

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe Study Guide

**Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe by
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Plot Summary

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café is the story of the town of Whistle Stop, Alabama, and its residents over the course of three generations. Most of the story centers on Ruth Jamison and Idgie Threadgoode, two best friends (and assumed lovers) who impacted the lives of everyone in their community. The story is told both in present tense, from the 1920's – 1940's, when the events occurred, and in past tense, when Ninny Threadgoode relives those events by retelling them to her friend, Evelyn Crouch, in the 1980's.

When Idgie Threadgoode is a child in the 1920's, she is profoundly affected when her older brother, Buddy, is killed in a train accident. She doesn't think she will ever love anyone again, and becomes somewhat of a wild, rebellious child until the summer that she meets Ruth Jamison, a visiting Sunday school teacher, and falls head-over-heels in love with her. When Ruth returns to Georgia to marry Frank Bennett, Idgie is once again heartbroken. She spends the next four years intermittently checking up on Ruth, and discovers that Frank is beating her. She immediately intercedes and Ruth returns to Alabama with her. Ruth and Idgie move in together and raise a son, Stump, whom Ruth was pregnant with when she left Frank. With money gifted to her by her father, Idgie opens the Whistle Stop Café as a way of supporting her new family, and they all live happily together until Ruth's death from cancer in 1947.

While running the Whistle Stop Café, Idgie and Ruth aid a variety of people, particularly during the Great Depression, when the women feed every hungry person – often at no charge – that comes through their doors. Idgie also aids the “colored” residents of Whistle Stop by serving them from the backdoor – even though segregation is strictly enforced – and treating her colored employees with the same fairness with which she treats her white employees. When Frank Bennett tries to steal the baby from her house one evening, one of those colored employees, Sipse, kills him with a frying pan, and her son, Big George, disposes of the body in that week's barbecue, which he feeds to the detectives performing the murder investigation. Even when Idgie is arrested for the crime years later, she refuses to blame Big George or Sipse, and risks time in prison lying to give them alibis. When Ruth dies of cancer, Idgie's story essentially comes to a close, but at the end of the novel, it is hinted that she is still alive.

Meanwhile, Ninny Threadgoode retells the stories of Idgie's adventures to Evelyn Crouch, an overweight, depressed woman, who visits her weekly. Evelyn undergoes a massive transformation due to Mrs. Threadgoode's stories, and a deep friendship blossoms between the women. Evelyn goes from a suicidal overeater to a successful businesswoman selling Mary Kay. At the end of the novel, Evelyn has enrolled in a summer-long fitness camp for women, where she is happily losing weight and making friends with she hears that Mrs. Threadgoode has died. Evelyn's experience seems to suggest that a small quaint life, where each member of a community is loved and fulfilled, is the fastest way to a happy life. It also suggests that when you've lived a full life, your legacy will live on forever.



Pages 1 - 39

Summary

Pages 1 - 39

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café is composed like a scrapbook, with many short chapters that jump across space and time, newspaper articles, and local newsletters. The story is told both in present tense, from the 1920's – 1940's, when the events occurred, and in past tense, when Ninny Threadgoode relives events by retelling them to her friend, Evelyn Crouch, in the 1980's. These chapters are interspersed with Weekly newsletters from Dot Weems (Whistle Stop, 1929 – 1969) and a variety of other short news clippings. Together, these short pieces work as a collage to create a vibrant image of the way that Whistle Stop, Alabama has changed over the years.

In the first section of the novel, Dot Weems, the local post woman who writes a weekly newsletter to fill the inhabitants of Whistle Stop in on all the town's gossip, writes that the Whistle Stop Café opened on June 12, 1929, and is run by Ildgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison. The cooks are two black ("colored") women, Sipsev and Onzell, and the barbecue is cooked by Onzell's husband, Big George. She also writes that Ildgie claims one of her hens laid an egg with a ten-dollar bill inside. In another newsletter, she writes that Mrs. Otis has had a two-pound meteorite crash through her roof, and that the meteorite is now on display at the café.

Evelyn Crouch arrives at Rose Terrace Nursing Home (1985) to visit her mother-in-law, but ends up sitting in the lobby eating a candy bar. She reluctantly has a conversation with "Mrs. Cleo Threadgoode" (Ninny), an eighty-six-year-old resident, about the inevitability of death. Mrs. Threadgoode is from a town called Whistle Stop, and she begins telling Evelyn about her life there. It's clear that Mrs. Threadgoode is lonely and loves to reminisce about her past. After the death of her parents, she went to live with her neighbors, the Threadgoodes, and even ended up marrying one of the boys, Cleo. She paints a lovely picture of the quaint life in Whistle Stop that sounds almost too good to be true. Ninny speaks mostly about Ildgie Threadgoode, a "real cutup" who would do anything to make others laugh. Mrs. Threadgoode catches Evelyn's attention when she says, "[Ildgie] was a character all right, but how anybody ever could have thought that she killed that man is beyond me" (Page 12). Ildgie's behavior changed when she was around 11 years old and swore that she would never wear a dress again. She began dressing as a boy, and never really stopped.

Dot Weems (1929) writes that times have been getting harder and harder, and that five new hobos showed up at the Whistle Stop Café. The narrative then jumps to Davenport, Iowa (1929), where a group of hobos, including Smokey Lonesome, sit around a fire keeping warm. The reader learns about Smokey's background and how he came to ride the rails. After not eating anything for two days, Smokey sees a sign on a railroad car that says "Whistle Stop Café" and knows it's the hobo code for where hobos can find a



hot meal. He jumps off the train at Whistle Stop and makes his way to the café, where he is greeted warmly by Iddie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison, the café owners. Iddie gives Smokey a drink, tells him to clean up in the bathroom, and when he's washed and shaved, serves him an elaborate hot meal. Later, they walk outside and Iddie tells him a ridiculous story about how the local lake suddenly disappeared.

Evelyn returns to Rose Terrace Nursing Home to visit with Mrs. Threadgoode (1985), this time with coconut snowballs instead of candy bars. Mrs. Threadgoode says that the coconut reminds her of the church picnic on "that awful day". She tells the story of how Buddy Threadgoode, Iddie's older brother and best friend, was playing near the railroad tracks at the church picnic and was struck by an oncoming train. He died instantly. Iddie never recovered from the loss, and became even more difficult to manage than before: "You never saw anybody hurt so much. I thought she would die right along with him" (Page 37). Iddie would regularly disappear to Troutville, the black side of town, to stay with Sipseey and Big George. One day she disappeared altogether.

Analysis

The quick-fire format of Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café might be disorienting for some readers, particularly because it skips across space and time rapidly with only headers at the opening of each short chapter to orient readers. Once the reader is able to formulate a basic timeline of events, however, the transitions make more sense and contribute to the homespun, patchwork quilt feel of Mrs. Cleo Threadgoode's collected memories.

While Mrs. Cleo Threadgoode and Evelyn Crouch appear to be the novel's protagonists, the novel's main plot events take place in Mrs. Threadgoode's memories, in which Iddie Threadgoode is the clear star. In fact, the child version of Ninny rarely even appears in the remembered stories, suggesting that the stories live on as family legend rather than her own specific memories. What the reader learns first about Iddie is that she loves to tell tall tales. Rather than tell Dot Weems about her struggle to open the café, she chooses instead to focus on the hen that laid an egg with a ten-dollar bill inside, or the meteor that crashed through Biddie Otis's roof. Instead of having a heart-to-heart with an down-and-out hobo about how he could improve his life, Iddie tells Smokey Lonesome a ridiculous story about how a flock of geese landed on the local lake just as it was freezing, and when they felt to cold temperatures, took off again simply taking the lake with them. These stories hint at Iddie's penchant to invent history – both personal and public – for her own amusement. Rather than tell the truth, Iddie would much rather invent a story, a characteristic that lends itself well to the novel's anecdotal tone.

Aside from being a classic leg-puller, Iddie is known in her community as being extremely generous. Even though it's the depression, Iddie gives out free meals to homeless men, and she employs (and clearly loves) African-Americans. Generosity to the hobos clearly comes from Poppa Threadgoode, who owned the shop in town when Iddie was growing up. Cleo Threadgoode told his wife (Ninny) that the reason the shop failed was because "Poppa couldn't say no to anybody, white or colored. Whatever



people needed, he just put in a sack and let them have it on credit” (Page 26). Her kindness to African-Americans, which would have been rare at the time, clearly stems from her close relationship with Sipsey. In fact, when Idgie was a child and mourning the loss of her best friend (Buddy), she often disappeared into Troutville, the black part of town, likely because she felt at home there.

Idgie’s kindness likely stems from her camaraderie with outsiders. Even as a child, Idgie was different from other little girls, and hints of her lesbianism – which never would have been acknowledged in the 1920’s – was clear from an early age. She dressed like, acted like, and for all intents and purposes wanted to be, a boy. She felt very close to Buddy and therefore desperately alone after he was killed. She found a sense of companionship and understanding with others forced to live on the outskirts of society, and these relationships carried on into her adulthood.

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel’s structure affect your enjoyment of the story as a reader? Why do you think Flagg chose this style rather than a straightforward narrative?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Idgie Threadgoode’s method of storytelling, particularly her tall tales. How does it compare / contrast to Ninny Threadgoode’s?

Discussion Question 3

What difference do you see in the way “hobos” are portrayed in the novel compared to the way they are viewed today? Why do you think there is such a difference?

Vocabulary

Corsage, benevolent, lattice, harebrained, organdy, scalawag, aversion, commence, mince, consignment.



Pages 40 - 78

Summary

Pages 40 - 78

This section opens with Evelyn Couch sitting in her sewing room eating ice cream, wondering how her life slipped away from her. She feels unsatisfied in every aspect of her life, from her marriage, to her social life, to her physical appearance. She remembers how life seemed so simple in high school: there were good girls and bad girls, and she always wanted to be a good girl, but now her life seems so boring, and she always seems unhappy.

Shortly after, Evelyn visits Mrs. Threadgoode at Rose Terrace Nursing Home and brings her a snack from home. Mrs. Threadgoode tells her about Sipse, the colored woman who cooked at Whistle Stop Café. She had been working for the Threadgoode family for as long as she could remember, and was the best cook in town. Sipse hadn't been able to have children of her own, but one afternoon, a woman came running to the house shouting that a girl on the train was giving away an unwanted baby. Sipse sprinted to the train station and came back home cradling a baby boy, whom she named Big George. Mrs. Threadgoode says that Sipse loved George more than any mother loved a son, and hints about Big George being on trial as an adult.

Mrs. Threadgoode also says that Idgie would serve colored people from the backdoor of the café even though all restaurants at the time were supposed to be segregated. She started when a single black boy was brave enough to knock on the door and ask for some barbecue, since he said the delicious smell had been tormenting him all week. A few days later, Grady Kilgore, the town sheriff, stops by to urge Idgie not to break segregation at the café, lest she have a run-in with the local KKK. Not one to be threatened, Idgie refuses to back down, and even calls Sheriff Kilgore out as a member of the KKK. She also mildly threatens to out Kilgore's affair with Eva Bates to his wife.

At her next meeting with Mrs. Threadgoode, Evelyn laments that she wishes she could just die. She is so unhappy with her life that she fears she will never be happy again. Mrs. Threadgoode realizes that in addition to feeling unfulfilled in her personal life, Evelyn is going through menopause. She suggests that Evelyn meet with her more frequently. It makes more sense for Evelyn to talk to Mrs. Threadgoode about her problems than to pay a shrink to listen. The next time she visits, the women discuss the different shades that "colored" people come in. Mrs. Threadgoode tells her about Big George's wife Onzell, who was practically white, with red hair and freckles. They had twin sons, Artis, who was dark, and Jasper, who was light. Then came light Willie Boy and dark Naughty Bird. They question why there aren't any colored patients in the nursing home. Only the nurses are black.



The narrative jumps back to 1917, when Onzell gave birth to the twin boys. Big George was thrilled until the boys grew up and Artis stabbed Jasper over and over with a penknife: "I knowed I shouldn'ta done it ... but it felt so good, I jes couldn't stop" (Page 76).

Analysis

Perhaps, the most interesting aspect of this section is the discussion of race relations. Segregation between blacks and whites was commonplace, even expected, in the early – mid 1900's, and even though integration took place in the 1960's, segregation is still apparent in Mrs. Threadgoode's nursing home in the 1980's. Racism was a big part of life in the South during this novel's setting, and its presence in the novel adds a realistic darkness to the narrative's otherwise quaint and rose-tinted recollections. The fact that the sheriff is a member of the local KKK might seem outrageous to modern day readers, but in the 1930's, this membership would be considered as American as apple pie.

Only Idgie, who loves outsiders and societal misfits, is bothered (although it's only a slight annoyance) by this fact, although her annoyance goes only so far as teasing Grady about his membership. Idgie accepts her friends without judgment. She is dear friends with Grady despite his affiliation with the KKK and the fact that he has been having an ongoing affair with the local floozy – another of Idgie's dear friends, Eva Bates. This shows Idgie's loyalty to her friends and her (arguably) skewed moral compass. Idgie seems to believe that she shouldn't meddle in anyone's affairs as long as they aren't affecting her directly. It is interesting to note that while the Whistle Stop Café has all black cooks cooking Southern soul food ("black food"), none of the members of their community are allowed to eat it, at least not sitting in the restaurant. This irony highlights the strained race relations at the time, and the ridiculous cultural appropriation (white people claiming aspects of black culture – the food, music, fashion, etc – as their own while banning black people from partaking in it) that was commonplace in the mid 1900's.

The other main element to explore in this section is the role of women in the 1980's. While women were certainly more liberated than they had been 50 years earlier, housewives like Evelyn still feel repressed by their traditional wifely roles. Evelyn is thoroughly unhappy with her sex life and is too timid to speak up about it. She is deeply embarrassed by the fact that her daughter has a more fulfilling life than she does. Evelyn acts as a literary foil to Idgie. Evelyn is concerned with other's opinions of her and models her life to please others' expectations, while she remains deeply unfulfilled. As a teenager, Evelyn was so worried about getting a bad reputation that she never drank or had sex. Even when Ed began having affairs, Evelyn never felt like she could confront him because in her mind, sex was an off-limits topic. As a result of her self-induced oppression, Evelyn is terribly depressed, filling the void in her life with comforting junk food. Often, she sits in her living room combing through newspaper obituaries. She is obsessed with death, and finds comfort in the death of very old, rather than middle aged, people. Suddenly, she realizes that she is not afraid of death, but the banality of her life.



Discussion Question 1

Do you think the color of Jasper and Artis' skin--Jasper being very light-skinned and Artis being very dark-skinned—will make a difference in their approach to life? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How does the novel deal with the theme of female sexuality? Compare / contrast the characters of Eva Bates and Evelyn Crouch to get the conversation started.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Idgie Threadgoode has such an affinity for societal outsiders like the African-Americans and hoboes? What does this tell you about her character?

Vocabulary

Diaphragm, usurp, nanshee, clodhoppers, menopause, superstitious, locomotive.



Pages 79 - 122

Summary

Pages 79 - 122

After Buddy's death, Iddie had become less and less sociable, more withdrawn, and quite erratic. She only wore Buddy's clothes, chopped her hair short, and spent all her time in the woods. All that changed, however, when Ruth Jamison came to town to teach at the Vacation Bible School. Ruth was twenty-one and Iddie was fifteen. All the boys in town instantly fell in love with virtuous Ruth, and Iddie did as well. She started showing off for Ruth, who was staying with the Threadgoode family and would occasionally join the family for dinner. Momma Threadgoode knew that Iddie had a crush on their house guest, and forbade any of the other children to tease her about it. Soon after, Iddie started acting like a tame puppy. No matter what request Momma had of her, she would do anything if it were Ruth that delivered the message. Ruth tamed the wild animal in Iddie, and Iddie's free spirit allowed uptight Ruth to unwind and enjoy herself with jokes and games.

In 1924, Iddie wakes Ruth up by knocking on her bedroom window and asking if she can take her for a picnic. Iddie lies and says that none of the other children want to join because she clearly wants Ruth's company to herself. While at the picnic, Iddie frightens Ruth by pulling a honeycomb out of a beehive, the bees swarming and covering Iddie's entire body. When Ruth starts crying, a dumbstruck Iddie says, "I just wanted for us to have a secret together, that's all" (Page 86). The two young women share a lovely, flirtatious picnic lunch, with Iddie so emotionally moved that she vows she would kill for Ruth. In the next chapter, it is revealed that even though Ruth is clearly in love with Iddie, she has promised her hand in marriage to Frank Bennett, a man from back home. She plans to marry him at the end of the summer. When Iddie finds out, she is outraged and begins breaking everything in her room. She screams at Ruth, shouting "I LOVE YOU AND I DON'T WANT YOU TO GO" (Page 90), but it's no use. Ruth packs up her belongings and leaves for Georgia anyway.

At Rose Terrace Nursing Home, Mrs. Threadgoode tells Evelyn that Iddie cried herself to sleep for months after Ruth left. One day, she just picked up and left, telling no one where she went. Only Big George seemed to know her whereabouts. She always showed up when important events, like marriages or deaths, occurred. In the next chapter (1924), the reader meets Eva Bates, the redheaded girl Buddy had been in love with before his death. Eva lived on the wrong side of the tracks. In the years since Buddy's death, she had acquired a reputation of being an alcoholic and an easy female companion. When Iddie arrives soon after Ruth's departure, it is the first time she has seen Eva in eight years, but they embrace like old friends. Iddie hides out with Eva Bates and her three-legged dog for the next five years.



Dot Weems writes that Railroad Bill has struck again, throwing seventeen hams off a moving train for the folks in Troutville at Thanksgiving (1935). At Rose Terrace Nursing Home, Mrs. Threadgoode jabbars on about her love of trains, and how she used to sit on her porch chair all day watching the trains come and go (1986). She also mentions that Ruth and Iddie had a son together. The narrative jumps to 1936, when Onzell (Sipsey's daughter-in-law) shouts that there's been an accident on the train lines, and that it's Iddie and Ruth's son that's been hit. Iddie and Big George run to the tracks where they find the boy lying in a pool of his own blood, his arm severed at the elbow. Big George carries the boy all the way to the hospital, but is denied entry because he is black. Mrs. Threadgoode tells Evelyn that Iddie and Ruth's boy lived, and they held a funeral for his severed arm. They also began calling the boy "Stump" to preemptively end the teasing they knew he would receive. The only time Stump ever grew frustrated with his handicap, Iddie brought him down to Eva Bates' place and ordered him to play with her three-legged dog. After, when Stump noticed how happy the dog was, Iddie said, "I'd hate like the devil to think that you didn't have any more sense than that poor, little dumb dog that we saw today" (Page 115). Stump's arm was never an issue after that.

Meanwhile, in 1934, Artis Peavey, Big George and Onzell's son, travels to Birmingham even though his mother has forbidden it. He immediately falls in love with the glitz and glamour of the blues town known as Slagtown. For the first time in his life he feels at home.

Analysis

Although it's clear that Iddie and Ruth develop a flirtatious romantic relationship, it is never acknowledged, in the narrative or by any of the characters, as lesbian. Despite this, Mama Threadgoode seems to understand that Iddie is different and accepts her life choices. She even forbids the other children from teasing Iddie about her crush on Ruth, a very progressive mindset for the time. Perhaps, because of this support Iddie is eager to start a life with Ruth. However, Ruth, who has been raised in a conservative, virtuous household, knows that their relationship will never be accepted. Despite the fact that she loves Iddie, she returns to Georgia to marry Frank Bennett, fulfilling the heterosexual gender expectations of the time. A devastated Iddie runs away from home and moves in with Eva Bates, another misfit who is judged and marginalized for her sexual choices.

Before Ruth leaves, however, she shares a picnic with Iddie. Iddie pulls fresh honey from a beehive, terrifying Ruth. In response, Iddie says, "Just think, Ruth, I never did it for anybody else before. Now nobody in the whole world knows I can do that but you. I just wanted for us to have a secret together, that's all" (Page 86). Not only does this characterize Iddie as a tamer of wild things, it also symbolizes the "secret" relationship Iddie desires to have with Ruth. There's something virginal about Iddie's confession and readers will be reading this passage on two levels, the literal and the symbolic. It's interesting to note that to Iddie, keeping secrets is a positive thing. This seems to be a



belief she holds even in adulthood. Iddie keeps many secrets throughout her life. For this reason, she has many strong relationships.

Even though Ruth moves away to marry Frank, it's clear in the patch-worked narrative that she and Iddie somehow end up together, and that they have a son, Stump. When Stump is a boy, he is involved in a terrible train accident, similar to the one that claimed Buddy's life. While Iddie couldn't save her beloved brother, she was able to save, both physically and emotionally, her adopted son. The connection between Stump and Buddy is strengthened with Iddie takes him to visit Eva Bates – Buddy's ex-girlfriend – when he loses his confidence after the accident. Not only does Stump "become a man" he also sees the value of living as a misfit through playing with Eva's three-legged dog. About the dog Iddie says, "Did that dog look like it was having a good time? ... Did it look like she was happy to be alive? ... Did it look to you like she felt sorry for herself? ... Now, you're my son and I love you no matter what ... but you know, Stump, I'd hate like the devil to think that you didn't have any more sense than that poor, little dumb dog" (Page 115).

Finally, this section hints at forthcoming drama in many character's lives. Most notably during her picnic with Ruth, Iddie mentions that she would kill for her: "You know, Ruth, I'd kill for you. Anybody that would ever hurt you, I'd kill them in a minute and never think twice about it" (Page 86). Keen readers will remember Mrs. Threadgoode mentioning a murder charge against Iddie and wonder whether these two scenes are connected. Also, this section hints at the drama in Artis Peavey's life. Despite his mother's wishes, he moves to Slagtown, Alabama. At the time, Slagtown was the South's answer to the Harlem Renaissance. The twelve blocks of Slagtown were filled with bars and clubs playing jazz music, hosting poetry readings, and otherwise elevating black culture for the black community. In addition to the glitz and glamour, Slagtown was also notorious for drug and alcohol abuse, violent fights, and police brutality. Readers may remember Artis Peavey's penchant for violence from the previous section and realize that moving to Slagtown will provide him many opportunities to find trouble.

Discussion Question 1

Why is the scene where Iddie reveals her bee charming skills to Ruth so pivotal to the story of their relationship and in understanding what drew them together despite their differences?

Discussion Question 2

How does Iddie help Stump overcome having lost his arm? How does this decision highlight her parenting differences from Ruth?



Discussion Question 3

How does Slagtown compare / contrast to Whistle Stop? Which town do you think is better at characterizing the era in which the story is set? Why?

Vocabulary

Heathen, linoleum, venetian, holster, teeming, viaduct, primeval, sepia, octoroon, brogan, promenade, resplendent.



Pages 123 - 156

Summary

Pages 123 - 156

At Rose Terrace Nursing Home, Mrs. Threadgoode tells Evelyn about Railroad Bill, the bandit that threw food out of moving trains so the residents of Troutville wouldn't starve during the depression. Sheriff Grady was so outraged that he couldn't catch Railroad Bill that he hired twenty extra officers just to ride the trains searching for him. His identity was never discovered. Mrs. Threadgoode also mentions The Dill Pickle Club, which Iddie started. The club met once a month as an excuse to drink in excess and tell tall tales. The Dill Pickles prided themselves on their ability to tell believable lies. The Dill Pickle Club's other mission was to harass Reverend Scroggins, a teetotaler. Mrs. Threadgoode also tells the story of when her son, Albert, was born. She and Cleo had tried, unsuccessfully, for many years to have a baby, and Mrs. Threadgoode believes Albert was conceived almost by Immaculate Conception. Albert was born with a birth defect that rendered him childlike for his entire life, but that didn't stop Ninny and Cleo from desperately loving him.

One afternoon while Iddie and Stump are playing in the yard (1938), Stump is excited to find an unopened can of sauerkraut. He realizes that Railroad Bill must have thrown it from the train for the residents of Troutville, and he is filled with deep respect. When Stump suggests that Railroad Bill is the bravest man in town, Iddie says that in fact, Big George is. She tells the story of how Big George saved her from being eaten by hogs when she was only three-years-old. When Stump claims that his Uncle Julian, who had shot a twelve-point buck the week previous was also brave, Iddie scoffs saying, "You don't have to be too brave to shoot some poor dumb animal with a twenty-gauge shotgun" (Page 131). Iddie also says that Stump's mama, Ruth, is the bravest person she knows.

For Stump's birthday that year, Ruth and Iddie arrange for Miss Fancy, the circus elephant, to come and give all the kids rides. Of course only the white children are allowed at the party, but Iddie hangs a picture of the elephant in the café for the colored children to see. Naughty Bird becomes obsessed with the elephant and refuses to eat until she is allowed to see her in person. At first, the adults ignore her demands thinking she will forget about them, but when Naughty Bird begins wasting away, her parents, Onzell and Big George, begin to worry. When it's clear that Naughty Bird is near death, Big George is beside himself, begging Iddie to help him save her. That night, Iddie disappears, and the next morning at dawn, triumphantly walks through the streets of Troutville with Miss Fancy and her trainer, JW Moldwater. The visit brings great joy to the kids of Troutville, and saves Naughty Bird's life.



Analysis

The connection between Idgie and Evelyn becomes stronger in this section as Evelyn lies in bed thinking constantly about killing herself. The only thing that distracts her from the desperate desires are thoughts of Whistle Stop. The place has become more real to her, she thinks, than her own life with Ed in Birmingham. Evelyn feels so repressed and constricted in her life that her imagination is the only escape. She lives vicariously through the stories of Idgie's high jinks, and they are the only thing in her life that bring her joy. As Evelyn begins to realize what is making her so unhappy in her life, readers can expect that her character will undergo a major awakening and transformation.

This section also introduced Railroad Bill, a character who, like Idgie, believes that the black people in Troutville should live a better life. Railroad Bill somehow manages to intercept the Whistle Stop trains carrying food and throw tinned food (or frozen turkeys) off the train for the residents of Troutville. The idea that Railroad Bill would be able to strike so many times without being caught suggests that he is likely working with members of the train line not only to receive the schedules, but also to pull off his stunt without being caught. This section also addresses how trains are the lifeblood of Whistle Stop, Alabama. Everything in town has been set up for a train-centered life, and because trains are no longer used with the same regularity that they once were, readers can expect to see the town struggle as trains fall out of fashion.

Also in this section, Idgie manages to convince Miss Fancy's trainer to take the elephant for a stroll through Troutville. Although it's not mentioned explicitly, it appears that Idgie bought JW Moldwater drinks at Eva Bates' bar all night, and beat him in a hand of poker. These activities would have been outrageous for a woman to partake in openly at the time, but Idgie is a pillar of her community and will do whatever it takes to get her way, especially if it's for the betterment of someone else's life.

Discussion Question 1

What do Ninny Threadgoode's stories offer Evelyn? Why do you think Evelyn is so drawn to this woman and her stories?

Discussion Question 2

How does race have an impact upon the lives of all the Peavey children--Jasper, Artis, Willie Boy, Naughty Bird? What options are available to them to better their lives?

Discussion Question 3

Who would you say is the main protagonist of the novel? Remember, a protagonist should undergo some type of character growth and change as the novel progresses. Does this answer surprise you? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Bandit, teetotaler, etiquette, trough, gauge, wanderlust, bugger, rove, petit, plume.



Pages 157 - 200

Summary

Pages 157 - 200

Two weeks after Ruth leaves Whistle Stop to marry Frank Bennett (1924), Iddie steals her brother Julian's car and drives to Georgia. There, she pretends to be a concerned cousin of Ruth's inquiring about Frank's character, and learns that he is a stand-up guy. She also learns that he has a glass eye, an old war injury. On the morning of Ruth's wedding, Iddie drives to Georgia again and watches Ruth walk to the church in her white dress. Although she doesn't go inside the church, and Ruth doesn't see her, Iddie lays on the car horn during the ceremony as her protest.

When Evelyn visits Mrs. Threadgoode at the nursing home after Easter (1986), she begins to tell Evelyn about the time Seymore Pinto, a famous murderer, was transported through Whistle Stop after being electrocuted in the electric chair. The narrative then jumps back to 1940, when Stump learns that Mr. Pinto's body is going to be transported on the 7:15 train through Whistle Stop, and that they even have to transfer trains at the station, so there's a chance he'll be able to see the killer's coffin. Stump grabs his camera, invites his crush, Peggy, and rushes down to the train yard. When the train arrives, Grady gives Stump permission to take a photo of the coffin, but has to leave momentarily to check on the transfer, leaving the kids alone with the body. With Peggy's help, Stump pries open the coffin lid, takes a photo, and screams at the sight of the body, dropping the camera in the coffin before sprinting away. Later, Grady returns the camera to the café with a laugh, saying that Stump accidentally broke Seymore Pinto's nose.

The reader learns a bit more about Frank Bennett (1924) and learns that he is not the stand-up guy Iddie has been lead to believe he is. In fact, Frank is a violent sex maniac who has slept with half the women in town, and raped as many colored women. Two years after his marriage to Ruth, Iddie arrives on the doorstep and says to Ruth, "Look, I don't want to bother you. I know you're probably very happy and all ... I mean, I'm sure you are, but I just wanted you to know that I don't hate you and I never did. I still want you to come back, and I'm not a kid anymore, so I'm not gonna change" (Page 178). Without waiting for Ruth's response, Iddie turns around and leaves. She continues to travel back and forth between Alabama and Georgia, but never again speaks with Ruth during the visits. Instead, she travels around asking about Frank, and one day, a woman tells her that Frank has been beating his wife (Ruth). Enraged, Iddie tracks Frank down at the barbershop and threatens to kill him if he ever touches Ruth again. When she gets home, Eva makes her promise not to ever go back there again. Iddie promises, but they both know she is lying.

Later, Iddie receives a letter from Ruth, which is actually just a Bible verse torn out of the King James: "Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following thee: for



whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and they God will be my God” (Page 191). Iddie knows Ruth is asking for her, and she immediately grabs Big George, Cleo, Julian, and Willy Weems, and drives out to Georgia to collect her. When Frank, who recognizes Iddie immediately as the woman who threatened him in the barber shop, tries to stop Ruth from leaving, he spots Big George casually leaning against the truck, holding his knife. Frank makes no attempt to stop Ruth, whom he has no idea is already three months pregnant with their child. Ruth returns to the Threadgoode home in Alabama, where she will spend the rest of her life. When the baby is born, Poppa Threadgoode gives Iddie \$500 to start up a business to support her family, which is how the Whistle Stop Café is born. When anyone asks about the baby’s father, Iddie tells them that Frank Bennett was crushed to death by an armored truck.

Analysis

The most important element in this section is Ruth’s decision to leave Frank and move in with Iddie. Despite the fact that Ruth left her to get married, Iddie never stopped loving her and remained faithful to her throughout the years. Even though Ruth broke her heart, Iddie still wanted Ruth to be happy, which is why she didn’t interrupt the wedding and didn’t try to convince Ruth to leave Frank. She checked up on Frank periodically, just to be sure he would take care of Ruth, and it wasn’t until she learned that Frank was a violent alcoholic that she intervened. However, Iddie wanted the decision to leave Frank to be left up to Ruth, which is why she waited until Ruth reached out to go get her. It’s unclear why Ruth stayed with an abusive husband as long as she did, but it may have been out of guilt: “Frank felt the love inside she had for Iddie. It had slipped out somehow, in her voice, her touch; she didn’t know how, but she believed he must have known and that’s why he despised her. She had lived with that guilt and taken the beatings and the insults because she thought she deserved them” (Page 195).

If due to her virtuous upbringing Ruth felt conflicted about her lingering feelings for Iddie, it’s possible that she might have felt she deserved the beatings. It is interesting to note that Ruth used a Bible verse to reach out to Iddie. Ruth must have known that her romantic relationship with Iddie would be rekindled, which is why it is particularly interesting that she would have used a conservative Bible verse to end her relationship with Frank. While she hasn’t exactly “lost” her religion, she’s clearly trading in one set of “family values” for another.

Despite Frank’s violent temper, it’s intriguing that he does little to prevent Ruth from leaving him. While he might have been intimidated by Big George and the rest of Iddie’s crew, it seems out of character to Frank to remain impassive. Readers should expect Frank to lash out at Iddie and Ruth later in the novel.



Discussion Question 1

Why did Ruth leave Idgie and marry Frank? What made her finally leave him?

Discussion Question 2

Is domestic violence viewed differently today than it was in Ruth's time? Do you see any changes in Ruth's character after she leaves her abusive marriage?

Discussion Question 3

Compare / contrast the characters of Ruth and Idgie. What do you think drew these two women together? Why do you think their relationship continues to work, decades later?

Vocabulary

Maniacal, apprehend, reminisce, reluctant, feign, dandy, hale, offend, ponder, reckon, cellophane, appoint, enrage, baying, talcum, tonic, baffle, sentiment, armored.



Pages 201 - 253

Summary

Pages 201 - 253

This section opens with two pickup trucks quietly pulling up to Whistle Stop Café. Wordlessly, both trucks empty and KKK Klansmen surround the café holding signs warning, “Beware of the invisible empire. The torch and the rope are hungry” (Page 203). Sheriff Grady, who is a local Klansman and is at the café says, “Them’s not our boys.” One of the Klansmen stares straight at Ruth, who’s holding the baby, and doesn’t look away even when Grady comes outside to speak with them. A few minutes later, Grady returns and the Klansmen leave. The chapter ends by hinting that Frank Bennett, Ruth’s ex-husband, comes back that night, alone. The next chapter is a newspaper clipping from the Valdosta Gazette with a headline screaming that a local man, Frank Bennett, has gone missing.

Three days later (December 18, 1930), Grady and a detective from Georgia arrive at the café searching for clues about Frank Bennett’s disappearance. They have reason to believe that he came to Whistle Stop a few days ago, and are now searching for clues to his whereabouts. Big George is stirring barbecue in a pot with Artis when the detectives begin harassing him. He swears he doesn’t know anything about Frank’s disappearance, and the cops eventually leave him alone, with Grady complimenting Big George’s reputation of making the best barbecue in the South. The detectives then stop inside the café for a piece of pie, and it seems as if one of the detectives is suspicious of Idgie. They don’t seem to realize that Frank Bennett is Ruth Jamison’s ex-husband, and it’s lucky that Ruth is out of town visiting Momma Threadgoode, who has been ill.

The next day, the suspicious detective returns to the café by himself. He tells Idgie that he knows who she is – that she threatened Frank Bennett in the barber shop, and that she came with her “black buck” to take Ruth away from Frank at knifepoint. He also suggests, however, that he knows Frank Bennett was a terrible man. Frank even impregnated the detective’s daughter, leaving her a poor, single mother. The detective is warning Idgie that if any evidence is ever found, he’ll have to come back and arrest her, which he would hate to do. The next few chapters are newspaper clippings announcing that the search for Frank Bennett’s body has been called off, that Idgie’s mother has died, and that Artis Peavey, who has moved to Birmingham, has married a “thick-lipped black beauty”.

In 1986, Evelyn visits Mrs. Threadgoode, this time bringing carrot sticks as their snack. She has joined Weight Watchers, lost some weight, and now feels a bit more confident. Mrs. Threadgoode suggests that Evelyn sell Mary Kay cosmetics since she has such beautiful skin. A few days later, Evelyn is at the grocery store feeling extremely confident in her new diet, when a teenage boy brushes past her and makes a nasty comment toward her. Confident in her new skin, and determined to rectify the misunderstanding,



Evelyn waits for the boy in the parking lot. When she confronts him, the boy says “Fuck you, bitch” and punches her in the face. Evelyn leaves the scene of the altercation feeling “old, fat, and worthless all over again” (Page 233). Later, instead of being outraged about the boy’s actions, Evelyn feels freed. She has tiptoed through her entire life out of fear of being called names: She had stayed a virgin so she wouldn’t be called a tramp or a slut; had married so she wouldn’t be called an old maid, faked orgasms so she wouldn’t be called frigid; had children so she wouldn’t be called barren; had not been a feminist because she didn’t want to be called queer or a man hater; never nagged or raised her voice so she wouldn’t be called a bitch...” (Page 237), and now, despite her careful execution, she had come face-to-face with her greatest fear in the parking lot. For the first time in her life, Evelyn is angry. She invents an alter ego, Towanda the Avenger, whose only goal in life is to right terrible wrongs, usually through violence.

War begins taking over the lives of the residents at Whistle Stop (1944). Big George and Onzell are emotionally sideswiped when the body of their son, Willie Boy, is sent back on the “coloreds only” car of the train. After the funeral, Artis heads to where he heard the man who killed Willie Boy lives, in the hopes of finding him and settling the score.

Analysis

In this section, the murder Idgie had been accused of is finally revealed. People then and now believe that Idgie killed Frank Bennett to protect Ruth, just as she promised to do when they were teenagers. It’s interesting to note that the detective investigating the murder is in no rush to arrest Idgie – he warns her that if any evidence is found he’ll have to take her downtown – and even suggests that Frank got what was coming to him. This is a small-town view of justice that is quaint and even somewhat romantic. However, it begs the question of whether or not Frank Bennett actually received justice. Had Frank actually been a decent human being who had mistreated the detective, rather than a vulgar animal who had abused everyone in his life, would his murder still be ignored based on the detective’s bias? Tight-knit communities, particularly in the South, had a reputation of covering things up for the neighbors, keeping up appearances, and not rocking the boat. While it may seem somewhat romantic, particularly when the “good guy” gets ahead, it is still a dangerous practice to promote.

Throughout the novel, many more pieces of Frank Bennett’s murder will fall into place and the events leading up to his death will be fully revealed. For now, it seems that Frank Bennett arrived with his KKK buddies – in full cloaks and headdress – to spook Idgie and Ruth. When Frank saw that Ruth had had a baby, he decided to come back, on his own, later that night. It appears that there was a touse and Frank was killed. Ruth was out of town visiting Idgie’s sick mother – who dies later in the section – so she is completely unaware not only of Frank’s death, but who might have been involved in the murder. When the detectives come to Whistle Stop to investigate, they head first to the black men, Big George and Artis, which would have been commonplace. This highlights the segregation and racial profiling that was common in the 1930’s. Big George and Artis were suspects simply because of their skin color – there was no other



evidence against them. In the end, Grady decides to let Big George go because he makes the best barbecue in town, as if that means he couldn't also be a killer.

Artis continues the murderous theme when, after his brother, Willie Boy, is killed in a bar fight during the war, rushes out to find his killer and settle the score. It is suggested that Artis cuts out the man's heart and leaves it in a paper sack a few blocks from his home. Readers will likely remember Artis' boyhood affinity for knives, and the motivation of his dear brother's death would certainly be motivation for Artis to carve out the literal heart of the man who had symbolically stolen his. It is interesting to note that the community is aggrieved not only that Willie Boy is dead, but also that he died at the hands of another black soldier, and not in wartime combat. The soldier who killed Willie Boy thought it unforgivable that Big George, Willie Boy's father, would work for white folk. Willie Boy was deeply proud of his father's sacrifices and lashed out to protect his family's honor. When modern day readers look back at the civil rights movement, many believe that the African-Americans formed a united front against the whites. This section highlights the divide and conflict within the community.

Finally, the reader begins to see the great change that Evelyn's character is beginning to undertake. The fight in the grocery store parking lot forces her to face her darkest fear: being judged. Although the altercation initially depresses Evelyn and throws her off her successful diet, she is eventually able to regroup, empowered by the fact that she no longer cares what other people, including her own husband, think of her. Her transformation is not yet complete, however. On the outside, she is beginning to recognize and appreciate her skills. She is no longer concerned with others' opinions of her. But on the inside, she has created a powerful persona, Towanda the Avenger, who, in Evelyn's imagination, battles everyone from child molesters to politicians. Evelyn finds great peace in her daydreams; yet, she is still too afraid to tackle the societal changes Towanda the Avenger battles in her real life. Readers should expect Evelyn's confidence to grow as she relies less on her imaginings and more on her real life for strength.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think of the revenge that Artis takes on the man who murdered his brother? Do you understand his rage? Do you think he had any other option for justice?

Discussion Question 2

How do you feel about a character like Grady Kilgore being the Whistle Stop sheriff, member of the Ku Klux Klan, and friend to Idgie and Ruth at the same time?



Discussion Question 3

How do you see Evelyn beginning to face her fears and manage her revenge fantasies? What does this tell you about her character growth, and who can be credited for this change?

Vocabulary

Scrutinize, nonchalant, sissify, gunmetal, venture, incline, blitzen, uncouth, venereal, officiate, nuptial, viand, hysterical, provoke, insidious, magnanimous, indelible, lacquer.



Pages 254 - 299

Summary

Pages 254 - 299

Idgie visits Eva Bates across the river and announces that Ruth has moved in with Cleo and Ninny. She says it's because she lied to her – Idgie told Ruth she was going to visit her sister but really went camping alone in the woods: “I was beginning to feel kinda trapped, like I needed to get out for awhile. So I lied. What’s the big deal?” (Page 258). Eva points out a sad looking woman who’ll go home with anyone who buys her a drink and says, ‘Now there’s a woman who’s got her freedom.’ After contemplating Eva’s comparison, Idgie rushes home to rethink her relationship with Ruth. They make up soon after. Meanwhile, Stump leads his high school football team to local victory despite his handicap.

One afternoon, Idgie pulls Stump aside to chastise him for turning down Peggy Hadley’s invitation to the Sadie Hawkins dance. Not only had Stump turned the girl down, he had told her to “come back when she had grown some tits” (Page 263). Idgie is furious that Stump would even talk to a woman like that, and she demands to know why he’s so angry. When he won’t answer her questions, Idgie begins to badger him on why he’s never had a girlfriend, or why he’s never even asked a girl to the movies. Despite his best efforts to evade Idgie’s questions, Stump finally admits that he’s afraid a girl will want to have sex with him and will then laugh at his arm. Realizing that Stump is afraid of intimacy, Idgie embraces him, tells him to pack an overnight bag, and then drives him across the river to have sex with Eva Bates.

In 1949, Artis Peavey sits on his porch watching the dogcatcher come down the street. He sees his friend After John’s scraggly dog digging in the garbage, and watches in surprise as the dogcatcher nets him. Artis calmly tells the dogcatcher that that’s someone’s dog, but the dogcatcher won’t listen. Artis knows that the dog is After John’s only pride in life, and that if something happens to the dog, After John might kill himself. Artis runs into town to try to call After John, but he doesn’t have a nickel for the phone, and a white man is talking on the line anyway. After a hectic fifteen minutes of trying to find After John, Artis finally runs back home, pulls out his pocketknife, and cuts the scraggly dog from the ropes. Apologizing, he watches the dog happily scamper away, but just then, the dogcatcher smashes him with a blackjack. Artis is arrested for attempted murder of a city official and sentenced to ten years in prison. When Idgie catches wind of the disastrously unfair verdict, she and Grady start their fight to free him. It takes six months, but on July 11, 1948, they travel to the prison to pick him up after his release. They drive him back home to see his family, but he jumps out of the car in Birmingham, promising to be back by the end of the day, but isn’t seen again for a week.



In 1986, Mrs. Threadgoode says that some residents of Rose Terrace Nursing Home resent having colored nurses because they believe that deep down, all colored people hate white people and would sooner kill them than care for them. She disagrees, saying that she's known too many kind colored people to believe they hate all whites. The scene changes to 1947, when Onzell takes care of Ruth, dying from cancer, in the final moments before her last breath. On the next page, the reader sees Dot Weems' report that Ruth has passed away. Back in 1986, Evelyn smashes the car of a teenage girl who talks back to her in the parking lot.

In 1948, Stump takes Peggy to the sweetheart dance at Ildgie's urging. Ildgie plans the entire evening for them, and is pleased to see them enjoying themselves when they arrive at the café that evening. Before saying goodnight, Peggy takes off her glasses and Stump realizes he's never really seen her eyes before. In that moment, he falls in love with Peggy and they are married soon after. A year later, Clarissa Peavey, Jasper's oldest daughter, whose skin is very light, is "passing" in a department store, buying perfume. Artis recognizes her and walks over to greet her even though she doesn't quite recognize him. Mortified to be caught as a black woman passing as white, Clarissa ignores Artis's greeting and the shop girl calls security in a panic: "THIS NIGGER WAS PAWING MY CUSTOMER!" she screams (Page 297). After Artis is ejected from the store, the shop girl says to Clarissa, "Just another drunk Negro ... see what happens when you're nice to them?"

Analysis

Ruth moves out after Ildgie lies to her about her whereabouts. Ildgie tells Eva that she needed some time alone in the woods because she sometimes feels suffocated in her life. Eva intervenes by reminding Ildgie of what Ruth gave up to come live with her, and how heartbroken Ildgie would be if Ruth left her for good. It is also suggested that Eva sent an anonymous note to Ruth, which prompted her to take Ildgie back. This shows not only how close-knit the community is, but also how they rally around and support each other. It also highlights the age-old saying that in small communities, everyone is involved in everyone else's business. The theme of meddling in other people's lives is again returned to when Ildgie takes Stump down to Eva's place to lose his virginity. When Ildgie learns of Stump's fear of being intimate with a woman because of his arm, she takes it upon herself to rectify the problem so that Stump can move on with his life in the way Ildgie sees fit, by taking his relationship with Peggy to the next level. Most kids would be horrified to have their parents intervene in their sex lives, but Fried Green Tomatoes only highlights the benefit of close community, rarely the downfalls. Everyone is involved in everyone else's lives, so much so that Dot Weems' daily newspapers include tedious gossip about community members' daily lives, but there is never a backlash. Ildgie is involved in the lives of the hobos, the African-Americans, the drunks, and the neighbors without repercussion. Even her constant annoyance of Reverend Scroggins – which many readers might find offensive – is presented as good natured and humorous.



This is clearly contrasted with Artis Peavey's life. Whenever he tries to intervene on someone else's behalf, he is met with fierce consequences, from being called a molester to being thrown in jail for attempted murder. This is due only to the fact that he is a black man in an oppressively racist community. The structure of the novel is such that these contrasts, even when they happen years apart, can be conveyed for maximum literary impact. The contrast of violent outbursts is utilized again during Evelyn's second parking lot altercation. Here, readers cheer for Evelyn, who has begun to embrace Towanda the Avenger, because she is standing up for herself. Readers have no need to fear that Evelyn will be arrested or detained. Instead, they can be thrilled that she is finally standing up for herself, a stark example of how society's view of violence has changed over the past fifty years.

Discussion Question 1

How does Whistle Stop characterize life in a small town? Based on Ninny's narrative, would you want to live in a close-knit neighborhood like Whistle Stop? Why or why not? Do you think this is an accurate or romanticized portrayal?

Discussion Question 2

What does the light-skinned Clarissa's encounter with her dark-skinned Uncle Artis say about life as a black Southerner?

Discussion Question 3

The importance of food in the fabric of everyday life is a central theme in this book. For example, Evelyn and Mrs. Threadgoode bond over the treats Evelyn brings. What does Evelyn's battle with her weight say about contemporary society and women's relationships with food and their weight? Are these struggles evident in the lives of Ninny, Idgie, or Ruth?

Vocabulary

Snood, chitlins, begrudgingly, impregnate, hysterical, demolish, berserk, interject, myopic, prestigious, debutante.



Pages 300 - 352

Summary

Pages 300 - 352

One day while visiting with Mrs. Threadgoode, Evelyn mentions that she wishes she had been born black because “colored” people “just seem to fit in with each other” (Page 302). Mrs. Threadgoode agrees that black people make the best barbecue – she would pay any price for the delicious barbecue Big George used to make outside the café – but that black people are always trying to look white, bleaching their skin and straightening their hair. The narrative then jumps back in time to when Naughty Bird falls in love with a man who is, in turn, in love with a “high yellow” woman. She spends months trying to lighten her skin and straighten her hair to no avail. She lives in an alcoholic depression until the man dies and she feels that she can move on with her life.

On September 21, 1986, Evelyn drives to Highland Avenue Presbyterian Church, a predominately African-American church, to join in a service. She isn't quite sure what to expect, and is surprised when she sees all the well-dressed, rich people sitting in the pews. When the choir starts, she nearly falls out of her seat, and even though she was never a religious person, is deeply moved by the pastor's emotional sermon. Suddenly, Evelyn feels the weight of her hatred, her deep anger and desire for violence, sliding off her shoulders: “Mrs Threadgoode had been right. She had taken her troubles to the Lord, and she had been relieved of them. Evelyn took a deep breath and the heavy burden of resentment and hate released itself into thin air, taking Towanda along with them. She was free” (Pages 312 – 313). When the congregation turns to greet each other, Evelyn shakes hands with a beautiful black woman, whom she doesn't know is Jasper Peavey's eldest daughter. The narrative then shifts back in time to 1950, when Jasper Peavey is named Railroad Employee of the Month, and 1955, when the newspaper reports that the rail line through Whistle Stop is set to close. Evelyn continues visiting Mrs. Threadgoode but notes that the old woman is beginning to lose her mind.

In 1958, Jasper Peavey is a few months away from retirement on the railroad lines. He considers the life he's lead, and whether it was a good one. He married a middle class black woman, worked hard every day of his life, and put all four of his children through college so they would never have to work for tips. He moved his family into an all-white neighborhood and refused to leave even after the Klan bombed his home. Jasper would have been proud of his life if he hadn't realized that his grandchildren were embarrassed of the way he “bowed and scraped” to white people: “It was clear to Jasper that his time was over now, just like his old friends rusting out in the yards. He wished it could have been different; he had gotten through the only way he had known how. But he had gotten through” (Page 320). The narrative then jumps back to 1939, when the café is thriving, and everyone is on the lookout for Railroad Bill, who has



recently thrown seventeen government hams off a train for the residents of Troutville, much to Grady's dismay.

In 1986, Stump is sitting at the dinner table with his family – his wife Peggy, daughter Norm, and granddaughter Linda, telling stories. He tells them the story of Railroad Bill, and how as a child, he discovered his Aunt Iddie in the bathroom with coal soot all over her face and a stocking cap in her hand. He realized then that she was Railroad Bill, and that Grady Kilgore had been the one tipping her off to the railroad times. He also tells the story of his Aunt Iddie bailing out the son of Reverend Scroggins – her archenemy – from jail and making him promise to never tell anyone that she had saved him. That same year, Evelyn visits Mrs. Threadgoode and she tells Evelyn the story about Iddie being arrested for Frank Bennett's murder. It was in 1955, over twenty years after Frank had gone missing, and someone found Frank's truck in the river near Eva Bates' house. Iddie and Big George were immediately named as suspects, arrested, and put on trial.

The narrative then shifts to 1955, describing the trial in detail. Since George is a Negro, he is not allowed to take the stand in his own defense, so it is Iddie's words that will seal their fate. As usual, Iddie is quick tongued and sassy. She claims that on the evening of Frank Bennett's murder, she and Big George were at her mother's house with Ruth, but neither Ruth nor Mother could testify to their whereabouts because both are now dead. Everyone in court knows the trial is going terribly until the defense calls a surprise witness. Reverend Scroggins, Iddie's sworn enemy, takes the stand to say that Iddie and George were, in fact, at one of his tent revivals on the evening of Frank Bennett's murder. The revival, he claims, lasts three days and three nights, and because Iddie is such a leader in their church community, there is no way she could have gone missing during that time without the community noticing. He also claims that the church congregation has joined him today to testify on her behalf. When Iddie looks around, she sees the "congregation" is a large group of the hobos she and Ruth have helped over the years, all cleaned up and wearing suits. She watches with tears in her eyes as each man takes the stand to fiercely testify on her behalf. The judge doesn't even wait for the jury's verdict before setting Iddie and George free. Iddie is shocked. She doesn't understand why Reverend Scroggins, whom she's spent so many years terrorizing, would come to her defense: "I'll see you in church on Sunday, Sister Threadgoode," he says with a wink before leaving the courtroom.

In 1986, Mrs. Threadgoode tells Evelyn that Iddie really had been at her mother's house on the evening of Frank Bennett's murder, and that she only would have stood trial to protect someone else, but Mrs. Threadgoode doesn't know who. The narrative then jumps to 1969, with the announcement of Smokey Lonesome's death. The narrative suggests that Smokey Lonesome had loved Ruth all his life and that he had died from a broken heart after Ruth's passing.



Analysis

While Evelyn sits in the church parking lot debating whether or not to attend the service, her memories bring the reader through two decades of “white” thought during the Civil Rights Movement. She recalls growing up with black housecleaners and nannies – all female – but a deep fear of black men, a fear that plagues her even now, sitting in a church parking lot nearly thirty years later. Evelyn’s view of black people is more recognizable as a “modern day” view meant to affect modern, white readers, who were Flagg’s primary audience at the time of the novel’s publication. Many readers will recognize themselves in Evelyn’s views – she considers herself to be liberal and open-minded – she is deeply offended by and has never used the word “nigger” – yet she has had very limited interactions with black people. While she judges her parents and grandparents for their simplified view of black people – “they thought most were amusing and wonderful, childlike people, to be taken care of” (Page 308) – yet her views are just stereotypical. She wishes she were black because they always seem so happy. In her mind, black women are bold and unafraid. Perhaps this is why she gave her counterpoint such a seemingly black name, Towanda. Although Evelyn is well intentioned in attending a black church, she continues to focus solely on their pretty faces and cute clothes, making them seem as if they are infants.

After Evelyn’s visit to the church, which she finds completely revitalizing, a comparison is made to Jasper Peavey: “It would have been wonderful, too, if Evelyn had known that the young woman who shook her hand had been the eldest daughter of Jasper Peavey, Pullman porter, who, like herself, had made it through” (Page 313). It seems a bit cheap to compare Evelyn’s struggle to find identity with Jasper Peavey’s struggle to overcome racism and segregation, but nevertheless, that is the thread Flagg is drawing. Through Jasper’s experiences, the reader vividly sees how race relations have changed over the past three generations. As the 1960’s approach, Jasper’s grandchildren are embarrassed of his public service job. What was once commonplace behavior for a black man looking to get ahead in life is now considered demeaning to his entire race. This realization is both sad and triumphant for Jasper who sees that his “time” is now over. The new black community will never accept him and he will never assimilate to their changing ways. In a way, this realization is one all humans must come to. Evelyn is just starting to come into her own, but characters like Jasper and Mrs. Threadgoode are on their way out. This is why it’s so important, Mrs. Threadgoode says, to do the best living you can, to be the best person that you can, while you’re still able. This mantra is the novel’s overarching theme. Always be true to yourself and you will have a rewarding life.

This is certainly true in the case of Idgie Threadgoode, who has remained faithful only to herself for her entire life. She has been a good person, followed her dreams, and single-handedly bettered her community. In her greatest time of need, her trial for murder, the goodness she showered on her community is repaid in kind. Once again, the idea that secrets and lies can be a good thing is returned to when Reverend Scroggins, a stand-up Christian man, is willing to lie under oath in order to save Idgie – his sworn enemy – from what he believes to be an unfair fate. It’s interesting to note that while most



readers will have assumed for most the novel that Idgie did, in fact, kill Frank Bennett, it is now suggested that she is taking the fall for someone else, someone who may not be able to defend themselves as well as she could. Keen readers may pick up on the fact that since black people are not allowed to speak in their own defense, she may be “taking the bullet” for one of her black friends who, at the time, would have been automatically sentenced to death. Now that Ruth has died, Idgie has transplanted her protective spirit to someone else, and she continues to live by her belief that life is not worth living if you are doing it alone.

Discussion Question 1

Jasper Peavey's grandson is embarrassed by his grandfather's behavior toward white people. Discuss generational conflict and how life changed or did not change across the generations in both the Peavey and Threadgoode families.

Discussion Question 2

What drives Idgie to masquerade as Railroad Bill? What role did the economic devastation of the Great Depression play in the lives of Idgie, Ruth, Smokey, and everyone in Whistle Stop?

Discussion Question 3

What do Dot Weems' weekly dispatches tell us about the nature of life in a small town? Were you sorry to see Whistle Stop fade away? Why has this been the fate of so many small towns in America?

Vocabulary

Gabardine, agitator, genial, commendation, chaperone, cuspidor, transom, enamel, bewildered, liable, hellion, shindig, exasperated, gavel, alibi, revival, bedevil, viaduct.



Pages 353 - 395

Summary

Pages 353 - 395

On December 9, 1956, Dot Weems writes that the post office in Whistle Stop is set to close, just another closing in the long line that includes the Whistle Stop Café and the beauty shop. She lists some of the Whistle Stop residents that have moved away. She also reports that Vesta Adcock's house was broken into, and that someone stole her purse from her car while she was visiting the cemetery. It's clear that times are changing.

In 1986, Evelyn Couch brings Mrs. Threadgoode a plate of perfectly fried green tomatoes. While Mrs. Threadgoode is eating her meal, Evelyn gives Geneene, the nurse, an envelope of money and asks her to ensure that Mrs. Threadgoode is given any special food she wants while Evelyn is away. Before she leaves that afternoon, she gives Mrs. Threadgoode the phone number and address of where she'll be staying on her vacation. A few days later, Evelyn prepares to board her flight to Los Angeles. As she finishes her packing, Evelyn considers how she got to be so overweight: "Food had become the only thing she looked forward to, and candy, cakes, and pies were the only sweetness in her life" (Page 359). Her visit to the Martin Luther King Memorial Baptist Church had been a real turning point for her. She suddenly realized that she didn't want to die or live in depression; she wanted to live, and to live life to its fullest. She visited a doctor who told her, just as Mrs. Threadgoode had suspected, that her estrogen levels were low. She began taking a hormonal supplement, and within a month felt like a new woman. She signed up to start selling Mary Kay, had enjoyable sex with her husband, and began working out regularly.

In 1967, a two construction workers begin digging up the lot next to the old Threadgoode place. They are horrified to discover a lifetime's worth of fish, pig, and chicken skulls that Sipsey had prepared over her years of cooking for the café. One construction worker stares puzzled down at one of the skulls and says to his partner, "Hey, Hank ... You ever heard of a hog with a glass eye?" (Page 362). The narrative then flashes back to December 13, 1930, the night when Frank Bennett is killed. Ruth and Idgie have gone to Idgie's momma's house, and Sipsey is alone in the kitchen with eleven-year-old Artis. Suddenly, a drunk Frank Bennett bursts in through the kitchen door, points a gun at Sipsey, and snatches baby Stump from his crib. Sipsey tries to snatch the baby back from him, but Frank throws her against the wall and then cold-clocks her with the side of his gun. Even though Sipsey is gravely wounded, she chases after Frank as he tossed the baby into the front seat of the car. She smashes a five-pound skillet over his head, killing him instantly. Then she gingerly picks up the baby and brings him back to his crib: "Ain't nobody gonna get dis baby, so suh, not while I's alive." Then she turns to Artis and says, "Go get Big George. I done kilt me a white man, I done kilt him daid" (Page 364). When Big George arrives, he immediately enlists Artis



to help him dispose of the body. Artis is horrified to see that the dead white man has no head, which means that his grandmother, Sipsey, must have buried it somewhere. As he helps his father prepare Frank's body to be thrown in with that morning's barbecue, Artis can't help but feel excited: "He had a secret. A powerful secret that he would have as long as he lived. Something that would give him power when he was feeling weak. Something that only he and the devil knew. The thought of it made him smile with pleasure. He would never have to feel the anger, the hurt, the humiliation of the others, ever again. He was different" (Page 366). When the two detectives arrive later that day and taste Big George's famous barbecue, they cannot contain their glee, claiming it's the best barbecue they've ever tasted. Little do they know that they've just eaten Frank Bennett.

In 1986, Evelyn had been at the weight-loss ranch for nearly two months and lost over twenty pounds. She is having the time of her life, making new friends and falling in love with herself. She attributes all the good things in her life to her relationship with Mrs. Threadgoode. After befriendng the old woman, she not only began to imagine a better life for herself, she embraced it. Two months into her time at the lodge, however, Evelyn receives a letter from one of Mrs. Threadgoode's neighbors informing her that she has died. Evelyn is heartbroken and leaves the lodge immediately. She drives to the friend's home and is deeply moved to learn that Mrs. Threadgoode has left her an envelope of pictures and memorabilia from Whistle Stop. With the help of the neighbor, Evelyn drives all around Whistle Stop and Troutville, emotional and excited to see that everything, even in its abandoned state, is just as she imagined it. She is pleased to see Mrs. Threadgoode's home, but no longer clings to her friend's memories. She has her own life to lead.

Two years later, Evelyn visits Mrs. Threadgoode's grave to tell her that she has finally earned the pink Cadillac Mrs. Threadgoode always dreamed of for selling Mary Kay. The novel then informs the reader of the deaths of the rest of the Whistle Stop residents, including Artis Peavey, Smokey Lonesome, and Vesta Adcock. The novel suggests that Idgie Threadgoode is still alive, selling eggs at a roadside stand to the few passers by who stop in Whistle Stop. The novel ends with recipes from Sipsey's handwritten collection. In this way, the novel allows the lives and memories of its characters to live on with future generations.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, its primary focus is simply to sum up the lives of the characters that have kept Whistle Stop alive for the readers. The reader finally learns that Sipsey was responsible for killing Frank Bennett, risking her life to protect her friend Ruth's family. It is nice to note that despite all the racism and segregation, Sipsey feels the same strong love for Ruth that Idgie felt for her, a feat neither Mrs. Threadgoode nor Evelyn thought was possible. The realization of what Artis Peavey saw at such a young age helps explain his predilection for keeping secrets and for violence. It's interesting to note that both Idgie and Artis view secret keeping as a good, empowering thing. However, the secrets that Idgie keeps are viewed with romance and intrigue, yet the



secrets Artis keeps – even the exact same secrets – seem more menacing. In the context of the novel, readers should question why this is.

Finally, Evelyn's character comes full circle in the wake of Mrs. Threadgoode's death. Before she left for the weight loss lodge, Evelyn lived vicarious through other people – first Idgie and then Towanda. It isn't until she begins to “shed her baggage”, both literally and figuratively, that she can truly live her own life. Once she embraces who she is and what she can contribute to her community, much like Idgie did, Evelyn is on the fast track to happiness. In just two short years, she works her way up the ladder at Mary Kay, repairs her sex life, loses weight, and completely turns around her self-esteem. In this way, Evelyn could be viewed as the novel's main character since she is the one who undergoes the deepest transformation.

Finally, with the suggestion that Idgie Threadgoode is still alive and affecting her community – albeit in a very small way – leaves readers with the message that our stories and memories are what keep us alive long after we are dead. Flagg pays her dues to the white and black communities by honoring Idgie's antics and Sipseys' recipes at the novel's close.

Discussion Question 1

This novel has a great deal to say about race relations in the South. How did the black and white communities interact in this story both within and beyond the borders of Whistle Stop?

Discussion Question 2

What is Artis Peavey's secret? Do you think the events he witnessed as a child had an impact upon his later life?

Discussion Question 3

We never learn where Ninny came from or how she came to be adopted by the Threadgoodes, only that they took her in and treated her like a member of the family. This is only one example in a novel full of non-traditional families. What are some other examples of familial bonds that do not look like a traditional nuclear family? How does this author challenge and expand our understanding of the meaning and structure of family?

Vocabulary

Transient, annex, bizarre, haunches, inauguration, galoots, addlebrained, deterioration, cronies, trellis, despondent.



Characters

Idgie Threadgoode

Idgie Threadgoode is the novel's main character even though all of her scenes take place in flashback. From the time she was born, Idgie knew that she was different, but that didn't stop her from living the life she chose. She began dressing as a boy at an early age, chopped off her hair, and fell in love with Ruth Jamison. Before she met Ruth, she was best friends with her brother Buddy until he was tragically killed in a train accident that deeply affected Idgie. Idgie became reckless and wild, living in isolation from her family. Ruth and Idgie taught each other how to love, and they went on to lead a very happy life together raising their son, Stump. Even as a teenager, Idgie swore her undying love for Ruth and promised to kill anyone who ever harmed her. Throughout the novel, readers believe Idgie held true to her word by killing Ruth's ex-husband Frank Bennett, but it is later revealed that Idgie is innocent. Idgie is best characterized by her sharp tongue, her unrelenting humor, and her deep commitment to Whistle Stop. No matter who came through her doors, Idgie welcomed them as family. She fed and clothed hobos, fed her black neighbors throughout segregation, and bonded with any outcast or stray that came her way. Because the reader only gets to know Idgie through Mrs. Threadgoode's memories, her character remains stagnant, not really growing or evolving.

Evelyn Crouch

Evelyn Crouch is an overweight, depressed woman who travels weekly with her husband to Rose Terrace Nursing Home to visit her mother-in-law. At the beginning of the novel, Evelyn is so depressed that she overeats constantly and is obsessed with suicide. Through Ninny Threadgoode's stories, however, Evelyn begins to relax, often picturing herself as a citizen of Whistle Stop, rather than the overweight, unhappy woman that she truly is. Time passes, and the reader begins to see Evelyn's character change. She is no longer satisfied simply living vicariously through Mrs. Threadgoode's stories, she wants to live life for herself. At first, Evelyn's depression turns to rage and she invents an alter-ego, Tawonda, whom she imagines killing everyone that has ever harmed her, but she soon realizes that this is once again living solely in her imagination. Eventually, Evelyn's self-confidence grows enough to start acting out on her own desires. She visits a doctor to start hormone replacement, begins having satisfying sex for the first time in her life, and stops caring what everyone else thinks of her. She begins selling Mary Kay, and does well at it. At the end of the novel, she is spending the summer in a weight loss camp, where she loses 50 pounds and makes a circle of close friends. When Mrs. Threadgoode dies and Evelyn visits Whistle Stop for the first time, she is delighted to see first-hand the town she once inhabited in her dreams. She realizes, however, that this is not her life, and there are more exciting things in her future.



Ruth Jamison

Ruth Jamison is the love of Idgie Threadgoode's life. Ruth met Idgie when she came to Whistle Stop as a teacher, fell in love with the teenage girl, but was so afraid of her emotions that she returned to her previous life and married Frank Bennett, a vicious, violent man who often beat her. Around the time that Ruth fell pregnant, Idgie returned and brought Ruth back to Whistle Stop where the two spent the rest of their lives raising their son Stump and running the Whistle Stop Café. Ruth is characterized as being as beautiful as she was virtuous. She is portrayed as angelic and wholesome, a perfect literary foil to the unpredictable and raucous Idgie.

Dot Weems

Dot Weems is the local post woman at Whistle Stop. She writes a weekly newsletter "The Weems Weekly" which contains little more than town gossip.

Sipsey

Sipsey is the Negro cook that has been with the Threadgoode family for two generations. She is deeply devoted to Ruth, and nurses her through her cancer. She is responsible for administering the morphine overdose that killed Ruth and for killing Frank Bennett, Ruth's ex-husband. Through everything, it is clear that Sipsey would do anything for Ruth's benefit. She would never let her suffer. She is also the cook at Whistle Stop Café.

Big George

Big George is Sipsey's adopted son. She acquired him when a woman at the train station was giving away her baby. Even though Big George is not Sipsey's biological son, she loves him as if he were her own. Like his mother, Big George is deeply devoted to the Threadgoode family, particularly Idgie, and even risks going to jail as an accomplice to Frank Bennett's murder. He is acquitted, along with Idgie, of the crime.

Artis Peavey

Artis Peavey is one of the twins borne to Onzell and Big George. Art is dark black, like his father, and is frequently described as having blue gums. Unlike his twin brother, Jasper, Art lives a flamboyant, excessive life that sees him in and out of jail for most of his adulthood. Despite this, Art's zest for life is seen positively because of his good heart. Although misguided, Art is honest, loyal, and dependable (just not with his lovers). He takes the secret of Frank Bennett's true killer to his grave.



Jasper Peavey

Jasper Peavey is one of the twins borne to Onzell and Big George. Jasper is described as light skinned and freckled, like his mother. Unlike his twin brother, Artis, Jasper works hard and succeeds in his life, dedicating himself to the rail lines. Jasper works hard, enduring years of racist abuse – both by the passengers and the train line that he works for – securing a small pension for himself. He is able to put all four of his children through college, which he sees as a major achievement, even if he had to “shuck-and-jive” to achieve it.

Virginia (Ninny) Threadgoode

Virginia (Ninny) Threadgoode is the main narrator of the novel. She lives in Rose Terrace Nursing Home, where she recounts her happy childhood memories to Evelyn Crouch, who visits weekly. Throughout the novel, the reader sees Ninny eventually lose her memory, and she dies while Evelyn is on vacation. There is some question raised to the believability of Ninny’s stories.

Stump

Stump is Ruth’s son with her husband, Frank Bennett. When Bennett began beating Ruth, she decided to leave him and move in with Idgie before she knew she was pregnant. When Stump was born, Idgie raised him as if he were her own, including taking him to see Eva Bates when it was time to lose his virginity. Stump lost his arm in a railroad accident – which is how he earned his nickname – but never let it keep him down. He went on to have a successful high school football career, married his high school sweetheart, and had a family of his own.

Buddy Threadgoode

Buddy Threadgoode is the eldest Threadgoode child. He was extremely talented, charming, and handsome. He was also Idgie’s best friend growing up. He was killed in a railroad accident as a teenager. Many women, including Idgie and Eva Bates, never got over his death.

Eva Bates

Eva Bates is the redheaded siren that lives at the River Club and Fishing Camp down by the river. She is known as a supplier of alcohol and as an easy female companion, but she is one of Idgie’s best friends. Eva had been in love with Buddy Threadgoode, and she never got over his death. Now, she spends her days drinking, telling lies with the rest of the Dill Pickle Club, and entertaining men. Idgie sends Stump to see her when it’s time for him to lose his virginity. It’s likely that Stump is not the only one.



Grady Kilgore

Grady Kilgore is the town sheriff in Whistle Stop. He is an interesting character because he is so loved in the community, even though he is a known member of the KKK. Despite his affiliation, Kilgore treats the Negroes in his community with a modicum of respect, particularly Big George, whom he thinks cooks the best barbecue in town. He regularly teams up with Idgie on adventures and is a member of the Dill Pickle Club.

Frank Bennett

Frank Bennett is Ruth's husband and Stump's true father. As a teenager, Ruth fell under Frank's spell and agreed to marry him, thinking he would treat her well for the rest of her life. As soon as they were married, however, Frank began having affairs, drinking heavily, and beating Ruth. When Ruth ran away with Idgie, Frank, a member of the KKK, attempted to kidnap Stump. Sipsey killed him, and Big George boiled his body with the hogs and served him as barbecue to the passing officers investigating his disappearance.

Albert Threadgoode

Albert Threadgoode is Ninny Threadgoode's son with her husband, Cleo. Albert has an unknown birth defect that leaves him childlike his entire life. Despite his disability, Ninny is thrilled to have a child and cares for him everyday until he dies.

Smokey Lonesome

Smokey Lonesome is one of the first hobos the reader sees Idgie help. He arrives at the Whistle Stop Café early in the novel in search of food. He ends up staying for weeks, months, even years at a time throughout the novel. He is Idgie's best friend, and comes through for her during her murder trial by scrounging up a group of hobos to pose as church members, proving her with an alibi.

Reverend Scroggins

Reverend Scroggins is Idgie's arch nemesis throughout the novel. He once gave a sermon judging Eva Bates, for which Idgie never forgave him. She spent many years tormenting him by sending hobos to his house in search of liquor, and putting whistle pops in his car engine. Despite decades of harassment, Reverend Scroggins lies on the stand during Idgie's murder trial by giving her an alibi, which deeply surprises a grateful Idgie.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Weems Weekly

The Weems Weekly is the daily periodical that Dot Weems writes for the residents of Whistle Stop. In the letters, she documents the daily “news” which is usually just town gossip, complaints about her husband, and requests for volunteers at social events. These clippings provide a snapshot of a quaint, Southern life and add time stamps to many of the novel’s events.

The Dill Pickle Club

The Dill Pickle Club is the club Idgie Threadgoode forms with her friends. They meet occasionally and swap tall tales, seeing which among them is the best liar.

Trains

Trains are the lifeblood of Whistle Stop, Alabama. Everything in town has been set up for a train-centered life. Since trains are no longer used with the same regularity that they once were, readers see the town struggle as trains fall out of fashion.

Barbecue

Barbecue is the dish Big George is renowned for cooking. He uses this to his advantage after learning that his mother has killed Frank Bennett. He disposes of Frank’s body by barbecuing it and feeding it to the very detectives investigating the case.

Beehives

Beehives are a symbol of Idgie’s wild nature and her desire to be a secret keeper. During a picnic with Ruth while they are teenagers, Idgie tames the bees long enough to steal their honey, terrifying Ruth. For the rest of their lives, Ruth refers to Idgie as “the beekeeper” as a symbol of the way she also tamed Ruth’s heart.



Settings

The Whistle Stop Cafe

The Whistle Stop Café is the café that Idgie opens when Ruth moves back in with her and she realizes they will soon have a family to support. Idgie uses the café as a platform to change her community, feeding any homeless man that walks through the doors, and even serving her black neighbors despite strict segregation. Since The Whistle Stop Café is the only restaurant in town, it is the main meeting place and focal point of most of the novel's events.

Whistle Stop, Alabama

Whistle Stop, Alabama is where all of Mrs. Threadgoode's flashback memories take place. In the early to mid 1900's, Whistle Stop is portrayed as a tight-knit community where everyone is involved in other people's business. Though it is easy to develop a warm, romantic feeling toward Whistle Stop, the community is also a hotbed of social and political change. The story is presented through the sentimental musings of an aging woman. So, its details must be sifted to find the real truths about what life in Whistle Stop was truly like. This creates a rich, layered experience for readers.

Rose Terrace Nursing Home

Rose Terrace Nursing Home is where Mrs. Threadgoode lives and where Evelyn Crouch visits each week. Rose Terrace is an interesting setting because it provides context for the progression of race relations in the South. Even though the scenes at Rose Terrace take place in the late 1980's, there is still a strong sense of segregation. There are only white patients and black nurses, which both Mrs. Threadgoode and Evelyn find strange.

Troutville

Troutville is the black neighborhood near Whistle Stop where Big George and his family live. The residents of Troutville are subjected to the racism and segregation that was commonplace in the South during this era. The reader comes to love Big George and his family, which makes the treatment feel especially harsh. Many of the Troutville residents are impoverished. Their houses, shops, and roads, are often in disrepair.

Slagtown

Slagtown is the South's answer to the Harlem Renaissance. The twelve blocks of Slagtown are filled with bars and clubs playing jazz music, hosting poetry readings, and

otherwise elevating black culture for the black community. In addition to the glitz and glamour, Slagtown is also notorious for drug and alcohol abuse, violent fights, and police brutality. This is where Artis Peavey moves despite his mother's wishes.



Themes and Motifs

Being True To Yourself

For the most part, the novel sends a very strong message to readers that it is important to stay true to yourself if you want to achieve true happiness. The reader sees this most strongly in Idgie's character. Even as a child, Idgie was different from other little girls, and hints of her lesbianism – which never would have been acknowledged in the 1920's – was clear from an early age. She dressed like, acted like, and for all intents and purposes wanted to be, a boy. Despite the fact that she was ostracized for her "subversive" lifestyle, Idgie swore to herself and to Ruth that she would never change, suggesting that she would never let gender expectations bend her into a more "acceptable" version of a woman. She remained faithful only to herself for her entire life. She was a good person who followed her dreams and bettered her community. It is during her greatest time of need when she is on trial for murder that the goodness she showered on her community is repaid in kind. Idgie finds true happiness through her relationship with Ruth, and her choices are "validated" by her community when they take the stand for her during the trial.

Evelyn Couch, the only character in the novel that undergoes a transformation, must learn these lessons for herself. At the beginning of the novel, Evelyn is overweight, frustrated, and depressed. Through Ninny Threadgoode's stories about the carefree and determined Idgie, however, Evelyn learns to embrace, not suppress, her true desires. In this way, she learns how to stay true to herself. Before she leaves for the weight loss lodge, Evelyn had been living vicariously through other people – first Idgie and then Towanda. It isn't until she begins to "shed her baggage", both literally and figuratively, that she can truly live her own life. Once she embraces who she is and what she can contribute to her community, much like Idgie did, Evelyn is on the fast track to happiness. In just two short years, she works her way up the ladder at Mary Kay, repairs her sex life, loses weight, and completely turns around her self-esteem.

However, this theme seems only to reflect the lives of the novel's white characters, as many of the black characters were forced to change or hide everything about themselves if they wanted to succeed – and the goals they were allowed to aim for were far less lofty. A great example of this can be seen through Jasper Peavey's life story. At the end of the novel, Jasper is a few months away from retirement on the railroad lines. He considers the life he's led, and whether it was a good one. He married a middle class black woman, worked hard every day of his life, and put all four of his children through college so they would never have to work for tips. He moved his family into an all-white neighborhood and refused to leave even after the Klan bombed his home. Jasper would have been proud of his life if he hadn't realized that his grandchildren were embarrassed of the way he "bowed and scraped" to white people: "It was clear to Jasper that his time was over now, just like his old friends rusting out in the yards. He wished it could have been different; he had gotten through the only way he had known how. But he had gotten through" (Page 320). Despite this, in a way, Jasper's realization



is one all humans must come to. Evelyn is just starting to come into her own, but characters like Jasper and Mrs. Threadgoode are on their way out. This is why it's so important, Mrs. Threadgoode says, to do the best living you can, to be the best person that you can, while you're still able.

Female Sexuality

The role of women is explored in both the 1920's and 1980's settings of the novel primarily through the discussion of female sexuality. In the 1920's, it's clear that Iddie and Ruth develop a flirtatious romantic relationship, but it is never acknowledged, in the narrative or by any of the characters, as lesbian. This is an interesting view of sexuality – to ignore it completely – particularly because the relationship is primarily discussed in the 1980's, a time at which homosexual relationships were far more accepted. The theme of lesbianism is returned to at Iddie and Ruth's picnic, when Iddie pulls fresh honey from a beehive, terrifying Ruth. In response, Iddie says, "Just think, Ruth, I never did it for anybody else before. Now nobody in the whole world knows I can do that but you. I just wanted for us to have a secret together, that's all" (Page 86). Not only does this characterize Iddie as a tamer of wild things, it also symbolizes the "secret" sexual relationship Iddie desires to have with Ruth. There's something virginal about Iddie's confession and readers will be reading this passage on two levels: the literal and the symbolic. Iddie has never pulled honey from a hive before, but she has also never given herself sexually to someone, and this, given the time, is far more dangerous secret for the girls to keep.

After leaving Iddie, however, it appears that Ruth stayed with her abusive husband out of guilt: "Frank felt the love inside she had for Iddie. It had slipped out somehow, in her voice, her touch; she didn't know how, but she believed he must have known and that's why he despised her. She had lived with that guilt and taken the beatings and the insults because she thought she deserved them" (Page 195). If Ruth felt conflicted about her lingering feelings for Iddie, it's possible that, due to her virtuous upbringing, she might have felt she deserved the beatings. It is interesting to note that Ruth used a Bible verse to reach out to Iddie. Ruth must have known that her romantic relationship with Iddie would be rekindled, which is why it is particularly interesting that she would have used a conservative Bible verse to end her relationship with Frank. While she hasn't exactly "lost" her religion, she's clearly trading in one set of "family values" for another.

The reader also sees "subversive" female sexuality explored in the character of Eva Bates, a sometimes prostitute, or "floozy," who lives on the outskirts of town. In *Whistle Stop*, Eva is judged harshly – although always behind closed doors – for her behaviors. The thought of a sexually liberated woman was scandalous.

While women were certainly more liberated than they had been 50 years earlier, housewives like Evelyn still feel repressed by their traditional wifely roles in the 1980's. Evelyn is thoroughly unhappy with her sex life and is too timid to speak up about it. She is deeply embarrassed by the fact that her daughter has a more fulfilling sex life than she does. Evelyn acts as a literary foil to Iddie. Evelyn is concerned with other's



opinions of her and models her life to please others' expectations, while she remains deeply unfulfilled. As a teenager, Evelyn was so worried about getting a bad reputation that she never drank or had sex. Even when Ed began having affairs, Evelyn never felt like she could confront him because in her mind, sex was an off-limits topic. As a result of her self-induced oppression, Evelyn is terribly depressed, filling the void in her life with comforting junk food. The parallel between women's sexuality in the 1920's and 1980's is clearly drawn, and modern readers may be surprised to see how little expectations of virtue had changed, even sixty years later. This encourages readers to discuss the way female sexuality is viewed today, and what changes need to be made for women to be able to truly embrace their sexuality, without judgment or fear, freely.

Race Relations

Despite the fact that Ninny Threadgoode's memories are romanticized and nostalgic, the reader still catches glimpses of what life was truly like in the segregated South during the Depression. The reader most clearly sees the harsh reality by exploring the lives of the novel's African-American characters. Ninny seems to believe that all the black characters were appreciative of their jobs and had no desire to rise higher in society, but by reading between the lines, the reader begins to see how unfairly the residents of Troutville were treated. For example, when the detectives come to Whistle Stop to investigate, they head first to the black men, Big George and Artis, which would have been commonplace. This highlights the segregation and racial profiling that was common in the 1930's. Big George and Artis were suspects simply because of their skin color – there was no other evidence against them. In the end, Grady decides to let Big George go because he makes the best barbecue in town, as if that means he couldn't also be a killer. This highlights the simplistic view many white Southerners had of their black counterparts, a view that is further highlighted by the absurd statement that Evelyn's family always thought black people were “amusing and wonderful, childlike people, to be taken care of” (Page 308).

Sixty years later, it appears that the Southern view of African-Americans hasn't changed much. While Evelyn sits in the church parking lot debating whether or not to attend the service, her memories bring the reader through two decades of “white” thought during the Civil Rights Movement. She recalls growing up with black house cleaners and nannies – all female – but a deep fear of black men, a fear that plagues her even now, sitting in a church parking lot nearly thirty years later. Evelyn's view of black people is more recognizable as a “modern day” view meant to affect modern, white readers, who were Flagg's primary audience at the time of the novel's publication. Many readers will recognize themselves in Evelyn's views – she considers herself to be liberal and open-minded – she is deeply offended by and has never used the word “nigger” – yet she has had very limited interactions with black people. While she judges her parents and grandparents for their simplified view of black people, yet her views are just stereotypical. She wishes she were black because they always seem so happy. In her mind, black women are bold and unafraid. Perhaps this is why she gave her counterpoint such a seemingly black name: Towanda. Although Evelyn is well intentioned in attending a black church, she continues to focus solely on the pretty faces



and cute clothes of the black community, which makes the blacks seem childlike and immature.

After Evelyn's visit to the church, which she finds completely revitalizing, a comparison is made to Jasper Peavey: "It would have been wonderful, too, if Evelyn had known that the young woman who shook her hand had been the eldest daughter of Jasper Peavey, Pullman porter, who, like herself, had made it through" (Page 313). It seems a bit cheap to compare Evelyn's struggle to find identity with Jasper Peavey's struggle to overcome racism and segregation, but nevertheless, that is the thread Flagg is drawing. Through Jasper's experiences, the reader vividly sees that even though the "white" view of black people has been slow to change, politically times have changed so drastically that Jasper's grandchildren are embarrassed of his public service job. What was once commonplace behavior for a black man looking to get ahead in life is now considered demeaning to his entire race. This realization is both sad and triumphant for Jasper who sees that his "time" is now over. The new black community will never accept him and he will never assimilate to their changing ways.

Small Town Life

For the white residents of Whistle Stop, Alabama, life in a small town is depicted as a glorious salvation. Although everyone is involved in everyone else's lives, the novel suggests that it is always for their betterment: Idgie saves Ruth from an abusive marriage, Eva meddles in Idgie and Ruth's relationship when it sours, Ninny saves Evelyn from a loveless marriage and stagnant life, and Idgie meddles with Stump's virginity. When Idgie learns of Stump's fear of being intimate with a woman because of his arm, she takes it upon herself to rectify the problem so that Stump can move on with his life in the way Idgie sees fit, by taking his relationship with Peggy to the next level. Most kids would be horrified to have their parents intervene in their sex lives, but Fried Green Tomatoes only highlights the benefit of close community, rarely the downfalls. Everyone is involved in everyone else's lives, so much so that Dot Weems' daily newspapers include tedious gossip about community members' daily lives, but there is never a backlash. Idgie is involved in the lives of the hobos, the African-Americans, the drunks, and the neighbors without repercussion. Even her constant annoyance of Reverend Scroggins – which many readers might find offensive – is presented as good natured and humorous.

This is clearly contrasted with the lives of the black residents, particularly Artis Peavey. Whenever he tries to intervene on someone else's behalf, he is met with fierce consequences, from being called a molester to being thrown in jail for attempted murder. This is due only to the fact that he is a black man in an oppressively racist community. The structure of the novel is such that these contrasts, even when they happen years apart, can be conveyed for maximum literary impact. The contrast of violent outbursts is utilized again during Evelyn's second parking lot altercation. Here, readers cheer for Evelyn, who has begun to embrace Towanda the Avenger, because she is standing up for herself. Readers have no reason to fear that Evelyn will be

arrested or detained. They are thrilled that she is finally standing up for herself, a stark example of how society's view of violence has changed over the past fifty years.

Styles

Point of View

The majority of the novel is told in first-person, past tense narration from Ninny Threadgoode's perspective as she looks back on her life in the months before her death in 1988. Most of the reminiscences are told to Evelyn Couch, Ninny's friend, when she comes to visit. While Ninny Threadgoode and Evelyn Crouch appear to be the novel's protagonists, the novel's main plot events take place in Mrs. Threadgoode's memories, in which Idgie Threadgoode is the clear star. In fact, the child version of Ninny rarely even appears in the recollections, suggesting that the stories live on as family legend rather than Ninny's own specific memories.

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that Ninny grew up during a tumultuous time in American history – the segregated South during the Great Depression – almost all of her memories portray a highly romanticized, nostalgic view of the South. The reader must read between the lines to see the true depiction of racism, political unrest, and suffering that surely would have plagued the area. The romanticism of Ninny's memories provides an interesting discussion of reality in fiction. While Ninny's (and Flagg's by default) stories are often labeled as "old timey" or "sentimental," one must wonder whether they discount the true rural Southern experience of the time, and whether they encourage readers to perpetuate "traditional family values" onto the stereotype of the rural American. Despite the great characters, relationships, and conflict presented in the novel, the novel has somehow contorted Ruth and Idgie's lesbian sexuality into the universal, safe value of "friendship."

Despite the flaws modern readers might find in the representation of homosexuality in the novel, Flagg does a better job of balancing the latent racism of the time through the omniscient narrator's (not Ninny's) stories about Sipsey's family. While Ninny represents the overly-romanticized "white" South, Sipsey's family, including Big George, Onzell, Willie Boy, Artis, Naughty Bird, and Japser, represent the black South, a time in American history that no African-American would want to return to. Although their stories are not necessarily well-balanced in the narrative, they provide readers with an opportunity to pause and reflect on the historic nostalgia of Ninny's memories.

Language and Meaning

Fried Green Tomatoes is written as a collection of retold memories. As a result, the tone of the novel is conversational and engaging. Readers may feel like they are listening to someone tell them a story, rather than reading it off the page. While Ninny is theoretically telling her tale extemporaneously, she speaks elegantly, never stumbling her words, or falling back on "um" and "like" as people speaking at length would. Because Ninny is not actually present in many of the stories she tells, it is suggested that the stories live on as family legend rather than Ninny's own specific memories. As a



result, Ninny is somewhat detached from the stories, allowing them not only to stand in as an overarching representation of Southern life, but also allowing Ninny to stay in control of the story's emotions, creating a cleverly shaped story.

While most of the novel is written in straightforward prose, Flagg often uses dialect to portray the voices of her black characters, which affects grammar, spelling, and syntax. It is interesting to note that Flagg does not misspell any dialogue from her white characters, despite the fact that many would have had strong Southern accents. Nevertheless, this authorial choice is likely put in place to further highlight the separation between the races.

Readers will also note, however, that because all the characters are filtered through Ninny, there is a sameness in tone and language that has potential to make the novel flat. Flagg combats this through the novel's patch-worked structure, but some readers may feel that characters lack their own individual voices and opportunities to show specific personality. Despite this, the novel's conversational tone and friendly style will likely engage readers to continue reading.

Structure

Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café is composed like a scrapbook, with many short chapters that jump across space and time, newspaper articles, and local newsletters. The story is told both in present tense, from the 1920's – 1940's, when the events occurred, and in past tense, when Ninny Threadgoode relives events by retelling them to her friend, Evelyn Crouch, in the 1980's. These chapters are interspersed with Weekly newsletters from Dot Weems (Whistle Stop, 1929 – 1969) and a variety of other short news clippings. Together, these short pieces work as a collage to create a vibrant image of the way that Whistle Stop, Alabama has changed over the years. The quick-fire format of Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café might be disorienting for some readers, particularly because it skips across space and time rapidly with only headers at the opening of each short chapter to orient readers.

While the format is somewhat disorienting, it provides great opportunity to create mystery and intrigue. Because the novel is told primarily in flashback memory, the creation of tension will naturally have to be fabricated. Through the patch-worked narrative, Ninny is able to hook the reader's attention by bringing up questions like "Who killed Frank Bennett?" and "Where did Baby Stump come from?" without having to answer them for many more chapters. Because the chapters are told as recalled memories, they are short and jam-packed with anecdotal action. All of these qualities make the novel an impressively quick read, despite the fact that it is nearly 400-pages long.



Quotes

You know, a heart can be broken, but it keeps on beating, just the same.
-- Ninny Threadgoode

Importance: Ninny says this in relation to Idgie's broken heart following Buddy's death. She means that life goes on even after a heartbreak, and one must learn to live life despite the pain.

I'm too young to be old and too old to be young. I just don't fit anywhere.
-- Evelyn Crouch

Importance: Evelyn feels terribly unhappy in her life. It's as if she doesn't fit anywhere. She makes this statement before considering suicide, the lowest low for her character. It also symbolizes her desire to find change.

There was something about Idgie that was like a wild animal. She wouldn't let anybody get too close to her. When she thought that somebody like her too much, she'd just take off in the woods.
-- Ninny Threadgoode

Importance: Ninny says this when retelling the story of when Ruth came to live with the family. Before that, Idgie had been like a wild animal. Once she fell in love with Ruth, she became more human.

Just think, Ruth, I never did it for anybody else before. Now nobody in the whole world knows I can do that but you. I just wanted for us to have a secret together, that's all.
-- Idgie Threadgoode

Importance: Idgie says this after scaring Ruth on their picnic by covering herself in bees. Not only does this characterize Idgie as a tamer of wild things, but it also symbolizes the "secret" relationship Idgie desires to have with Ruth. There's something virginal about Idgie's confession and readers will be reading this passage on two levels, the literal and the symbolic. It's interesting to note that to Idgie, keeping secrets is a positive thing, which seems to be a belief she holds even in adulthood.

Rejoice for a comrade deceased,
Our loss is his infinite gain,
A soul out of prison released,
And free from its bodily chains.
-- Smokey Lonesome

Importance: This is the quote from his Salvation Army songbook Smokey reads at the dead tramp's funeral. The young hobo was killed by police officers during a raid, which is one of the few scenes in the novel that showcases the true reality of hobo life. Hobo life was not just the nostalgic reminiscences of Ninny Threadgoode.



I just wonder how many people never get the one they want, and wind up with the one they're supposed to be with.

-- Ninny Threadgoode

Importance: This quote highlights the novel's assertion that all the characters ended up with the people they were supposed to be with, whether on a romantic or platonic level. All the lives of the Whistle Stop residents were intertwined. As the novel progresses, the reader sees the beauty in those connections.

Look, I don't want to bother you. I know you're probably very happy and all ... I mean, I'm sure you are, but I just wanted you to know that I don't hate you and I never did. I still want you to come back, and I'm not a kid anymore, so I'm not gonna change.

-- Idgie Threadgoode

Importance: This is what Idgie says to Ruth the one time she visits her after her marriage to Frank. Idgie seems to realize that the age difference might have been a factor in their failed relationship. Now that she's an adult, she wants Ruth to know that she's still in love with her. Her promise to never change not only reflects her unflinching love for Ruth, but also her promise that she's not going to let society change her sexuality.

You never know what kind of fish you've got till you pull it out of the water.

-- Sipseey

Importance: In this quote, Sipseey explains that you never truly know a person until you see them out of their element. Frank had been very cordial to Ruth while they were dating, but as soon as they were married, he revealed his true colors.

That's what I'm living on now, honey, dreams, dreams of what I used to do.

-- Ninny Threadgoode

Importance: This quote highlights the value that both Ninny and Evelyn derive from Ninny's fond, nostalgic memories of Whistle Stop.

He had traveled all over the country, from Chicago to Detroit, from Savannah to Charleton and on up to New York, but there was never a time when he wasn't happy to get back to Birmingham. If there is such a thing as complete happiness, it is knowing you are in the right place.

-- Ninny Threadgoode

Importance: Although this quote is stated in reference to Artis Peavey, it holds true for all the characters, particularly those living in Whistle Stop. It insinuates that home truly is where the heart is. Once you find the place where you belong - whether literally or figuratively - you can truly be happy. This is certainly the case for most of the residents of Whistle Stop, including Idgie and Ruth once they "find where they belong" in their relationship.



It's odd, here the whole world was suffering so, but at the café, those Depression years come back to me now as the happy times, even though we were all struggling.

-- Ninny Threadgoode

Importance: This quote highlights how many of the nostalgic memories presented in the novel are quite romanticized. When one looks back at their life, they tend to remember the past, even the unpleasant times, fondly because it makes life (and death) easier to process. This is certainly true for Ninny Threadgoode who lived in the segregated South during the Great Depression.

People can't help being what they are any more than a skunk can stop being a skunk. Don't you think if they had their choice they would rather be something else? Sure they would. People are just weak.

-- Ninny Threadgoode

Importance: Ninny says this in reference to the boy who cursed out Evelyn at the Piggly Wiggly, but it is true of many of the novel's characters. Ninny suggests that who we are is imprinted in our DNA and it takes a lot of inner strength to change. This statement seems to praise Evelyn for the personal change she is undergoing. However, it sends a somewhat mixed message, particularly about Idgie, who lived a subversive life and refused to change for anyone.

Towanda was taking over her life, and somewhere, deep down, a tiny alarm bell sounded, and she knew she was in sure danger of going over the edge and never coming back.

-- Narrator

Importance: Once Evelyn taps into the anger that she has been suppressing all these years - anger that takes on the form of Evelyn's alter-ego, Towanda - Evelyn fears that she may lose control of her emotions completely. This highlights the dangers of hiding from one's emotions and stresses the importance of dealing with one's emotions rationally.

It was clear to Jasper that his time was over now, just like his old friends rusting out in the yards. He wished it could have been different; he had gotten through the only way he had known how. But he had gotten through.

Importance: In this quote, the passage of time is symbolized through Jasper Peavey's life. The world has changed so much in his lifetime, particularly for African-Americans, that he feels he no longer has a place in it. He had once been proud of the accomplishments he achieved despite living in the segregated South. Now his grandsons are embarrassed by the way he "shucks and jives" for the white man, and they feel he is a disgrace to their race.

While Artis was digging the hole, he couldn't help but smile. He had a secret. A powerful secret that he would have as long as he lived. Something that would give him power when he was feeling weak. Something that only he and the devil knew. The thought of it



made him smile with pleasure. He would never have to feel the anger, the hurt, the humiliation of the others, ever again. He was different.

-- Narrator

Importance: Even as a boy, Artis knew the truth about who killed Frank Bennett. Also, he recognized that the truth was a bit of information the "white man" wanted to know. Holding onto this secret allowed Artis to protect his family and gave him a sense of power in an otherwise powerless world. Artis was often beaten, abused, and maltreated by his white counterparts. During these times, he kept the secret for strength.