

# **God Help the Child Study Guide**

**God Help the Child by Toni Morrison**

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## Plot Summary

"God Help the Child" by Toni Morrison revolves around the life of Bride, formerly known as Lula Ann Bridewell. She's a young black woman in her early twenties who has had to overcome many obstacles in her life, particularly moving on from her childhood, to become the successful business woman she is today. She works for the cosmetic company Sylvia, Inc. which sells a "flat-out hip with six cool colors cosmetic line" (10). One of those cool cosmetic lines has actually been developed and is now owned by Bride herself. She calls it, "YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium" (10). The story follows Bride's current life situation while flashing back to past events in the lives of her and the other characters. Everyone has problems and many have childhood memories better forgotten, but Bride is hindered as an adult by events from her past.

The book begins with Bride's mother, Sweetness, telling the story of Lula Ann's birth. Sweetness and her husband, Louis, are both what Sweetness calls "high yellow" or light-skinned blacks with good hair. That's why both parents are shocked when Lula Ann is born "Midnight black." Because of her dark color, Louis assumes that she isn't his baby, never touches her, and eventually leaves Sweetness, after three years of marriage, to raise Lula Ann on her own. Sweetness is embarrassed to be seen with such a dark child. She treats her harshly from the beginning and doesn't even want to touch the baby, a feeling she has throughout Lula Ann's whole life. Sweetness claims to believe that she is only doing this to help the child, to toughen her up, so she will not fall prey to bullies and discrimination. Since she is ashamed for people to think that Lula Ann is her child, she tells the baby to call her "Sweetness" instead of "Mama" or "Mother." Sweetness sees Lula Ann's color as "a cross she will always carry" and professes over and over that Lula Ann's plight in life is not her fault.

After high school, Lula Ann Bridewell drops her "countrified" name, first becoming Ann Bride, then finally, to sound mysterious and interesting in her career, settling on Bride, no last name. At this point in her life, she is living with her boyfriend, Booker Starbern, a man whose background, job, and overall life is a mystery to her. None of that matters to her as long as he continues to treat her like the center of his universe at all times. After what Bride feels is a minor argument, Booker leaves her and doesn't look back or even return for his belongings.

Although Bride is devastated about her loss, she is mostly focused on visiting a prisoner, Sofia Huxley, who is being released from the Decagon Women's Correctional Center where she served fifteen years of a twenty-five-year-to-life sentence for child molestation. Bride is one of the children who helped put Sofia behind bars by testifying at her trial. Despite the fact that Bride helped put Sofia away, she has been planning for a year to do a good deed for the ex-con upon her release. She arrives at the prison as Sofia is released. She is carrying gifts to help Sofia get started in her new life; she has \$5,000 in cash, a \$3,000 Continental Airlines gift certificate, and a promotional box of YOU, GIRL cosmetics all placed neatly into a brand-new Louis Vuitton shopping bag. Neither Bride nor her gift are well received by Mrs. Huxley. She turns into a wild ball of



rage and beats Bride to the point that she needs plastic surgery to have any semblance of her normal, stunning appearance.

After the beating, not wanting to call the police, Bride calls her best friend and co-worker, Brooklyn, for help. When Brooklyn arrives, Bride tells her that the attack was from a would-be rapist. Of course, the reader knows she's lying. Brooklyn helps her and takes care of her through the recovery process, but also uses this time of Bride's absence from work as a stepping stone in her own career.

While recovering, Bride becomes obsessed with Booker's exit from her life. At this point, the reader sees that Bride has grown from an awkward, emotionally needy little gal into a beautiful but self-centered, materialistic, and emotionally needy woman. Her new focus in life is to find Booker and discover why he left to give him a piece of her mind.

She goes through a series of emotional and physical problems while searching for Booker. As she goes through these dramas, she flashes back, occasionally, to her childhood. She talks about how her mother, Sweetness, was emotionally and physically distant from her. She knows that Sweetness is ashamed of her. The only happy memory from her childhood is connected to the tragedy of testifying against Sofia Huxley. When she testifies, Sofia is convicted. Everyone seems to be so proud of Lula Ann at that moment. Even Sweetness first smiles at her, then actually holds her hand as they walk out of the courthouse. She is not proud that she confronted the molester; she is bursting with joy that the act of testifying made Sweetness proud and softened her to little Lula Ann.

By tracking a pawn shop ticket in Booker's name, Bride discovers not only his pawned horn and ring, but his forwarding address as well. She immediately sheds her work responsibilities and heads to the unmarked, backroads town of Whiskey, CA, with only the name "Q. Olive" as a reference guide. Along those dark, rustic roads, Bride's shiny Jaguar crashes into a tree trapping her inside with a fractured ankle. She's discovered at dawn by a little girl named Rain, who has mesmerizing emerald green eyes. Bride is rescued by the couple, Steve and Evelyn, who have taken the child in when she is on the streets alone. Likewise, they take Bride into their old-fashioned home. She has to stay there to heal for six weeks, during which time she becomes Rain's confidant as she tells Bride about the physical and sexual abuse she endured before Steve and Evelyn. Rain's mom sold her as a prostitute and kicked her out after she had injured a man trying to molest her.

With a healed leg and a more realistic outlook on life, Bride continues her journey and finds Q. Olive, who happens to be Booker's aunt. While feeding the super thin young woman, Q., or Queen as she prefers, tells Bride about Booker's past. She confides that when Booker was a child, Booker's brother was taken by a child molester, killed, and left to rot in a culvert. Booker's never recovered, and his entire being has revolved around his brother's sad and untimely death. Like Bride, he also carries scars from his past that have shaped him into a confused, emotional adult.



Queen points Bride in Booker's direction. They have a very rocky reunion. Queen shows up to referee. Not long after Queen returns to her own home, a bonfire she had in her yard earlier sparks and sets her home aflame. Booker and Bride rescue her from the burning house. They take shifts at the hospital seeing to her care personally. Unfortunately, in spite of all of their effort, she still passes away. In a moment of despair, Bride confesses to Booker that her fixation on Sofia Huxley was not because the woman had molested her, but because Bride, so many years ago, had falsely testified against a woman whom she actually did not witness abusing children. This helps Booker to understand Bride's former preoccupation with a jailed child molester.

As they spread Queen's ashes from the riverbank, Bride makes another confession to Booker that she is pregnant with his child. He is happy, and they decide to take another chance on their relationship. The novel ends with Sweetness, who is now in a nursing home, telling the people there about her daughter being pregnant with a grandchild. Although she's happy, she also knows she will probably never see this child.



# Part One, Chapter 1

## Summary

Sweetness begins the novel not by telling a joyous story of her child's birth but instead by professing over and over, "It's not my fault." During a time when even African Americans judged each other based on the lightness or darkness of skin color, the light-skinned, "high yellow" Sweetness gives birth to a very dark child who has "too-thick lips...funny-colored eyes, crow-black with a blue tint, something witchy about them too." Sweetness is ashamed of Lula Ann from the moment she is born. Wishing Lula Ann had not been born that terrible color, Sweetness places a blanket over the child's face, begins to press to smother her daughter's breath, but then realizes she cannot do such a thing. She thus bears the shame throughout the child's formative years. Sweetness withholds physical and emotional love and tenderness from Lula Ann. Even worse, the child's father, Louis, who is also light-skinned, never even touches the baby and leaves Sweetness to raise the child alone. He is embarrassed by this dark-skinned baby and refuses to believe that she is naturally his despite Sweetness' swearing it to be true. The mother is so ashamed to be Lula Ann's mom that she insists Lula Ann call her Sweetness instead of "mother" or "mama."

Although it is against the law in the nineties to discriminate renting to people based on their skin color, Sweetness knows that bringing Lula Ann along to meet with landlords is a good idea. She finds an apartment in a nice neighborhood thanks to the landlord, Mr. Leigh, who allows her to move in, even though he charges an extra seven dollars per month. Luckily, Louis gets a tug from his conscience and starts sending fifty dollars per month. With that and the money she makes from her night job at the hospital, Sweetness is able to get off of welfare. Still, she proclaims, "But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not."

## Analysis

In Chapter 1, the story begins with the first person point of view of Sweetness. She introduces her daughter, Lula Ann, and explains her shame of the child. By beginning and ending the chapter with the words, "It's not my fault," the author is foreshadowing the fact that something bad will happen to this little girl. Because she says this so many times in the chapter, the reader is inclined to watch for problems from the beginning. This act of refusing take responsibility in general begins here, but continues with many of the characters in the novel throughout their lives. First, Sweetness claims that it's not her fault that Lula Ann is born dark-skinned. Because she and her husband, Louis, are light-skinned, Sweetness is shocked by the deep ebony child, and Louis insists the baby isn't even his, eventually leading to him leave his family altogether. Abandonment is a motif that continually occurs in the lives of this story's characters. Blaming others and not taking responsibility for what happens in one's own life is another theme that runs throughout the novel beginning with Louis and Sweetness. They are the first to



emotionally scar Lula Ann and the first to abandon her--Louis by rejecting her and physically leaving and Sweetness by her harsh uncaring treatment of a child hungry for love and affection from her mother.

The discrepancy over skin color demonstrates another theme that is continually returning with all of the characters. This is the theme of Image and Appearance, specifically either taking pride in or being ashamed of the color of one's skin and judging others by the color of theirs. Sweetness and Louis are extremely upset that their baby is so dark. They are ashamed of her and embarrassed to be seen in public with her. Louis never even touches Lula Ann and abandons them, claiming that because of her skin color, the baby could not possibly be his. This is the first of many times with several of the characters that Abandonment and not belonging are prominent issues, and in some cases, not merely an issue, but a motive for the actions of different characters. In Sweetness' mind, the skin color of her baby causes her to be cold and harsh as a parent. She believes she is doing Lula Ann a favor by making her hard in a cruel world. Louis' leaving forces Sweetness to find a different but decent place for her and Lula Ann to live.

Sweetness is an African American woman who hovers between the races and who places a lot of stock in the image she portrays to the world. She continually claims that her harsh treatment and withholding of physical and emotional affection toward Lula Ann is necessary to make her tough enough to handle the cruelty Lula Ann will experience in the world because of prejudice against dark-skinned people. Actually, Sweetness herself is the first person who exposes the child to the injustice of racism in the world. Although Lula Ann is born in the nineties, a time when laws are in place to try to deter prejudice and racism, Sweetness still categorizes people, especially her own daughter, based on skin color and believes that everyone else does the same. A lot of emphasis is placed on being proud to be light-skinned. Sweetness' parents had been so light that they passed as white and refused to ever use the "colored only" fountains even if they were dying of thirst." This may lead the reader to more closely examine not merely the intolerance between the races but also the degree of light to dark shades within the African American community itself. This chapter therefore introduces the important theme of Color.

The theme of Color is prominent to some degree with every character introduced in the story, specifically the colors white and black. This concept is introduced in this chapter to get the reader thinking about the symbolic meaning of colors starting with white and black. By tracing the binary components of these colors, the reader will find that the connection of white verses black symbolize the opposition of more than color, but also the oppositions of good verses bad, accepted verses unaccepted, happiness verses sadness, and even virtuous verses evil or moral verses immoral. Color symbolizes these concepts, and these binary classifications will also all be introduced as the story continues.





## Discussion Question 1

What harmful effects could a child experience as an adult from tenderness, love, and affections being withheld from her throughout her formative years?

## Discussion Question 2

Louis and Sweetness are both African American. What about the lightness or darkness of theirs and Lula Ann's skin tone matters?

## Discussion Question 3

Since Sweetness continually professes that "it's not her fault," what does this tell the reader about Sweetness' true feelings about Lula Ann?

## Vocabulary

mulatto, quadroons, pickaninny, pursuant, copulative, fragmentary

# Part One, Chapter 2

## Summary

In Chapter 2, the reader is introduced to Bride, formerly known as Lula Ann. She is now an adult in her early twenties. The chapter begins with her explaining that “Something bad is happening to me,” which introduces the device of stormy weather, in this case not rain or tornadoes, but bad situations are coming her way picking up on the foreshadowing in Chapter 1. Bride’s adult story begins with her live-in boyfriend, Booker, having a disagreement and Booker walking out. Before leaving he says to her, “You not the woman I want.” These are words that will haunt her throughout the novel and will be motive for many of her impulsive actions. She regrets her answer of “Neither am I.” Booker leaves the house and doesn’t look back. He walks out with just the clothes on his back.

Bride tells herself that it doesn’t matter and that their relationship wasn’t perfect anyway. Besides, she has her best friend, Brooklyn, who is also a work colleague. She thinks about calling her and complaining about how he left and all of the reasons he was wrong for her anyway. After a few glasses of wine, she decides not to call Brooklyn about this break up drama. Too much is happening at work for them to worry about another break up. Bride tries to keep in mind the fact that because she’s regional manager of Sylvia, Inc., she must maintain a somewhat professional relationship with the employees, which includes Brooklyn. Bride has a lot of work to do on her new line of cosmetics which she feels is her baby, and all of the campaigning that goes with the launch of “YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium.”

In a flashback, the reader discovers that Lula Ann Bridewell goes through a transition after high school from what she calls this “countryfied” name, first changing it to Ann Bride, then finally settling on just Bride, no last name, like the iconic performers Cher and Madonna. It sounds mysterious and important. As she sits in her modern apartment enjoying the luxurious life that hard work and success have bestowed upon her, she starts to dwell on missing Booker. She realizes that other than their great sex life and the fact that he listens to her, she really knows nothing about him. His past, his job, his hobbies, literally all aspects of his life that didn’t include adoring her were all a mystery to her.

She decides to focus on the project she’s been working toward for a year, the same project that began her argument with Booker. The previous year she had decided to be a Good Samaritan to a female parolee. Her plan, now, is to wait for the person’s release and to give her a new Louis Vuitton shopping bag containing \$5,000 in cash, a \$3,000 Continental Airlines gift certificate, and a promotional box of YOU, GIRL cosmetics. She’s already chosen a specific parolee, a Mrs. Sofia Huxley, who is being released that week from Decagon Women’s Correctional Center. She arrives at the prison in time for Mrs. Huxley’s release. Here, Bride has a flashback to being a child and a prosecuting attorney asking her if she’s afraid. Back in the present moment, Bride asks Sofia if she



needs a ride, but Sofia declines and gets into a taxi instead. Bride follows the taxi to Eva Dean's Motel and Restaurant. Bride watches from a distance as Sofia eats as if she's never eaten before and then gets a room at the motel.

When Bride knocks on the motel room door, Sofia doesn't recognize her. Bride pushes her way into Sofia's room and tries to give her the gifts. Sofia is bewildered and can't understand why this woman is in her motel room trying to give her gifts. Bride explains that she probably doesn't recognize her. "I guess you don't remember me...Lula Ann. Lula Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—" When Sofia realizes who Bride really is she attacks her and throws her into the parking lot. She then throws all of Bride's gifts onto her bloody, injured body. Bride limps to her car thinking of calling 911. Upon further reflection, she decides that this would be a scandalous story and could hurt her budding cosmetic line. She decides to call Brooklyn, instead.

## Analysis

Chapter 2 begins to give the reader a vision of Bride as an adult from a first person point of view. She has become a successful business woman who has become accustomed to the finer things in life, especially material things. The reader is given a vivid picture of the Bride's mood or state of mind as well as her surrounds by the use of metaphors like, "Bullet taps on the windows followed by crystal lines of water." This metaphor comes at a time in the story when Bride grows sad and begins to miss Booker as she watches the weather through her apartment window.

The "Bullet taps on the windows" description is symbolic of the pain caused by Booker leaving. The "crystal lines of water" then, are symbolic of her figurative bleeding wounds. She admits to feeling sad about his departure. She turns to a glass of wine and has several to soothe her nerves. That's when another metaphor explains what she is missing because of his absence; "...sank into the sofa, its suede and silk cushions as comfy as any arms." She misses his physical presence, the act of holding her in his arms when she is sad. The arms of the sofa thus symbolize his embrace. The use of metaphors to describe Bride's feelings continues as she thinks, "How he hit me harder than a fist with six words..." once again alluding to her interpretation of how painful the situation is to her and referencing his parting words to her: "You not the woman I want." He has not literally hit her, but symbolically his six hurtful words to her are harder than taking a punch.

This chapter continues to demonstrate the theme of Abandonment. Bride is heartbroken when Booker leaves. She reflects on her relationship with him, and for the first time, realizes that other than him being gorgeous, she doesn't know a lot about him. She doesn't even know how he spends his days while she's at work. She admits that she never really cared about the details of his life. It isn't until they are apart that she seems curious about his life. Alone and feeling abandoned, she reflects on all she's done for him since they've been together. Although she periodically claims she doesn't care about him leaving or calls him a "Selfish Bastard," she is actually showing how much



she truly does care. By obsessing over him not being there, she is showing the reader how much she wants him there. She can't stop thinking about him.

Booker is not the only thing in this chapter that leaves Bride; as she dresses to go out, she notices that she no longer has pubic hair. This is significant because it is the first of many symbols that represent Bride's decline from a confident, independent woman to a scared, needy child. So, not only has Booker left her, she is also missing pubic hair which, in this case, is symbolic of the difference between being a grown woman and a child. Her descent begins.

Chapter 2 introduces the first flashback to Bride's childhood. She briefly recalls her childhood self being coaxed and comforted by a prosecutor telling her, "There's nothing to be afraid of. She can't hurt you." That quick glimpse occurs as Bride is in the jail parking lot waiting for Mrs. Sofia Huxley to be released. The fact that this flashback occurs in the very place she will be meeting a female convict and the fact that the child in the flashback is being told by a prosecutor not to fear a woman, the reader is given his/her first clue that there is a connection between Bride and Sofia. A few more flashbacks show Bride's thoughts while she waits to approach Sofia. She describes how the woman looks now, then reverts back to her domineering presence when Bride was a child in court. As she watches Sofia gobble many plates of food, Bride flashes back to when Sofia used food, pretzels, watermelon chunks, and apple slices, as a lure for young children. "Fruit as bait was a big part of the trial's testimony," she observes.

As a result of her abandonment, Bride must overcome her feelings of anger and come to a point of forgiveness. Bride reveals to Sofia Huxley, as well as to the reader, how she is connected to this recently paroled woman. When she is watching Sofia from a distance, Bride sees a meek and mild woman seemingly scared of the world around her. But soon she is quickly shown a different side of her personality when Bride reminds Sofia that she "was one of the children who—." At this point, the reader sees that Bride is bringing these gifts to the very woman whom she helped put behind bars so many years ago. Easing her conscience of her part in Sofia's incarceration by giving her gifts is definitely not an option. Sofia physically beats Bride, leaving her broken and bleeding in the parking lot with her would-be peace offerings scattered around her. This tells the reader that Sofia, although seemingly mild-mannered at first, was a much more volatile woman, and second, she has no intention of forgiving and forgetting the past.

It is unknown to the reader at this point why Bride feels sorry for a woman who has been convicted of child molestation, especially since she obviously had something to do with Sofia being put away fifteen years prior. Sofia has a big transition awaiting her as she moves from prison back to the real world. Bride thinks her gifts can help this transition. Bride convinces herself, before approaching Sofia, that she will be helping Sofia make a new life. She thinks her gifts will "help her forget and take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness, and boredom." However, just as Bride is holding on to childhood pain, Sofia, too, is greatly influenced by events from her past and the consequences that followed.



Presenting the right image and Keeping up Appearances is another important theme in this novel. One of the things that Bride continues to think about where Booker is concerned is his physical appearance. She claims that he is “one beautiful man, flawless even.” She also notes that she is very attractive and that they make a stunning couple. Keeping up appearances makes her decide against calling Brooklyn, her best friend and colleague, to cry on her shoulder. Here, Bride uses a simile to claim that her position as regional manager who is in charge of personnel is like a captain maintaining the “right” relationship with his crew members. She has an image to uphold as the boss. Bride makes a point to describe her expensive home furnishings, her sleek Jaguar, and material things she has given to Booker. In the jail parking lot, she describes a man there and judgmentally claims that his clothes “scream Salvation Army store.” As she watches Sofia in that same parking lot and then again at the motel, Bride is very judgmental about the woman’s physical appearance. Bride is very proud of the fact that she is stylish and sophisticated. She enters Sofia’s room with an air of superior confidence, but she surely doesn’t leave that way.

## Discussion Question 1

If Lula Ann, or Bride, as a child testified against and helped jail Sofia Huxley for child molestation, what could be the reason(s) that Bride wants to give this particular woman a fresh start?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think caused Sofia to have such a violent reaction? Is it specifically Bride’s presence?

## Discussion Question 3

Why doesn’t Bride want the police involved? What could be the personal repercussions of an investigation?

## Vocabulary

frumpy, complexions, countryfied, reps, samaritan, brothel, bailiff, botox, helter-skelter, stiletto



## Part One, Chapter 3

### Summary

Brooklyn, Bride's best friend and coworker, drives two hours to meet her behind a police station, which is closed because it's Sunday. This chapter is told from Brooklyn's viewpoint. Seeing the condition her friend is in, Brooklyn finds an open clinic and takes Bride in. Brooklyn shares with the reader that not only does Bride look pitiful, but also she knows that Bride is lying. At this point, the reader is given a description of the two women. Bride is "very black with silky curls," and Brooklyn is the "white girl with blond dreads."

As Brooklyn tries to discover the truth about what happened, Bride begins an unlikely story of how she was attacked. Brooklyn asks questions about it, and Bride fumbles to make something up. She ends up claiming that a would-be rapist attacked her. Brooklyn challenges her story by saying that she was carrying a lot of money, but none was taken. When Bride can't sufficiently answer the questions and starts to panic, Brooklyn backs off and leaves her to the lie. Brooklyn probes more by asking why Bride is so far from home anyway. Bride says she is there to meet a friend from the past, but didn't see her. Brooklyn realizes that Bride is still lying, and she also understands that Bride is aware she has been caught telling a lie.

Brooklyn describes how horrible Bride looks after seeing the doctor. Only a quarter of her face is untouched. The rest is swollen, bandaged, and stitched up. She's in bad shape. Although Brooklyn feels badly for her, she is secretly hopeful because Bride looks so bad and can't sell beauty products looking like as she does, which will enable Brooklyn to take over at work, "temporarily, of course." On the trip home, she tries to get Bride to smile and to stop dwelling on her misery, but nothing works. She decides that she'll get Bride home and settled. She will be on sick leave for a long time, so Brooklyn will take care of the office. She observes, "And who knows how that might turn out?"

### Analysis

As in the first two chapters, Chapter 3 is also told in first person, but from Brooklyn's point of view. Brooklyn is a great example of the theme of Image and Appearance. She doesn't have one nice thing to say about anyone or anything in the area. For instance, she begins by saying that they are sitting in, "this dump of a clinic after driving over two hours to find this hick town..." She continues to negatively judge the area when she talks about waiting for the on-call doctor arrive because he lives "far off in some other crappy town." When Bride asks if she thinks the doctor has done a good job, Brooklyn answers, "In this trailer park clinic?" She looks down on the area because it's not as glamorous as she is and therefore, she assumes they do poor work as well. She's not any kinder in discussing people, including Bride. Brooklyn describes Bride's altered appearance in a callous way, saying that she has "ugly stitches...lips so Ubangi she



can't pronounce the r in raw...nostrils wide as an orangutan's under gauze the size of half a bagel." She insultingly describes the nurse saying, "that nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she's washed her hands since graduating from that online nursing course she took." She looks down her nose at any people or places she deems below her.

Although Brooklyn is Bride's best friend, she thinks a lot of "unfriendly" things about her. When she first sees how injured Bride is, she feels sorry for her, but still describes Bride's eyes as, "the ones that spooked everybody with their strangeness" as "alien eyes, but guys think they're gorgeous, of course." This indicates a tinge of jealousy on Brooklyn's part. First she describes Bride's eyes in an unflattering way, then compares them to aliens, and finally, admits that guys like them. She almost sounds like a jealous young girl who begrudgingly has to admit that her rival has qualities that boys like. Not only does Brooklyn seem jealous of Bride's looks or at least her effect on men, she also has her eye on Bride's job. This is abundantly clear when she says that her position at Sylvia might be vacant soon because she believes she shouldn't be pushing beauty products that she, herself, isn't using to improve her own beauty.

## Discussion Question 1

If Brooklyn is her best friend and the only person she can trust, why is Bride lying to her?

## Discussion Question 2

By the various judgments that Brooklyn makes about people and places, what does that tell the reader about Brooklyn's character?

## Discussion Question 3

What sorts of actions, thoughts, or statements does Brooklyn make regarding Bride that makes the reader question their friendship?

## Vocabulary

dreads, brainpan, cratered, Ubangi, bloodshot, hypodermis, idleness



## Part One, Chapter 4

### Summary

At this point, Bride is on the mend. She is healing well, but is still out of work on sick leave. She goes back and forth in this chapter over several issues. First, she says it's good to work from home, though she mostly still has power. Then, she claims that she's bored and lonely. Next, she thinks of Booker and says, "Maybe he is right. I am not the woman." Then she reverses position, saying, "I don't want to think about him now. Or how empty, how trivial and lifeless everything seems now." She doesn't waver, however, about her friendship with Brooklyn. Even though Brooklyn is doing her job and sometimes overrides her decisions, she still has Bride's back and is the only person she can trust.

Bride is absolutely shocked at Sofia Huxley's reaction to her attempted kindness. She is floored by the rapid way she went from meek and mild to ferociously aggressive. Bride explains that she wasn't the only child to accuse Sofia at that trial. Four other kids testified as well. She thinks of how the social worker and psychologists had placed their arms around the emotional children after they testified. She didn't get that because she was strong in her testimony. What she remembers most about her feelings that day is that not only did the other mothers smile at her and the fathers give her thumbs-up, but most importantly Sweetness smiled and held her hand walking from the courthouse. She had never done that before. Bride remembers that Sweetness didn't like to touch her. She could tell by the look of disgust on her face when she had to bathe her. She remembers that she would try to get in trouble and cause her mother to slap her as punishment just to be touched, but Sweetness would only yell, lock her in her room, or send her to bed without dinner. She craved her mother's touch.

Bride also is angry with herself at how she handled, or, rather, didn't handle, Sofia's attack. As a child, Lula Ann never fought back. Reflecting on the confrontation she is angry because she believes herself to be a strong independent woman now, but reverted back to merely taking punishment without defending herself as she did when she was a child. She tells how a stylist she consults, Jeri, helps give her confidence to get the job she now has. He's the one who convinces her to wear only white because it's such a stunning contrast to her dark ebony skin. Upon taking his advice, she sees that he is right. Not only is she beautiful to herself, but she turns heads wherever she goes.

During this chapter, she develops a coping mechanism to divert her loneliness and her depression. She retrieves Booker's shaving brush from the trash, lathers her face, and shaves off the lather with the non-bladed edge of the razor. This seems to calm her. She decides to take a walk to the park where she sees an older couple walking hand in hand, looking happy and content. Watching the couple sends her back to memories of the first time Booker embraced her.





## Analysis

Once again the first person point of view in this chapter is through the eyes of Bride. She is almost completely healed, but still working from home. Yet again Brooklyn's faithfulness can be questioned. Bride still claims that Brooklyn has her back, but she also states that she, "second-guesses me, even overrides a few of my decisions. I don't mind. I'm lucky she had my back." The reader must wonder, does she really, or is she just worming her way into Bride's position at work? Bride is so solid in her belief that Brooklyn always has her best intentions at heart. She says, "She is a true friend and doesn't annoy me like those fake ones who come here just to gaze and pity me." Bride only hears what Brooklyn says aloud. Would she feel differently if she could hear her inner thoughts as the reader does?

In this chapter too, the reader must question why Bride is so shocked at Sofia's reaction to her intended gift. She uses vivid descriptions to show Sofia's transformation from mild to wild like, "ex-con to raging alligator...slack-lipped to fangs...slouch to hammer." She is truly baffled that Sofia doesn't welcome her gift with open arms. Flashback is again used in this chapter to explain a bit more about Sofia's molestation trial and about Bride's connection to the trial. She uses a simile and onomatopoeia to describe how she pointed out the culprit, Mrs. Sofia Huxley, in court. "Then I unfolded my forefinger. Pow! Like a cap pistol." Lula Ann learns at that point that every action has a reaction. When she points out Sofia Huxley as the child molester, she earns the praise of the prosecutor and social worker, the parents of the other children involved, and most of all, Sweetness. She claims that "after the trial Sweetness was kind of motherlike." At that point in her life, that's all she has ever wanted. As Bride obsesses over her encounter with Sofia at the motel, the motif of Abandonment comes up again in an unusual way. Sofia isn't her friend; she doesn't owe her anything; she's a paroled convict, but Bride is still very defeated by the fact that even Sofia has decided to "erase her," which makes her feel worse that she imagines a slave would feel. She's referring, of course, to the incident between her and Sofia at the motel. Although Bride may be a successful and competent business woman, the child inside of her, Lula Ann, is still seeking approval from others.

The author makes use of flashback again when Bride is remembering the night that Booker approached her for the first time. She ponders over every detail, every feeling from that night at the stadium concert where he came up and wrapped his arms around her from behind. That is the first moment of their journey together. After her reminders, she expresses that in the end, she is "Dismissed. Erased." Once again, Abandonment is an issue.

Bride's approach in this chapter to the theme of Image, and the importance of looking good, shows up as she looks in the mirror and realizes she is almost fully healed and makes remarks about how beautiful different parts of her face are. She flashes back to being Lula Ann; "She's sort of pretty under all that black" her neighbors claimed when she was a child.



Back in the present, self-confidence and her true beauty began to shine through with the help of Jeri, her “total person’ designer.” He is the person to suggest that she only wear white. Her entire wardrobe should be white to contrast with her deep ebony skin tone, not only because of her tone, but also because her name is Bride, and brides symbolically wear white.

The fact that Bride only wears white on her black skin continues to demonstrate the theme of Color and its symbolic use. Whatever the characters, or the readers, believe about the colors is enough to make them meaningful on a different level than just black and white. Earlier in the story, Sweetness is so concerned with the shade of skin. She implies that lighter (close to white) is superior or a better fit in society than darker (close to black). Whether or not Bride holds these beliefs is not important; the important part is that is the guidelines under which she has been raised. Therefore, the contrast of her dark (black) skin against her light (white) clothes is symbolically meaningful as to what Bride feels about her station in life now, her old life, a dark child whose own mother is disgusted by her, versus her beautiful bright white, new clothes symbolizing her new life away from her “dark” past. Now her darkness is an asset in her life. People see her beauty in contrast to the white chic clothes she wears to her fancy job and the upscale clubs in her new life. While working with her stylist, Jeri, she asks if she should add some color, maybe with accessories. Jeri is the first person to help implant confidence into Bride. Coincidentally, after taking his advice and going for a second interview, she is hired at Sylvia, Inc. The author takes these binary differences between black and white and applies those concepts to Bride’s overall life, to the people in her life who are dark and light, to the situations, present and past, that are dark in her life, and to her own mood and self-image. All of these aspects of Bride can be applied to this scale.

Another point worth mentioning is her sudden obsession with Booker’s shaving brush. She first retrieves it from the trash as she is pining away for her lost love. First, she merely tries to use it as he had so many times. Then, it becomes an obsession. She even puts it in her purse so that when she’s feeling anxious or depressed, she can touch it to make her calm to use it as a substitute for being with Booker, to feel the calmness that he showered upon her.

## Discussion Question 1

So far, what other contrasts between light and dark can be seen in this story? How do they affect the characters?

## Discussion Question 2

Although Bride participates in Sofia’s trial, she is entirely shocked at Sofia’s reaction to her gift. Why would Sofia react in this manner?



## Discussion Question 3

What effect did Jeri, the stylist, have on Bride's life and self-image?

## Vocabulary

slack-lipped, haunches, Loutoutin, brooch, prowess, benevolent



# Part One, Chapter 5

## Summary

Chapter 5 allows the reader to hear more about Lula Ann's childhood through her mother's eyes. This chapter is a series of memories that Sweetness has about Lula Ann. The reader sees that Sweetness truly believed that she treated the child harshly to help her to cope in a mean world. She tells the reader that she had seen African American kids being picked on by young white boys. Toughening Lula Ann up at home would help her survive in a world where she'd be ridiculed because of the color of her skin. Sweetness admits that she "couldn't see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her." Because Lula Ann was so dark-skinned, Sweetness claimed that she would fall prey to what she called "skin privileges."

Sweetness flashes back to remember a different time in Lula Ann's childhood that made her feel softer, even proud of her child. She refers to the trial of the child molesters. At first Sweetness had been so scared that her child would shame her in public; she explained that other child witnesses cried and whined, but not her daughter; she was an unwavering key to the guilty verdict of at least one of the three accused. When Sweetness saw how happy Lula Ann's testimony made the other parents and adults in the courthouse, she was proud to walk out of the courthouse holding her daughter's hand. Because of Lula Ann's testimony, she and Sweetness were treated with more respect by people who formerly looked down on them. Sweetness was so pleased, she took Lula Ann to get her ears pierced. She explains that although she was too stern with Lula Ann throughout her life, she truly does love her. Back in the present, she's proud once more when Bride comes to visit, all dressed in white and looking classy. She admits that Bride sends money sometimes, but she doesn't ever know when she will drop by.

## Analysis

This chapter is still in first person point of view, but switches back to Sweetness' version of life. Flashback is the device that is most prominent in this chapter. Sweetness admits many things from Lula Ann's childhood. She admits she can't get past her color to love her for herself and that she has always been too harsh with Lula Ann. Sweetness flashes back to the trial against the teachers and uses the idiom "proud as a peacock" to describe how she feels about Lula Ann's testimony.

The theme of Color is demonstrated in this chapter as Sweetness provides her perspective about life and her daughter. In previous sections of the novel, the color white represents good and black symbolizes bad. In this chapter, Sweetness turns that around when she tells the story of the little girl who is tripped by a group of young white boys. She calls them "white trash." Here the color white is seen in a negative light by specifying that the mean, or bad, boys are white, then going on to call them "white



trash,” placing the color word with a word meaning garbage or waste. Since the little girl involved is dark-skinned, Sweetness sets up the binary opposites, but reverses the way they’ve been used to this point. Once again, in Sweetness’ eyes white represents evil; however, she is inconsistent when discussing the shades of skin within her own race. Light-skinned African American people are favored over darker-skinned people, such as Lula Ann. Sweetness confesses that Lula Ann’s color disgusts her and that her dark skin will scare others on the street. Sweetness doesn’t realize that she’s being hypocritical by thinking white-skinned people are evil yet light-skinned African American people are good and the dark-skinned blacks are bad or scary.

Presenting the right Image or Keeping up Appearances is another important theme in this chapter. One of the things that Bride continues to think about where Booker is concerned is his physical appearance. She claims that he is “one beautiful man, flawless even.”

Another important theme that is noticeable is the idea of Child Abuse. Sweetness spends a lot of time explaining that her treatment of Lula Ann as a child is for her own good. Throughout the chapter she continues this plea by saying things like, “I had to protect her. She didn’t know the world” and, “I wasn’t a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges.” In this chapter, Sweetness not only admits her cruelty to Lula Ann, but admits that what happens to a person in childhood may stay with them forever. It may affect her adult life. Since Lula Ann, or Bride, doesn’t visit her mother now that she’s grown, Sweetness is rethinking the way she raised her.

## Discussion Question 1

Why would Sweetness be so concerned about keeping up appearances?

## Discussion Question 2

If Sweetness is so worried about what people think of Lula Ann and is then proud when she testifies, why wouldn’t Sweetness be worried that she is a bad mother or is mean to her child?

## Discussion Question 3

What can be said about the importance placed on skin tone in any community?

## Vocabulary

white trash, pervert, noose, preventative, obscure, obfuscate, dreary, reminiscent, aloof, subjugation



## Part One, Chapter 6

### Summary

In this chapter, told from Bride's viewpoint, the reader sees that she is still sticking to the ruse that she experienced an attempted rape. Brooklyn decides to get her out in public, but not somewhere that Bride will be intimidated by men. At dinner, Bride announces to Brooklyn that she wants to get away somewhere on a cruise ship. Brooklyn convinces her that she doesn't need to make any plans "until this rape stuff wears off." Bride decides to confess to Brooklyn that she was not attacked by a would-be rapist. She even admits that it was a woman who beat her. Brooklyn coaxes the whole story out of Bride. She doesn't understand why Bride would worry about a woman who would hurt children and why she is surprised that the woman she put in jail would want to beat her. Bride gets upset because she doesn't feel that Brooklyn understands her reasons for feeling sorry for the convict, and she doesn't. Bride explained that she was not molested by this woman and had only seen her two times, at the trial and when she was beaten. Brooklyn catches a slip up and asks her, "You said you saw her twice...But what about seeing her diddling kids?" Bride gets frustrated and says that's what she meant. Bride finally gets Brooklyn to see that she wants to make a positive difference in someone's life and a recently released felon would certainly need help.

Finally, it's time for the pre-launch party for YOU, GIRL where Bride will be the main attraction. As she's getting ready in her stunning white party dress, she is stunned to realize that she cannot put her earrings in her earlobes. Although she's had her ears pierced since second grade, after the trial, the holes have mysteriously closed. She claims, "I've got virgin earlobes."

Bride wakes up the next morning in bed with a stranger. She has had too much to drink and brought home a man she's never met before. She's embarrassed and ashamed. She starts to feel panicked and takes out Booker's shaving brush. Using the brush to spread foam on her body somehow calms her. She thinks back to a time when she told Booker about looking out of Sweetness' bedroom window and seeing their landlord, Mr. Leigh, sexually abusing a little boy. When the landlord saw Lula Ann looking out the window, he cursed at her and called her names that she had never heard before. When Lula Ann told Sweetness about what she saw, Sweetness was angry. If she had to stand up to Mr. Leigh, they would have to try to find a new apartment, so they never say anything. As Bride finishes telling the story, she tries to make light of it, but starts to cry. Booker is sympathetic. He tells her it's not her fault and says, "Correct what you can; learn from what you can't." She recalls something else he tells her that day that haunts her and makes her toss and turn in bed: "...the mind always knows truth and wants clarity." She thinks back to all of the mean things kids said to her in school. Her consolation is that she turned out to be a "deep dark beauty" and "...forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them—to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback."



Currently Brooklyn has become the “acting” regional manager now in place of Bride. Bride still believes that Brooklyn saved her and has helped her through this recent tragedy in her life, so “Good for her.” She also admits that call from Brooklyn are coming less and less.

## Analysis

First person point of view continues with Bride in this chapter. Through the use of flashbacks, the reader learns several things about Bride’s past that add to various motifs already established in the story. Another theme comes into play here: be honest as it’s hard to live with a lie. When Brooklyn is trying to help Bride overcome her rape scare, Bride cannot handle the lie any longer. She decides to be honest and tell Brooklyn the truth about Sofia Huxley. This again brings light to the theme of Child Abuse. Brooklyn cannot understand why Bride would dare to feel sorry for a woman who has done such things to children. Bride gets aggravated trying to explain. Bride tells Brooklyn that she testified against Sofia in court because she is witness in the case, then later states that she’s only seen Sofia twice: in the courtroom and when she was beaten. A foreshadowing occurs when Brooklyn catches Bride’s statement of only seeing Sofia twice, when she would have to have seen her harming the children if she testified as a witness. If she always told the truth, she won’t have to remember the lie.

While getting ready for the pre-launch party for her makeup line, Bride discovers that she can no longer put her earrings in her ears. The piercings that she received as a prize from Sweetness have closed up totally. Even the markings where the holes had been have disappeared. This marks the second event pertaining to Bride’s body that symbolizes that she is reverting back to a childlike state; first the loss of pubic hair, and now non-pierced ears. Another significant event stemming from the party is Bride’s lapse in judgment by getting drunk at a work party and bringing a strange man home to her bed. Upon waking she immediately realizes her blunder and is ashamed of herself. She feels like she’s losing herself in all of the losses around her.

She tries to comfort herself by falling back on the theme of Appearance and Image. So much emphasis has been placed on Bride’s appearance, first how bad she looked with her dark ebony skin as a child, and later how stunning she looks and all of the perks that go along with being beautiful as an adult. Because of this, telling herself how beautiful she is and being able to rub her beauty and success in the faces of Sweetness and all of her former tormentors makes her feel a better about her insecure self.

Child Molestation as a theme is demonstrated again as Bride remembers telling Booker a memory of seeing her landlord molesting a young boy. That is a time in her life that rings with injustice. Sweetness did not get mad about the story of what the man did to the boy, but rather she was upset that Lula Ann might tell someone which would make trouble for them and cause them to need a new apartment. As far as Bride knows, there has been no justice for that boy. She realizes as an adult how guilty she feels about not helping him or telling someone what had happened. Booker soothes her mind by telling her “you’re not responsible for other folks’ evil” and “correct what you can; learn from



what you can't." These two phrases can apply to many aspects of Bride's life. Bride begins to question herself as to whether or not she really meant to point her finger as a witness to the landlord and not to the teacher sitting before her. Thus this chapter begins and ends with Bride struggling with lies in her life both past and present.

The theme of Color comes up again in small ways in this chapter. When Bride describes being tormented by kids in school, a time in her life when her dark ebony skin was a bad thing, she says, "They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper." The white children taunt their dark-skinned peer by telling her she isn't like them and that she spoils their world, just like black ink spilled on white paper. She relays that she didn't tell on these children for the same reason Sweetness wouldn't let her tell on the landlord; life isn't fair. She tolerated their torture until she felt that if she could just become "so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' was all I needed to win." Therefore, as an adult, her appearance, especially her color, play a big role in feeling as if she is conquering the haunts of the past. It is almost as if she feels that she will show them, and they'll be sorry they ever hurt her or are not as good as she is now.

Finally, Brooklyn's friendship can again be called into question. She doesn't seem to understand Bride's intention toward Sofia. She also doesn't have time for people and their pity parties. "Hitting the floor, she always says, requires choice—lie there or bounce." Bride has been on sick leave for quite a while. Brooklyn has become the "acting" regional manager and rarely calls Bride. Bride sees this as a good opportunity for Brooklyn. She is blind to the fact that Brooklyn's success in her position can ultimately mean failure for Bride.

## Discussion Question 1

Bride feels that her success and beauty has "shown them," meaning tormentors from her past. Has she really overcome those ordeals? How can one tell?

## Discussion Question 2

What sorts of things might Lula Ann have been considering and thinking about as a child testifying against an adult?

## Discussion Question 3

What events seem to suggest that Brooklyn has ulterior motives where Bride is concerned?

## Vocabulary

mahimahi, mojo, pudenda, Vicodin, curried, soiling, Botox, pallor, silicon



# Part One, Chapter 7

## Summary

In this chapter, told from Brooklyn's point of view, she confesses her feelings about Booker. She doesn't like him. She thinks that his going up to a complete stranger at a concert and embracing her is inappropriate. Bride claims that she doesn't know what he does for a living and that it doesn't bother her, but it bothers Brooklyn. She doesn't tell Bride, but she's seen Booker in coffee shops, on street corners, by the subway, and on the steps of the library. Brooklyn believes that he is faking when he reads his books or appears to be writing. She thinks he is just trying not to be thrown out on the street.

Brooklyn does admit that Bride is different, in a positive way, when she's near Booker. She seems more confident and doesn't come off as needy as she usually does. Brooklyn still believes, though, that Bride's only into him because she's addicted to their sexual encounters. She says that she could have warned Bride that he would leave. She then goes on to explain an encounter she nearly had with him herself. Appearing at Bride's apartment for work purposes, she found Booker home alone, lying in bed naked reading a book. Just to see what would happen, Brooklyn shed her clothes and slipped under the covers next to him. He didn't really have a reaction, and didn't respond to her advances, but he didn't push her away either. When she asked him if he wanted to have sex with her, he replied, "Are you sure you know what makes a garden grow?" She answered, "Tenderness." He blankly looked at her and said, "And dung." She was so insulted, she jumped out of bed, got dressed, and stormed out. Brooklyn claimed she could have convinced him to sleeping with her if she'd wanted to.

## Analysis

Once again the reader sees the story through the first person point of view of Brooklyn. She is not coming off as a very true friend in this chapter. For Brooklyn, she never knows whom she can really trust. Here she discounts Booker, stating basically that he's just a bum. Yet, she didn't think so little of him to not try to sleep with him. The friendship between Brooklyn and Bride comes into question here. Would a true friend try to prove someone's boyfriend isn't trustworthy by sleeping with him? If he's being an unfaithful boyfriend for sleeping with someone, then that so-called friend is also being unfaithful too, in this case to Bride.

In this chapter, Brooklyn makes use of a simile to describe why she's not surprised that Booker leaves when she says, "he left her like a skunk leaves a smell." The theme of Appearances and Keeping up an Image are demonstrated here again. Brooklyn describes all of the places she sees Booker away from Bride. In each place, she describes a negative reason for why he must be there. For instance, at the library, she believes he couldn't be actually reading a book; he must be pretending to keep from being thrown off the library steps like a bum. If he lives with Bride and can be in a



beautiful modern apartment, he wouldn't be loitering on the library steps unless he is actually there to read. Brooklyn complains that Bride doesn't really know Booker, and if she did, she'd throw him out. Well, Brooklyn doesn't know Booker like she thinks she does. Because he doesn't dress in fancy clothes and hang out in hip places, she assumes he's a mooch. She thinks he's great looking, but not worth Bride's time. She acted like he was worth her time when she tried sleeping with him. She's a perfect example of a hypocritical person who feels superior to others.

## Discussion Question 1

Why would Brooklyn be confused as to whom she can trust?

## Discussion Question 2

What does it say about Brooklyn that she looks down on Booker, but is still willing to sleep with him?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the phrase "people aren't always what they appear to be" important to this chapter Brooklyn?

## Vocabulary

panhandling, rut, soliciting, mock-ups, dung, ironic, celibate, near-sighted, unintelligible

# Part One, Chapter 8

## Summary

The reader views this chapter through Bride's eyes. This chapter sees Bride finding a duffel bag of books that was left by Booker. As she searches through them, she realizes that she really doesn't know anything about him. She knows that they look gorgeous as a couple, that people envy them on the dance floor, on boat rides, and on the beach. She doesn't ask anything about his private life and thinks that he appreciates that she respects his privacy. She admits that they have in-depth discussions, but they are always about her.

When she checks the mail, she finds a letter addressed to Booker from Salvatore Ponti with a bill for sixty-eight dollars. Before she can decide if she wants to see what this is all about, Brooklyn calls going on and on about last night's party and the guys with whom each left. Bride doesn't want to discuss it. Bride tells Brooklyn she needs to get away. Brooklyn reminds her that she wasn't going to do that until after the launch of the cosmetics line. Bride cuts Brooklyn short on the phone and decides to check out the bill from Mr. Ponti.

## Analysis

Once again the first person point of view is that of Bride. She shows an extremely selfish side to her personality. She has seemed whiney and self-centered before, but here she actually claims that she and Booker did have serious conversations, but they were all about her. She didn't want to invade his privacy by learning anything about his life outside of being with her. Again, she explains how they appeared to other people, how they were envied by others. She proclaims that she knew went to "some" college because he wore their t-shirts and that he tried giving her a lecture once about "the history of water in California," but she fell asleep bored. All she cares about when they are together is their appearance and the image this beautiful couple portrays.

When she confesses to Brooklyn that she wants to leave and go away somewhere, Brooklyn reminds her that she promised to wait until the cosmetic line comes out. Besides, one cannot run away from who she is, she always brings herself wherever she goes. Then, Brooklyn goes on to talk about being hung over and only concerned with herself and what's happening in her life. Her life seems to be getting easier and easier at work, or at least more profitable for her, since Bride has been on sick leave. Bride doesn't seem bothered in the least by Brooklyn's gradual takeover. She claims that Brooklyn is her best friend.

It may be too little, too late, but Bride decides to track down Mr. Ponti and find out what Booker's bill from him is all about. Now that he's gone, she's interested in his life.



## Discussion Question 1

What evidence suggests that Bride realizes what is happening with Brooklyn and her job?

## Discussion Question 2

What does it say about Bride's character that she lived with a man and didn't know anything about his life or his past? Explain.

## Discussion Question 3

In real life, what could be the consequences of only worrying about appearance and image instead of forming meaningful bonds?

## Vocabulary

duffel, logistics, fraught, lingering, melodramatic, flagrant, flamboyant, formative

## Part One, Chapter 9

### Summary

This chapter is told from the viewpoint of Sofia, the released inmate that beat Bride. Sofia begins by telling the reader that the first job she got after prison was as a home health position helping an older woman. She liked it there but had to leave because the woman's grandchildren visited on weekends, and she couldn't be around children because of her crime. Her parole officer finds her another, similar job, but it is answering to people in uniforms. She is not happy to be around people in authority wearing uniforms, but these people are nice to her.

She describes the horrible things that went on when she was behind bars. She explains that she and her cellmate, Julie, were both in for child abuse. They were considered worse criminals than anyone else in prison, and they were treated as such. Julie tried to hang herself, but did a terrible job of it. She ended up in the infirmary. When she returned, she was changed, now quiet and ended up being the "wife" to some older scary woman whom no one would mess with. Sofia explains that luckily, because of her height and the fact that she's a fighter, no one wanted her in prison for more than a casual hook-up.

Growing up in an extremely strict religious home, Sofia hadn't been allowed to have books in her home unless they were religious or the Bible. She loved and took advantage of the prison library. She worked for twelve cents per hour in the sewing room. For fifteen years, she had been tough, protecting herself, and had not cried. While in prison, she received two letters from her husband and a Christmas and birthday box from her parents each year which contained "nutritious candy bars, tampons, religious pamphlets and socks." No one wrote, called, or visited her there.

On the day she was released, she wanted nothing more than to eat good food and have a silent, peaceful sleep. She was shocked when a young woman (who the reader knows is Bride) knocked on her motel room door. She seemed to recognize the girl's eyes, but couldn't place her. She was there to give Sofia money and other gifts. When the woman explained that she was one of the kids who put her behind bars, she freaked out. Sofia didn't even realize what she was doing. She beat that woman, threw her and her gifts in the parking lot, and curled into a ball on the bed, crying for the first time in fifteen years. Bride had come to give her a gift. Sofia, in the present day, acknowledges that she did give Sofia a gift, just not the one she brought with her. That had been the first time in fifteen years that Sofia had been able to cry. It allowed her to cleanse herself of all of the bad from the past. Sofia states that she waited and waited for the police to come and take her back, but no one came. When she woke the next morning, she "reminded herself that freedom is never free. You have to fight for it. Work for it and make sure you are able to handle it."



## Analysis

From Sofia's first person point of view, the reader is given a glimpse into what life was like for her in jail. It was a terrible experience. She is a mess when she is released. She starts out as a meek and mild woman who seems afraid of her own shadow and then surprises even herself when she turns from mild to out of control as she brutally beats Bride and throws her into the parking lot. At this point in both of their lives, these ladies realize that there are consequences for all actions, something that continues to reappear throughout this novel.

Upon her release from prison and before her attack on Bride, Sofia uses vivid descriptions to express her joy in seeing nature, colors, and the world outside of the prison. She describes the grass as "so green it hurt my eyes." She doesn't remember everything looking so vivid and real. Her use of personification describes her joy at feeling the wind through the car window: "Wind fingering, stroking, kissing my hair."

Obviously, just being released from prison, Sofia isn't centered on her appearance or image as the other characters in this story. Her focus in jail is on surviving and getting through the time. Her focus upon release is assimilating into the real world. She must learn that not everyone is "out to get you" and that most times people are compensated in one way or another for the work they do. She finds it's the same principle as doing something bad; there is a consequence, good or bad, for everyone's actions.

The author's statement about unnecessary excess can be seen in the chapter as well. Obviously, just being released from prison, Sofia does not possess an excessive amount of material items. She is however, excessive with her food intake, which is symbolic. She has only had prison food for so long that she orders many different items from the menu. She shows gluttony, in this case an excess of too much food. She eats as if she hasn't eaten for years, and if she doesn't gobble it down quickly it will be taken from her. As with everything in life, Sofia learns again that everything has a consequence. Because of her over-indulgence at dinner, she spends the first bit of free time in a quiet solitary room throwing up all of the food he has just inhaled.

Although the binary difference between black and white are not approached the same way here, except that one woman is dark skinned and one is white, there is a binary relationship between good and evil. Sofia uses her fists to battle "the Devil...seductive, but evil." The dark skinned woman, Bride, is dressed in all white. Since white is symbolic of purity, Sofia calls her clothes and accessories "Satan's disguise." The irony of this situation is that Sofia, the white, convicted child molester, is battling a dark skinned woman she believes to be the Devil, when actually she was a young child during Sofia's crime and trial. Sofia sees Bride as the enemy, the evil one, despite the crimes that put Sofia behind bars. Originally, Sofia, who is white, is the evil one based on her past crimes, and Bride the dark-skinned one, is the innocence that put Sofia behind bars though the reader should question whether Bride is in fact innocent.

In the present, Bride is, in Sofia's eyes, seen as the dark, evil one wearing a white, or pure, disguise. Because she reacts so quickly and so violently, even Sofia isn't sure if



she beats Bride because she is trying to give her a gift and “nothing in life is free,” so she sees Sofia as a danger. She may be retaliating for Bride’s testimony that put her behind bars, or she may just be lashing out with the pent up anger and fear that she has hidden for fifteen years in prison. Either way, this particular scene is a very interesting twist on the rest of the book where black and white are symbolic of evil and good, in that order. Although Bride is the one who is physically broken, with her vicious attack and release of pent up anger, Sofia and her spirit is also broken in a different way.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What do you feel is Sofia’s true reason for beating Bride at the motel? Explain.

## **Discussion Question 2**

After growing up in such a strict, religious home, what do you think could account for Sofia’s complete turn-around that leads her into prison?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How might Sofia be, on some level, grateful to Bride?

## **Vocabulary**

paroled, infirmary, arsonists, scorch, deceits, seductive



# Part Two, Chapter 1

## Summary

From the perspective of an unnamed Narrator, this chapter is told in third person. Bride has decided to find out why Booker owes money to someone. She arrives in a seedy side of town where the taxi driver refuses to wait for her to conduct her business inside. She is at Salvatore Ponti's Pawn and Repair Palace. Upon entering Salvatore watches her closely and asks her to call him Sally. When she shows him the bill, he remembers Booker well, "Picky guy, real picky."

Bride is surprised that they are holding a trumpet and a pinky ring for Booker. When he was there he had only asked for the trumpet, the man tells her, but then they threw in the ring. They explain that he left a forwarding address to a Q. Olive in his "hick" hometown of Whiskey, CA. The men in the shop laugh and laugh about funny names given to towns. Sally tells her there's no street address, but in a small, hick town they probably don't have street names. Bride steps outside to hail a cab and realizes that she'd be better off going back inside and calling for a cab to come to this neighborhood.

## Analysis

In this chapter, the point of view changes to third person, an unknown narrator that describes what Bride and other characters are doing. Bride realizes in this pawn and repair shop that she really doesn't know Booker at all. The men in the shop, although only being around Booker for a short amount of time, seem to have more information about him than Bride does. During this visit, she finds out that he plays a trumpet and that he's a country boy from a "hick" town called Whiskey, CA. She is bewildered.

This is a major wake-up call because Bride comes she realize that although she lived with this man and shares her deepest, darkest secrets with him, she never bothered to find out anything of substance about him. She claims that she was being a cool girlfriend who doesn't interfere with her boyfriend's private affairs, but now she sees that that may have been a mistake. This realization is not only a shock to her beliefs about who he is, but also is shocking to the image she thinks she's portraying while with him. She dressed him up in her fancy clothes, from her fancy stores, and took him out like a piece of "arm candy." However, now she realizes that she merely creates the appearance she wants to portray while he's with her. She is so proud that she doesn't parade her boyfriend around at parties by bragging about his job. What she doesn't realize until now is that she has been parading him around as the person she's created, the person she wants him to be, not the person he truly is, the person whom it seems she doesn't even know.





## **Discussion Question 1**

Why do you believe Booker kept his personal life from Bride?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Bride realize about herself with her realization about Booker and his life?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why might someone keep secrets from the person he lives with and supposedly loves?  
Why do people keep secrets?

## **Vocabulary**

pawn, mouthpiece, dimple, ample, traumatize, fiasco, beauteous



## Part Two, Chapter 2

### Summary

In this chapter, Sofia hears from her father that her mother has died. She knows she should feel sad about her mother passing, but she doesn't. Sofia asks her employer for an advance to go home to the funeral, but isn't sure if her parole officer will let her go. At this point, she takes the time to recall all of the details from her stern religious upbringing—the church, the Reverend Walker, her mother, and all of the rules that were strictly followed. She admits to marrying merely to get out of her family home. Finding her marriage to be a bad situation, she says, “Teaching was the only pleasure I had.”

Sofia also wonders about the young woman she beat at the motel. The morning after, when no one had come to take her to jail, she finds what she believes to be Bride's pearl earring in the parking lot. She experiences sorrow for what she has done to Bride and thinks of her often. While working at the nursing home, she believes that helping these people in need is a way to make up for what she has done to Bride.

### Analysis

This chapter returns to first person point of view. The reader knows what Sofia knows and also her thoughts. When she finds out that her mother has died, she doesn't feel sad although she knows that would be the appropriate response. She immediately thinks back to her childhood and all of the bad memories she has from that time. She uses vivid detail to describe the wallpaper that she claims “to know better than my own face.” This statement tells the reader that she has been frequently punished by standing against the wall, “a quiet punishment.” Often times she can't even remember what infraction places her there; they were many and often.

She admits that it is because of her mother's strict rules that she hastily “married the first man who asked.” During her two years with him, she is treated the same way she has been her whole life. Through this statement about her husband and his treatment of her, the reader can see that Sofia is not treated well as a wife either. Here the reader sees the theme of Child Abuse being demonstrated, in that what happens to a child is carried with her for the entirety of her life; her life is shaped by this mistreatment. Because Sofia is so unhappy in her childhood home, she leaps at the first opportunity to leave when it comes along. Because she is treated poorly as a child and then again in her new marriage, she believes that that's her position in the world. She does say that something positive has come from her mother's unpleasant treatment. She credits her mother's strict rules and rigid discipline for keeping her alive in the prison.

After marrying to escape her family, Sofia finds married life to be similar to her home life. She claims that teaching is the only thing that makes her happy. Many aspects can be explored because of this statement. She may have loved the change of atmosphere;



she may have seen it as an escape; she may have wanted to be near those children because that is a situation in which she is in control. Whichever it may be, events in a person's life shape the personality and morals that she has, good or bad.

In this brief chapter, the reader is also shown a softer side of Sofia. She admits to feeling guilty about beating Bride when she visits Sofia. She sees the realization that by attacking Bride, she is just hitting the girl who helped put her in jail, she is also letting out the anger of her entire life—having to be strong in prison, her bad marriage, her strict unpleasant childhood, and even “returning slaps and running the devil Mommy knew so well out of my life.” After having time to think it over, Sofia feels sorry. She worries about Bride and feels that she is somehow making restitution for what she did to Bride each time she cares for her patients, “in my mind I am putting the black girl back together, healing her, thanking her.” Once again, Sofia's actions have been manifested from her own treatment as a child, and now, she feels sorry for what she has done to another.

## Discussion Question 1

How did Sofia's mother's treatment of her contribute to the way Sofia has behaved as an adult?

## Discussion Question 2

Why would Sofia say, “Sorry Mommy?” What does she have to apologize to her mother about? What would lead the reader to believe that she might not be truly guilty of the child molestation crime?

## Discussion Question 3

When a person has done someone wrong, do you believe that they should step up and apologize to that person, or do you believe that paying forward a kindness makes up for the shameful act?

## Vocabulary

pew, clematis, claimant, decadent, fruition, hasp, indecisive

## Part Two, Chapter 3

### Summary

Bride decides to leave town without telling Brooklyn to search for the small town of Whiskey, CA. She hopes to discover Booker there with the help of whoever Q. Olive may be. Booker made her feel safe, and without him, she feels vulnerable as she did in her mother's home as a child. She thinks about all of the rules and punishments received in that home. Bride blames Booker for her misery in life. She can't understand why he left her. She is reverting to her childhood mannerisms, like not fighting back or even defending herself, against Sofia's attack. Bride sees her journey to find Booker as a way to stand up to him and prove her strength because she was "too weak, too scared to defy Sweetness, or the landlord, or Sofia Huxley..." Upon reaching Booker, Bride plans to ask him why she is "not the woman." She plans to stand in front of him with her Jaguar, her expensive clothes, and the reminder of her position in a "billion-dollar company" in order to make him realize his mistake.

Her first stop on the trip is at a diner where she presented herself as better than the only person there, the waitress. She asks for "a white omelet, no cheese" and acts superior when the waitress doesn't know what that means. It is here that she realizes that she has lost weight. At first she seems puzzled by this, then shrugs it off stating, "No such thing as too thin in her business."

She continues on her journey, only finding a road, not a town named Whiskey, so she takes it. Bride accidentally crashes her car into a tree after not making a sharp curve. She is stuck in a wooded area, in her Jaguar, with what she believes is a broken ankle, all night. Finally, in the morning, a little gal with brilliant green eyes finds Bride, leaves and returns with help. Bride was afraid of the bearded man who took her from the car. She asked him over and over not to hurt her. Then she fainted. Soon she finds that the bearded man, Steve, and his wife Evelyn are looking after her. They live in a world without electricity, phone service, or plumbing. Evelyn introduced the green-eyed gal as Raisin. Steve and Evelyn name her Rain actually because that is where they found her and took her in from, but she prefers to be called Raisin.

Steve brings in Dr. Walter Muskie to check out Bride's leg. It's severe enough to be treated in his office and not at their house. Although Bride is expecting a dumpy little clinic, Dr. Muskie's office is state of the art with top of the line equipment. He explains to Bride that, "Loggers are life soldiers...they have the worst wounds and need the best and quickest care." He splints her leg, gives her pain medicine, and tells her she'll need to stay with Steve and Evelyn for six weeks.

During her stay, she learns that Steve and Evelyn were both college-educated people who grew up in modern society, have traveled the world extensively, and have chosen to live this way on purpose. They claim they are able to live a "real life" in their current home. Bride asks them if real means "poor." Steve asks, "What does 'poor' mean? No



television?” Bride replies, “It means no money.” Although Bride doesn’t like staying in such a rustic place, they are kind to her. Once her cast is removed, she is able to sit in the zinc tub and take a bath in the pails of hot water Evelyn brought to her. It is at this time that Bride freaks out when she realizes that except for nipples, her chest is totally flat. She is shocked at the drastic changes in her body.

While there, she also learns from Evelyn how Rain came to live with them. When they were in town during a heavy rain, they saw her, about six years old, sitting on some steps soaking wet. They end up taking her to their home against her will, and she’s been there ever since. Later, she hears Rain’s side of the story and is horrified. Rain’s drug addict mother sold Rain to men who performed sexual act on the little gal. After making a customer angry, Rain’s mother threw her out of the house into the rain and told her not to come back. She learned to live on the streets for a while, then Steve and Evelyn found her. When Bride asks Rain how she will react if she sees her mother again, Rain states, “...I’d chop her head off...Made me feel good just thinking about it.” Bride convinces Rain to tell her how she survived on the streets—avoiding social workers, finding food, dodging danger, and locating shelter. Rain admits that because of her past, she is scared of men.

## Analysis

This lengthy chapter is told in third person point of view from an unknown source. In this chapter, the author makes great use of figurative language technique. The very first sentence is a gracefully detailed example of personification: “The sun and the moon shared the horizon in a distant friendship, each unfazed by the other.” This statement paints a picture for the reader that begins the mind movie that plays out during the period of Bride’s life. The author continues creating vivid images through the use of metaphors, “The moon was a toothless grin and even the stars,” and similes, “...seen through the tree limb that had fallen like a throttling arm across the windshield...” Another descriptive metaphor in this section is “The piece of sky she could glimpse was a dark carpet of gleaming knives pointed at her and aching to be released.” This quote is not only beautifully worded but also helps to create a feeling of fear and urgency. Metaphors continue to paint a picture with words like, “The sun merely hinted at its rise, an apricot slice teasing the sky with a promise of revealing its whole self.” Bride’s feeling of suffocation in Steve and Evelyn’s house is clearer with the use of the simile, “Sleeping in a house of such deep darkness at night felt to Bride like being in a coffin.” Figurative language, such as the examples displayed here of personification, similes, and metaphors, create a vivid scene and help the reader not only picture the scenes, but feel the emotions of the atmosphere.

This chapter demonstrates the theme of Image and Appearance. Bride’s womanly body is reverting back to a childlike state. She has already lost pubic hair and a lot of weight. Now, she realizes that her breasts are gone. She has a flat chest and is becoming worried about and embarrassed of her childish body. These changes and Bride’s reaction to them fall under the theme of worrying about Image and Appearance because Bride is in the beauty and fashion industry. She has also used her looks, which were a



disadvantage to her as a child but which she has turned into an advantage as an adult, as a path to success in her career.

Image and Appearance as a theme becomes very prominent in the beginning of this chapter when Bride is dressed in her fancy, expensive clothes, driving her Jaguar, and treating the waitress in the diner as if she is beneath her. At this point in the story, Bride believes that her expensive and beautiful appearance will cause Booker, should she find him, to be regretful of his action of leaving her and realize what a mistake he has made.

Another theme that can be found demonstrated in this chapter is the idea that there is a Consequence for Every Action, good or bad. Since Booker left, Bride has gone through many emotional incidents. She has been beaten by Sofia Huxley which led to a long leave of absence from work, plastic surgery, and an uncomfortable, lonely recovery. This all leads back again to her childhood. She obviously has not overcome her childhood traumas; despite all of the fashion, money, and friends, she is still carrying Lula Ann's feelings inside. Falling under another motif in this book, she has not been able to overcome the tragedies of her childhood.

Another theme that is covered in this chapter is the subject of Child Molestation. Rain confides in Bride what her life was like before she came to live with Steve and Evelyn. Her biological mother allowed men to use and abuse her sexually for money. Although Bride was never sexually assaulted, she realizes the scars that her abuse has placed on her, and is horrified to hear what Rain has gone through in her short life so far.

The theme of Abandonment is also brought out in Rain's character. When Rain bit the customer, her mother threw her out on the street, in the rain, to fend for herself, which she did until Steve and Evelyn took her to their home. Rain is a child of abandonment who did not want to go with Steve and Evelyn originally and who claims that they "kidnapped" her, but she's happy to be with them. She is in a secluded place far from the harms of the world she has always known. Although she confesses her past to Bride, she has never told Steve and Evelyn the entire story. They, especially Steve, always stop her and don't want to hear the tragic memories of a small girl in a seedy world. They just take care of her now and make sure she's safe.

Bride has never fully trusted anyone, except Booker, until now. She originally doesn't want to trust Steve and Evelyn, but she is forced to rely on them for her care during her recovery from her broken leg. She is shocked when she finds out that they lived "normal" lives before getting married; they both went to well respected colleges and traveled the world before deciding to spend their lives away from the problems of society today.

Flashback is another device that is used in this chapter to further display the importance of a character's life. Rain's use of flashbacks is very detailed when she explains to Bride what her life was like before Steve and Evelyn took her in. Rain is actually very casual about her history on the streets. "Rain giggled on occasion as she described her homeless life, relishing her smarts, her escapes, while Bride fought against the danger of tears for anyone other than herself." Rain's attitude toward her plight in life is a wake-



up call for Bride, who has been wallowing in depression. “Listening to this tough little girl who wasted no time on self-pity, she felt a companionship that was surprisingly free from envy.” This is a new feeling for Bride who is very self-centered and used to wallowing in her own worries and past injustices. Rain, the liquid substance, symbolizes a cleansing. In this instance, Rain the person cleanses Bride and enlightens her to the seriousness of the problems of others, helps her to not only think of herself.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What do you believe accounts for Rain’s laid-back attitude toward her turbulent past?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What is the cause of Bride’s returning to a child-like body?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What do you think Bride learned from her stay with Steve, Evelyn, and Rain?

## **Vocabulary**

carnival, colonized, oasis, malign, Syndesmosis, petulant, infantile, squatted, coalesced



## Part Two, Chapter 4

### Summary

In this chapter, Rain tells about what happened when she and Bride were together and how she feels about Bride. She calls her “my black lady.” She’s sad that she’s gone. Her car was fixed with unmatched parts, but it works, and she left. Rain is overwhelmed by the fact that she is finally able to talk to someone about the tragedies of her life before Steve and Evelyn. They both refuse to let her discuss it. She claims that at first she wanted to kill them, actually to kill everybody, but she doesn’t anymore. They bought her a kitten who she tells all her secrets, until Bride came around. One day on a walk with Bride, a truck load of boys drove by and one said, “Hey, Rain. Who’s your mammy?” Bride didn’t pay any attention to them. Rain stuck her tongue out and made hand motions at them. They backed up, and a boy that Rain recognized, because his dad does business with Steve, got out of the truck and pointed a shot gun at the females. Bride threw her hand in front of Rain and took all of the bird shot from the gun in her hand and arm. After rushing home, Steve and Evelyn doctored her wounds. Rain is amazed at what Bride has done for her. “...nobody put their own self in danger to save me. To save my life. But that’s what my black lady did without even thinking about it.”

### Analysis

This chapter is presented in first person point of view from the character Rain. She expresses how stunned she is by how well she is treated by Bride. She doesn’t call her Bride; she calls her “my black lady.”

In this chapter, both Bride and Rain have the opportunity to step outside of their normal character traits and to act significantly different. Bride, at this point in the story, has turned into a very meek, timid person who whines about the woes of life and how depressed she is. When she is around Rain, she is humbled by the horrific experiences that Rain describes to her, and she becomes stronger around Rain by lending an ear to her problems, being sympathetic to her plight in life, and most importantly, by putting herself in danger to protect another person. Bride becomes the type of adult that Rain not only looks up to, but admires and respects. That’s a far cry from where she was at the beginning of this journey.

Rain, also, has the opportunity to be different. Normally quiet and distant because she is not allowed to discuss her past, Rain becomes very descriptive around Bride because she feels that finally someone will listen to her. She just needs to be heard. Rain also gets the opportunity to trust in an adult. She states that when she first moved in with Steve and Evelyn, she wanted to kill them, and that she wanted to kill everyone. She no longer feels that way. Bride has stepped up and allowed Rain to relieve some of her emotional burden. Rain is also in awe over the fact that when confronted by bullies,





Bride stood in front of her to take the gun shot instead of Rain, to protect her from harm. No one's ever done that for her in any way.

Rain, of course, is a prime example of the theme of Child Abuse. She also carries much emotional trauma that is repressed by the rule of not being allowed to discuss her early years. Since she is still a child, the point is not whether or not she has overcome her childhood, but it's the question of will she be able to overcome it. With Bride around, she was able to vent her angers and fears. Now that she's gone, there's only the cat to confide in.

Before leaving, Bride gives Booker's shaving brush, Bride's security token, to Rain as a gift. This is significant because it shows growth in Bride being able to let go of, first something that calms her nerves and second, something that belongs to Booker. She is placing Rain's feelings above her own.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How has Rain's life as a child shaped her as an adult?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why do you think Bride put herself in front of Rain to take the bullets? How does this show that she has grown?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Compare and contrast Bride's childhood with Rain's childhood.

## **Vocabulary**

mammy, pellets, iodine, nonsensical, paltry, juxtaposed, nominal

# Part Three, Chapter 1

## Summary

Booker is on a college campus. He beats a man unconscious because the man stands at the edge of a children's playground and exposes himself to the little children. Booker cannot stand the idea of innocent children being exposed to such shameful acts. When he realizes what he's done and the troubles he can attract, he picks up his book bag and half runs, half walks to his class. He's late, but so are some others. He is a serious student who has tried many areas of study, but has never been satisfied with the answers from professors about the deep questions in life. As a graduate student, he decides to study economics hoping to "learn how money shaped every single oppression in the world and created all the empires, nations, colonies with God and His enemies employed to reap, then veil, the riches."

Booker is from "a large, tight family with no television in sight." Upon entering college, he is thrown into the real world of technology and mass communication. He grew up only reading books and sharing with his family, so while in college, he fakes his interest in the excitement of video games that he really thinks are pointless.

When Booker was a young boy, his older brother, Adam, went missing. He was gone for several months, and the family received little, if any, assistance in the search. "Then at the beginning of spring, when lawns started preening, Adam was found. In a culvert." His remains were decomposed beyond recognition. His shirt and size helped to identify his body. Booker has an extremely difficult time overcoming Adam's murder. In fact, he never really does overcome it. He is even offended when his family tries to move forward by making jokes and telling everyday stories. He is consoled by an eccentric aunt they called Queen. She is "heavy-set, with fire-red hair, and has had many husbands." She is Booker's salvation at this time. Her advice to Booker about Adam's death is: "Don't let him go...not until he's ready...Adam will let you know when it's time."

During this troubled time in his childhood, Booker asks to take trumpet lessons. His dad agrees if he can pay half. The music becomes his salvation. When Booker was fourteen, six years after his brother's death, the murderer is caught. The killer, who neighbors claimed seemed to be "the nicest many in the world," has the names of each child he molested tattooed on his shoulders. The several years including the abduction, murder, capture, and trial are difficult for all of the families involved. Nothing a trial could impose on this man was enough torture for what they all know their children (brothers) went through. At Adam's funeral, Booker placed a yellow rose on the coffin because that's the last thing he remembers of his brother, seeing him in a yellow shirt skateboarding down a tunnel blocking the sun. Before leaving for college, Booker has a tattoo of a rose put on his left shoulder as a way to reenact placing the rose on the casket. Because the tattoo artist doesn't have a yellow tint, Booker settles for "an orangish kind of red." Later, Bride will recall a red burn looking mark on his shoulder, but not know or care to know the story behind it.



College seems like a refreshing break from the sadness that has been Booker's life. Unfortunately, he is disappointed by the lack of knowledge and inspiration that he acquires there. Hoping for more, he applies to and is accepted into graduate school. During his time in graduate school, Booker begins writing for pleasure, not merely for class. When he reaches graduation, he returns home to his family where his mother has prepared a congratulatory celebration for Booker. His homecoming is not as he or his family has hoped. Although Booker still harbors tremendous grief for his murdered brother, he is extremely upset to see that his family has moved on with their lives. They have coped in a different way than Booker. The room he had shared with Adam has been changed, and all of his childhood memories have been taken away or changed. He has a severe reaction to which his father gets angry and tells him, "I want you civil in this house or out of it." After this confrontation with his father, he left the house. Leaving his home, he steps out into a downpour of rain which mirrors his mood. Before the disagreement, he tries to convince his parents to set up a "modest scholarship in his [Adam's] name." His dad was against the idea claiming they do not have the funds.

Upon returning from the unfortunate visit with his family, Booker moves in with his sometimes girlfriend, Felicity. After a eating at a dinner-and-dancing club, Booker auditions for the band there. Although Felicity doesn't know about it nor does she approve, Booker plays with the band all summer. By the end of summer, he and Felicity are at a breaking point. The final break comes after Booker passes a parked car in which a man and a woman are doing drugs. The problem is that there is a child in the back seat crying. Booker goes to the car, drags the man out, and starts to beat him. Meanwhile, the woman jumps on Booker trying to make him stop hitting the man. All of this commotion attracted the attention of people who called the police. The three adults are jailed, and the child is given to social services. This is the last straw for Felicity. She believes that he overstepped his bounds by interfering where he isn't supposed to.

Once they break up, Booker floats from job to job until his sister finds him and forwards a letter from their grandfather, Mr. Drew, whom they have always viewed as a bigot and "openly hostile to everybody not as rich as he was." By some miracle in their eyes, he named them in his will and left enough money for Booker to get a place of his own and play music in local clubs. This is the point when his whole life changes. As he is walking to the train one day, he notices a girl and is "simple dumbstruck by her beauty, Booker stared open-mouthed at a young blue-black woman standing at the curb laughing." Although she enters a limo and leaves, and he continues to the train, "it was only then that he noticed the rain—soft, steady." When he begins to play his trumpet, he plays sounds that he's never made before. "Low, muted notes held long, as the strains floated through drops of rain." A few weeks later, he spots her at a concert and makes his way to stand behind her. In the frenzy of the music and dancing, he slips his arms around her waist. After the song, she turns to face him and tells him her name. He believes their relationship is flawless and especially appreciates her lack of interest in his personal life. He loves her about as much as she loves herself, and that is okay with him. He loves being with her and doesn't want to share her with dance club people, although he does love to dance with her: "Once in a while she dropped the hip, thrillingly successful corporate woman façade of complete control and confessed some flaw or painful childhood memory." While Bride is at work, Booker practices the trumpet, writes letters



to his aunt Queen, and visits the library because she has no books in her apartment. After being together for six blissful months, their world comes crashing down, and Booker runs away.

## Analysis

This section of the novel is told from a third person point of view by an unknown narrator. The reader is taken through a series of flashbacks to get a better understanding of Booker's life, starting when he was a child and his brother was abducted up until the moment he says his relationship with Bride fell through and left without giving her or the reader an explanation.

Because of the tragedy of Adam's murder, Booker is affected in many ways. The theme of Overcoming One's Childhood Trauma is prominent in Booker's life. He, of course, can never forgive the man who did this to Adam, but he is also angry at his family for trying to move on after the funeral and the trial. He expects them to keep Adam's death in the present as he does. Booker feels wronged by his family because they do not hold fast to the trauma of Adam's murder. When they seem to move on and try to continue with their lives, Booker takes this as an affront to Adam's memory and an insult to his own grief and loss. When they don't and he becomes offended, his father asks him to leave.

Adam's murder continues to affect him throughout his life. He beats a man on a playground by his college when the man exposes himself to the children. Later, he beats another man who is doing drugs with a woman in the front seat of a car while a baby cries in the backseat. He seeks to right the wrongs of men who are inappropriate with children because of the torture, pain, and death that Adam endured from the man who took him so many years ago. With Booker, it is not that he just can't get over the memory. It is like this incident began controlling his life as a child and still continues to do so as an adult.

Because Adam is abducted, molested, tortured, and murdered, the theme of Child Abuse is extremely prominent in Booker's life and in this part of the novel in general. What happens to Booker's brother in their childhood shapes the adult that Booker becomes. He is the ever vigilant watcher of indecency to or in front of children.

On a lighter note, rain is a recurring symbol throughout the novel and makes its appearance several times in Booker's life. After the argument he with his father when he is asked to leave his family home, Booker walks out of the house into the rain and does not return. The rain is symbolic of a new start or period in his life. Later, when he sees Bride for the first time, he plays his trumpet as the rain falls around him. Once again, it's used as a signal for change in his life. In both instances, rain is used as a signal that his life is being cleansed, and he will move on clean and renewed.

Figurative language is used frequently in this section. The author uses similes to describe Booker's brother; "Adam was the brother he worshiped, two years older and



sweet as cane,” and his relationship with Felicity, a former girlfriend, “Nevertheless they might have stayed together, in spite of the mutual hostility that was growing like mold between them...” Another simile describes his first sight of Bride: “The sun still blazed so the raindrops falling from the baby-blue sky were like crystals breaking into specks of light on the pavement.” Here again, rain is used symbolically as well. Rain is used again symbolically and in a simile in a description of Booker leaving home: “Rain forced him to raise his collar and duck his head like an intruder thankful for the night.” Vivid imagery once again creates a mind movie for the reader. The description of Adam’s body is dramatic: “Filthy, rat-gnawed with a single open eye socket. The maggots, overfed and bursting with glee, had gone home leaving fastidiously clean bones under the strips of his mud-caked yellow T-shirt. The corpse wore no pants or shoes.” This graphic image helps the reader understand why Booker is so obsessed with his brother’s murder since he went with his dad to identify the remains. When remembering Adam, Booker sees him as “a spot of gold moving down a shadowy tunnel toward the mouth of a living sun.” As he thinks of how easily his family seemed to bounce back after the murder, Booker personifies cheer when he remembers, “In time the whole family perked up like Sesame Street puppets, hoping that cheer, if worked at hard enough, could sugar the living and quiet the dead.” Once the murderer was found and his back story revealed, irony prevailed when they discovered that the dog he used to lure the young boys to him to torture, molest, and kill was actually named “Boy.”

Booker sees Bride as a salvation from all of the years he’s tormented himself at the thought of Adam’s plight. She awakens indescribable feeling in him that he had not realized he was missing until she appeared. When describing his awe of Bride he sees his desire for her grow as his pain over Adam takes a step back. “...for years Adam’s death had clouded him. When he stepped through that cloud and became as emotionally content as he had been before Adam skated into the sunset—there she was.”

In a moment of foreshadowing, Bride is described as “A midnight Galatea always ready and alive...when the music stopped, his Galatea turned to face him and surrender to him the reckless smile he’d always imagined.” In Greek mythology, Galatea was a sea nymph who was wooed by a cyclops, but decided to be with a Sicilian boy, Aci, instead. The cyclops is said to have crushed the boy under a rock, after which, Galatea changes the cyclops into a stream. Knowing this reference to mythology helps the reader foreshadow that loving someone like Galatea [Bride] can only lead to misery or pain. When Booker leaves Bride, the reader, and Bride herself, are unaware of the exact reasons, but Booker believes himself to be in pain because of her.

Again the reader sees binary opposites, such as good and bad, white and black, and purity and evil, the difference between the forces of mass communication and true knowledge come into play when Booker moves from his television free, book reading, family discussing home to a dorm full of kids who are overly stimulated by television, video games, and various means of mass communication. They are blind to true knowledge because they believe whatever the media tells them.



## Discussion Question 1

After learning about Bride, her personality, and her past and learning about Booker, his personality, and his past, why do you think that Booker would refer to Bride as Galatea?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think it is about Booker that kept him from moving past his brother's murder when the rest of his family was able to do so?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you feel Bride has done to warrant Booker's anger and his act of leaving her?

## Vocabulary

Luddite, frugally, sumptuous, culvert, fastidiously, raucous, censure, coalesced, Gothic, harrowing, unassuageable, facile, cynicism, roiled, anathema, deference, antagonistic, dappled



# Part Four, Chapter 1

## Summary

After being gone for over a month, Bride sends Brooklyn a note from Steve and Evelyn's home. She doesn't say what happened, where she's been, where she is, or where she plans to go. She only says that she had to run away because things are falling apart, except with her [Brooklyn]. Unbeknownst to Bride, Brooklyn has no sympathy for her. She calls her "Beautiful dumb bitch."

Brooklyn has no compassion toward Bride's feelings because she, herself, has lived a hard life. She believes that she can read what people want even before they want it. Brooklyn claims that she saw Bride's behavior coming, and the only time she has ever misread anyone was the one time she tried to get into bed with Booker. She says that was a mistake.

Brooklyn talks about how she ran away when she was fourteen and had to fend for herself, make her own way. She thought Bride was a fighter too, but realized that being with Booker turned her into the weak little girl that she was before.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Brooklyn speaks from a first person point of view. She expresses her disgust in Bride. Here the reader again can question Brooklyn's intentions as Bride's friend. She calls her a name and mocks her pain and reasons for running away.

The theme of Child Abuse, particularly sexual child abuse, is demonstrated here when Brooklyn describes that she knew ahead of time when her uncle planned to molest her again, meaning it happened more than once. She also brings into light the subject of bad mothering. She expresses that to save herself from her abusive uncle, she "... screamed with a fake stomachache so my mother would wake from her drunken nap to tend to me." Once again, an unfit mother is exposed. So, too, is the motif of overcoming one's childhood. Despite the bad things that have happened to Brooklyn and the fact that she ran away at fourteen and has had to fend for herself and fight to get where she is now, she still carries the weight of her past.

When Bride has risen above her past to success, then fallen after the loss of her lover and the beating from her former teacher, Brooklyn has risen above her past and seems to stay up by crawling on the shoulders of those weaker than herself, including her "best" friend, Bride.

Brooklyn seems to have lost all respect for Bride. Even if she didn't respect the person before, she did respect her position and how she rose to her place in the company. When things started to go downhill for Bride, Brooklyn took advantage of the situation under the ruse of being her friend and used Bride's problems to her own advantage.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What has either woman gained from knowing the other?

## **Discussion Question 2**

For what reasons does Brooklyn seem disgusted by Bride's behavior?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How can one tell if a person is truly her friend or merely using her for some other purpose?

## **Vocabulary**

rehab, felon, conman, misogynist, thrall, bodegas, benevolence, milieu, obsidian, repellant





## Part Four, Chapter 2

### Summary

As Bride leaves Steve and Evelyn's home, she continues her journey to find Booker. She is amazed and puzzled by the people living in squalor up and down the roads: "Bride wasn't feeling superior to the tiny, melancholy houses and mobile homes on each side of the road, just puzzled." She can't imagine Booker living here.

While driving, she can't stop thinking about the changes in her body over the past few months. Although the changes have stopped occurring, she is concerned at the loss of her menstrual cycle, "...at least two, maybe three months." She has been overwhelmed at the various changes in her body. She feels like a different person: "Flat-chested and without underarm or pubic hair, pierced ears and stable weight, she tried and failed to forget what she believed was her crazed transformation back into a scared little black girl."

Whiskey turned out to be no more than a few houses and mobile homes lining a dirt road. She drove until she spotted a mailbox in front of a mobile home with the name Queen Love printed on it. When she approached the home, flames and fumes flowed from the rear of the mobile home where Queen was burning a mattress to get rid of potential bed bugs. Not sure what to do, Bride goes back to her car. As she waits to approach the house again, white people up and down the street stare at her open-mouthed, obviously because of her dark skin. Finally, she works up the nerve to knock on the door. She asks Queen if she knows of Booker Starbern. Queen said yes that he is her nephew and has his mail sent to her as his permanent residence. She tells Bride that he lives nearby, but before she takes her to him, she wants to feed her because she looks so frail and thin.

As Bride eats with Queen, she notices all of the cozy touches and homemade items around her. She also noticed a wall of photos of young people. During the meal, Bride finds out that Queen has been married seven times and has five children, but she is still alone. Bride explains her relationship with Booker to Queen and is given to read some poetic letters he had written and mailed to Queen while living with Bride. Queen also explains Booker's childhood and the background about Adam's murder and his family. Although Queen can't figure out what he is talking about in his letters, Bride gets it and is touched by the sweet sentiments and unsure of what the final notes about her truly. Queen tells her where he is and that Bride should walk down the street to see him.

As soon as Bride walks in the door, she and Booker begin arguing. It even becomes physical on both sides, and Bride ends up breaking a beer bottle over his head. She tells him that she's there to find out exactly what she did to make him go. He explains that he can't understand why she'd bring presents to a child molester. Bride confesses that she lied when she was a child. She did not see Sofia Huxley molest children. She just wanted her mother's attention. She wanted Sweetness to be proud of her for



something. He admits that he left her because she was going to be kind to someone like the person who murdered his brother.

After Bride falls asleep, Queen came to see how things are going. She asks Booker, "What caused the split?" He replies, "Lies. Silence. Just not saying what was true or why." When Queen realizes that Booker's part in this mess is his hanging on to Adam and what happened to him she says to him, "You lash Adam to your shoulders so he can work day and night to fill your brain. Don't you think he's tired? He must be worn out having to die and get no rest because he has to run somebody else's life." She leaves his house calling him a fool.

Walking home, Queen thinks back on her past relationships and all of her mistakes. She has never raised any of her five children beyond the age of twelve. She worries that Booker and Bride are going to ruin the good in their relationship. She always had. Now in her older, lonely years, she claims to be "...grateful that, at last, Sweet Jesus had given her a forgetfulness blanket along with a little pillow of wisdom to comfort her in old age."

Meanwhile, Booker looks back how he has let Adam's situation rule his life. He ran at the first sign of trouble instead of working through problems. "Instead I write notes about the shortcomings of others." He decides it is time to let go of Adam, to let them both find peace. He "once again put on paper words he could not speak." As Bride wakes from a solid rest, she and Booker talk about what happened in their relationship. She also explains that she found him because of his pawn shop bill. He is overjoyed to find that she has his trumpet in the trunk of her car.

As Booker and Bride head toward Queen's house where she has left her car, they see smoke and fire coming from her home and group of people on the front lawn just staring at the show. Booker and Bride react quickly and are able to drag Queen out of the house before the fire department arrives. Unfortunately, "a spark hiding in Queen's hair burst into flame, devouring the mass of red hair in a blink..." As the fire department takes over, they realize that Bride has no shirt on because she's taken it off to put out the fire on Queen's head. Torn between the terror of this fire drama and the new developments to her body, it is at this time that Bride notices that her breasts have fully returned.

Queen receives extensive physical damage and remains in the hospital where she is cared for during the day by Bride washing her and changing her bandages, while Booker takes the night shift and washes her feet and hands as a kind of ritual each night. When she finally wakes and seems to be in the clear, Bride and Booker take a coffee break, talk about their concerns for each other, and about how Queen has so many kids, yet is left all alone. Booker fills her in on that situation explaining that each of her husbands had taken his children when he left: "They all hate her for some reason or another. I know she abandoned some of them to marry other men. Lots of other men. And she didn't or couldn't take the kids with her. Their fathers made sure of that."



Booker reaches into his pocket and produces Queen's favorite earring that had to be removed during her treatment. He gives them to Bride to wear. She is once again surprised that the piercing holes in her ears have returned. Upon returning to Queen's side, she mistakenly takes Bride to be her daughter, Hannah. Booker explains that she feels the most guilt over Hannah because she ignored Hannah's claims that her father had been fondling her, and "Queen refused to believe it." Hannah is currently in medical school and has nothing to do with her mother.

Although her recovery looks promising and they are planning to get a place for the three of them to live, Queen contracts a bone virus in the hospital and dies. Upon receiving her ashes, they drive to the stream's edge, where Booker opens the urn and allows Queen's ashes to float into the moving stream. In addition to her ashes, he also throws the trumpet in and watches it sail away.

When he returns to Bride in the car, she tells him that she is pregnant with his child. After losing so many people in life whom he loved, he has no intention of letting Bride and the baby leave him as well. They are both blissful in the hope of a new life free from any of the evil in the world that they have encountered.

## Analysis

Here again this part of the story is narrated by an unknown third person. Bride has finally reached Whiskey where she is stunned by the poverty and people on his street. Bride shows true growth in this scene when she is not judgmental over the image and appearance of the area; she is puzzled and concerned by it instead. She has moved on from being a self-absorbed, elitist individual who only cares about herself—how she looks, what she wears, what material items she can acquire, and where only her problems matter in her world.

Bride continues to obsess about the changes in her body. She has no armpit or pubic hair, a flat chest, closed up earring holes, and now realizes that she hasn't had a menstrual cycle in three to four months. As she has declined emotionally, she has also relapsed into a child-like state physically. She worries that not only has her body reverted to its childish self, so has her emotions and her reactions to stressful, unpleasant situations. She no longer has the tough business-woman's persona that she worked so hard to achieve. She has regressed into the weak, submissive, needy girl who has always lurked just below the surface, but is an identity that she believed no longer existed. However, she is like a changed person when she begins to regain womanly things lost to her. First, at the fire, she realizes that her breasts have returned to normal. When Booker gives her Queen's earrings at the hospital, she finds that the piercings on her earlobes have reopened. Slowly, after accomplishing her goal of getting answers from Booker, the adult Bride begins to reform.

The theme of Overcoming One's Childhood is very strong in this section. Booker is forced to face his obsession with Adam and his murder and to admit that he has been using Adam as a crutch to hide from the world. If anything gets too intense, he just



walks away. He sees now that this action can hurt people. Bride is hurt by his leaving, especially without knowing why. Bride admits that she lied about seeing Sofia Huxley molest a child. She confesses that she wanted so much for Sweetness to be proud of her and to hold her hand that she went along with the story and testified against Sofia. Although this is a horrible, regretted childhood mistake, Bride thought that she could help Sofia start a fresh, new life by giving her the gifts that actually caused her to be beaten. Queen's daughter, Hannah, is only alluded to as a character, but from the story told about her, she had to overcome the loss of her mother, the sexual abuse from her father, then the pain of not being believed when she gained the courage to divulge her secret. In each of these cases, the characters have to overcome something bad that happens to them in childhood.

Using these same three characters and their stories, the theme of Child Abuse is prominent here as well. In Booker's case, the abuse happens to his brother who ends up murdered. In Bride's case, she gave the final solid testimony against a woman who is charged with sexual assault on a child. Bride has carried the guilt her entire life that because she lied about seeing the incident, she is instrumental in putting a woman behind bars. In reality, there were other children giving testimony of actually being abused, but Bride takes the burden of her lie and Sofia's jail time all on her own shoulders. In Hannah's case, she must live with and overcome the fact that not only did her father sexual abuse her, but her mother didn't believe her nor did she do anything to investigate or change the situation.

Poor parenting is exemplified, in particular by the mother, is seen in Bride's and Hannah's cases. Bride did something in her childhood to try to get her mother's positive attention—testify in the child abuse case despite having never actually seen a crime committed. She was successful in getting her mother's attention, and life was somewhat easier for her after that but the adult Bride has to live with the consequences of her actions. She does something dishonest for her mother's sake. Hannah, too, is forced to face consequences from an unfit motherly influence, but where Bride was dishonest, Hannah consequentially, works harder in school and becomes a doctor, someone who can help those in need, to believe their pain—unlike her mother.

While reflecting on her life before her house burned, Queen thinks of how she of how she's grown as a woman and describes herself as "...smart enough now to read the minds of selfish people right away. But the smarts came too late for her children." Queen is realizing not only the effects her earlier actions have on her children, but she realizes that she has cheated herself as well. She believes that by being a poor mother, she has deprived herself the joy and happiness of family love, especially in her old age. She realizes that she has done wrong.

Symbolism can be seen in the funeral scene at the end of this section. By releasing Queen's ashes, Booker is letting go of the only person in the world he trusts, someone he loves dearly. Here he is making the choice not to wallow in Queen's absence the way he did with Adam. Also, he finally lets go of Adam in two symbolic ways—first, he writes out his feelings for Adam explaining why he needs to let go, and second, he throws his trumpet in the stream with Queen's ashes. This act symbolizes letting go of his past. He



took up the trumpet as a distraction from thinking of Adam and the murder. Letting it go proves that he is no longer going to live in or for his past. He will now make a fresh start.

Taking a closer look, the reader can see that the color yellow is symbolic as well. It is a yellow rose that Booker places on Adam's casket because bright yellow is the color of the shirt Adam is last seen in, and that same yellow shirt is filthy, shredded, and caked with mud when they find Adam. Both times, it's the same shirt that Booker last sees him in because he also helped his dad identify the body. Yellow is also the color of the rose tattoo Booker wanted on his shoulder. Because the artist didn't have yellow, the tattoo was done in an orangish red; orange being symbolic of the sweetness of Adam, and the red hue to symbolize the anger Booker feels over the murder and loss of his brother. When Bride pulls up to Queen's house, her mailbox printed with her name is a pale-shade of yellow. Although Queen is the one person in life that Booker believes he can count on and she boasts a powerful name, pale-yellow symbolizes something that is weak and unimpressive. Queen may have always been larger than life for Booker, but inside that home with the pale-yellow mailbox, the reader finds a lonely old woman stuck with bearing the pain of the mistakes from her past, not bold at all.

Once again, the author uses figurative language to make these scenes come alive. The use of personification helps to intensify the description in the story by giving an object or feeling true human responses that everyone can relate to; for instance, "Her anxiety during the long trip has masked her stomach-yelling hunger." Booker uses personification in his poetic letters about Bride: "...its [the pulsing star] explosive brilliance rings justifiably loud like a din of a tympani." This passage not only exhibits the personification of the pulsing star, but also includes a simile and vivid imagery. Referencing words from his poem using another simile, Bride asks Booker, "You still believe heartbreak should burn like a star?"

The most obvious use of personification comes when Queen's house begins to burn. Describing the sparks that remain in the yard after burning the mattress, the author describes the fire as, "shy, unsure of how to proceed, fingering its way, slithering tentatively at first..." Once again the vivid imagery through the use of personification helps the reader actually see the fire starting. Watching Queen in the hospital the author describes the tubes and medical hook ups as, "one clear as glass, turning like a rainforest vine, others thin as telephone wire..." The personification and description of color is used again as Queen lay unconscious: "Lines of primary colors bled across the screen above the hospital bed." Personification is also used to describe Queen's dying: "A vicious hospital-borne virus, as sneaky and evil as the flame that had destroyed her home, was attacking the patient."

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Bride lose her womanly features? Why did they come back? Explain and use examples from the text.



## Discussion Question 2

After being such a bad mother to her own children, what is ironic about Queen's relationship with Booker?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways did Queen help Bride and Booker become a couple again?

## Vocabulary

anti-capitalists, rebuffed, filigreed, manna, dirge, facile, tympani, din, sundered, absconded, tatting



## Part Four, Chapter 3

### Summary

In this chapter, Sweetness describes the new nursing home where she's now living—Winston House. She talks about how much she likes the place and the people. She confesses to having “some creeping bone disease, so good care is vital.” Sweetness is very happy to have received a note from her Lula Ann, signed Bride, telling her that she is having a baby. Sweetness shows everyone the note. In her own mind, she realizes that there is no mention of the father, wonders if “he is as black as she is,” and notices there is no return address on the envelope. She claims, “So I guess I’m still the bad parent being punished forever till the day I die for doing the well-intended, and in fact, necessary way I brought her up. I know she hates me.”

Sweetness tells the reader that Lula Ann moved as far away from her as soon as possible. She knows she has a big important job, makes a good living, and has turned her skin color into a beautiful advantage for herself. She's upset that she has very little contact with her but does appreciate the money she occasionally sends her way. Although outwardly Sweetness says that she did the right thing by raising Lula Ann as she did, she still says, “If I sound irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I didn't do or did wrong.” All in all, Sweetness still claims that Lula Ann has been a burden in her life, and she did the best she could. She even believes that her strict rules and guidance are the reasons that Bride is a successful business woman today. She pats herself on the back. She is very excited about the baby, but explains that Bride is in for the shock of how hard it is to raise a child, how her whole world will change. She realizes she probably will not get to see the baby, but wishes her luck and asks God to help the child.

### Analysis

This chapter is told from the first person point of view of Sweetness. Thus the novel's story both begins and ends with her. She is now living in a nursing home she likes. She struggles with herself about whether or not she did a good job raising Lula Ann. She believes that she can take credit for Bride's success in life. In a way, she did play a part in that. Her behavior drove Bride to become independent and to find her way, to make her burdensome dark skin into a beautiful asset.

She realizes that she'll never get to see the baby. Bride keeps Sweetness from her life as much as possible. It's times like this, when she wishes she could be involved, that she questions herself about her parenting skills. In the end, she continues to claim that Lula Ann has always been her cross to bear, as if she were Sweetness' punishment in life. Now Bride punishes her for the harsh treatment throughout her childhood.



In the end, she claims to be happy, but actually warns that Bride does not realize that a child will change her entire world. Life with a baby isn't all fun and games. It's hard work and a burden actually. She doesn't believe that Bride is well equipped to handle this child. Each story about a child in this novel is of a child who is neglected, abused, tossed out, and desperate. Bride and Booker believe that their child will be free from all of the pain they've experienced and witnessed. Sweetness thinks they would be fooling themselves to believe it's easy to accomplish that task. Therefore, she ends up wishing Bride luck and sending out a prayer, "God help the child." This prayer gives the novel its title, emphasizing for the reader that parenting and childhood are central themes in the novel.

## Discussion Question 1

How is Sweetness able to justify, and continue to justify, her parenting of Bride?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you believe Bride and Booker will do to try to create a better life for their child?

## Discussion Question 3

The title and the last line of the book is "God Help the Child." What do you think the author meant by this statement in relation to what happened in the book?

## Vocabulary

homey, vital, reckon, primping, insolence, flaccid, communicant, heather, ablutions, congenial





# Characters

## Lula Ann/Bride

Bride is the protagonist or main character in the story. She is an African American woman who is a beautiful, vibrant, successful business woman. Bride's birth name is Lula Ann. She feels that name is too "countryfied" for her profession and changes it to Bride which sounds chic and mysterious. She is the regional manager for a cosmetics company called Sylvia, Inc. She has worked her way up and has recently developed her own line of makeup that she calls YOU, GIRL. Although she was not born in California, she moved far from her mother's home as soon as she was able.

Bride has been raised in a very strict, even harsh home where she was seen as a burden from the day she was born. Both of her parents are light-skinned, and when she was born dark-skinned, they were both shocked. Her mother, Sweetness, was embarrassed and repulsed by her and only touched her out of necessity. Her father, Louis, could not believe that she was his child and assumed that Sweetness had an affair. Not long after Lula Ann's birth, Louis left them. Lula Ann did everything she could think of to win her mother's favor. She behaved, was quiet, was helpful, and didn't complain. She would occasionally get in trouble hoping that Sweetness would slap her, just so she could feel her touch. She was always told that her looks were unattractive and that her dark skin scared people. She felt the teasing and ridicule as a child, but the worst feeling came from her own mother.

Because of this, Lula Ann, in order to gain her mother's pride and approval, testified against a teacher at her school who had been arrested for child molestation. Lula Ann claimed she had witnessed this act and testified against the woman who was later found guilty and spent fifteen years of a twenty-five-to-life sentence. After Lula Ann testified, her mother smiled at her with pride and held her hand as she left the courthouse, something that she had never done before. Life was a little better for Lula Ann at home after the trial.

As an adult, Bride shed the needy insecure feelings that she carried through her childhood. She learned to use her skin color to a beautiful advantage and cultivate sex appeal. Now, a confident independent woman, she lives a luxurious life and has become the type of person who looks down on those not as successful as herself. She is an elitist.

When Bride is dumped by her live-in boyfriend, Booker, she becomes depressed. After planning for a years, she brings gifts to the woman she helped put in jail years before on her parole day . That task went tragically. She was beaten so badly she required plastic surgery. This is the real catalyst into her decent into depression and her old feelings.

With the help of several people and incidents along the way, she comes to realize that the world does not revolve around her and that she has been acting selfish and in a



ridiculous manner. As she experiences more and more hardships and worry, she regresses to a childlike state. It is only after finding Booker, getting real answers from him about why he left, and experiencing people whose lives have been worse than hers does she reevaluate her outlook on life and people, what is truly important and what is not. Only then does she heal physically and emotionally.

## Sweetness

Sweetness is Bride's mother. She is an antagonist in the story. She despises the sight of her child from birth because being a light-skinned African American, she is repulsed by the ebony, dark skin of her new baby. She treats Lula Ann—Bride's birth name—harshly and with cruelty. Throughout Lula Ann's childhood, Sweetness claims her strict treatment is in order to help the child so she'll be prepared for the cruel world ahead. In reality, Sweetness was the meanest person in Lula Ann's life.

It isn't until the trial of the teacher charged with abuse that Sweetness starts to change a little. When Lula Ann testified against the woman, Sweetness was beaming with pride because finally others looked at Lula Ann as more than the scary dark-skinned girl. Although Sweetness continues her harsh treatment, it is lessened some, and she shows Lula Ann occasional smiles.

It takes until Lula Ann is grown and has transformed into a new woman that Sweetness realizes that she is resented as a mother for her strict ways. Lula Ann changed her name to Bride which does not please Sweetness. She rarely visits or calls. She doesn't include Sweetness in any aspect of her life, except an occasional check to help her mother with expenses. Sweetness stands by her actions to the end, although she does have a brief moment of weakness when she shows regret for her treatment of Lula Ann when she was a child because what she did in the past has made her lose out on Bride and her life as an adult.

## Booker

Booker is Bride's live-in boyfriend. He is very mysterious in her world. She thinks she's showing him how cool she can be by not prying into his business or his past. He likes that she isn't nosy, and he doesn't have to explain himself to her. While they are together, he seems like a laid-back, easy-going guy. It isn't until he leaves Bride that the reader is informed of his complicated life.

When Booker was a young boy, his older brother Adam was abducted and killed by a child molester. This affects Booker's entire life from childhood to the present. He took up trumpet lessons to get his mind off of his brother. He went away to college, but was not stimulated by his studies or happy with what the professors had to offer. During graduate school and his study of economics, he believes that money is truly the root of the world's problems.



The manner in which his brother was abused and tortured causes Booker to be extremely sensitive to predators who target or harm children in any way. Several times he takes matters into his own hands when he feels an injustice is being done by an abuser or other person unfit to be around children.

When he returns home after graduate school, he finds that although he hasn't, his family has moved on with their lives and are trying to get over what happened with Adam. This enrages Booker and causes a rift between him and his family. Not long after leaving his family home in anger, he hooks up with Bride. Bride is pretty much the opposite of him. He loves keeping his personal business private, and all she cares about is his adoration of her. He seems totally fine with that. After what Bride considered a minor disagreement, Booker leaves her. He doesn't even take his belongings. He just disappears.

Eventually, Booker learns that he cannot let Adam's murder control his life. He must come to terms with what happened and allow Adam to rest in peace while he begins truly living.

## Sofia Huxley

Sofia was a kindergarten teacher when Lula Ann was in the second grade. Sofia, her husband, and another woman were accused of child molestation. Sofia was in her twenties at the time she was found guilty. She was sentenced to twenty-five-years to life, but ended up only serving a brutal stint of fifteen years.

She came from a very strict religious home where she was punished often and can't even remember the reasons for the punishment. Her home consisted only of religious books and the Bible. When she became a teacher, she was overwhelmed with the amount of interesting, thought-provoking literature available outside of her family house.

Reading, weekly basketball games, and her cell mate are the only things that got her through her time in prison. She was shunned because her crimes were considered worse than all other crimes in the prison.

Her husband wrote her two letters in the beginning from his jail cell. Then, her parents sent her a box every Christmas and birthday containing "nutritious candy bars, tampons, religious pamphlets and socks." No one wrote, called, or visited her there.

Upon release from prison, she feels scared and vulnerable. When confronted with gifts from one of the now grown children who put her away, she freaks out and beats the girl badly. She expects to be arrested and sent back to jail, but the police never come.

She obtains work in nursing home care. She likes the job and the people. After coming to terms with her past and being settled into the present, Sofia feels bad about hurting Bride. She tries to make amends to the universe by gently caring for her aging patients.



## Rain

Rain is a young gal who is living with a couple who rescued Bride after a car accident. Rain is very quiet and reserved at first. She plays with her cat and is fascinated watching Bride because she is so dark and so different from anyone she knows.

Rain is not her birth-given name, but she never reveals that to the reader. She was taken in by a couple, Steve and Evelyn, who found her in the rain and just couldn't bear to leave her. Although they know that she has been through trauma in her life, they will not let her talk about it. They don't want to hear such horrible stories. So Rain has only her cat to confide in until Bride comes to stay with them after her car accident.

Bride takes up time with Rain and gives her needed attention. She allows Rain to tell her all of the sordid details of her former life. Her story is truly tragic and appalling. It's a relief for Rain to be able to share that part of herself with someone. It is listening to the story of Rain's life that helps Bride realize that some people have it much worse than her.

Once Bride heals and moves on, Rain is very sad and lonely again. She must go back to telling her stories and secrets to her cat.

## Queen Olive

Queen is Booker's aunt. She is a white woman with flaming red hair. She's the only person in the world whom he trusts. He is comforted by her when Adam dies, and he believes that she is the only one who understands him. Her home is considered his permanent mailing address no matter where he goes. She is instrumental in getting Bride and Booker to talk out their problems.

She is an older woman whose home consists of homemade, welcoming items. She has a wall of pictures of her children, none of whom live with her. She has had seven husbands and five children. She never raised any of the kids to an age older than twelve because they always ended up with their father for one reason or another. Now that she is aging, she has many regrets in life and realizes she will be alone and it's her own fault.

She helps Booker overcome his adult obsession with Adam's murder. She shows him how it is ruling his entire life and that Adam cannot rest in peace.

## Brooklyn

Brooklyn is Bride's best friend. They are also colleagues. She is a white woman with dreadlocked hair. She is pretty and attracts a lot of attention. Although she does help Bride in her initial time of need after being beaten, she slowly reveals herself to have an ulterior motive for helping Bride. She inches her way in little by little, hoping to get a



better position at the company. She is even secretly pleased that she will take over Bride's position while Bride recovers from her violent attack. She tries to be understanding and sympathetic to Bride's face, but is all the while speaking negatively behind her back. At one point, she even tries to seduce Bride's boyfriend.

After Brooklyn reveals her own life story toward the end of the novel, the reader can understand somewhat why Brooklyn behaves the way she does. She's a fighter and a survivor despite her childhood, no matter what it takes.

## **Steve/Evelyn**

Steve and Evelyn are the couple who care for Bride after her car accident. They are also the people who took in Rain from her street life. Although Steve and Evelyn live in a home with no electricity, plumbing, or inside toilet, Bride is surprised to find out that they have not always lived this way. They each went to well-known colleges and have traveled the world. Once they got married, they decided that "the good life" for them was to shed materialistic things, the technological world, and get back to nature.

## **The Starbern Family**

This is Booker's family. Before Adam's abduction and murder, they were a happy family who was very close. Although they had electricity and other modern comforts, they did not own a television. They read a lot and had many family discussions about what they learned from each other and discussed their problems.

After Adam's death they mourned their loss but eventually tried to move on to a somewhat normal life again. Booker took this very badly and was eventually thrown out of his parents' home for speaking inappropriately to his parents.

## **Jeri**

Jeri is a personal stylist who is hired by Bride to help make her marketable for her second interview with the company she ends up working for, Sylvia, Inc. He is the person who convinces Bride that she is beautiful and will be absolutely stunning in her dark ebony skin wearing only white. The stark contrast creates a remarkable sight. This transformation helps her in her career and in her personal life. She finally feels good about herself; she is beautiful.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Color Yellow

Yellow is an important symbol in this story because it is the color that Booker associates with his murdered brother, Adam. The last time he seems Adam alive, he's wearing a bright yellow shirt. When he helped identify his body, Adam still wore the yellow shirt although it was tattered and dirty. At the funeral, Booker put a yellow rose on Adam's casket. Booker attempts to get a yellow rose tattoo, but the artist doesn't have yellow, forcing him to settle for an orangish red. Pale yellow is the color of Queen's mailbox indicating that she and her home are no longer significant or important despite the irony of having the name Queen, a regal word, painted on the box.

## Rain

An actual product of nature, rain is a prominent symbol in this story. Rain can be seen as something old or bad being cleansed. A little girl later renamed "Rain" was taken in out of the bad weather after being sexually abused and left on the streets to take care of herself. Being found in the rain is symbolic because she was able to live a clean life after Steve and Evelyn found her. The first time Booker sees Bride, it is raining, and he believes that he is changed forever that day. Eventually, she is instrumental in changing him or cleansing him from old worries. Rain is also symbolic after Booker leaves Bride, and she watches the rain hit the window like bullets and create crystal lines as they stream down the window.

## Binary Opposites—White/Black, Good/Bad, Pure/Evil

In "God Help the Child" many binary opposites can be traced throughout. White and black are very prominent throughout. Bride is black, and Booker is white. Bride's dark skin is made to be very sexy through the compliments of wearing only white clothes. Sweetness leads Lula Ann to believe that her black skin is evil or bad, but it turns out to be good and profitable personally and financially for Bride.

She furthers this point when she is discussing the trial and says, "It's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites." Once again, in Sweetness' eyes white represents evil; however, she is inconsistent when discussing the shades of skin within her own race. This is because Sweetness, her family, and Louis all see light-skinned blacks as superior to dark-skinned blacks; however, they see white people as evil.

Another example of the binary difference between black and white is Sofia and Bride's struggle. Here one woman is dark skinned and one is white, and a binary relationship between good and evil is set up. Sofia uses her fists to battle "the Devil...seductive, but evil." The dark skinned woman, Bride, is dressed in all white. Since white is symbolic of purity, Sofia calls Bride's clothes and accessories "Satan's disguise." The irony of this



situation is that Sofia, the white convicted child molester, is battling a dark skinned woman she believes to be the Devil, when actually she was a young child during Sofia's crime and trial. Sofia sees Bride as the enemy, the evil one, even though the crimes that put Sofia behind bars were her own doing. In the present, Bride is in Sofia's eyes seen as the dark, evil one wearing a white, or a pure, disguise.

Following the motif of binary opposites, such as good and bad, white and black, and purity and evil, the difference between the forces of mass communication and true knowledge come into play when Booker moves from his television free, book reading, family discussing home to a dorm full of kids who are overly stimulated by television, video games, and various means of mass communication. Booker feels out of place and uncomfortable, caught between two worlds.

## Loss of Adult Features

With each new stage of depression or problem that occurs in Bride's life, she loses a womanly feature—her pubic and armpit hair, her pierced ears, and her breasts. The more that she emotionally acts like a child, the more her body begins to take on a childlike appearance. This is symbolic of her stepping back from the confident sexy woman into the frightened needy child. By the end of the novel Bride has transformed and grown in maturity. She is also pregnant, signaling the return of her adult capabilities.

## Booker's Shaving Brush

Booker's shaving brush is something that Bride keeps with her to remind her of a time when she was loved and safe. When she passes this on to Rain, it is highly symbolic of her wanting that same feeling for Rain. It is also significant that Bride is able to now let go of it and pass it on, signaling that she has reached the point where she is able to let it go. She is able to put someone else's feelings before her own.

## Names

Originally Bride has the name "Lula Ann" which is an old-fashioned, country sounding name for a meek, abused child. As she grew into an adult, she changed her name to Bride to match the world she wanted to live in. "Bride" alone sounds glamorous and sexy like "Madonna" or "Cher." The new mysterious name helps her to be remembered in her profession of the fashion world. Her mother's name speaks to the opposite of her true nature. Sweetness turns out to be an ironic name for Bride's mother because with a name like that one would expect a gentle, kind woman, but Sweetness is actually very cruel to her own child.

Queen Olive has a huge personality and is loved by all, but no one really knows that privately, her name doesn't fit her because she is one of the neglectful mothers originally living a life of fun, but now lives a life of loneliness and regret. Booker is aptly



named because before going to college, he was only exposed to music and the written word. Throughout college, he was a big reader who often knew more than his fellow students and felt he couldn't blend with fellow students. While living with Bride, he spent most days "loitering" at the library.

## Mothers

Mothers, for the most part, in the story are cruel characters. Bride's mom, Sweetness, mistreated her because of the color of her skin. She claimed that her harsh treatment of Bride was to prepare her for the cruel world that would mistreat her because of her color. Brooklyn, Bride's close friend, also grew up with an uncaring mother. When she was a child, her uncle molested her, and her drunken, passed out mother only helped when Brooklyn made a fuss about feeling bad, and she woke up, which put an end to the abuse. Rain had a bad mother. She didn't just abuse Rain herself, she prostituted Rain out so that she was also abused by men who took advantage of her.

Queen Olive was the kind of person who was loved by all, but who mistreated her own children. One of her daughters, Hannah, was abused sexually by the father who Queen left her with. When Hannah reached out for help, Queen didn't believe her. Queen was nice to everyone except her own children.

Even Sophia Huxley, who turned out to abuse children herself, was emotionally and physically abused by her mother. She came from an extremely religious family who did not allow books in the house, except religious pamphlets and the Bible. She was not allowed to do the things other kids her age were allowed to do. She was punished often and abused. She was so desperate in her home that she married the first man to come along, and she married him to get out of her family's house. Unfortunately, she married into a very similar situation as the one she left. Mothers in this story are generally not nurturing or caring characters.

## Books

Booker is not the only character who is affected by a lack of access to books. Booker's family did not allow television. He was immersed in books and the intellect of questioning whatever is read or said; therefore, he was very distressed at the environment at college. Booker expected everyone would have the same relationship to books and intellectual debate at college, but the majority of students were more interested in television and video games than in books and discussing serious matters. Sophia Huxley had a problem with books, but it was the exact opposite of Booker's problem with books. Sophia's parents were so strict and mind controlling that they would not allow any books in their home unless they were religious in nature or the actually Bible. She would be in trouble for doing the exact things that Booker's parents required of him because her family censored her reading material. For this reason, when Sophia became an adult, she decided to teach and have access to many books.





## Food

When Sophia lured children into her twisted scenarios, she used food to tempt them: "Fruit as bait was a big part of the trial's testimony." This thought returns to Bride as she watches Sophia shovel in the food from the first diner she enters after being released from jail. She is so gluttonous with the food she has at this sitting, she actually makes herself sick and throws up from her excessive intake of food. When Sophia thinks of the food she's eating in the diner, she only thinks of all of the things she wasn't able to have in prison. She orders as much as she can and eats it as quickly as she can, as if someone will take it from her if she doesn't finish it in a hurry.

## Bride's White Dresses

The irony of someone named 'Bride' wearing all white is ironic at best, since she never becomes a bride in that sense. Additionally, Bride's white dresses are a nod to fairy tales where the princesses wear white, dance at the ball, and have a happily-ever-after ending. The white clothes seem to appear right when she comes into her own power as a woman, leaving behind the scared little girl to become a powerful woman.

## Queen's Ashes

When Booker releases her ashes he is saying goodbye to the only person he ever trusted. The reader knows that with the letting go of her ashes Booker has come to a decision regarding all other people, and that being able to ever trust anyone else will be difficult.



# Settings

## Small Apartment in the City

This is the place where Bride grew up. Her worst memories were from this setting where she was neglected and abused.

## The Courthouse

This is the first place where Bride ever received positive actions from her mother, Sweetness. Because she testified against the teacher who was charged with child molestation and the woman was found guilty, Bride became the source of pride for her mother, who even held her hand for the first time there.

## California Apartment

This is the first place the reader encounters Bride. She is an adult who is being dumped by her boyfriend, Booker. She is in this setting a good bit of the time—specifically during her recovery after being beaten up by Sofia. She works from home and hides out there during this process. The longer she is a shut in, the more depressed and detached from society she becomes.

## The Motel by the Jail

This motel is where Bride is beaten up by the recently released convict, Sofia Huxley. She has followed Sofia's cab to this motel, waits for her to eat her meal, then approaches her in her room hoping to make amends and give Sofia a fresh start with money and gifts. Instead, she gets a fist in her face and then is beaten very badly and thrown into the parking lot with her gifts in tow after she reveals her part in Sofia's conviction.

## Evelyn and Steve's House

After finding Bride stranded in her car with a broken ankle, Steve rescues her, brings her to his home, and he and his wife, Evelyn, care for her there until she is well. They live a very rustic life in a simple wooden home, free from any materialistic comforts including electricity, plumbing, and indoor toilets.

# Themes and Motifs

## Overcoming Childhood Trauma

Bride, Booker, Brooklyn, and Rain all had to endure some type of trauma in their childhood. Bride was treated harshly and neglected. Booker suffered desperately over his brother's murder. Brooklyn lived with an incompetent parent who was blind to others abusing her. Rain had the hardest childhood of all. Her mother sold her to men sexually and eventually threw her out on the street to fend for herself.

The notion that abuse can be overcome is one that is addressed using these four characters as examples. What becomes clear throughout the novel is that while they all manage to arrive at a place where they can at least function within society, there are certain parts of their soul, their very personalities, that are damaged for good. This underscores and places emphasis on the criminal component of childhood trauma and abuse, and the fact that most who perpetuate the crime are seldom prosecuted.

Rain is an interesting addition to the group, especially as she is so much younger than the others and comes from a different generation and era. However, despite the differences among their stories, the fact is shown that abuse is abuse, no matter the time period in which it happened. The only difference that can be seen with Rain is the fact that more people are aware of what it looks like when a child is abused. Likewise, as opposed to Bride's time, Rain has people willing to help her and work to try and get her to that functional and accepting level faster than it did for Bride, Booker, and Brooklyn.

## Abandonment

Many people experience abandonment throughout this story beginning with Louis abandoning Sweetness and Lula Ann soon after the baby was born. They were forced to find an apartment in a decent neighborhood that they could afford. Louis was sure that Lula Ann was a product of an affair because her skin was so dark, when actually she wasn't.

Rain was abandoned by her mother who sold her to men for sexual favors. When she upset one of the customers, Rain's mother threw her out and left her with only a sweater in the rain storm. She had to learn how to take care of herself in the mean streets of crime and danger.

The story begins with Booker abandoning Bride. They have, what Bride believes is a minor disagreement, and Booker leaves. No explanation, taking not possessions, no forwarding address, no parting words; he just leaves. Bride is devastated by his actions. Her feelings grow from shock, to sadness, to depression, to determination, to anger.



As Bride obsesses over her encounter with Sofia at the motel, the motif of abandonment comes up again in an unusual way. Sofia isn't her friend; she doesn't owe her anything; she's a paroled convict, but Bride is still very defeated by the fact that, "Even Sofia Huxley, of all people, erased me...I'm not sure which is worse, being dumped like trash or whipped like a slave." She's referring, of course, to the beating that Sofia gave her at the motel. Bride may be a successful competent business woman, but the child inside of her, Lula Ann, is still seeking approval from others.

## Image and Appearance

Presenting the right image or keeping up appearances is another important topic in this story. One of the things that Bride continues to think about where Booker is concerned is his physical appearance. She claims that he is "one beautiful man, flawless even."

She tries to comfort herself by falling back on the motif of appearance and image. So much emphasis has been placed on Bride's appearance, first how bad she looked with her dark ebony skin as a child and later how stunning she looks and all of the perks that go along with being beautiful as an adult. Because of this, telling herself how beautiful she is and being able to rub her beauty and success in the faces of Sweetness and all of her former tormentors makes her feel better about her insecure self.

Image and appearance become very prominent during another section of the story when Bride is dressed in her fancy, expensive clothes, driving her Jaguar, and treating the waitress in the diner as if she is beneath her. At this point in the story, Bride believes that her expensive and beautiful appearance will cause Booker, should she find him, to be regretful of his action of leaving her and realize what a mistake he has made.

## Consequences for One's Actions

Just as Bride is holding on to childhood pain, Sofia, too, is greatly influenced by events from her past and the consequences that followed. Besides the crimes that she is convicted of, Sofia is guilty of beating Bride and leaving her bleeding in the parking lot. She's fortunate that Bride decides not to call the police, but Sofia must live with the consequences, in the case horribly guilty feelings, of her actions toward Bride.

The adult Bride has to live with the consequences of her actions. She did something dishonest for her mother's sake when she testified against Sofia even though she didn't see Sofia commit a crime. She feels guilty and wants to make amends by giving gifts to Sofia which turned out to be very negative consequences for Bride.

Hannah, too, is forced to face consequences from an unfit motherly influence of Queen. However, where Bride was dishonest, Hannah works harder in school and becomes a doctor, someone who can help those in need, to relieve their pain unlike her mother did for her



## Child Molestation/Child Abuse

Child abuse or molestation first comes into play as Bride recalls testifying at the trial of a teacher at her school who is accused of molesting some children. Lula Ann, as Bride was known as a child, was a witness testifying for the prosecution who helps to secure a guilty verdict against Sofia Huxley.

Child molestation becomes the topic as Bride remembers telling Booker a memory of seeing her landlord molesting a young boy. That is a time in her life that rings with injustice. When Bride told Sweetness about what she saw, Sweetness got mad about the story of what the man did to the boy and was upset that Lula Ann may tell someone which would make trouble for them and cause them to need a new apartment. As far as Bride knows now, there has been no justice for that boy. She realizes as an adult how guilty she feels about not helping him or telling someone what had happened.

Continuing the theme of child molestation, Rain confides in Bride what her life was like before she came to live with Steve and Evelyn. Her biological mother allowed men to use and abuse her sexually for money. Although Bride was never sexually assaulted, she realizes the scars that her abuse has placed on her and is horrified to hear what Rain has gone through in her short life so far.

Three characters and their stories carry on the motif of child molestation and abuse. In Booker's case, the abuse happens to his brother who ends up murdered. In Bride's case, she gave the final solid testimony against a woman who is charged with sexual assault on a child. Bride has carried the guilt her entire life that because she lied about seeing the incident, she is instrumental in putting a woman behind bars. In reality, there were other children giving testimony of actually being abused, but Bride takes the burden of her lie and Sofia's jail time all on her own shoulders. Bride also witnessed the landlord sexually abusing a young boy in the alley, but is unable to tell because it would cause problems with renting the apartment for her mother, yet another reason to carry guilt over a sexually abused child. In Hannah's case, she must live with and overcome the fact that not only did her father sexually abuse her, but her mother didn't believe her nor did she do anything to investigate or change the situation.

## Color

Throughout the story the motif of color comes into play. Black and white are the two most prominent colors discussed in this story. Because Bride is a very dark, ebony black woman, she has tremendous troubles from the day she is born. Her grandparents were so light in color that during a time when blacks were publicly humiliated and segregated, her grandmother could pass as a white woman and could drink from the "whites only" water fountain. Bride's mother, Sweetness, and her father, Louis, were both light skinned. They considered themselves to be "high-yellow." In their culture, not only are blacks judged for their color by whites, but Sweetness and Louis, both light-skinned, believe themselves to be of higher quality and social standing than darker



skinned blacks. Being so dark in color, Bride is shunned immediately. Her own mother even says that she can't get past Lula Ann's color to even love the child inside.

Bride embraces the color white as her signature color because it contrasts so starkly with her ebony skin, making her beauty even more striking. Instead of trying to blend in, this contrast allows her to make a statement, and by doing so, by claiming her dark coloring, she becomes empowered. The author uses this event and character development to indicate that one is only powerful and confident when one embraces who they truly are and do not reject it just because of society's lack of vision.

Likewise, color is used as a contrast (shadow and light) in many instances. For example, Sofia is in the darkly lit hotel room when Bride comes by to welcome her back into society. She literally steps from the sunshine outside into the dark room where terrible things happen to her. This is something that is repeated throughout the book with characters moving from the literal and physical light to dark, and vice versa.

The color yellow is traditionally a happy cheerful color, but in this story, yellow holds a different meaning. As Booker's brother, Adam, leaves him for the last time, he is set before the setting sun. His brother was wearing a yellow shirt the day he was kidnapped and was wearing the same yellow shirt, dirty and torn, when Booker helped his dad identify the body. Because of this, Booker placed a yellow rose on his brother's casket. Later in life, he tries to get a yellow rose tattooed on his shoulder. When the tattoo artist doesn't have yellow, he agrees upon an orangish-red. As mentioned previously, orange represents the sweetness of Adam and red symbolizes anger that Booker feels over his brother's tragedy.

Yellow is seen again on the mailbox belonging to Queen Olive. She has a seemingly happy, larger-than-life personality which would go along with the brightness of yellow hues, but the yellow name on her mailbox was a pale, fading yellow color. This is representative of the fact that although she puts on a big personality, at home she is truly fading in her regrets from life.



# Styles

## Point of View

Most of the chapters are told from a first person point of view based on whichever character is named in the title of the chapter. Each of the main characters has the opportunity to express his/her feelings to others and within his/her own thoughts. During some of the characters' accounts, they give information about what is happening in the present, but each character also, at one time or another, shares flashbacks from the past to help the reader better understand the situation or the feelings that are going on in the present. Learning the backgrounds of the characters help the reader to understand from what angle they see the world. Knowing backgrounds and histories help the reader see, right or wrong, the intentions behind each character's actions.

The non-named chapters are told from a third person unknown point of view. This is important because it gives an impartial account of what is actually happening in the story at that time. There is no bias based on feelings or history or relationships. Each third person section is an honest view into what is really happening in the story to each of the characters mentioned.

## Language and Meaning

The language in this story changes with each chapter. In the chapters that are first person point of view, the character's traits dictate the attitude used. For instance, when Sweetness speaks, she is particularly guarded because although she thinks she did the proper thing in the way she raised Lula Ann, she is aware that because Bride, formerly Lula Ann, has a problem with her and doesn't want to associate with her, some may not agree with her child rearing methods; therefore, she is guarded and paranoid about approaching that topic.

Another example would be Brooklyn who speaks to Bride as a concerned friend, helps her deal with her drama and her sick leave, but who also slyly moves into Bride's work position and behind her back calls her a "beautiful, dumb bitch." To Bride's face she is the epitome of friendship, but in her mind, she believes she makes stupid moves that will be to her own advantage in her career.

The individual first person point of view speaks informally as if that character were carrying on a conversation with the reader in their own dialect. The third person point of view is more formal and is written grammatically correct.

## Structure

This book not only flips from character to character, but it also moves within time. Each character has a section discussing the present activities in the story. Then, each also

has a flash-back or two that allows the reader a view into the earlier lives of the characters who are thinking of the past.

The storyline for each character is set up to allow the reader to first see what is happening in the present, then flips back to what happened in the past to get the reader up to speed about each character's life, family, and background.





## Quotes

Memory is the worst thing about healing.

-- Bride (Part One, Chapter 4 paragraph page 29)

**Importance:** Although Bride is the character saying this and it applies well to her, this statement applies to all of the characters. When one is going through a difficult time in life and trying to get past it, the memories are the things that hold up the healing process.

What passes for news is either gossip or a lecture of lies.

-- Bride (Part One, Chapter 4 paragraph page 29)

**Importance:** Once one has been deceived in the past by a person known to her, it is hard to believe strangers and hard to distinguish between truth, gossip, and lies when strangers speak.

When fear rules, obedience is the only survival choice.

-- Bride (Part One, Chapter 4 paragraph page 31)

**Importance:** Many of the characters childhood lives have been ruled by fear. When the choice is punishment and pain or obedience, obedience is the wiser choice.

At first, I couldn't see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her.

-- Sweetness (Part One, Chapter 5 paragraph page 43)

**Importance:** Sweetness admits here that although Lula Ann is her biological child, she is so blinded by color within her own race to have any loving feelings toward her daughter.

What you do to children matters. And they might never forget.

-- Sweetness (Part One, Chapter 5 paragraph page 43)

**Importance:** Sweetness may be saying this about her relationship with Sweetness because as an adult Bride doesn't want anything to do with her. This statement could match anyone actually because, good or bad, children do not forget what adults have done to them.

Hitting the floor, she always says, requires a choice—lie there or bounce.

-- Brooklynn (Part One, Chapter 6 paragraph page 49)

**Importance:** When Brooklyn says this to Bride, she is explaining that when something bad happens to someone, she can either lie on the floor or bounce back up and start fresh.



Correct what you can; learn from what you can't.  
-- Booker (Part One, Chapter 6 paragraph page 55)

**Importance:** Not everyone can correct mistakes by themselves or others. All one can do is learn from the mistake and try to make it better.

No matter how hard we try to ignore it, the mind always knows truth and wants clarity.  
-- Booker (Part One, Chapter 6 paragraph page 55)

**Importance:** Even if we want to be dishonest, our mind is programmed to want the know the truth and to understand it.

Wealth alone explained humanity's evil, and he was determined to live without deference to it.  
-- Booker (Part Three, Chapter 1 paragraph page 121)

**Importance:** He is trying to say that anyone who submits obediently to live only worrying about wealth explains the evil in the world.

When I woke up I reminded myself that freedom is never free. You have to fight for it.  
-- Sofia (Part One, Chapter 9 paragraph page 69)

**Importance:** This is a universal truth. Nothing is free. There is always someone who wants something to equal what he has shared.

Determined to discover what she was made of—cotton or steel—there could be no retreat, not turning back.  
-- Booker (Part Three, Chapter 2 paragraph page 143)

**Importance:** Booker needs to find out if Bride is tough like steel or soft like cotton. Regardless, he has made a decision to find out and can't change his mind now.

I sit on a throne and identify signs of imperfection in others.  
-- Booker (Part Four, Chapter 2 paragraph page 160)

**Importance:** Booker is admitting that he judges others looking for all of their imperfections.

I don't think many people appreciate silence or realize that it is as close to music as you can get.  
-- Bride (Part One, Chapter 1 paragraph page 11)

**Importance:** This is something that Bride thinks to herself when she is a small child trying to deal with a mother that doesn't love her, or want her, and must learn to survive in a situation where she is ridiculed for the darkness of her skin, even within her own community.



No matter how hard we try to ignore it, the mind always knows truth and wants clarity.  
-- Bride (Part Two, Chapter 2)

**Importance:** Bride is trying to make sense of the attack by Sophie and trying to figure out what would have provoked the response that she received. She is not able to be empathetic and understand how angry and vengeful Sophie would be since it was partially Bride's testimony that put her in jail for something she didn't do.

The sun and the moon shared the horizon in a distant friendship, each unfazed by the other.

-- Bride (Part Three, Chapter 3)

**Importance:** This is Bride's observation of her relationship with her boyfriend. She realizes that she doesn't really know much about him.

Every Saturday morning, first thing before breakfast, his parents held conferences with their children requiring them to answer two questions put to each of them: 1. What have you learned that is true (and how do you know)? 2. What problem do you have?

-- Booker (Part Four, Chapter 1)

**Importance:** This gives the reader some insight into the way that Booker was raised and how it contrasts sharply with the way that Bride was raised. His parents are much more engaged in raising their children, whereas Sweetness didn't want to have anything to do with her daughter.