

The Fifth Sacred Thing Study Guide

The Fifth Sacred Thing by Starhawk

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Plot Summary

The Fifth Sacred Thing by Starhawk is a post-apocalyptic novel set in 2048 in California. While the rest of the state is dystopian, living in fear and in poverty under the military and religious control of the Stewards and Millennialists, the main characters of the novel live in the City (what was once San Francisco), an egalitarian community in harmony with the Four Sacred Things that sustain life - earth, air, fire, and water. The novel's perspective shifts between three characters from the same household, the Black Dragon House: Maya, Madrone, and Bird.

Maya is one of the elders in the City, having lived in San Francisco in the 1960s and having witnessed the revolution of 2028 in which residents resisted the military dictatorship of the Stewards, established their own consensus-based system of government, The Council, and have subsequently worked together to reverse the environmental degradation of the land, water, and air. Maya spends much time communicating with the spirits of those from her life who have died, particularly Johanna and Rio, two of her lovers.

Johanna's granddaughter Madrone is one of the healers in the City. Her knowledge of medicine goes beyond an understanding of traditional and herbal treatments. She connects with her patients spiritually, entering a trance state in order to evaluate her patients on a metaphysical level. A powerful healer and dreamer, Madrone's services are in high demand, both in the City and as the novel progresses in southern California, among other rebel groups.

Bird, Maya's grandson, has been imprisoned by the Stewards in the south for ten years when the novel opens. Initially, his memory is foggy and he is uncertain of who he is. However, he overcomes the physical and mental pain incurred by his captors and manages to escape and return to the North.

Bird's return to the City coincides with rumors of a pending invasion by the Stewards and in order to learn more and to make alliances with rebel groups, the Council and the community decide to send Madrone south. While on her journey, Madrone acts as an evangelist of sorts, spreading the message to both active rebel groups in the hills and dissenters within the city that there is a viable alternative to the racist, sexist, and fundamentalist system of the Stewards and Millennialists.

While she is gone, the Steward army invades but residents of the City resist using nonviolent non-cooperation rather than violence. Although the army does respond with violence nonetheless and many residents are killed, some of the soldiers, seeing the racial and cultural harmony of the City as well as the equitable access to water and other resources, begin to question their leaders and some desert. The Stewards recapture Bird and attempt to force him to betray the City by revealing its "secret weapon." The Stewards can neither break the spiritual strength of Bird nor of the City's residents. A widespread mutiny among the soldiers alongside the City's nonviolent resistance blocks the Stewards' plans to destroy the City.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The Fifth Sacred Thing by Starhawk is a post-apocalyptic novel that focuses on one family in the egalitarian community in what was formerly San Francisco. The utopia of the City or "The North" contrasts with the dystopian climate of the rest of California that exists under the control of a Christian fundamentalist military regime. The Stewards are the military wing while the Millennialists are the religious wing of the regime. Through flashbacks, the novel traces some of the events that led to the fracturing of the US and of California and the founding of the communal governance of the City, and leads up to the invasion of San Francisco by the Steward armies. Told from the perspective of three members of the Black Dragon House, Maya, Madrone, and Bird, the novel is a fictional exploration of many of the spiritual, ecological, and political beliefs and practices that the author Starhawk has explored in her other nonfiction writing.

The opening chapter alternates between the perspective of ninety-eight year old Maya and Madrone, the granddaughter of one of her lovers. The opening scene has Maya climbing a hill overlooking the San Francisco Bay, describing how the city streets have been transformed into streams and gardens. Maya prepares rituals for the Day of the Reaper. Death dominates the passages from the chapter that focus on Madrone. The City appears to be on the verge of an epidemic and as a healer, Madrone tries to save the life of a fevered pregnant woman who has gone into labor too early. Madrone enters a trance-state in order to diagnose and heal energetically, but she cannot save the woman. Distraught over the recent death of her lover Sandy to the same disease, Madrone is already exhausted. Nonetheless, she joins Maya on the trek to the shrine of the Four Sacred Things. She leaves a stone in memory of Sandy alongside all the other stones left by those who have lost loved ones. Maya and Madrone watch dancers and musicians perform, and then listen to speakers. Maya is asked to speak and relates the part of the history of the Las Cuatros Viejas or the Four Old Women who helped spark rebellion in the city in 2028 when the Stewards declared martial law.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces two of the main characters. They are Maya and Madrone. It also contains two important events that help establish the trajectory of the book. The first event is Madrone's struggle to save the pregnant woman from what appears to be plague on the verge of sweeping through the City. Madrone's healing techniques such as her ability to go into a deep trance to heal her patient energetically and spiritually are demonstrated in this chapter. Her patient dies in this first chapter, resurfacing the pain of the recent death of Madrone's lover Sandy and demonstrating her fallibility.

The other important event of Chapter 1 is the ritual surrounding the Day of the Reaper. The description of the City's participation in the ritual demonstrates one of the core



aspects of the utopia such as its religious tolerance and blending of various religious celebrations. With the death of Madrone's patient and with a religious festival honoring the Reaper, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* opens with a sense of foreboding for this community's ability to survive.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter introduces the third of the novel's narrators, Maya's grandson Bird. The chapter opens with him awakening in prison, in bed with a young man named Littlejohn. Bird is confused, not knowing where he is or how he got there. Littlejohn explains that Bird has been imprisoned for ten years and is now in Terminal Island in Angel City, which is the former Los Angeles. Bird tries to "ground" himself and Littlejohn balks. Such witchcraft is forbidden. As Bird starts to remember his past, in particular Maya and Madrone, he senses another person in the cell is in pain. Littlejohn has just been brought to the jail and has been beaten by the guards to the point of near death. Using a process similar to Madrone's in the previous chapter, Bird is able to soothe the man energetically and heal some of his pain. Littlejohn cautions Bird, helping him pretend to still have amnesia and reminding him to neither let the guards see him practice anything that can be construed as witchcraft nor hear him speak any Spanish. Through flashback, Bird retraces how he ended in the prison cell and how the guards tortured him in an attempt to get him to divulge information about the City.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter establishes the dystopian half of *The Fifth Sacred Thing* or the part of California run by the Stewards. Contrary to the religious blending and tolerance in the north, only Millennial beliefs are allowed in the south. Contrary to the cultural blending of the former San Francisco, the regime of the Stewards is overtly racist, in particular banning any Spanish words. They change the name of Los Angeles to Angel City instead for example.

Although the opening chapter hints at the City's openness towards sexuality with mention of Maya's former lovers, including both male and female, this chapter has more graphic depictions of homosexuality. Bird and Littlejohn are lovers. While the stereotypes of homosexuality in prison make this unsurprising perhaps, what is unique is Bird's matter-of-face acceptance of homosexuality as something neither deviant nor merely a result of his male-only surrounding. The main characters' bisexuality and polygamy prominently throughout the novel as they interact with those with more rigid notions of monogamy and heterosexuality.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 begins with Maya waking up in the morning. This is the part of the day where she often communes with the spirits of the dead. Her former lovers Johanna, Madrone's grandmother, and Rio, Bird's grandfather, are her most frequent visitors. Madrone brings Maya tea and they discuss the dead. Madrone then goes to the Council, the city's form of governance, as a representative of the healers. Participating in the discussions of the Council are the Voices, animal representations of the Four Sacred Things. In the north, there is the earth, represented by the White Deer and to the east is air, represented by Hawk. In the south is Coyote, the guardian of fire and to the west is Salmon, the guardian of the water. These four Voices were given a seat in the Council because when it was established and all guilds and neighborhoods had representation in the new system of governing. People feel that it is important that the Four Sacred Things also have a voice in discussions. At the Council meeting, Madrone is asked by Lily Fong, a member of the Defense Council and one of Las Cuatros Viejas, if she thinks the disease that has killed numerous people is a biological weapon. Madrone says she is not certain. As she leaves the Council Hall, she has a strong feeling of Bird's presence.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter showcases the City's system of governance. Unlike other forms of governance such as that of the Stewards, in which decrees are issued from those in power and accepted unquestioningly by those beneath them in the hierarchy, the Council operates through consensus. This method requires that everyone involved must come to agreement before a decision is made. The Council adds another layer to its open, deliberative, and egalitarian model of governing whereby not only are all people and professions in the community represented, but the natural world has a voice as well.



Chapters 4-7

Chapters 4-7 Summary

Chapter 4 returns to Bird's story as he continues to regain his memories and power. He enacts a spell to "get me out of here," and a few days later he, along with Hijohn and Littlejohn, are reassigned to an outdoors work-camp. This provides Bird with the opportunity he needs to escape, and the three of them manage to get away. Hijohn wants to return to the hills, where he is a leader among the rebels, and at the end of Chapter 4, he splits from the other two.

Chapter 5 returns to Madrone, who attempts a healing that involves dropping her own protective psychic shields and delving deep into her patient's system. This is a risky method of healing where you would "absorb the disease; then cure it inside yourself" (pg. 79.) Madrone realizes almost immediately that she might have made a mistake and that the disease might be too powerful for her. In a trance, she has a vision involving a variety of goddesses. The disease takes the form of a metallic monster which Madrone chases and eventually destroys, leaving it in a pile of metallic rubble. Emerging from the trance, her patient's fever is gone but Madrone collapses.

Chapter 6 continues with Littlejohn and Bird making their way north. When they cross into an area marked as "Toxic Territory," they run into a group of self-described "Monsters." Suffering from mutations as a result of the damaged environment from a nearby nuclear reactor, the Monsters live outside of the control of the Stewards and Millennialists. They ask Littlejohn and Bird to join them in a Full Moon Ritual and later to stay them. Bird agrees to remain for a few days to recuperate, while Littlejohn opts to stay there permanently.

Chapter 7 returns to Maya's narration. Maya tends to the bedridden Madrone, still incapacitated from her healing work. Maya fears Madrone is dying and Madrone does not seem to have the will to live. Hearing Maya cry and plead for her to live, Madrone starts to fight her urge to acquiesce to death.

Chapters 4-7 Analysis

Chapter 4 has many of Bird's powers returning. Through magic and luck, he escapes prison along with Littlejohn and Hijohn. Out of prison, the three are able to talk openly. Hijohn discusses the resistance groups in the hills and Bird discusses his home. Surprising to both Littlejohn and Hijohn is Bird's insistence that no one owns the water and that no one goes hungry. As with most of the novel, the utopian existence of the City is contrasted with the rest of the country. Part of this contrast is to demonstrate the violence and exploitation of the Steward and Millennialist controlled areas. Another part of it is also to contrast to the poverty of the hills where the rebels have their



encampments as well as the rebels' own ideological and tactical flaws that make them less than ideal as an alternative to the Stewards' system.

Bird's time with the Monsters in Chapter 6 begins to reveal some of the deep psychological scars he will have to face throughout the novel. The nuclear reactor that has caused the Monsters' mutations was, in fact, the site Bird and his friends had shut down ten years earlier, the event that led to his imprisonment. The pain of his friends' deaths during that episode, his own hand in killing one of the guards of the plant, his inability to play guitar with his broken hands, and his feelings of having betrayed himself, his friends, and his community contribute to Bird's feelings of anguish.

In Chapter 5, Madrone enters a deep trance in which she pursues and eventually destroys the disease that threatens to become an epidemic. When Madrone succeeds in curing a disease that in the opening chapter killed her patient, Madrone's skill as a healer is evident. Indeed, this is the trajectory for the book as Madrone continues to become more and more powerful. Equally important as this growth in her character development is the content of her visions and the reference to multiple goddesses from a variety of cultures such as the Aztec serpent goddess Coatlicue, the Greek goddess Hecate, and the Babylonian goddess Tiamat. Drawing from a pantheon of goddesses points not only to the multiplicity of religions and cultures on which those in the City draw, but also points to a specifically feminist form of spirituality and one that the author Starhawk espouses.

This spirituality takes a more familiar tone with Maya. Less concerned with goddesses and more concerned with family, Maya is perpetually in conversation with the spiritual world and with the dead. Although ostensibly a sign of Maya's spirituality, this technique also allows Starhawk to give background information on the characters and on the city. Chapter 7 in particular indicates the interconnectedness of Maya and Madrone and the chapter moves from Maya being concerned for Madrone's life to Madrone stirring and realizing her role to take care of Maya, alongside the rest of the city. This chapter seems to foreshadow Maya's death, or at the very least the connection between Madrone's life and the survival of the rest of the City.



Chapters 8-12

Chapters 8-12 Summary

In Chapter 8, Bird returns to the City. Arriving at the Black Dragon House he finds Madrone in bed. She wakes and thinks she is seeing his ghost. He reassures her that he is alive but she in turn has to tell him the long list of those who have died since he has been gone. He goes to greet Maya, who also thinks he has returned to her as a spirit. Madrone and Bird rekindle their sexual relationship. As his lover and as a healer, Madrone can sense the deep wounds that Bird has experienced, both physically and emotionally. The chapter ends with a rainstorm and the city dwellers take to the streets to celebrate.

Chapter 9 continues the story of Bird's homecoming and his struggle to adjust. Wanting to be useful, he starts to work on the chores that have been neglected since Sandy's death. Madrone however finds some of the choices that Bird makes difficult to handle, particularly Bird's gardening that disturbs the comfrey plant around which Sandy's ashes were scattered. The two of them fight. Another homecoming occurs in Chapter 9, including the return of Holybear, Sage, and Nita, who are also members of the Black Dragon household. These three are researchers for the Toxics Council and their work has them sampling water in the surrounding regions. Their return seems to change some of the dynamics between Madrone and Bird. As Bird puts it, "It's been two weeks. The honeymoon's over" (pg. 135.) The chapter ends with the five of them engaging in a ritualized sexual encounter.

In Chapter 10, Bird, Madrone, and Maya visit Lily, the spokesperson for the Defense Council. The Council is interested in hearing both Bird's account of activities from the south as well as Madrone's assessments about potential biological warfare being waged against the City. The Defense Council is curious as to whether or not the Stewards' forces are preparing to invade. Bird admits that he has a lot of guilt and concern about information he might have revealed when he was tortured. Lily responds, "If you had told them the truth, if you had said to them, 'Our city is defended by nine old women who listen and dream,' would they have believed you?" (pg. 152.) In their conversation, Bird says that he has promised to return to the south, but Lily insists that is not his path. She says, "Yes, someone must go there. But not you. That road is not for you now" (pg. 154.) As the rebels in the south need a healer, Lily seems to think Madrone who is clearly becoming a dreamer in addition to a healer might be the one to go.

Chapter 11 begins during El Dia de los Muertos or the Day of the Dead. The members of the Black Dragon House construct altars to their deceased loved ones and share stories with one another. One of the stories Maya shares concerns her involvement in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. She speaks of the protestors' frustrations and their adoption of more violent slogans and tactics. Maya tells of a face-to-face confrontation she has with a young National Guard troop where "He was young, about my age. His eyes were brown, like mine, and I could see he was scared, like I was scared. We were



just the same. All of a sudden I knew that, and he knew it too. I could see it in his face. His hands were shaking, and he lowered his rifle. I know, then, what could really end the war" (pg. 163.) Maya confesses she was unable to explain this profound experience to Rio who was her lover at the time and someone who was increasingly involved in more radical activism. So instead she left him to go to the mountains. Rio stayed in San Francisco and was involved in a bombing that killed a security guard at the Federal Building. Rio spends the next thirteen years in prison for this crime. Later in the chapter, Bird is visited by the spirit of Rio and the two of them discuss violence and guilt. Madrone also dreams of the dead in this chapter.

After having a dream that she was to head to the Southlands, Madrone goes to the Healers' Council in Chapter 12. She also confers with Lily who instructs her on lucid dreaming and being able to control her dreams. Bird is distraught that physically he cannot accompany Madrone but he shares with her all the information he can recall about his time in the prison, the people he met, and places he visited on his journey north. At the end of Chapter 12, Madrone departs.

Chapters 8-12 Analysis

Although Bird and Madrone are both clearly traumatized by their experiences where Bird is affected by his imprisonment and escape and Madrone is upset over the death of Sandy and her encounter with death during a healing trance, their relationship quickly turns sour. The novel implies that the blame is not simply a matter of their trauma. The two experience relief with the arrival of Nita, Sage, and Holybear. Starhawk makes an argument against monogamy and polyghe conflict between a monogamous couple and the benefit found in having multiple partners seems to be Starhawk's argument against monogamy and in support of polyamory. However, Nita, Sage, and Holybear are undeveloped characters who are solely included to make Bird and Madrone polyamorous.

With the threat of invasion from the Steward armies, Chapter 10 serves to outline how the City plans to defend itself. This chapter explores the ideas of resistance and nonviolence, incorporating many of Starhawk's ideas about magic as well where "magic is the art of changing consciousness at will" (pg. 152.) The stories Maya tells in Chapter 11 of Vietnam Era Anti-War protests provide a contrast to the policies and practices of the Defense Council outlined in Chapter 10. According to the story that Maya relates, the militancy of activists, their use of violent rhetoric and eventually violent acts is similar to failure.

Contrary to more traditional stories where the young male hero undertakes a journey in order to save his village, a young female is cast in the role of the archetypal hero in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Her training is very different than one of these more traditional stories. She is not trained in fighting, but instead in dreaming. She is not given weapons but information instead. Bird is physically too weak to take the journey. Perhaps, this is the author's way of writing him out of this traditional role of male hero. He is emasculated, where his body unable to take the journey or even play the music he once

loved. As Madrone leaves the City at the end of Chapter 12, Bird agrees to go to Sam and have his bones broken again and reset so that his body can heal.



Chapters 13-16

Chapters 13-16 Summary

Madrone's departure for the south begins in Chapter 13. Her first step is to wait for a boat to transport her. Fortunately, Bird has given her all the information necessary so when the sailor asks for Madrone to tell her her name, she can respond correctly that it is "Isis." As with most of the interactions with people from outside the City, Madrone spends much time talking about its utopian aspects. In this case, Isis is particularly curious about the city's free health care and who pays for immunoboosters or the injections that those in the south use in order to avoid disease, to enhance their bodies in certain ways, and to stay controlled by the Stewards. Madrone explains that they do not have the boosters in the north. She asks Isis how she came to be a pirate and Isis explains her background as a runner and how she was "designed." Despite the Millennialists' religious decrees that ban gambling, betting on the runners was a popular activity among the elites. Moreover the bodies of women like Isis are used not only for sport but for sex. The physical and sexual mistreatment of people like Isis is justified according to the Millennialists because people of color are like animals and have no soul. Isis asks Madrone to help her break free of the drugs, which she does, and the two of them spend the journey south engaged in a blend of healing and sexual intimacy. When they arrive at the Monsters' camp, Madrone meets Littlejohn. Madrone is quickly put to work healing the sick. She is overwhelmed and without lab equipment, Madrone must rely on herbs and her own spiritual healing powers. She goes into the forest and ingests one of the pills that the Stewards distribute, and by analyzing it through a vision she is able to make progress in healing the sick. Littlejohn informs her that Hijohn, whose group is camped outside Angel City, wants her to come south. Madrone agrees to do so but only after staying a few weeks with the Monsters to help train new healers.

In Chapter 14, Madrone and Littlejohn head south to Hijohn's camp. When they arrive, Hijohn is very ill. When Madrone examines him, she observes it is nothing worse than a virus from the common cold but with the extreme malnutrition and dehydration the rebels face, he has been unable to fight off disease. After attempting to heal him, Madrone requests he drink a lot of fluids but water is in severe shortage. In this chapter, Madrone is introduced to the Melissa, a woman who in some way has acted as a healer for the rebels in the area. The Melissa group has a special relationship with bees, calling them "sisters" and wearing them like a full-body suit. Madrone finds out that the sisters "work with us to heal wounds...It was difficult to train them. We have had to enter into the hive mind and become part of it. But it has become part of us" (pg. 204.)

Chapter 15 returns to the city, narrated from Bird's perspective. It is the Jewish holiday of Passover, which the community celebrates with a heavy amount of pagan influence.

When Madrone starts to menstruate in Chapter 16, she feels as though she can no longer handle the dirt and the water rationing and asks to be shown to a waterfall, a half day's hike outside the camp. Hijohn accompanies her there. The Melissa interrupts the



bathing and takes Madrone for an initiation into the hive. The ritual includes an immersion into the sweetness of honey and at times, it appears as though Madrone is losing her singular identity as a human and as Madrone, as she becomes part of the hive. She is stung in the forehead and then the Melissa cuts there with a ritual knife in order to leave a scar. At the end of the initiation, Madrone learns that by pressing on this scar, she can call the bees.

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

Chapter 13 offers a contrast between the utopia of the north and the dystopia in the south with the introduction of Isis. A black woman who has been bred as a runner, Isis explains that she has been used for her physical attributes, both athletically and sexually. Although gambling and sex are forbidden by the Millennialist creed, these sorts of practices are overlooked in part because they contend people of color do not have souls. As Madrone heads farther south, she finds the environmental conditions and the health of those she meets deteriorate.

Chapter 15 occurs in the City, on the occasion of Passover or the Jewish holiday marking the Hebrews' escape from slavery. The chapter uses the celebration to reflect on family and on ideas of liberation. These ideas both resonate not only as the Black Dragon House is missing one of its key family members but as the forces of the Steward assemble together, threatening the freedom of the City. At the end of the chapter, Maya has a vision and is visited by the prophet Elijah.

Although there are many aspects of Madrone's journey south that transform her and many new things she discovers about herself and about the world, the initiation into the world of the Melissa is literally a transformation. The Melissa have surrendered their individuality to join the bee hives and have found power as healers in doing so. This knowledge from the animal world adds to the spiritual form of healing that Madrone already practices.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

This is one of the key chapters in the novel, occurring at approximately the midway point. The chapter opens with the statement that "it seemed to Maya that the whole City had come to Council" (pg. 231.) The purpose of the meeting is to discuss how the City will respond to the five thousand Steward troops marching north up Highway 101. The Defense Council lists what weapons they have, which are very few. Maya tells the crowd about her visitation from the prophet Elijah who told her, "What happens to the enemy who is invited to share the feast? Does the enemy not transform? Tell your enemies this: There is a place set for you at our table, if you will choose to join us" (pg. 234.) In other words, Maya proposes the city respond with nonviolent resistance. The decision to use this tactic is controversial with some members wanting to use sabotage and other forms of guerilla tactics. Particularly vocal in the opposition to nonviolent resistance is Cress from the Water Council. The City debates tactics but eventually comes to consensus to utilize nonviolent resistance. Bird suggests that they make a "pseudo-council" so that there are some "leaders" for the invading army to speak with as that's what they would expect. The Engineering Council also suggests that they blow up the bridges.

Chapter 17 Analysis

A lengthy chapter, Chapter 17 deals with many of the longstanding debates historically about the efficacy of nonviolence versus violence as a political tactic. Can violence ever bring about peace? Is nonviolence effective? Can the residents follow through? It is also very telling that the City agrees to destroy the bridges when the army is in sight. Arguably the symbols of San Francisco, the residents are willing to let go of these massive physical structures in order to preserve their lifestyle.

As one of the most contentious chapters in terms of the internal workings of the community, this chapter also highlights how consensus functions. At the end of the chapter, several groups note that they are not ready to agree to abide by the decision to utilize nonviolence. They must return to the groups they are representing and deliberate further. They do not block consensus.



Chapter 18-21

Chapter 18-21 Summary

In Chapter 18, Madrone returns from the Melissa and the beehive to the hillboys' camp. There she is sent on a raid, along with Begood and Littlejohn, into a pharmacy in Hollywood. Along the way, they come to another camp, where one woman and two men are staying. The woman Joan has a bullet wound and again, Madrone struggles with healing what would normally be a minor wound but due to infection and lack of water finds the health of her patients already at a grave level, even before their injury. In preparation for the raid, the others hand Madrone a gun which she refuses to take. In the pharmacy warehouse, Madrone tries to locate the most useful types of drugs and is dismayed when the others in her raid plan to grab boosters. Using a combination of her "bee" skills and her own energy-work, she attempts to identify the drugs she knows and ones she wants, which are mainly antibacterials and antivirals.

In Chapter 19, Madrone, Littlejohn, and Begood head back to the camp. En route, Madrone suffers from dehydration and begs to stop for rest and water. They opt to break into one of the rich secluded houses in the canyon, choosing one that has a swimming pool in the backyard. The men think Madrone is just going to drink her fill, and they are shocked when she dives in. As she surfaces, she hears a warning call and gun shots and her friends have left without her. However, the housekeeper of the residence saves Madrone by taking her inside and when the police search the house, Madrone pretends to be another servant. When the authorities leave, Madrone must explain herself to Mary Ellen, the housekeeper, and to Sara, the wife of the house's owner. Both women seemed shocked that Madrone, a woman of color, is a "doctor," as women in the Steward-controlled area are banned from having jobs outside of the most traditionally feminine roles. Later, Sara has a women's group meeting at her house. Although all married to wealthy white men, these women too suffer from the Millennialist policies. The gathering at Sara's house provides an opportunity for these women to explain Millennialist beliefs to Madrone. Instead of the Four Sacred Things, they have the Four Purities: Moral Purity, Family Purity, Racial Purity, and Spiritual Purity. The women are very curious about Madrone's world and ask a lot of questions about the economic and sexual arrangements.

Chapter 20 is a short chapter, updating on the goings on in the City. The residents practice nonviolent resistance tactics in preparation for the invasion. Maya and Sam have started sleeping together and Bird visits Lily regularly.

In Chapter 21, Madrone along with Hijohn visits Angel City. There she meets Katy, Hijohn's pregnant lover. s with every new place Madrone visits, her arrival brings not only the possibility of healing but also the spreading of the word about the possibility for a better world in the utopia of the north. Katy lives in the rubble of the city, although they have tapped into the city's water supply so unlike in the hills, there is water. During conversations with Katy, Madrone learns how the Stewards and Millennialists came to



power. After a major earthquake in 2027, the Stewards declared martial law, backed up by the Corporations, the imposition of the Four Laws of Purity and the outlawing of non-Christian religions, the removal of women from most professions. As with the other locations she visits, Madrone teaches the people she meets some of her healing practices. In Angel City, Madrone is shocked to learn more about the sexual slavery of the Stewards. For example, she meets the Avenging Angels, group of genetically-engineered teens and Poppy, a five year old girl. Despite the Millennialist decrees about sexual purity, these teens and children have been sex slaves to those in power.

Chapter 18-21 Analysis

While Chapter 17 has the City weighing violence versus nonviolence, Chapter 18 has Madrone weighing her own positions politically as well such as how she feels about using a gun and how she feels about those on the pharmacy raid stealing pleasure drugs. These two chapters side-by-side help to demonstrate how complicated it can be to maintain a political "purity" in the face of circumstances that require such absolutes be negotiated and ignored. They also foreshadow some of the pitfalls, however, of the rebels' tactics. By engaging in violence and in black-market dealings, these groups seem to offer less promise than the utopian north and less chance of achieving such an egalitarian state.

While many of the other comparisons between the utopian north and dystopian south emphasize the privation of the south, Chapter 19 involves women who live in what they see as privileged circumstances such as large house, money, and swimming pool. Yet, Madrone tells them, "To me it looks like a form of hell" (pg. 269.) Despite the gulf between the women's' worlds, the meeting at Sara's house provides the one opportunity in the book for the philosophies of the Stewards and Millennialists to be explored. Echoing debates within feminism, these elite women note that they too suffer under the rule of the Stewards and while certainly not to the level of poverty and violence of the hillboys or of people of color, they do become allies of Madrone's.

Chapter 21 not only explores some of the history of the rise to power of the Stewards and the Millennialists. It also provides a sharp contrast between the sexual practices of the north and the south. According to the Millennialist doctrine, all sexual deviance is outlawed. The "free love," polyamory, and bisexuality of Madrone would be seen as deviant. However all the sexual relationships that Madrone gets involved in are always entered into willingly. This is contrasted with the deviance of the Stewards, with their use of children as sex slaves.



Chapters 22-31

Chapters 22-31 Summary

In Chapter 22, the Steward armies arrive in San Francisco. As suggested by Bird and designated by the Council, a pseudo-Council of Bird, Marie, Roberto, and Lan greet the troops, who Bird observes are segregated by race. These "leaders" say the sentence that is echoed repeatedly throughout the City's resistance to the invasion, which is that, "there is a place set for you at our table, if you will choose to join us" (pg. 310.) The Commander scoffs but the pseudocouncil refuse his commands, stating they do not recognize his authority. Their calm response infuriates the commander who steps forward and slaps Roberto across the face.

"We don't accept your authority," Bird said. "We will do nothing to aid you in any way. We will not cooperate, we will resist you in every way short of violence. But we will never stop offering you the choice to join with what is here instead of attempting to conquer and control it" (pg. 311.) The Commander responds with racist curses, which Bird observes as causing a ripple within the troops and a sign that the Commander's control of his troops might have weaknesses. Although the Commander has his troops set up camp, the first chink in the Commander's armor is seen as the troops marvel at the City's abundance of water.

In Chapter 23, Madrone receives a message to visit Beth, one of the women she had met at the women's meeting at Sara's house. She and Hijohn venture to the university where Beth is the housemother for the nursing students. Beth has called Madrone to help with a young woman suffering from a severe infection resulting from getting an illegal abortion. Again, Madrone faces having to help someone without any antiviral or antibacterial medicines and must rely on a combination of herbs, honey, and energy for healing. After working to stabilize the young woman, Madrone, Beth, and Hijohn discuss some of the policies that resulted in the removal of women from professions, that resulted in the population's dependency on the Corporation's pharmaceuticals, and the ways in which the hillboys and the women can aid each other. On the way back to Hijohn's camp, Hijohn and Madrone have sex, an unsatisfying experience for Madrone who in turn instructs Hijohn in how to satisfy a woman. Hijohn is taken aback when Madrone broaches the subject of him telling Katy that they have been together. Although Madrone did not intend to make trouble between Hijohn and Katy or between herself and Katy, it seems as though this is bound to happen.

Chapter 24 returns to the City where the troops have dammed the river, believing they have stopped the source of the water supply. Residents come into the streets to protest and confront General Alexander, leader of the Steward forces. The General responds with violence, shooting Roberto then Lan in turn as the residents repeat the mantra, "There is a place set for you at our table, if you will choose to join us" (pg. 334.) The General turns his gun to Bird but is interrupted by a group of children who surround the pseudocouncil members and repeat, "There is a place set for you at our table, if you will



choose to join us" (pg. 335.) The General commands Jones one of his troops to deal with the situation and to shoot and kill the children. As he raises his gun to do so, another soldier kills Jones instead. Rosa, a young woman who has been taking piano lessons from Bird, Marie, and Bird are taken into custody. Soldiers start to desert the army and are hidden and protected by community members. The Water Council blow up the dam, and the next day soldiers shoot five people at random and rebuild the dam. In turn, the Water Council blows up the dam again, an act followed by ten people's death.

In Chapter 25, Bird is back in prison, being tortured and interrogated by the army. Although both Bird and Marie tell the truth to their interrogators, the army cannot believe many of their answers. Marie, for example, tells them that, "There is a power you will never defeat or understand" (pg. 344) and the army think this is some sort of weapon. "That power is not a weapon," Bird tries to explain. "It's a metaphor" and receives the response, "Liar. Armies are not defeated by metaphors" (pg. 345.) As the army continues to torture him for an explanation of the city's "power" and "weapon," Bird tries to tap into the soldiers' own fears and prejudices, telling them that by killing Witches that they'll invoke the wrath of the Goddess of Death. Bird finds Rosa in prison and she has been raped and tortured as well. Feeling responsible, Bird agrees to some of the army's demands in order to spare Rosa. He dons an army uniform and returns to the city, where he meets with Lily, tells her that he has revealed the city's power and announces that he will be offering water ration cards to those residents who sign a pledge not to oppose the stewards and to accept the Millennialist Creed.

In Chapter 26, Madrone continues to offer instruction in healing and in spiritual techniques to the rebels in the South. Her friendship with Katy has been strained as Katy discovered that Madrone had had sex with Hijohn. Her healing lessons are interrupted when soldiers invade, in all likelihood looking for Madrone. Although Madrone escapes, Littlejohn is killed and Katy and Poppy captured. Madrone joins a group of the Avenging Angels to rescue them. They find Poppy's dead body and the Avenging Angels want Madrone to kill the man who has raped and murdered the little girl. Madrone cannot do it and the Avenging Angels are disgusted with her.

Abandoned by the Avenging Angels after her unwillingness to kill a soldier, Madrone has to escape alone. Chased by troops, she uses her "bee-keen hearing" to avoid them, eventually finding her way to water. Diving into the ocean to escape, Madrone is carried far out to sea. In the water, she almost drowns and finally, after the whole novel lamenting that she has no memories of her mother, converses with her mother's spirit. Close to death, Madrone is rescued by the Melissa and Isis.

Chapter 28 returns to the action in San Francisco, where Bird is living in the barracks with one of the military units. Feeling like he has betrayed the city, Bird admits to feeling at home with the soldiers. Bird refuses to take part in the rape of one of the girls who's been imprisoned, saying that he "knows better" and that he'd rather die than face the consequences of doing so. Tapping into the other soldiers' fear and ignorance, consequently none of them want to rape the girl and she is released.



Rescued by the Melissa and Isis, Madrone insists she needs to return to Angel City to find Katy. She solicits the help from Sara and Beth, and with this network of women is able to rescue Katy. Back on Isis's boat to recuperate, Madrone dreams further about her mother. In this vision, her mother reminds her that it is not enough to be a healer and that she must be a Witch. Madrone gathers the energy of the women present to help with healing Katy's infection. Shortly after, Katy goes into labor and gives birth to a baby girl.

In Chapter 31, the Council meets again to assess whether or not the strategy of nonviolent resistance is effective and worthwhile in pursuing, particularly as it appears to some as though Bird has betrayed them and particularly as more and more residents are being killed by troops. The Defense Council suggests that the city start a new tactic, following through on Bird's "confession" that the power of the community was their ability to invoke the spirits of the dead to haunt their killers. Residents begin to approach the troops and tell them intimate details about the people they have killed, actions that spook many of the soldiers and cause quite a few to question their orders and even desert. In the final scene of the chapter, Bird again sits at his post in the city center, sent to distribute the water ration cards that no one takes. Flanked by Ohnine, the residents, dressed in white as "ghosts" arrive and start to relate the memories of their dead loved ones. Ohnine orders them to disperse, and the family of someone he has killed addresses him. He shoots them one-by-one, first the father, then fifteen year old son, followed by a younger daughter, and then the eight-year-old child. And still the community steps forward towards Ohnine with compassion, repeating, "There is still a place for you at our table, brother, if you will choose to join us" (pg. 419.) Ohnine has a mental breakdown. Screaming and crying, Ohnine is carried away by the crowd.

Chapters 22-31 Analysis

While Chapter 22 contains the invasion of the Steward army into the City, much of this chapter is foreshadowing - the ability for the residents to maintain nonviolence resistance and the army's inability to understand how to respond, the Commander's racist treatment of the biracial community and the troops' response, the troops' wide-eyed amazement at the City's water and food supply.

In Chapter 23, Madrone begins the work of building affinity between the different rebel groups she has met in the south. Although the upper-class women at Sara's house and the Hijohn and "hillboys" are very different, she tries to point out their common goals and ways in which they can aid each other. As Madrone makes alliances between Sara's women's group and the women health workers in Angel City and the hillboys, she finds that the sexual liaisons she makes undo other relationships. Although comfortable with "free love," her sexual encounter with Hijohn foreshadows the loss of friendship with Katy, the one person she has really felt a strong bond of friendship with.

Chapter 24 contains the first confrontation between the violent practices of the army and the nonviolent tactics of the City. Seventeen residents die, and only one soldier deserts in the chapter. The Water Council, without the approval of the full Council, undertakes a



campaign to keep blowing up the dams the army constructs on the river. Unlike other chapters where the characters debate the efficacy of these tactics, these events are told rather straightforwardly, without commentary.

Chapter 25 demonstrates the army's misunderstanding of the fundamentals of the City's way of life, both philosophically and practically. Bird is easily able to convince them that the "weapon" of the city is the residents' ability to invoke the dead. The army does try to use Bird to do their bidding. They dress him in the army uniform and send him to the city center to distribute water ration cards. While the residents ignore the water ration cards, this act of "betrayal" weighs heavily on Bird.

In Chapter 26 Madrone faces several hurdles to making alliances with those in the south. The first is a personal hurdle where Katy is unable to understand or forgive Madrone for having sex with Hijohn. The second is a political and tactical one of finding Poppy's raped and murdered body and the man who committed the atrocity, Madrone is unable to do what the Avenging Angels want her to do, which is to kill him. "'Don't you want revenge?' asks one of them. 'I do,' Madrone admitted. 'I could tear his heart out. Torture is too good for him. But that's not what I'm thinking of. We become what we do. If we do these things, how do we become something better than what he is? How can we build something all together?'" The response of the Avenging Angels points to the huge gulf between the groups that oppose the Stewards and the almost insurmountable difficulties in forging alliances, saying, "Who says the Angels are interested in building anything with a pack of rats and dried-up hillboys?" (pg. 366.)

Associations of water with the Goddess and with womanhood are ample in Chapter 27. Madrone escapes Angel City by diving into the ocean. There she not only finds escape but is able to commune with her mother's spirit, which in previous visions Madrone had seen as La Serpiente.

Bird continues his struggles in Chapter 28. Already feeling like his initial ten-year imprisonment made him a betrayer of his city, he feels even more dismayed by his current situation. He claims to feel at home with the soldiers. It is noteworthy that while Bird is a prisoner of the Stewards, he is housed alongside other soldiers, suggesting that all of the members of the army - most of whom are men of color like Bird - are prisoners.

Abandoned by the Avenging Angels in Chapter 27, Madrone constructs a network of women rebels in Chapter 29 that includes Isis, the Melissa, Sara, and Beth in order to locate and rescue Katy. The male rebels are quick to abandon Madrone. Madrone feels as though she must find Katy, which is an act to demonstrate the power of women's commitment to one another, even though Katy feels as though Madrone has betrayed that commitment by having sex with Hijohn. With the help of these women, Katy is rescued. At the end of chapter 30, Katy gives birth to a baby girl. The moment is special, where "there were still dangers...But now, just for now, she could savor her triumph. Something had turned. A new child had come to the world of light and dark, and I am still alive, Madrone thought, and the sun is rising over the swelling waves, and today, yes today, we are turning our faces toward home" (pg. 409.) The rescue of Katy by the

group of women and the subsequent birth of the baby girl, alongside Madrone's continued dreaming of her mother all point to women's power in political transformation and activism, but also most simply in giving life.



Chapters 32-34

Chapters 32-34 Summary

Madrone returns to San Francisco in Chapter 32 and the chapter opens with her view of the Golden Gate Bridge where an "empty sky gaped through missing sections, and no festive lights decked the cables" (pg. 420.) Madrone finds the front door to the Black Dragon House uncharacteristically locked, and Sam does not recognize her when he opens it. The chapter switches to Bird's narrative, where the members of his unit are struggling to come to grips with Ohnine's breakdown. Bird explains to them that the Witches will not kill Ohnine and furthermore that they will help him with the withdrawals associated with getting off the boosters. The chapter closes with Bird again being tortured as the General has learned the reason why no one has come to take Bird's water ration cards. Each household in the city has had its own water cistern.

Madrone's return home is tempered by Bird's disappearance. Sara and Katy settle in. Madrone has to heal Ohnine and help him end his booster addiction. She also must help him cope with the anguish of the murders he has committed. She enters a trance-state to do so. Importantly, she gives him a new name of River, something he has never had before.

Chapters 32-34 Analysis

Madrone's return home is marked in short chapters as the action of the novel quickly moves towards its final outcomes. The most significant part of this section is Madrone's communion with Ohnine where she gives him a name. This is a crucial piece of identity. Ohnine promises help with the overthrow out the invading forces, foreshadowing the final confrontations in the closing chapters.



Chapters 35-37

Chapters 35-37 Summary

Maya is frustrated that she has not seen or heard from Bird. Bird has managed to keep Maya's existence hidden from the General, in order to protect her. Maya turns herself in to the General. The Defense Council struggles to convince the rest of the community to maintain the policy of nonviolent resistance.

Everyone gathers in the plaza in Chapter 36, including the residents as well as all the troops. In the center is a flagpole, with Maya tied to it. The General announces, "We are charged with the cleansing of this land from all forms of Witchcraft and demon worship. Before you stands the chief Witch and demoness. You have come to witness her execution" (pg. 469.) Believing this act will finally break the city, the General hands Bird the gun and instructs him to kill his grandmother. Bird weighs this, knowing that if he does not obey that the army will fire on the crowd instead. He struggles with what to do, hearing the General's countdown to "Ready Aim Fire." At this point, he and Madrone have an intense spiritual communion, where Madrone heals and everything is forgiven. As he goes to pull the trigger, he is stung in the forehead by a bee. This shocks him and "Bird let out a small cry. A golden pain, a good pain, shot through him like a shaft of sunlight breaking through the fog. A myriad of Mayas swam and danced before his eyes, but each one was clear and perfect. Bees walked his murderous wrists with thread feet, and he wanted to caress them. They had reached for him; they had not abandoned him. Not because he deserved compassion, but because by their very nature they were emissaries of a power that was always and everywhere offering itself, asking nothing in return, a force that set the bees in motion and colored the blossoms and made them sweet. That was the real gift, the true grace: not death, but love, the fifth sacred thing" (pg. 473.)

The General orders his unit to kill Bird but they refuse. River springs up to the platform and extols his former troops to join him. There is pandemonium of shooting but as the smoke clears, it appears that the troops are fighting among themselves rather than attacking the residents of the city.

In the closing chapter, the General lies dying, shot by one of his own men. He is offered medical services, which he refuses. Bird, Madrone, Isis, Katy, and River debate what to do next and agree that they cannot rest easy with the departure of the Stewards' troops from the City. Instead, they must return to the South and help spread the knowledge and practices of the north to the rest of the state.

Chapters 35-37 Analysis

The final chapters move very quickly to resolve the novel: Madrone's return home, Ohnine's healing, Maya's disappearance, and finally the General's attempt to get Bird to



kill his grandmother at a public execution. The thoughts that run through Bird's head weighing this decision take up almost three pages, but the rest of the actions unfold rapidly. The coup is chaotic.

In the climactic confrontation between the General and the City, the General ties Maya to a stake in the center of the city. All the townspeople gather to watch. In *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, Starhawk does not often utilize the word "witch" to refer to the pagan beliefs and practices of the City. However, a public execution is a purposeful reenactment of the historic persecution of witchcraft, which is a topic Starhawk has addressed in her non-fiction writings. When the General announces that he has been "charged with the cleansing of this land from all forms of Witchcraft and demon worship," (pg. 469) he is acting in accordance with a long history of public inquisitions and executions of women who practiced an earth-oriented spirituality.



Characters

Maya

One of the main characters of the novel, Maya is ninety-eight and an elder of the City. Almost always in contact with the spirit world, Maya connects the past of the history of both her family and the City with the present. She is the grandmother of Bird and the elder of the House of Black Dragon.

Throughout much of the novel, Maya acts as a storyteller, relating episodes from the past, rather than as an active protagonist in the City's present. This does change at the novel's climax when she surrenders to the General. This is an act that precipitates the final showdown between Bird and the City residents and the army. Maya's role in the novel is to primarily connect the past and the present. Active in the Anti-Vietnam War Movement in the 1960s and part of that decade's counterculture, Maya serves to ground the reader in a past they are familiar with and to trace the events of the novel from that familiar history into the utopia established in San Francisco. In almost constant communion with the spirits of the dead, Maya is quite literally the lynchpin between the old and the new.

It is significant then that the novel both opens and closes from Maya's perspective.

Madrone

A healer, Madrone's skills encompass not only traditional medical practices but also non-traditional herbal remedies and most significantly, powerful laying-on-of-hands whereby Madrone can spiritually diagnose and heal.

As the novel opens, Madrone has recently experienced the death of her lover Sandy, but she recommences a relationship with Bird when he returns home from prison. Demonstrating the City's acceptance of open relationships, Madrone is sexually intimate with many characters throughout the novel, including both male and female. Although Madrone joins with others sexually willingly and without judgment, her "free love" practices serve to contrast with the monogamy and heterosexism espoused by other groups.

Madrone is sent by the City to the south where she acts as a healer for several resistance groups. As she travels in the south, she experiences the racism, sexism, and religious intolerance of the Millennialists as well as the poverty and disease caused by the Stewards's policies. While traditional storytelling usually has a male hero that sets out in order to have an adventure and to save his community, in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, this heroine is female. Madrone's path is undoubtedly heroic. She suffers great privation during her time in the south. Her feats however are not based on physical prowess, but rather on spiritual, moral, and emotional tenacity.



As the novel progresses, Madrone grows from uncertainty about her skills to being a powerful "dreamer," who is able to heal and diagnose the most difficult of cases. Her skills are also enhanced by her initiation by the Melissa, the group of women that she meets with in the south who have joined with the bees.

In the climax of the novel, Madrone's great powers allow her to leave her body and unfold spiritually. By unfolding the layers of the social and physical construction of herself, she finds out who she really is. As Starhawk explains, "Layer by layer, peeling away everything she had every constructed to tell her who she was and separate what was not, she opened" (pg. 471.) Madrone is able to commune with Bird, in part via a bee sting to his forehead, and help him realize that he must tell the General that he refuses to kill.

Bird

The novel commences with Bird imprisoned in southern California. His memory of the ten years in prison and of his former life in the City are foggy, but as he begins to remember and reclaim his powers as a witch. He is able to escape, along with two others, Littlejohn and Hijohn. Eventually he returns to the City, where he struggles to adapt to society after his long traumatic imprisonment and the intense physical and mental suffering he has experienced there. The guilt surrounding the actions that led to his imprisonment where he broke into a nuclear reactor along with three others who all died during the process and the guilt associated with what he revealed under duress while tortured, make Bird's return to the City difficult. Prior to his imprisonment, Bird was a musician and a member of the Musician's Guild, but his hands have been broken by his jailors. He does start giving piano lessons to a young woman, Rosa, but he struggles to find his place in the City, having once been renowned as a musician.

When he returns home, Bird rekindles an intimate relationship with Madrone, who leaves to retrace his steps back south. While Madrone throughout the novel makes intimate connections with the various political allies she meets, Bird does not so readily share himself with others. Although he is sexually intimate with Littlejohn when his character is first introduced and although he also shares a ritual bed with the other members of the Black Dragon House, Bird's sexuality is not explored as fully as Madrone's.

When the Steward armies invade the City, Bird is imprisoned again and the General of the invading army attempts to use Bird as a pawn to infiltrate the city. In part due to Bird's own guilt, he finds himself caught between the City and the family that he loves and the other soldiers in the army. These soldiers are men of color who are also ostracized and disempowered by the ideologies of the Stewards and Millennialists.

In the climax of the novel, the General places a gun in Bird's hands and commands that he shoot his grandmother, Maya in front of the whole city. Bird weighs heavily all the pain he has suffered and the choices between the world of the Stewards and Millennialists and that of the City. He is on the verge of squeezing the trigger when



Madrone is able to summon enough energies to force Bird to forgive and be forgiven and to tell the General that he refuses to kill.

Sam

A traditionally-trained healer, Sam practices medicine with Madrone. Although substantially younger than her, he expresses a romantic interest in Maya and the two of them become lovers.

Johanna

One of Maya's former lovers and grandmother to Madrone. Johanna's spirit frequently visits Maya and several times also visits Madrone.

Rio

One of Maya's former lovers and grandfather to Bird. Rio's spirit frequently visits Maya, and as with Johanna, visits Bird on occasion.

Sandy

One of Madrone's lovers, his death recently precipitates the events of the novel.

Sage, Nita, and Holybear

Members of the Toxic Council and of the Black Dragon House. The primary role of these character is to establish a normalcy around the polyamorous arrangements of Madrone and Bird.

Cress

A representative at the City's Council from the Water Council, Cress is combative. He strongly dislikes Bird. When the Steward armies invade, Cress is an outspoken proponent for a violent response. As part of the resistance to the Stewards, the Water Council, under Cress's direction, engage in unsanctioned direct action, exploding the dams the army has placed in the river.

Lily Fong

One of Las Cuatro Viejas, the Four Old Women who sparked the rebellion of 2028 against the Stewards, a rebellion that eventually led to the establishment of the City. Lily is a member of the Defense Council. The City's "defense," the Defense Council is



comprised of the City's old women, a way to counter the traditional patriarchal idea of "defense" as the prerogative of men.

Cleis, Zorah, and Tom

Prior to the events of the novel, these three, along with Bird, infiltrate a Steward nuclear reactor in an attempt to shut it down. They are killed and Bird imprisoned.

Rachel

Madrone's mother. She was killed in Guatemala, when Madrone was a child in an act that Madrone suppresses. Although Madrone communes with other spirits of the dead, she notes several times that she has never dreamed of her mother. However, Madrone realized that the visions she has had of La Serpiente are her mother. Rachel appears to Madrone when she is almost drowning in the ocean and later when she is on Isis's boat, after the rescue of Katy.

Isis

A pirate who helps Bird northward and Madrone southward, Isis has been bred to be a runner for the Stewards. Madrone helps her break her addiction to the drugs and steroids.

Hijohn

One of the rebel leaders of the south, Hijohn is first introduced as a prisoner near death, thrown into Bird's cell. Bird helps heal Hijohn's wounds and, along with Littlejohn, the three escape prison. When Madrone heads south in the second half of the novel, she reconnects with Hijohn. Again, he is near death, this time from the common cold. Madrone notes that Hijohn is unable to fend off even a minor illness because of the harsh living conditions of Hijohn and the hillboys. Most notably, there is very limited access to water. Hijohn and Madrone are sexually intimate, an act that serves to distance Madrone from one of the only friends she makes on her journey south, Katy, Hijohn's pregnant lover.

Littlejohn

Littlejohn is Bird's lover while in prison. Although Littlejohn seems to have known Bird for much of the ten year stay in prison, Bird seems to know little about Littlejohn. Littlejohn escapes prison with Bird, but he opts to stay with the Monsters instead of going to the City with Bird. When Madrone heads south, she reunites briefly with Littlejohn. This character is undeveloped, and his brutal death during a raid by steward armies is only mentioned in passing.



Rosa

A young resident of San Francisco, Rosa is interested in studying music, and despite Bird's feeling as though his musical abilities have been taken from him due to the physical injuries he sustained in prison, Rosa becomes his piano student. She leads the children in a protest against the troops when the river is damned in Chapter 24 and is subsequently taken into custody with Bird. She is raped and is used to manipulate Bird during his interrogation.

The Melissa

Introduced in Chapter 14, the Melissa is a woman who has merged with the bees. The bees are used as healing aids for the rebels in the hills. The bees are also very symbolic of an organism that thinks and works together, in unison. In the hive, the females are the workers and the leaders; this arrangement echoes the author's vision of a world in which men are no longer in power and counters the world of the Stewards where women are solely used for reproductive purposes (in the bee kingdom, it is the males, incidentally, who are used as such).

General Alexander

Leader of the Steward invasion into San Francisco

The Monsters

The Monsters live in the area surrounding a nuclear reactor. The toxics in the area have caused numerous birth defects.

Sara

The wife of a wealthy man in the canyon, Sara befriends Madrone when she breaks into her house for water. Although the oppression Sara feels under the rule of the Millennialists and Stewards is vastly different from some of the others in the novel, Sara finds affinity with Madrone and in turn with the other rebel forces. She helps Madrone rescue Katy from a medical center.

Beth

One of the women Madrone meets at the women's meeting at Sara's house. Later contacts Madrone to have her visit her at the nursing school.



Katy

Hijohn's lover, pregnant with his baby, Katy lives in Angel City. Initially Katy and Madrone become close friends, but when Madrone has sex with Hijohn, this strains the women's relationship. During a raid on the encampment, Katy is captured and it is presumed she is taken to the medical center. Madrone stages a rescue. Katy gives birth to a baby girl.

Poppy

A small child in the camp in Angel City. She does not speak. Although only five years old, she has been a sexual slave to the Stewards. During an army raid on the encampment, Poppy is recaptured. Madrone finds her dead and mutilated body and the Avenging Angels are disgusted that Madrone is unwilling to murder the man they believe committed the crimes.

Ohnine

Leader of the military unit into which Bird is assigned. Ohnine has a mental breakdown while accompanying Bird to the city center to distribute water rations. Confronted peaceably by the members of a family whose mother Ohnine shot, Ohnine shoots the widower and several of his children. After his breakdown, Madrone helps heal him, giving him a name - River - something he has never had before. During the climax of the novel, Ohnine exhorts those within his unit to desert the army.



Objects/Places

The City

Formerly known as San Francisco, the City is now a utopia and a place of egalitarian practices in tune with the Four Sacred Things of air, earth, fire, and water.

Angel City

Formerly Los Angeles, the city has been renamed as the Stewards and Millennialists shun any Spanish words. The focus of the Stewards' operations in the southern part of California, Angel City is in ruins.

The Hive

Melissa, a group of women who sacrifice their singular human identities to join, initiates the Madrone in this location.

The Council

The process by which the members of the City come to deliberate and determine the path forward. An egalitarian form of governance, the Council is consensus-based, ensuring everyone can accept the decision made. The Council includes all professions and neighborhoods in the City and also includes representatives of the Four Sacred Things.

The Black Dragon House

The household where Maya, Madrone, Bird, Nita, Holybear, and Sage all reside. When Bird and Madrone return to the city from their journeys, they go first to the house and in many ways the condition of the house echoes the condition of the family and the city itself. When Bird returns home, Madrone is semiconscious from her healing trances and the front of the house is decorated with gifts and candles, almost as if it is a shrine to the dead. When Madrone returns home, the door is locked, marking the changes to security that have had to be implemented with the Stewards' invasion.

The Four Sacred Things

The cornerstone of the City's spiritual and ecological philosophy, that their community is responsible for protecting the Four Sacred Things that sustain life, which are earth, air, water, and fire.



The Millennialist Creed

The Millennialists' religious beliefs focus on Four Purities. They are Moral Purity, Family Purity, Racial Purity, and Spiritual Purity.

The Army Barracks

Shortly after the Steward Army invades the City, Bird is captured and kept in the barracks rather than in a prison. The prison and the barracks are considered interchangeable and this shows the kind of treatment meted out to the soldiers in the army. Units are segregated by race and rather than a clearly defined power hierarchy, leaders within the units are chosen through violence. The strongest and loudest one becomes the de facto commander.

The Hills

While most of the novel's action takes place in either San Francisco or Los Angeles, the rest of California is referred to as "the hills." In this area, there are many of the rebel groups such as the hillboys lead by Hijohn, the Monsters, and even Sara.

San Francisco Bay

This is one of the many important bodies of water in the novel. "Reclaiming the Bay" from the toxics polluting it has become a priority for the residents of the City. Madrone returns to the City via the Bay, observing the destruction to the Bay Bridge.



Themes

Utopia/Dystopia

Utopias in literature are ideal societies. The word utopia derived from Greek has a dual meaning of "no place" or u-topia and "good place" or eu-topia. The word dystopia, also derived from Greek, means "bad place." The two places stand in opposition and in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, the worlds of the north and the south are split between the good and the bad. The *Fifth Sacred Thing* contrasts the utopia of the San Francisco or the "City" with the dystopia of "Angel City" or Los Angeles and the surrounding hills.

The three main characters of Maya, Madrone, and Bird live in the City, the former San Francisco. As she relates the history of the City, Maya, an elder of the community, helps establish the steps that activists had to take in order to stand up to the Stewards and establish a free and egalitarian society. In the City, there is no poverty. Although the environment has experienced severe pollution, scientists work to clean the land, air, and water. Water, in particular, is plentiful and relatively clean. People live in harmony, embracing a diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual arrangements, and religious practices.

This is contrasted sharply with the dystopia of the south, the part of California controlled by the Stewards and the Millennialists. The Stewards comprise the military wing and the Millennialists the religious wing of a society that claims to be based on moral, sexual, and religious purity and is shown to be racist, sexist, and brutally violent. While those in the north have access to health care, to a strong economy, and to a clean environment, those in the south face addiction to pharmaceutical drugs, poverty, starvation, and disease, in addition to oppression based on a racist and sexist religion.

Sent to the south, Madrone serves as a beacon for those rebel groups there, constantly telling stories of the north and assuring them that an alternative is possible.

Religion/Spirituality

The author of *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, Starhawk is renowned as a leading spokesperson for and practitioner of an earth-based spirituality directly tied to political and economic justice. The novel spells out how a society based around such beliefs can function.

The main characters of the novel are all Witches, although the novel rarely labels them as such. They practice an earth-based faith, invoke pagan deities, and engage in rites and rituals honoring goddesses. The profound spiritual experiences of the characters aid them not only in their daily skills such as Madrone's healing powers but also in profound social transformation. While the members of the Black Dragon House have a strong core of pagan beliefs, they also recognize a multitude of religious faiths. They observe the Jewish celebration of Passover for example.



The openness of the north to recognize various religious doctrines contrasts with the fundamentalist dogma of the south. The Millennialists have no tolerance for religions other than theirs and alternatives are outlawed. The Millennialists ascribe to the Four Purities, which are Moral Purity, Family Purity, Racial Purity, and Spiritual Purity. However, despite their restrictive laws about these practices, the hypocrisy of the Millennialists is demonstrated with their sexual enslavement of women like Isis and children like Poppy.

Although the conflict between the north and the south is political, it is armies and not priests who invade after all. The division between the two culminates in an action that is ultimately religious where the General's desire to see Maya killed at "the stake."

Water

Water takes on an important practical and symbolic role in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. It is one of the voices represented at the Council, and it is the first target of the invading army. It is what the rebels in the south lack. It is also what Madrone is drawn to for protection and escape.

Water has long been a feminine symbol. In many cultures, the ocean and other bodies of water are associated with goddesses. Madrone notes this when she escapes from Angel City into the ocean in Chapter 27. In that chapter, as she is carried out to sea by the waves, Madrone observes, "So this is what it means to become one with the Goddess. To turn into water, water of life, water of birth and death and all that passes between, joy and pain" (pg. 372.)

Madrone observes the suffering when water is restricted. As she travels among the rebels in the south, the hillboys in particular experience severe water rationing. Madrone notes that even the mildest of illnesses are devastating when her patients are severely dehydrated. There is not enough water for medical patients, let alone the healthy or especially for bathing. On a raid of a pharmacy, Madrone puts herself in great danger in order to get water. The hillboys she is with presume that she merely wants to drink from the swimming pool, but when she dives in, they are shocked and abandon her.

In the City, water is recognized as a cornerstone to life. When the Steward armies invade, one of their first targets is to shut down the City's water supply. They dam the river, which the Water Council proceeds to blow up. The battle for control of the city seems to be waged in terms of water. Bird is forced to sit in the city center and hand out water ration cards. Each household has access to an alternative water supply in the form of cisterns which allows the inhabitants of the City to carry on their non-violent resistance.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third-person subjective, told from the point of view of three main characters. The three narrators are Maya, Madrone, and Bird. All are members of the Black Dragon House.

The move between narrators allows the novel to explain a variety of important perspectives. As one of the community's elders, Maya's narrative provides the history of the City and of the Black Dragon House. For example, Maya relates some of the events that occurred in San Francisco in the late 1960s. Madrone's narrative begins as an explanation of some of the medical crises that the City faces, such as a potential biological attack from the Stewards. When Madrone is tasked with leaving the City and venturing south as its representative, Madrone's narrative also acts as a method to contrast the utopian culture of the north with the dystopian society of the south. Bird's narrative begins in that dystopian south but his escape returns him to the City. However, when Bird returns to the north, he feels unsettled, guilty, and broken.

The three narratives allow for an alternating focus between the events that unfold in the south during Madrone's journey and the events that unfold in the north during the Steward invasion. Most of the chapters alternate. While one focuses on the south, the next focuses on the north. The novel both begins and ends with the narrative of Maya. The elder and designated storyteller, Maya's narrative locates the world of *The Fifth Sacred Thing* historically, tying it to San Francisco's long history of political activism.

Setting

The novel is set in California in 2048. Environmental degradation has reached a critical point. Much of the water, air, and land are polluted. Toxins threaten both wildlife and humans, represented most notably by the Monsters. The Monsters are a group of people with various birth defects resulting from their living near a former nuclear reactor.

The actions of the novel are divided geographically. In the north is the City, which is the former San Francisco. The home of the novel's three main characters, the City is an egalitarian society that lives in harmony with the Four Sacred Things and actively works to heal the scars on both the environment and on human society. The bridges of San Francisco, still symbols of the city are mentioned several times. Notably, however, when the Steward armies invade the City, its residents agree to blow up these landmarks in order to make their access more difficult.

The rest of California is contrasted with the utopian north. The Steward and Millennial forces control and occupy various sections and other parts are inhabited by rebel groups. Regardless, the south is dystopian with ongoing struggles over politics, the environment, and poverty. The hillboys are one rebel group that operates in the hills of



the south. They live in poverty with such restricted access to water that they hover on the brink of dehydration and disease. Although the hillboys take Madrone on raids of pharmacies in more populated and wealthy areas, including ventures into Angel City or the former Los Angeles, even the more affluent areas suffer privation when Madrone compares them to the north.

Language and Meaning

The language of *The Fifth Sacred Thing* is very accessible. Sentences and paragraphs are short. There is more dialogue than description and the author perhaps relying on readers' knowledge of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and California.

Much of the novel pertains to the political and spiritual philosophies of the three main characters and that of the utopian City. Dialogue is the primary method of explaining these beliefs. These political discussions occur both among the City's residents such as in the Council meeting when the plans for nonviolent resistance are weighed against guerilla tactics and between residents of the north and people they meet from other parts of California. As she journeys south, Madrone is often asked to tell stories about the City, for example.

Some of the characters speak in a blend of Spanish and English. Those in the south are shocked by this, as the policies of white supremacy there have forbidden Spanish. Attempting to erase the Spanish history of California, city names like Los Angeles have been anglicized.

Structure

The novel contains 37 chapters, each roughly 13 pages in length. The chapters are not named.

The chapters alternate among the narrations of Maya, Bird, and Madrone. Although some of the chapters contain the perspective of two of these characters, most frequently, the novel moves back and forth between the actions in the north and those in the south.

This structure reinforces an important theme of the novel: the contrast between the dystopian south and the utopian north. , as well as by moving back-and-forth from the north to the south, the novel is structured primarily around contrast.

As the elder of the Black Dragon House and one of the oldest residents in the city, Maya also serves to contrast the past and the present. Most of the passages from her perspective have her relating the history of the City and of the members of her household.

The final conflict between the Steward forces and the City occurs in Chapter 36, the second-to-last chapter in the novel. The residents of the City gather in the square where



the General of the army has Maya bound to a flagpole, a reenactment of a many hundred year old practice of publicly executing a woman accused of witchcraft. Although this chapter results in the final overthrow of the military forces by the residents, alongside a coup by many of the soldiers in the army, the emphasis of this chapter still is less on action per se than on dialogue, in this case mainly an internal dialogue of Bird, weighing whether or not he can resist the General's command to kill his grandmother.

Quotes

"Below stretched a panorama of sculpted hills crowned by toy houses, cradling the aging skyscrapers that rose from the low ground beside the bay. The city was a mosaic of jewel-like colors set in green, veined by streams and dotted with gleaming ponds and pools. Seen from above, blocks of old row houses defined streets that no longer existed. Instead, bicycles and electric carts and the occasional horse moved through a labyrinth of narrow walkways that snaked and twined through the green" (Chapter 1, pg. 1.)

"If we have courage / We can be healers; / Like the sun, / We shall rise" (Chapter 1, pg. 24.)

"The cord twisted in her hands. It had become a snake, a pair of snakes, whose heads facing each other fused into the face of La Vieja/Snake Woman/Tiamat/Hecate/Coatlucue, all with the same challenging pair of eyes: not cold but implacable. The eyes were strands of gray appearing in her hair, wrinkles on the back of her hands. The eyes were a destination. Her own hands held the cord and the knife. Choice. The crossroads" (Chapter 5, pg. 84.)

"If you had told them the truth, if you had said to them, 'Our city is defended by nine old women who listen and dream,' would they have believed you?" (Chapter 10, pg. 152.)

"What happens to the enemy who is invited to share the feast? Does the enemy not transform? Tell your enemies this: There is a place set for you at our table, if you will choose to join us" (Chapter 17, pg. 234.)

"There is a place set for you at our table, if you will choose to join us" (Chapter 22, pg. 310.)

"'That power is not a weapon. It's a metaphor.'
'Liar. Armies are not defeated by metaphors'" (Chapter 25, pg. 344-345.)

"We become what we do. If we do these things, how do we become something better than what he is? How can we build something all together?" (Chapter 26, pg. 366.)

"But she was only opening to water. It poured out of her eyes and lapped her face and soaked the tissues of her lungs, it was in her as she was in it, and she imagined it washing through her brain, soaking through her memories. Cleansing. She opened, imagining her whole self splitting wide so that there was no longer any separation between her and the waves...If this is dying, she thought, it's not so bad. It's a clean death, no blood, no pain, just a ride on the tide, tides of life, tides of sickness and death, great currents of ch'l that ebb and flow, great life womb that births and swallows and reclaims even memories" (Chapter 27, pg. 372.)



"We are charged with the cleansing of this land from all forms of Witchcraft and demon worship. Before you stands the chief Witch and demoness. You have come to witness her execution" (Chapter 36, pg. 469.)

"It was all here, thousands of years of the lash and the stake and the bomb. Could she take that into herself to heal it as she had taken other sorts of disease? Could she heal not just the pain of the wound but the pleasure in hurting and the worse and deeper pain behind that?" (Chapter 36, pg. 471.)

"Bird let out a small cry. A golden pain, a good pain, shot through him like a shaft of sunlight breaking through the fog. A myriad of Mayas swam and danced before his eyes, but each one was clear and perfect. Bees walked his murderous wrists with thread feet, and he wanted to caress them. They had reached for him; they had not abandoned him. Not because he deserved compassion, but because by their very nature they were emissaries of a power that was always and everywhere offering itself, asking nothing in return, a force that set the bees in motion and colored the blossoms and made them sweet. That was the real gift, the true grace: not death, but love, the fifth sacred thing" (Chapter 36, pg. 473.)



Topics for Discussion

Starhawk has written several non-fiction books connecting earth-based spirituality and goddess-worship with political movements for social justice. What does a fictional imagining of such a transformation offer that a non-fiction book cannot?

What is the fifth sacred thing? How and when do the characters discover it?

One of the important distinctions between the utopian north and the dystopian south is their approach to religion. How do they differ? How does Starhawk argue that the religious and spiritual practices of the north connect to the utopian society there?

Another distinction between the utopian north and the dystopian south involves the treatment of gender and sexuality. How do they differ? For example, how are men and women treated in the north and in the south? What are the societal norms and expectations around sexuality in the two regions? How does Madrone's sexual liaisons with the people she allies with in the south impact her ability to make political alliances?

Contrast how race and ethnicity handled in the north and in the south.

One of the major philosophical arguments of the novel and an argument the residents of the City have in Chapter 17, involves the use of violence versus nonviolence as a political tactic. What are some of the arguments the residents invoke for using nonviolence and for using violence? What does the novel suggest about the efficacy and the cost of these approaches?

Set in California, the novel relies on a division between north and south that exists today, but that also echoes a historical divide in the US from the Civil War era. How does geography play a role in *The Fifth Sacred Thing*? Why did Starhawk select San Francisco as a site for a utopia?