girl's birth and childhood, touching on each of the people and events that shaped her childhood.

The novel is told in a linear way, beginning with the main character's birth and moving through her childhood until she reaches the age of fourteen, the year in which her mother dies. The stories are told heavily in exposition because of the nature of the stories, but also include a great deal of dialogue. The novel comes together in a comprehensive way at the end of the novel, telling a compelling and touching story.



Quotes

"When my mother entered her tenth month of carrying me, I stopped moving inside her womb." (White Lilacs, p. 12).

"On the surface Burgdorf was a town of great virtues while underneath all kinds of transgressions were hushed up." (Trudi Montag's Romantic Episode, p. 18).

"Each book jacket showed a beautiful woman leaning against something while she looked up at a man who wasn't leaning against anything. My mother never leaned or slouched." (Women in Distress, p. 32).

"Quite a few boys in the grades above us were called Adolf—a name that had been popular for babies born in the early war years—but we had not Adolfs in our class or in the younger grades. The name Adolf Hitler was never mentioned in our history classes." (Props for Faith, p. 40).

"Marrying a woman who was reckless must have been the ultimate reckless act, requiring a lifetime of balancing to keep both of them safe." (My Father's Reckless Act, p. 57).

"Though Matthias was in his late twenties, his rooms held the smell of old skin, as though he had carried it home from the Theresienheim in his hair and on the soles of his shoes." (The Order of Punishment, p. 60).

"My mother liked to swim during thunderstorms." (Floating in my Mother's Palm, p. 66).

"After the police shot the seven dogs, we asked ourselves if, by buying the dogs, Siegfried Tegern had brought on his death himself. We told each other he could have avoided it so easily. And yet, there were times—especially late at night when we were startled by the sounds of a restless dog—that we couldn't feel all that sure anymore and almost believed his death had been waiting for him in that meadow all along." (Dogs of Fear, p. 77).

"Once I was almost caught stealing flowers for my brother's grave." (The Thread of his Grieving, p. 78).

"Some of the people in town that the brief time without light last summer had drained him of his strength, but the old women suspected that his violets had ranked him inferior and—in a bizarre reversal of his own ritual—had let him shrivel to death." (Of Weaker Stock, p. 96).

"Until then, the bicycle shop had been a magical place for me, filled with fairy tales Karin's grandfather had told me, warm and bright even in winter, strangely familiar with its faint smell of machine oil and black rubber that drifted up the stairs and wove itself

into the apartment above, through the kitchen, and even into Karin's room." (Baby Mansion, p. 111).

"But of course it didn't work that way, and it only occurred to me much later that the summer I was fourteen I saved a life—not the life of a stranger as I had imagined—but the life I had taken for granted and which, in the years to come, I would take for granted again." (Saving a Life, p. 149).



Topics for Discussion

Who is Hanna? What is significant about her birth? Why does the author chose to begin with this story? Where does Hanna live? What is unique about the place and time in which Hanna is writing about? What is unique about Hanna's family? What is unique about the people Hanna choses to tell stories about in this novel?

Who is Trudi Montag? What is her role in Hanna's life? What do the people of the town think of Trudi? What is commonly thought to have caused Hanna's short stature? Did it? What is the true cause of Trudi's stature? Why did Trudi's father stop Trudi from watching the young man swim naked? What might have happened? Why does Hanna's mother comment that her father should have allowed it to happen?

Who is Renate? What role does she play in Hanna's life? Why do Hanna and Renate have a falling out? Why does Hanna think that holy water might heal Renate's leg? Why does Hanna want to heal Renate's leg? What happens when Hanna rubs the water on Renate's leg? Why is this a significant story of Hanna's childhood as told by her adult self?

Who is Matthias? What role does he play in Hanna's life? Why does Hanna often visit Matthias? Why did Matthias quit his studies to become a priest? What does Matthias do for a living? Who comes to visit Matthias often? What happens during these visits that upsets Hanna? Why does this happen?

What injury does Hanna's grandmother suffer from? Why do the doctors tell Hanna's father that her grandmother is dying? Why does Hanna's father remove his mother from the hospital? What does he intend to have happen to her? What does happen to her? How does this change Hanna's beliefs in religion and spirituality?

Who is Klara Blocker? What role does she play in Hanna's life? How does Hanna feel about Klara? How does she treat Klara? Why do many in the town look down on Klara? Who is the father of Klara's son? What has Klara told her son about his father? Does the boy believe her? What happens to change his mind?

How does Hanna's mother die? Why does Hanna swim in the river after thinking about her mother? What does the river remind Hanna of when she thinks of her mother? How does Hanna's father react to her mother's death? Why is Hanna unhappy with her father's behavior after her mother's death? Where does Hanna go in the aftermath of her mother's death? Why?