

Grace Notes Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Grace Notes takes a poignant look at the life of a female composer whose life has begun to unravel. Short listed for the Booker prize, *Grace Notes* offers a look at the state of a depressed female mind in a male dominated profession. The novel is a moving exploration of music in the mind of an artist for whom music is her only salvation.

Catherine McKenna is a composer whose life seems to be unraveling. She is battling postpartum depression when she learns that her father has died of a heart attack. Now she must return to Ireland to comfort her mother and renegotiate the terms of their relationship. Since Catherine has been estranged from her parents for well over two years, she has not told them that she has a child. Her father dies never knowing he has a granddaughter, which adds further guilt to Catherine's already troubled mental state.

Catherine comforts her mother as best she can. She attends the funeral and burial of her father and accepts the condolences of friends and family. While in Ireland, Catherine visits with her first music teacher, Miss Bingham. She learns that Miss Bingham is dying, and Catherine is glad she got the chance to discuss music with her teacher one last time. Catherine also tells her mother about the baby and is met with a very poor reaction. Mrs. McKenna is shocked that her once good daughter is now a single mother with an illegitimate child. She cannot reconcile that her child would go against all that she was taught to believe. Catherine, for her part, tries to get her mother to understand that times are different and that a life like hers is not considered evil or wrong anymore. The two form an uneasy truce, and Mrs. McKenna offers to let Catherine and the baby move in with her if they want.

Catherine returns to Glasgow to find that her daughter has said her first word. She is so excited to see Anna that she does not put her down even to use the bathroom. Catherine, who has never been religious, experiences a spiritual joy at seeing and being with her child. Part 1 ends with the musical notation "Credo."

Part 2 begins with a still-pregnant Catherine contemplating music and procreation. She goes into labor and is flown to the hospital to give birth. Catherine's initial joy and excitement at giving birth to Anna are immediately eclipsed by a crushing depression. She is afraid that she will hurt Anna. She is afraid something will happen to Anna, and it will be her fault. She worries that she won't be a good mother because she doesn't love her child as much as she should.

Catherine has more to worry about. Her relationship with Anna's father Dave is falling apart quickly. He constantly drinks and is either leaving the house with a hangover or arriving at the house drunk and stumbling. After Anna is born, Dave becomes abusive. He hits Catherine on several occasions, always claiming to not remember doing so the next morning. It is not until he tries to break Catherine's fingers that Catherine works up the courage to leave him.



Catherine moves into the basement apartment of her friend Liz's house. There, she begins working on a commission for the BBC's *Cutting Edge* series. The piece is *Vernicle*, a title she takes from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. *Vernicle* is unique in that Catherine is Roman Catholic but heavily uses Protestant drums in the music. The composition is a complete success and goes out live over the radio.



Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Grace Notes takes a poignant look at the life of a female composer whose life has begun to unravel. Short listed for the Booker prize, *Grace Notes* offers a look at the state of a depressed female mind in a male dominated profession. The novel is a moving exploration of music in the mind of an artist for whom music is her only salvation.

Catherine McKenna goes to Ireland for her father's funeral. She boards the plane, trying her best to block out thoughts of her baby, Anna. She remembers her father, the way he dressed and the way his Adam's apple would bob when he spoke. She remembers being a child and sitting on his knee. She wants to cry again. From the plane, she rides the bus through her hometown, searching for familiar landmarks. She remembers listening to the Orangemen's drumming contests.

Catherine remembers her father explaining the politics of the Protestants playing their drums so loud. The Orangemen play on the outskirts of town. Catherine's father explains that the Orangemen are Protestants, and they play large goatskin drums. According to Catherine's father, they play so hard that their wrists bleed, all to feel superior to Catholics. Catherine's father calls it bigotry on the part of the Protestants. He can't hear the different types of rhythms. To him, the drumming is a lot of noise influenced by bigotry. To Catherine, the drums are a revelation. They thrill her, and she can feel it deep in her sternum like bells.

Once Catherine gets to town, she is surprised to see a Chinese restaurant and new police barracks. She barely recognizes her town anymore. Some buildings are boarded up while others are in various stages of renovation. The bus driver explains that there was a bombing in October. No one was hurt because there was enough warning. Shaken, Catherine begins her walk home. She is assaulted by memories of her childhood. She reaches her father's pub and enters by the side door. The smells of the pub bring back more memories of the patrons and the bits of conversation.

Taking a steady breath, Catherine enters the living quarters of the pub and hears quiet conversation from the kitchen. She sees how much her mother has changed. Embracing her mother, she can only apologize. She asks her mother about the details of her father's death. She learns that he died of a massive heart attack in the pub. Her mother makes her a cup of tea as Catherine mentally prepares herself to view her father's body. She listens to the conversation of the women in the kitchen and learns that the Chinese restaurant had to start selling chips in order to stay in business.

Catherine finally works up the nerve to see her father. She goes to her childhood bedroom, where her father is laid out, and interrupts the rosary of Mrs. McCarthy. Asking for a moment alone, she tries not to notice the room of her childhood and focus



on her father. She makes herself look into the coffin resting on her childhood bed. She is shocked by his appearance. He looks like a different version of himself. He has the face of a dead man, not the smiling face of her father. She will never see that face again. She cries and repeats "daddy" over and over again.

After the crying stops, Catherine cleans herself up and examines the house. She studies the piano and remembers more of her childhood. She is surprised to see small changes like CDs and a CD player. She remembers the things her father taught her about music and how it made her an outsider to her school friends. Her mother interrupts her reverie and offers her a glass of scotch. They talk about the changes to the house as they drink the brandy.

Armed with a hot-water bottle, Catherine goes to spare room to take a nap. She wakes with a cry in her throat. She is on the verge of calling out Anna's name. She is sweaty and anxious. She wants to die, and she feels selfish for the thought. She is home to comfort her mother. She thinks about how her depression had been improving before this. She remembers her doctor saying this could happen. She is fully awake now and examines the room, thinking about her childhood. She remembers her teachers and her classmates. She realizes how hard life is for everyone.

Catherine decides she must think about work. Her work, her music, will save her. She remembers one of the things her first music teacher, Mrs. Bingham, taught her. In the lesson, Mrs. Bingham asks her to clap her name. Catherine claps out her full name, Catherine Anne McKenna, because seven sounds better than six. She remembers a composition workshop with Huang Xiao Gang and how he asked the question, "Do you compose music or does music compose you?" She remembers how he discussed pre-hearing and inner hearing and categories of sound. She thinks about how he invited her and some other students on stage to do vocal improvisations. During the improvisations, he asks them about grace notes.

Grace notes are the notes between the musical notes. Huang continues to talk about composition and how each piece of a composition must have a head, body and tail. Catherine remembers thinking how Huang risked being thought pretentious, but he always got away with it. She takes one belief from these meetings: "A composer does not grub around changing this note and trying that note instead. A composer hears the thing in his or her head and writes it down."

Catherine comes back to the present and decides she needs a shower. Lying around in bed reminds her of being a child home with the flu. She remembers listening to Georg Buchner's story about Lenz, a mad poet. She remembers the tension of the music going straight to her body. She believes the memory was so vivid because she had the flu. The story stays with her for the rest of her life. Now, whenever she feels the flu coming on, she feels the need to write.

Catherine forces her mind back to her father's funeral. She thinks about what she will wear. She can't wear jeans because she would annoy and offend. She conforms when she is home because it is easier. She chooses her black graduation skirt. She will have



to iron it because she didn't pack carefully the previous night. She relaxes a little in the shower and emerges to find the house quiet. The pub downstairs is closed because of her father's death. She finds her mother in the kitchen. Her mother tells her that Geraldine will do Catherine's hair.

Geraldine isn't a hairdresser, but she does good work. Catherine sits in Geraldine's kitchen. They discuss memories of washing their hair in rainwater as Geraldine snips away. They discuss Catherine's travels and the fact that both of them are still single. Geraldine thinks they are single because they are too smart. Men want to feel intellectually superior to the women they date. They talk about boys they dated when they were fifteen and how much trouble they got into when their parents found out where they were. It had been the first lie Catherine ever told, and she got caught. She remembers having to go to confession that evening. Then, she remembers that her father is dead, and she begins to cry. Geraldine puts down the scissors and comforts her.

At the funeral, Catherine shakes cold hands and listens to platitudes from friends of her family. Paddy, who doesn't know Catherine, puts his arm around her and tells her to call him if she needs anything. It's time for Catherine and her mother to say their final goodbyes before the coffin is sealed. Neither is able to cry anymore. She remembers bits of conversation with her father. Everyone crowds into the room for the prayer.

Catherine watches the funeral director seal the lid, and the men carry her father's body from the room. They follow the coffin's funeral procession to the church. Her mother cries and repeats the name Brendan over and over again. Catherine holds her tightly and lets her cry. Catherine and her mother sit in the front row, and Catherine wonders how she will tell her mother about Anna.

Back at the house, Catherine sits in a corner drinking tea. Geraldine sits next to her eating a sandwich. Catherine has to lean in close to hear Geraldine over the voices of so many people. Geraldine introduces Catherine to the young priest who performed the ceremony. He asks if Catherine would play the organ at the formal services the next day. After asking if it is the same organ she remembers from childhood, Catherine agrees. Catherine realizes that she is still very far from home.

Catherine wakes up at four thirty the next morning in a panic. Her doctor warned her that the anxiety would be this way. She thinks about Anna and what is happening at home in Glasgow. She thinks about when she met the composer Helmut Lemberg in Kiev when she won the Moncrieff-Hewitt Award for her Piano Trio. The prize means a thousand pounds to spend on travel during or after her postgraduate year in Glasgow. Catherine remembers blushing at Lemberg's praise of her work. She hears her mother stirring and meets her in the kitchen. They discuss the pills the doctor gave her mother to sleep. Then they discuss her father. Catherine feels guilty about the way she left things. Her mother does not know how to get on with out him after having known him for forty years. Her mother dries her eyes and asks Catherine to play something on the piano.



Catherine plays a piece by Haydn. Her mother calls it glorious as she taps out the rhythm. When Catherine finishes, her mother talks about Catherine's recent performance on the radio. She says that Catherine's father received many phone calls afterwards and that he was disappointed to have missed it. Catherine thinks her father would have hated the drums in that piece. She cleans a cup and sees a note from her father to meet someone on Tuesday. Not knowing which Tuesday, Catherine throws the note away. She says goodnight to her mother and goes to bed.

Catherine, unable to sleep, remembers when she finally met Melnichuck, her favorite composer. In Kiev, she waits for a summons by Melnichuck's wife Olga. Since Melnichuck doesn't speak English, Olga translates their conversation. While both of the Melnichucks are in their sixties, Olga looks better than Anatoli. When Catherine asks Anatoli questions about music and influences, he responds, "Tomorrow." He asks her to play for him instead. She is nervous and doesn't play as well as she could. Olga translates his response. He says that her music is good and interesting. After they have tea, he asks her to play something that she hasn't finished writing so that he can critique it. As she plays, the Melnichucks' dog tries to mount her and interrupts her playing. Olga, embarrassed, throws the dog out of the room.

Catherine is now at her father's requiem mass. She leaves her mother with other family members by the coffin and climbs the stairs to the organ. She focuses on the music to keep from crying. She listens to the eulogy with her head down and a lump in her throat. She follows her father's coffin to the cemetery. As she listens to the dull thud of earth hitting the coffin, Catherine remembers a Christmas Eve from her childhood. She is about eleven years old and is rigid with excitement.

Catherine and her mother are meeting her father at the train station. Her father is drunk, and her mother is embarrassed by his drunken behavior. Catherine is suddenly frightened of this drunken man that is her father. People giving their condolences bring Catherine back to the present. Her old music teacher, Miss Bingham, shakes her hand and says how sorry she is. She tells Catherine to call on her if she feels up to it.

Paddy opens the bar for everyone to come back and have a drink and something to eat. Mrs. McKenna sits in a corner and accepts kind words from her guests. She tells them that her husband is with his Maker now and that there is no reason to grieve. Catherine tries to help her mother but feels useless. There is no organization. People simply wait for a chance to approach and speak to Mrs. McKenna. Catherine is overcome by the intensifying cigarette smoke in the bar and excuses herself. As she goes upstairs, the priest compliments her playing at the mass. She chokes out a thank you and moves past him.

Catherine gets to the kitchen and realizes she is still holding an egg sandwich. She takes a bite and looks for the salt. She finds a shaker with a crease in the metal top. She realizes that the crease happened the same Christmas they picked up her drunken father from the train station. She immediately relives the memory.



Catherine's job is to help her mother set the table for Christmas dinner. After carving the turkey, her father picks up the saltshaker and realizes that it is empty. Her mother tries to refill it but cannot get the top off. Her father tries and doesn't have any success. He closes the top of the shaker in the kitchen door and tries to use it as leverage to get the top off. The top of the shaker creases, and they have to dip their salt from a saucer for the meal.

The next day, Catherine and her mother visit the graveyard. Her mother says that she didn't get a chance to pray the day before because there was too much going on. There are cards at the gravesite. Her mother asks Catherine to have someone gather up the cards so that they can read them later. Catherine leaves her mother to pray at the grave. She walks through the cemetery noting the names on gravestones. She recognizes many of them. She sees a military grave for Patrick Fleck. She remembers him from primary school. He died while she was in Scotland. Her mother walks up behind her and asks if they can walk home through the woods.

Mrs. McKenna says that Miss Bingham wants Catherine to meet her the next day for tea. She asks Catherine if anything is wrong. Catherine thinks her mother can sense something and that she knows about Anna. She comes up with an excuse, saying that her father used to walk this path with her. They discuss what Catherine is doing. Catherine quit teaching to write music. She says that she is working on a mass because of the structure and form of it. Her mother is offended and says that Catherine used to be such a nice girl. She accuses Catherine of mocking her beliefs. She says that Catherine has become a heathen. As they emerge from the woods, her mother begins to cry, saying, "It'll be unbearable when I start to miss him."

Catherine's mother wakes her the next morning, reminding Catherine of her eleven o'clock appointment with Miss Bingham. Her mother notices the pill bottles on Catherine's table and asks about them. Catherine explains that they are anti-depressants. Catherine cries hysterically as she describes her depression to her mother. Her mother calms her somewhat and describes Catherine's uncle. Catherine's uncle had to receive electric shock therapy. She says that he got better and so will Catherine. As her mother brushes her hair, Catherine confesses that she has post-natal depression.

Catherine explains to her shocked mother that she had a baby the year before. Her mother says that she is glad Catherine's father is dead so that he wouldn't have to hear this. Her mother calls her dirty and says that this is just an awful situation. She leaves the room crying, and Catherine is left to get dressed. Catherine packs her things. She plans to visit Miss Bingham and then find out if she can catch a bus to the airport. She tries not to get angry with her mother as she walks to Miss Bingham's. She stops to buy Miss Bingham some chocolates.

On the walk to Miss Bingham's, Catherine remembers how she got involved in music. Her mother had asked Miss Bingham to give Catherine piano lessons when Catherine was ten. Catherine remembers how Miss Bingham would ride her bicycle everywhere to



keep her joints loose. Miss Bingham taught Catherine things that Catherine seemed to already know by instinct.

Miss Bingham opens her door and welcomes Catherine inside. Catherine gives her the box of chocolates, and Miss Bingham goes to make some tea. Looking around the house, Catherine remembers how Miss Bingham would take her to concerts in Belfast. Miss Bingham would get them the cheap seats in the choir stalls so that they could watch the conductor. Catherine walks over to the fire and warms her hands behind her back. Miss Bingham returns with the tea and tells Catherine how proud she is of her. She says she sat in her chair and listened to every single bar of Catherine's work on the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra. She goes on to say that the work was very powerful and difficult. It wasn't the type of thing one could listen to while washing dishes.

Miss Bingham lights a cigarette and says that it was also mentioned in the newspapers. Catherine says it's because she is a Roman Catholic using Protestant drums in her music. She says the papers wanted to make a big deal out of it, but she just told them that she liked the sound. She says it's the kind of drum a child would like to play. Miss Bingham laughs and begins to cough uncontrollably. At Catherine's questioning, Miss Bingham explains that she has cancer. Miss Bingham asks Catherine how she is. Catherine says she was down last year because she had a baby. Miss Bingham congratulates her, and Catherine explains that she only told her mother this morning.

Miss Bingham supposes that Anna is too young to learn the piano. Catherine says that Miss Bingham was a great teacher and that she learned what she needed when she needed to learn it. Catherine tells her about Huang Xiao Gang and how he made her think differently about music. The two of them discuss everything from music to cigarettes to goings on in town. Miss Bingham explains that her arthritis is so bad that she cannot play piano anymore. She asks Catherine to play for her, and Catherine shyly plays some works in progress. She explains that the artist Vermeer inspired them.

Catherine goes on to say that she is working with voices to write a Latin mass. She says that Catholicism isn't important to her anymore and that it's a way of getting back at the priests that wouldn't let her serve at the altar. She also says that there are so few masses written by women that the idea intrigues her. She apologizes for being flippant about religion. Miss Bingham takes her only comfort from religion. Miss Bingham explains that the week she was diagnosed was the same week she listened to Catherine's concert. She says that Catherine's music spoke to her that night, and it gave her hope. Catherine builds the fire back up and apologizes for having stayed too long. She promises to send the rest of the Vermeer pieces when she finishes them. They say their goodbyes.

Catherine walks the long way home and searches out changes to the neighborhood. She considers stopping for coffee but doesn't want to answer questions about her father and why she isn't having coffee at home. She goes home and decides that her mother can choose whether or not to say goodbye to her. She goes to get her things, and her mother comes in. Her mother says that she promised to take Catherine to the airport.



She doesn't look at Catherine when she speaks. She tells Catherine that the long drive will be good because they have a lot of talking to do.

Mrs. McKenna asks Catherine if the baby has a father. Catherine says yes and that she also has a name, Anna. Her mother asks if Catherine is married. Catherine says she isn't but that things are different from her mother's day. She goes on to say that Anna's father is an Englishman named Dave. She and Dave had been living together when Catherine got pregnant by accident. She says that Anna is eighteen months old. Mrs. McKenna says that Catherine's father would have banned her from their house if he had known any of this. She wants to know when she can meet Anna. Catherine doesn't know. She asks Catherine if the baby is baptized. Catherine says no.

Mrs. McKenna says that Catherine and her child have a home there in Ireland with her. The house is too big for just her anyway. She says that she wouldn't interfere, either. She goes on to say that Catherine's father was a grandfather for eighteen months and never knew it. She doesn't know if it would have been worse if he'd known or if it's worse that he died without knowing. At the departure gates, Catherine writes down her address in Glasgow and says she is only there until she gets her own place. The hug their goodbyes, and Catherine gets on the plane.

On the plane, Catherine tries not to think too much about Anna. She wants to suppress the emotion rising in her because it will be too intense. She flicks through the airline magazine. A stewardess passes her a tray with snacks on it. Catherine eats mechanically and imagines feeding Anna. She hasn't thought about bibs and baby spoons for several days. She makes herself think of something else. The trip is too long to think about Anna. She remembers the day Melnichuck showed her where his spiritual inspiration came from. Melnichuck, Olga and Catherine walked to the Refectory Church to hear the monks' choir. The beauty and intensity of the music brought tears to her eyes, and now she is unable to control her tears on the plane. A stewardess asks her if she is all right. Catherine nods and then smiles to prove it.

Catherine begins to think of Anna again. She wonders how her friend Liz has dressed Anna and what her hair is like. She forces herself to think of something else. She remembers the end of the service with Olga and Anatoli Melnichuck. She and Olga climb up to the tower to hear the bells. She can feel the bells all through her body and soul. She meets the priests and discusses bells and religion. After the service, they go back to the Melnichuck's home and listen to some of Melnichuck's recent work. Catherine thinks about the discussions of Nazis and anti-Semitism.

The pilot announces that the plane will be landing soon. Catherine has to hold back the feeling of anticipation. All of her emotions are so close to the surface that she is as likely to laugh as she is to cry. She tries to think of the fastest way to get home from the airport. A taxi is too expensive, and a bus will take too long. She picks up her luggage from baggage claim and heads for the nearest taxi. She tries to control her negative thoughts as she rides along in the smoke-filled taxi. She arrives and can't get to her key, so she rings the bell. She says hello to Liz and runs downstairs to Anna.



Catherine looks down at the small sleeping child and has a spasm of fear. The child isn't Anna. She can't be. Catherine turns on a light and looks more closely. She looks like Anna. She could be Anna's cousin. She looks closer. It is Anna. She has grown. Her features have lengthened, but she is Catherine's daughter. Catherine turns with tears in her eyes and tells Liz that she didn't recognize her own child for a second. Liz tells Catherine that Anna said her first word, "Mama." Catherine, unable to let Anna go, takes the baby into the bathroom with her. On the way out of the bathroom, Catherine looks at their reflections in the mirror. They both smile at what they see.

Part 1 Analysis

Catherine is just starting to emerge from her postpartum depression when she is summoned home for her father's funeral. The first half of the novel deals with the clash of two worlds. Catherine is carrying the trauma of childbirth along with the heavy load of grief for her father. Catherine's relationship with her father was strained. They had not spoken to each other in years. The estrangement with her father also meant that Catherine had been out of touch with her mother. Because she has not spoken to them in so long, Catherine has not told them that they have a grandchild, and her father dies without ever knowing.

Catherine has to come to grips with her past in order to compose a harmonious future. Catherine can be seen as the "prodigal daughter." She has left home and all she knew behind in order to create her own individual life. Now, she has to renegotiate the terms of her relationship with her family and her past. Even though this Ireland is familiar to her and brings back memories of her childhood, it is as though she is seeing it for the first time.

The first part of the novel deals with Catherine's guilt and grief. She feels guilty for having gone so long without contacting her parents. She also feels guilty for not having told them about Anna. She grieves for the parent that she has lost as well as knowing her father will never know his granddaughter. When Catherine finally tells her mother about Anna, she is so relieved that her mother's anger, hurt and disgust cannot mar her relief.

While Catherine is in Ireland, she finds herself focusing her thoughts on the different things that she has been taught about music. Her earliest teacher is her father, and he is very strict about what music is allowed in the house. He teaches her about the Orangemen and their playing. Most importantly, he teaches Catherine about homophones.

Catherine also learns about rhythms and singing from her Granny Boyd. Whenever her parents' fighting worries Catherine, she runs to her Granny Boyd. Granny Boyd sings along to the rhythm of her pedal operated sewing machine. She sings while she quilts. She sings while she and Catherine work in the kitchen. Granny Boyd sees that Catherine is a very fast learner when it comes to music. In a matter of minutes, the child knows the words and melodies of any tune Granny tries to teach her.



If Catherine's father and Granny Boyd instill a love of music in Catherine, it is Miss Bingham who shows Catherine how to work with it. Catherine's mother asks Miss Bingham to give Catherine piano lessons. Miss Bingham later tells Mrs. McKenna that Catherine is learning faster than she can be taught. Music is instinctive with Catherine. All Miss Bingham can do is show her how to draw it out of her head.

Huang Xiao Gang first teaches Catherine about the nature of composing music. Huang's theory of composition has a basis in Taoism. One of the central tenants of Taoism is how opposites form a balance and harmony, the yin and yang, the male and the female, and the light and the dark. This belief is central to what he teaches Catherine about music. Huang is the one who teaches Catherine about grace notes. Grace notes are the notes between the notes. They are the unintentional product of the composition. They can be a pause, a breath or an echo of an intentional note.

Catherine has internalized all of these musical influences. When she returns to Ireland, they all collide within her as she tries to compose a new life for herself. In the end, Catherine knows that it will be the music that saves her and creates a future for her and her child.



Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Part 2 of *Grace Notes* steps back in time. Catherine is still pregnant with Anna. She wakes suddenly and sees that Dave is gone. She gets out of bed and sees that Dave has taken the van to work. She gets dressed and has breakfast, noticing everything around her. Dave dives for scallops and sells them to the fish factory. Since summer came early this year, Dave is able to dive for longer periods. Since Dave is a one-man diving crew, he can get closer to the shore, while the big boats cannot. It is good paying work, but it is very dangerous and tiring. Catherine is happy about Dave's working. She hates the winter when he simply lies in bed battling hangovers. She has to teach then, since there is nothing for Dave to do.

Catherine looks over her possessions. She purchased most of the furniture at auctions and is especially proud of the piano. She remembers spending the most money on the piano. She takes her tea and toast to the front room and sees her papers strewn on the desk. She is working on a set of variations for a string orchestra. Putting the pieces of the music together reminds her of Granny Boyd's handmade quilts. She is working on one of Purcell's catches. Purcell seemed to like the catch form. She remembers learning catches from her Granny Boyd.

The first catch that Catherine learns is "Three Blind Mice." Whether Catherine and Granny are sewing or boiling a kettle, they break out into the catch. Catherine loves doing the rounds, or the "rounds of the kitchen," as Granny Boyd calls them. After the rounds die away, Granny says how terrible it must be to not be able to hear. She says it's worse than not being able to listen. So many of Catherine's memories are tied to her Granny Boyd. She remembers the scoldings and the comforting that her Granny would give.

Catherine decides to play what she has written so far. Squeezing herself between the stool and the piano, she imagines that she should write a manual on how to play piano while pregnant. She could include drawings in the manual. She is on twelve weeks maternity leave from the high school. She was hoping to work, but she keeps getting caught off balance by her mood swings. Some days she is excited and looking forward to the baby. Some days she is anxious, worried about her parents and how to tell them she is pregnant. Other days, she works tirelessly and berates herself for neglecting the child in her womb. She is feeling pains; it's the second time in an hour. She wonders if labor is starting. She calls her doctor, who arrives within the hour. She is definitely ready.

Catherine leaves a note for Dave and puts it in the front mirror. The doctor drives her to the ambulance plane and tells her that the hospital is called "Rotten Row," but it isn't as bad as the name implies. She boards the plane, and it loudly takes off. The nurse assures Catherine that she won't have to give birth on the plane. The nurse rubs the



back of Catherine's clenched hand. Catherine relaxes and thinks about the mass she is working on. She remembers practicing the opening with her students, splitting them into sections. She explains to her students that she knows how difficult the piece is, but she also knows they can learn it. They do learn it, and the night is magical.

The sound of the engine changes, and Catherine looks to the nurse for reassurance. The sounds of the plane's descent are deafening. The plane lands, and everything is quiet. Catherine thanks the nurse for her kindness. The nurse smilingly reassures Catherine and walks her down to the tarmac. Catherine has another pain sitting in the ambulance and thinks about death. People can die from something as simple as going to the dentist. At Rotten Row, everyone is soft-spoken and soothing. Catherine decides to enjoy the mothering. A midwife examines Catherine and pronounces her ready. Another nun checks the baby's vital signs, and Catherine watches her face to see if everything is all right. The nun smiles at Catherine reassuringly and walks away.

Everything stops, and Catherine has no more contractions. The sisters put her in a room with magnolia walls and tell her to walk around. Gravity will help bring on labor. Catherine thinks about her mother giving birth. She remembers her mother telling her that the "M" had fallen off the sign of Malone Place, leaving it to read "alone Place." According to her mother, the building was well named. Mrs. McKenna remembers lying there waiting for Catherine for hours by herself. Men weren't allowed in the birthing rooms at that time. Now Catherine understands the isolation her mother felt. The baby's father is down on the island, and Catherine is cut off from her parents.

Catherine wonders how she will tell her parents. She remembers their big fight during her postgraduate year in Glasgow. Instead of going home that year, she stays in Glasgow and works as a waitress until Christmas. On December 8th, she talks to her father and explains that she won't be home for Christmas. She explains that she has won a scholarship to travel, and January is the only time she can do it. Her father is angry and asks if Catherine has attended mass for the Feast of Immaculate Conception. Catherine laughs out loud, and her father says that he would be glad if she never comes home again. He tells her to stay in England. The line goes dead as Catherine says she is in Scotland.

Catherine notices the radiator and how it is painted. In a daze, she rubs her finger against the scored plaster of the wall and touches it to her tongue the same way she did as a child. Her last pain was over an hour ago. She remembers being eleven and passing her qualifying exam. Her parents buy her a New Marian Missal as a reward. The very first thing she looks up in it is the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia. She remembers asking her mother what the phrase "conserved her virginity," meant. She remembers her mother turning away as though she hadn't heard. Catherine later learns that the story of St. Cecilia is a total fabrication. She learns the real history of St. Cecilia, but she holds on to the early story the same way children hold on to Santa Clause.

Catherine walks around the room and tries to think of pleasant things, but her mind keeps returning to her family. She wonders if she should write them and let them know that they are going to be grandparents. She imagines her father going into a black rage



at the news. She also realizes that the longer she goes without telling them, the more difficult it will be.

The nurse returns, and Catherine begins to have more severe contractions. The nurse moves Catherine to another room, and Catherine has two more major contractions. She wonders if she should pray even though she does not believe there is a God. Catherine thinks that if there is a God, she won't be able to change his mind by praying to him anyway. A nurse keeps Catherine moving and talks with her. The nurse gives her a shot to help with the pain, and Catherine lies back and relaxes. The nurse, Janet, makes small talk with Catherine. Catherine knows the conversation is to keep her mind occupied and goes along with it.

Catherine sounds drunk and is trying to keep up with the talking when another pain erupts. The nurse tells her to remember her breathing, and it reminds Catherine of her vocal exercises with Huang Xiao Gang. Catherine says that she wants to push. The nurse tells her not to and leaves the room. The midwife moves Catherine to a trolley and moves her through the corridor. Catherine is yelling now, as a nurse holds her hand and wipes her face. Catherine hears the nurse telling her to push. The midwife says that she can see the baby now. Catherine feels as though she is being ripped open. She hears the midwife say, "Here comes the head." Catherine pushes again and feels everything slither out of her. She hears choirs singing "Hallelujah," and the midwife tells her it's a girl.

Catherine's daughter is perfect, so feminine and tiny. Catherine realizes she is crying as she hears herself saying how lovely her child is. Catherine makes a vow to always protect this child. The nurses clean Catherine and wheel her to a different ward where she is given tea and toast. The feeling of motherhood is so unexpected. Catherine suddenly wants to tell her mother as one mother to another. She wants to forgive her mother for the anxieties and worries Catherine once thought were frivolous.

A nurse comes and tells her that Dave Dewhurst called and said congratulations. Catherine remembers when they discussed baby names. If it is a boy, they will call it Simon, they decided. If it is a girl, they will call her Anna. The baby looks like an Anna. Catherine says the name out loud, and it feels right. Catherine begins to nurse Anna. The clear plastic bracelet on Anna reads "Baby McKenna" and her date of birth. The sucking stops, and Catherine realizes the baby is asleep. She looks to the nurse for reassurance. Catherine is unable to sleep for a long time. She cannot wait until the next time she gets to hold Anna. She eventually falls into an exhausted sleep.

Catherine wakes at six the next morning thinking of her baby. A nurse helps her rearrange her pillows. Catherine sees that Anna is still asleep and leaves the bed to use the restroom. Catherine returns and, after eating breakfast, begins to nurse Anna. She realizes how fragile Anna is. Anna's fragility strikes Catherine again when she gives her a bath for the first time. After Catherine cleans and dresses her, Anna is put down for a nap. Catherine watches her sleep.



Catherine painfully walks to the phone to call Dave. She visualizes the empty room and knows he isn't home. The weather is still good; Dave is making the most of it. She looks in her address book and dials Liz. She tells Liz that she had a baby girl yesterday. Liz is shocked. She says she didn't know Catherine was married. Catherine says that she isn't. She tells Liz when visiting hours are and says she just needed to talk to someone. She goes back to bed and watches Anna sleep. Anna is a miracle. Catherine knows that children are born all the time, but she still finds it miraculous.

Catherine realizes that there is no form of music to celebrate a birth. There are requiems for death and music for marriage, but there is no music to celebrate birth. There are plenty of Christmas carols, but those only celebrate the god-part of Jesus, not the human part born into the world. Catherine wants a celebration for the birth of an ordinary but perfect girl. A breathing rhythm in three-note sequence comes to her. She sketches the idea on paper.

Dave calls, and Catherine tries to convince him to come to the hospital. Dave wants to work. He says he has a family to support and needs the money. He says that the night before everyone bought him drinks to congratulate him. He doesn't remember much of the night, but neither does anyone else who was there. He says he is looking forward to seeing both Catherine and Anna.

As Catherine soothes Anna late in the night, she remembers one of her teachers saying that all songs about childhood are either lullabies or songs of infanticide. She reminds herself to think of something else, anything but the death of her child. She remembers how in pre-natal class she was told that the baby's feeding also manufactured the milk. If the baby stops suckling, the milk will dry up. She wonders if music works the same way. Will she lose the ability to compose if she takes a break from it? She realizes that she only wants to put the baby down and sleep. She must stop thinking of any hurt coming to the child. She will protect her child with all her might. She will give her life for Anna if necessary.

The nurses allow Catherine to have a bath. The nurse runs the bath and sprinkles coarse salt in it. Saline is the best for healing. Catherine relaxes and examines her stomach. She looks at the stretch marks and wonders if Dave will still find her attractive. She thinks about Dave and how they met.

Catherine and Liz are on the island for the weekend planning a geography field trip for Liz's students. Because of the clouding, they aren't able to see any geography, but they spend most of their time in pubs. Catherine meets Dave in one of them. He says she looks like a student and asks what she studies. She tells him that she is studying music. They make loud conversation over the noise of the bar.

Catherine rubs her stomach and thinks about Dave. The nurse tells her it's time to get out of the tub. Liz visits and brings Catherine irises from the flower stall downstairs. Liz fawns over Anna, calling her gorgeous. She asks about the father, and Catherine reminds her of Dave and the night they all met. Liz asks if Catherine and Dave will get



married. Catherine says no and accuses Liz of sounding like her mother. Liz says she is just trying to get the whole picture since this whole thing a big shock.

Later that night, Catherine thinks about the changes that will have to be made. Dave drinks too much. The two of them fight about it constantly. It reminds her of the arguments her parents had when she was a child. Catherine would always run to Granny Boyd when the fights got bad. Usually Granny would be sewing, and the two would discuss music or whistling or sewing.

Catherine buys chocolates for the nurses as a way of saying thank you. She will miss being pampered by them. Catherine is feeling anxious. She doesn't feel the same way about Anna. She is tense and uneasy about leaving. The day she leaves, she feels isolated from everything going on around her. She feels like something awful is about to happen and that she must prepare for it by tensing up.

Catherine takes a taxi to the plane that will shuttle her back to the island. She knows many of the people taking the plane. Most of them crowd around her at the airport and ask to hold Anna. At their inquiries, Catherine says that Dave will be meeting her and taking her home. Catherine feels detached from the baby and everything involving the baby. When they land on the island, the baby gets the same kind of reception.

Catherine anxiously looks for Dave at the terminal. Two people offer her a lift home. She thanks them and explains that Dave is meeting her. Catherine knows the flight attendant, Ingrid. She listens to Ingrid make announcements about incoming and outgoing flights. At the slightest sound, Catherine looks up, expecting to see Dave walk through the door. Everyone seems to have gone, and Ingrid approaches Catherine. Ingrid says she is going Catherine's way and can give her a ride. Catherine accepts, saying how typical it is that Dave has left her waiting.

In the car, Catherine answers questions about the labor and Anna's weight. She thanks Ingrid for the ride, saying she doesn't know what happened to Dave. Ingrid volunteers that she saw him earlier outside a local pub. They see a blue van racing in the opposite direction and realize it's Dave. Ingrid asks if she should follow him. Catherine thinks he will figure out that she is on her way home once he gets there. Ingrid drops Catherine off and helps her to the door. The house is tidy, but it smells like cigarettes. Catherine puts Anna down in her newly painted nursery and goes into the living room. She sees her work exactly the way she left it. She calls the district nurse and says that she made it home safely.

Then, Catherine calls McKechnie's garage and says she would like to learn to drive. It takes Catherine the better part of a year to learn. Dave won't teach her because he wants to avoid fights and problems with the van's gearshift. After forty lessons and two failed tests, Catherine finally passes. McKechnie sells her a car for very little. Catherine realizes that for a mother, a car is a necessity not a luxury.

Catherine wakes at five-thirty. Dave is snoring loudly from the couch. She tries not to think of Dave. She focuses on the fact that Anna's first birthday is next week. Catherine



is not the type of mother to throw a party for screaming babies. She tries to think of something else. She thinks that if she can just lie there quietly, she will go back to sleep. Catherine remembers a chemistry class taught by Sister Immaculata. Catherine has to use the restroom, but she does not want to disturb Dave or Anna. She wishes she were a baby so that she could go where she is and have someone else clean up. She realizes that she will not be able to go back to sleep. She is outraged by what Dave did to her last night.

Catherine gets out of bed and quietly uses the restroom. She doesn't flush and anticipates an argument with Dave about it later. She just doesn't want to wake the baby or Dave. She gets back in bed and listens to Dave's snoring. She feels trapped in her mind. Her mind is attacking itself. She can't escape the repetition of caring for the baby. She can't escape the repetition of her thoughts. After Anna is first born, Catherine goes to the doctor constantly. She complains to him that she is not getting enough sleep and that the baby is crying too much. She hopes he can see what the problem is without Catherine having to say it out loud.

Catherine remembers breaking down in the doctor's office. She says she doesn't know how to be a mother, and she is finding it hard to deal with. The doctor assures her that she is not alone. Many people feel this way; it's normal. He tells her that she has to give herself time to relax, and she will be fine. The baby is about to wake; Catherine can feel it in her stomach. She wants to avoid Dave and the curious looks of other people. She feels her lip, and it's still tender and swollen. The baby wakes, and Catherine changes and feeds her. She takes an anti-depressant and packs the baby bag. She tells Anna that they are going for a long walk.

Catherine walks along the shore with Anna on her back. She leaves off her sandals and walks along the very edge of the water. She remembers discussing patterns and rhythms with her students. During the discussion, Catherine wants her students to tell her what the time intervals of the sea are. She explains that there are different types of tides, and they all have different intervals of duration. The students just stare blankly at her.

Catherine stops and lifts a handful of saltwater to her lip. She is glad the term is over so that she doesn't have to explain her lip to her students. The saltwater soothes the tenderness, and Catherine remembers what the nurse told her about saline. She stops for something to eat. She sets up a small picnic in the sand. She takes off Anna's plastic pants and diaper so that the sand doesn't chafe her. She thinks of Anna's colic and her constant crying. Catherine would do anything to drown out the crying. When the colic was over, Anna began teething. Sometimes Catherine doesn't trust herself not to hurt her child.

Catherine takes off Anna's top, and the two go down to the shallow part of the water. Suddenly Catherine feels good. She wonders if the anti-depressants are finally working. She looks around and sees they are completely alone. She takes off her clothes, and the two go back to playing in the shallows of the water. They return to the beach and let the wind dry their skin. She puts more sunscreen on herself and Anna and then gives



Anna another jar of food. She thinks back to the schoolyard during breaks. She suddenly hears a sound. It starts with gentle strings in different tones. She is composing the song in her head. She is excited and can't wait to work on it.

Catherine gathers up her and Anna's things and gets dressed. She turns around and sees Anna standing. Anna is standing, but she is wobbly. Catherine is speechless; she drops the shirt she is holding and holds out her hands to Anna. Anna takes two steps and grabs Catherine's fingers.

Everything is packed. Catherine is just waiting. There is a storm raging outside. She can't sleep, even though she knows she has to get out the next day. Catherine gets up knowing that she won't sleep. The room is full of labeled boxes and tea chests. The mover told her to only pack boxes of books a third of the way. Catherine hates throwing anything away. She even has her notes from her undergraduate music courses packed away. Catherine tries her mother's trick of using hot milk to help her sleep. As she goes through her notes, she tries to sip the milk, but it is too hot.

Catherine is working on a composition called *By the Sea's Edge*. She recently heard a repeat performance of her earlier work, *A Suite for Trumpetists and Tromboners*. Graeme McNicol heard it and asked to commission *By the Sea's Edge* for a new series he is working on. She is excited about how the work is going and is irritated about having to move in the middle of it. She notices an unmarked folder and realizes it is the last piece she worked on with Melnichuck. She remembers playing it for him.

While Catherine is visiting with Olga and Melnichuck, she tells Olga that she should have gone home for Christmas because it is so important to her family. Melnichuck asks Catherine to play some of the things she wrote in her final year. Olga speaks on the phone with her daughter and closes the door to the piano room. Catherine begins to play and notices Melnichuck is very close behind her. His breathing is getting louder. She notices that he is now leaning on her with his full weight. She turns and sees him crumple to the floor. She shouts for Olga, who forces a pill down Melnichuck's throat and phones for a doctor.

When Catherine returns to Glasgow, she writes Olga to thank her and ask after her husband's health. Catherine never receives a reply. A year later, Catherine hears a live performance of Melnichuck's Second Symphony. There is no mention of Melnichuck being dead, so Catherine assumes he survived.

Catherine tries to imagine the moving van. She knows she should abandon all these things, but she can't leave them behind. She especially doesn't want Dave to benefit from her possessions. She looks around, unable to believe that she is finally leaving. The day of the beach walk was the turning point for her. It gave her the confidence to make a move away from Dave.

Dave seems to have lost all control of his life. He doesn't wake up in the morning for work. He can't remember how much he drinks at night. She wakes a man with a hangover and receives him back drunk again each evening. She decides that she has



to leave before they release Dave from the clinic on the mainland. She asks Liz to keep a look out for an apartment. Liz tells her that they have a basement Catherine can use.

The night Dave first hits her is when it all starts. The next morning is the beach walk. She returns to the house and learns that Dave doesn't remember hitting her. Dave apologizes and says that he has never hit anyone he cared about. He keeps doing it, though. The worst time is when he tries to slam her hand in the piano. She tries to get past him, but he slams her to the floor and tries to break her hand in the doorjamb. He doesn't believe her when she tells him about it the next day. Catherine knows she has to get away.

Catherine gives Anna a bath and enjoys watching the child play with the bubbles. She reconsiders calling her piece *By the Sea's Edge* and tells Anna time is up. She wraps Anna in a baby towel and holds her close. Catherine imagines that one day Liz will tell her that someone is at the door, and Catherine will see Dave standing there. She knows it will happen some day, and she should have a plan for dealing with him. She dries Anna and puts her down for the evening. She goes to her desk and works on her manuscripts. She has been working this way for two months now. She misses having the sea to look at.

There are two periods in the day when Catherine can work. She can work in the evenings and for about an hour in the afternoon. Time disappears for her when she is working. Liz comes down and asks Catherine how she is. Catherine really does not want the interruption and is very short with her. Liz leaves, and Catherine tries to apologize to her. Liz closes the door sharply behind her, and it wakes Anna. Catherine takes Anna upstairs to say goodnight to Liz.

Catherine finds Liz watching television and immediately begins to apologize. She says that she is really stressed about the commission, and her voice breaks. Liz sees Catherine is crying and asks what's wrong. Catherine says that this is normal for her lately. She explains that she has been depressed and having crying jags for a while now. She says it started after Anna was born. She apologizes to Liz in earnest, and Liz wishes she could be artistic and temperamental. Liz cuddles and plays with the baby while Catherine makes them tea. They try to talk of other things. Catherine says she has put in a claim for housing and that Liz will need to sign a form for her. Catherine can use the money to help out around the house until she finds a place and a job.

Catherine says that she is working on a composition titled *Vernicle*. She will get two thousand for it upon completion. Catherine says that this piece is so important that she would have done it for free. She will get to join the Performing Rights Society when she finishes it. The men will have no choice but to let her in. Catherine says she can write composer on her passport when this is done. Catherine apologizes for crying and laying all her problems on Liz. Liz tells her to feel free to unload on her anytime.

Catherine is worried about getting her period on the first day of rehearsal. She stands in front of a largely male orchestra and tries to be diplomatic. She worries that her work is pretentious with a pretentious title. Now that it is the evening of the concert, Catherine's



confidence is back. She is a different kind of nervous. There is no need for this nervousness; the orchestra and conductor are well rehearsed. The composition sounds better than it did in her head.

The hall used to be the Church of Scotland. The building resonates with the sound of the drums. The concert is sponsored by the European Broadcasting Union and will be broadcast live in twenty European countries. Catherine thinks of the reaction she may receive from the music. Some people might hate it or not understand it or think it's pretentious. She sits on the toilet in the women's room and listens to everyone gather for the show. Her piece is the entire second half of the show. She hears the outer door of the ladies' room open, and Liz calls her name. Catherine says she is fine and comes out to wash her hands.

Catherine wonders if she looks okay or if she is too pale. Liz tells her that the only thing that matters is that they are late. Liz takes Catherine back to the hall, telling her not to panic. They meet up with Peter, Liz's husband, and take their seats. Liz gives Catherine a reassuring squeeze on the arm as the audience quiets down for the performance. Catherine squeezes back in thanks. She can't believe *Vernicle* is about to have its first performance. She is shaking and reads the program to ease her mind. There is a biographical note and an interview. Catherine reads through it for the first time and doesn't remember saying any of it.

Liz notices Catherine is shaking and squeezes her arm again. Everyone is suddenly applauding. The applause stops, and Catherine can hear a single voice speaking loudly. She remembers that the BBC is broadcasting right now. She hears her name and thinks about her parents in their kitchen listening to the radio. She should have told them. She should have sent them a polite note letting them know her music would be on the radio. She is an only child, an only girl; she should not be this distant from her family. This will be the last performance of the series for the BBC. The last of the announcements are made, and the audience quiets down.

The music begins quietly, and Catherine is back on the beach with her baby. The notes repeat slightly louder this time. The listeners must pay attention. The music is a simple idea that grows more complex, adding layers as it continues. It's perfect. The orchestra, the drums, everything, is perfect. Catherine puts her self-criticism aside and just listens. The drums sound amazing. The first movement finishes, and the audience sits stunned. There is nervous throat clearing and shuffling. The second movement begins, and all fidgeting stops. The listeners are trapped in the music. The orchestra soars, and the drums roar in response. This is Anna's song, her baby.

Catherine is weeping. The tears are different now. She has found her faith, and it is music. There is one final lurch, and the orchestra stops. The drummers continue to play as they walk off the stage. The conductor, Randal, gives a signal, and everything stops. There is a moment of silence broken by a man shouting. The hall fills with applause. Liz leans over and whispers, "Good for you." She tells Catherine that the audience really likes it. She says that linguists would insist that the audience yell Brava instead of Bravo.



Randall, the conductor, comes back and points to each section of the orchestra. He looks down into the audience and beckons Catherine to the podium. Catherine stands.

Part 2 Analysis

Part 2 of *Grace Notes* goes back in time. It opens with a pregnant Catherine trying to get around in her advanced condition. The second part of the novel centers on Catherine's ability to create. The reader sees that the way Catherine creates music is mirrored by the way she views her unborn child. Neither is complete while they are still inside of her. Neither is real until they are out of her and in the world.

The second half of the novel shows how completely isolated Catherine is. She is living with Dave, but she rarely sees him, as he is either working or drunk. She has cut herself off from her parents and hasn't heard from her friend Liz in well over a year. When Catherine gives birth, she is alone. Dave doesn't come out to see her at any time while she is in the hospital. Catherine is so excited about her child that she calls Liz out of the blue just to be able to tell someone that she has given birth.

The initial excitement of having given birth wears off, and the depression starts to sink in. Catherine is unable to control thoughts that she might hurt the baby or that the baby will somehow die due to her negligence. She is afraid that she simply does not love the baby enough and is a bad parent because of it.

Part 2 shows how Catherine came to be the woman the reader meets in part 1. In part 1, Catherine is dealing with both a postpartum depression and the grief of her father's death. In part 2, Catherine has to deal with giving birth alone and breaking away from an abusive alcoholic boyfriend. The Catherine of part 2 slowly becomes triumphant in her accomplishments. She leaves Dave and begins to compose *Vernicle* for the BBC. Her composition is an immediate success, and she sees just how important Anna is for her life, music and creativity. Part 2 shows Catherine as unsure and unsteady but ready to move forward.



Characters

Catherine Anne McKenna

Catherine is an Irish composer who finds it difficult to talk about music. She currently lives in Glasgow. Catherine lives in the basement of her friend's home with her baby, Anna. The book begins with Catherine going to Ireland for her father's funeral.

Catherine is an only child and has a strained relationship with her parents. She attends the funeral, having not told her parents about her child. She hasn't spoken to her parents in more than a year.

Catherine is numb throughout most of the first part of the book. She is reeling from both her depression and her father's death. The first part of the book introduces Catherine's earliest memories of music and how they are directly related to her family. Her father explains music to her in biased terms. According to him, all modern music is not real music. He also tells her that the Orangemen play out of bigoted spite. He says that they play so hard their wrists bleed, and it's all because of their bias against Catholics. Catherine's Granny Boyd uses music as a means of getting through the day. She sings while sewing and teaches Catherine how to do rounds. Catherine's mother is the one who gives Catherine the tools to make music. Catherine's mother catches her going through the piano bench one day. She chastises Catherine, saying that she could hurt her hands if the bench cover swings shut. She mother arranges for Catherine to have piano lessons from that point on.

Each of the music relationships stays with Catherine throughout her life. When Catherine is commissioned to write a piece for the BBC's *Cutting Edge* series, she invites Orangemen to play the drums as part of the orchestra. She asks one of them if he has any scars on his wrists, and he tells her that a good drummer's wrists never touch the rim. He explains that the Catholics spread that rumor to make the Protestants look like fanatics. When Catherine is trying to get through labor or depression, she remembers the rounds her Granny Boyd taught her and gets lost in the repetition of them. Finally, whenever Catherine feels she needs something to pull her through, she works on her music the way her mother always encouraged her to do.

When Catherine is saying goodbye to her father, she has to deal with her grief and her guilt. She feels guilty because of her last conversation with her father. In that last conversation, they argue because Catherine does not come home for Christmas. While Catherine views religion as superstition, her parents view it as sacred. For Catherine not to be with family or attend the holy mass is a slap in the face for them. Catherine also has to live with the guilt of her father not knowing about his granddaughter.

Catherine also has to console her mother. Catherine feels a kinship with her mother that can only come from being a mother herself. When Catherine gives birth to Anna, she understands her mother and her mother's motivations. Catherine tells her mother about Anna in a moment of depression. Catherine then has to deal with the aftermath of her



announcement. Her mother does not react well. She does, however, accept what Catherine tells her and even offers to let them move in with her.

The second part of the book shows Catherine's life before her father died. She is pregnant and in a relationship with an alcoholic named Dave. After Anna is born, Dave gets worse and becomes abusive. Catherine puts up with the abuse until he tries to break her fingers so that she can no longer play piano. She makes up her mind to leave him after that. The reader sees that music is what saves Catherine time and again. She plays the organ to say goodbye to her father at his funeral. She works on writing a mass to deal with her postpartum depression. The fear of not being able to play gives her the strength to leave a bad relationship. For Catherine, music is more spiritual than any religion.

Mrs. McKenna

Mrs. McKenna is Catherine's mother. The reader never learns Mrs. McKenna's first name. She is only referred to as Mrs. McKenna or Catherine's mother. Catherine's mother is a traditional and old-fashioned Irish housewife. She takes care of her family and is devout in her religious beliefs. She wants Catherine to be respectful of family and religion. While Mrs. McKenna never spanked Catherine, there was always the threat as a form of discipline. She wants Catherine to be a proper Catholic girl who does not run around with boys or put on airs like a "shameless hussy." Mrs. McKenna's preferred method of punishment was the threat of a spanking or sending Catherine to confession.

Mrs. McKenna is the first person who sees how important music will be for Catherine. When Catherine is ten years old, Mrs. McKenna catches her going through the music inside of the piano bench. She chastises Catherine, saying that the bench lid could snap off her fingers. She also decides to find someone to give Catherine piano lessons. She asks Miss Bingham to give Catherine piano lessons.

Mrs. McKenna is grieving the loss of her husband when her daughter comes home. She has no idea how she will get on without the man she has known for forty years. She is also trying to bridge the distance between her and her daughter. When she learns that Catherine had a baby, she is heartbroken. Not being married and having a child is a betrayal of everything Mrs. McKenna believes in. Mrs. McKenna also does not want to lose her daughter and granddaughter. Mrs. McKenna offers an uneasy truce because she does not want to lose Catherine again. She offers to let Catherine and Anna come live with her and asks her daughter to stay in touch as they say goodbye.

Brendan McKenna

Brendan is Catherine's father. Brendan has a history of drinking too much. Brendan is a devout Catholic and has a falling out with his daughter over her lack of belief. He owns a pub in Ireland and is well liked by the town locals. He has a bias against Protestants, but he claims it's just a reaction to being hated. Brendan is very strict about what kinds of music Catherine is allowed to listen to. He considers pop music to be noise pollution.



Catherine has a hard time in school because she comes to share his belief. Her friends call her snobby for expressing such an opinion.

According to Mrs. McKenna, Brendan was heartbroken about the falling out between them and Catherine. Even though it was Brendan who told Catherine to never come home again, Mrs. McKenna says that he never meant it. He always loved Catherine, and he was too hurt to apologize. For Brendan, it is a child's place to apologize to the parent. Brendan's death is a source of both grief and guilt for Catherine. He was always so proud of Catherine. He framed every minor award she ever earned. Brendan was a proud man. He was proud of his beliefs, of his pub and of his family. Brendan died of a massive heart attack in the pub. His death is what brings Catherine back to her family and in a way back to herself.

Granny Boyd

Granny Boyd is a major character of Catherine's childhood. When her parents' fighting frightens Catherine, she runs to her Granny Boyd. Granny Boyd sews on a pedal-operated Singer sewing machine. She sings as she keeps time with the rhythm of the pedal. She tells Catherine that there is a reason it's called a Singer. Granny Boyd makes quilts that everyone in the family uses. She teaches Catherine about her family's history while showing her the quilts. She tells Catherine that it would be horrible to be deaf, but it is even worse to not be able to listen.

Catherine learns how to sing rounds as she and Granny Boyd work in the kitchen. Catherine later learns that these rounds are called catches. Later, she works with orchestral variations to Purcell's catches and remembers the "kitchen rounds," as Granny Boyd used to call them. Granny Boyd would chastise Catherine any time she showed unladylike behavior. She was always quick to soothe Catherine's hurt feelings after doing so. Granny Boyd provides a stable starting off point for Catherine.

Miss Bingham

Miss Bingham is Catherine's first music teacher. Every Wednesday, starting when Catherine is ten, Miss Bingham gives Catherine a piano lesson. Miss Bingham is an eccentric presence in Catherine's life. Catherine visits her while in Ireland for her father's funeral. Catherine remembers how Miss Bingham would ride her bicycle up to the pub and dismount before the bicycle even stopped. Miss Bingham claims it keeps her joints loose to ride the bicycle. Miss Bingham teaches Catherine how to use the things that Catherine already knows by instinct. Miss Bingham says that everything is already in Catherine's head, and all Miss Bingham has to do is draw it out.

Miss Bingham is described as angular and awkward looking. She is very old when Catherine visits her and wears large black slippers that are misshapen by the woman's bunions. She moves in a flat-footed motion, sliding her feet across the floor in a shuffle. Her arthritis has finally caught up with her, and she is unable to ride the bicycle anymore. She is a chain smoker and has been diagnosed with cancer.



When Catherine was still her student, Miss Bingham would take her to concerts in Belfast. They would always sit in the cheap seats in order to see the conductor's face as he directed the orchestra. Miss Bingham would talk to Catherine about the performances on the drive back. Catherine, feeling safe and warm in the back seat, would eventually fall asleep listening to Miss Bingham's voice.

Miss Bingham is proud of Catherine's accomplishments. She considers Catherine's latest piece, *Vernicle*, to be very difficult and powerful. She says it is the type of music that demands attention; you can't listen to it while doing the dishes. Miss Bingham explains that the week she listened to *Vernicle* was the same week that she received her diagnosis. She says that the music touched her and gave her hope.

Huang Xiao Gang

Huang Xiao Gang is a Chinese composer Catherine meets at a composition workshop during her time at university. Huang Xiao Gang is well over six feet and has a wiry build. He is in his fifties but still looks boyish. His black hair is graying and cut very short. He was born in China. It wasn't until he reached adulthood that he heard Western music for the first time. Before then, he had only heard ceremonial music for weddings and funerals.

Huang Xiao Gang teaches Catherine about pre-hearing and inner hearing. He also discusses things like rhythm and pitch, which he pronounces "peach." He asks the students whether they compose music or if music composes them. He wants them to listen for the notes between the notes, or grace notes. When he discusses pre-hearing, he asks the students to think about the shape of the sounds that they are trying to create. Each sound should be complete with a head, body and tail. Silence can be a part of sound; indeed, silence can be its own grace note. Huang goes on to explore the tenets of Taoist philosophy and how the balancing of opposites is an important part of creating music.

Anatoli Melnichuck

If Catherine finds it difficult to discuss music, she finds it even more difficult to discuss her mentor, Melnichuck. There is a spare and austere quality to Melnichuck's music. His music is also surprisingly spiritual. Anatoli is from the Ukraine, a country that has done away with religion. It is surprising that such spirituality can come from an atheist soul.

Melnichuck is in poor health. He does not speak English, so his wife must translate their conversations. Melnichuck is a man in his sixties who smokes all the time and has a dark ragged voice. His health is bad because he eats too much salt in his diet, mainly because salt is cheap. Melnichuck only ever wants to hear a work in progress when he critiques music. If he hears something that is under construction, the artist won't mind his criticism, but if he hears something that is finished and criticizes it, the artist is unhappy.



Melnichuck shares the source of his spiritual inspiration by taking Catherine and Olga to the Refectory Church in Kiev. There, they listen to the church's magnificent choir and later, hear the bells. Melnichuck sees music as the grace of God. It is a way of praying and receiving God's grace even in a place where religion is not allowed.

Olga Melnichuck

Olga is Melnichuck's wife and translator. She is also in her sixties and has a vibrancy that Catherine finds unexpected. She nurses her sick husband and translates his thoughts on music to words that Catherine can understand. Olga is a motherly woman with gray hair pulled back in a bun. Catherine wishes Olga were her mother. She feels safe with Olga and her habit of crossing herself three times.

Sister Immaculata

Sister Immaculata is Catherine's high school biology and chemistry teacher. She has a round solemn face and two protruding front teeth. Her face flicks from smile to solemn and back again in an instant. Sister Immaculata teaches Catherine about the Golden Mean. According to Sister Immaculata, God's favorite ratio is 1 to 1.62, and almost all things correspond to this ratio. To illustrate her point, she makes her students measure the spirals of chrysanthemums, the chambers of shells, and the points where the twigs emerge from branches. She amazes her class by showing them that the calculations on all of these things are always the same 1 to 1.62 ratios. She further illustrates the point by having the students measure the horizon on famous paintings and the climaxes in a Mozart piano sonata. According to Sister Immaculata, a work of art is a prayer, and when artists create, they instinctively offer things constructed in God's favorite ratio.

Dave Dewhurst

Dave is Catherine's boyfriend and Anna's father. He is an Englishman who dives for scallops during the season and signs on for temporary work during the off-season. Dave is an alcoholic. When Catherine first meets him, he is fun and witty. She moves in with him and gets pregnant. At first, Catherine is sure that things will be all right. Dave's drinking gets out of hand, though, and he becomes abusive. The worst part about the abuse is that he doesn't remember it the next day. His drinking gets so bad that Catherine only sees him when he is either waking up with a hangover or coming home stinking drunk. After he tries to break Catherine's fingers so that she can't play piano anymore, Dave is sent to treatment. Catherine uses his absence to escape and move to Glasgow.



Objects/Places

Grace Notes

Grace notes are the notes between the main notes of a musical piece. They are usually unintentional on the part of the artist. A grace note can be a pause, a breath or a random sound made from the strings of an instrument.

The Pub

The pub provides income and a home for Catherine's family. The family lives above the pub, and her father earns a living running the pub on the ground floor. Catherine grew up in the family's home above the pub. The building started out as a bank in the 1900s. The safe is in the center of the building. Catherine's father was always proud of the safe and would remark that a man could stand tall and still walk inside of it.

Catherine's Childhood Bedroom

Catherine's bedroom is where her father framed and hung all of her early music awards. She spent much of her childhood there. After her father dies, his body is laid out there for viewing before the wake and the funeral.

The Beach

Catherine takes Anna to the beach as a means of avoiding Dave. While there, she comes to the realization that she must leave him or he will kill her. It is also the place where her inspiration for *Vernicle* comes. She listens to the rhythm of the waves and Anna's expressions of happiness and immediately begins to compose her latest work in her mind.

Rotten Row

Rotten Row is the nickname of the hospital in which Catherine gives birth to Anna. Catherine meets several nurses and nuns who pamper her and teach her how to take care of her newborn.

The Silver Saltshaker

Catherine's parents received the saltshaker as part of a wedding set. Brendan is drunk during one Christmas dinner and dents it in the doorway. Her mother keeps the shaker, and when Catherine sees it, she is instantly reminded of her father and that Christmas.



The Graveyard

The graveyard is where Catherine's father is buried. When Catherine and her mother go to visit the grave, Catherine notices the grave of a childhood classmate. She learns that he died in military service. It reminds Catherine of how far from home she is.

The Ratio of 1 to 1.62

According to Sister Immaculata, 1 to 1.62 is God's favorite ratio. It can be found in most aspects of nature, art and music.

The Orangemen's Drums

The drums have a huge circumference and are about two to three feet deep. They are made from goatskin and require long rods or Malucca canes to play them. Catherine's father used to tell her that the drummers would play until their wrists bled out of sheer bigotry against the Catholics. Catherine hires some Orangemen for her composition and learns that no true drummer would ever let his wrist touch the rim of the drums. Her use of the Orangemen brings her full circle with her childhood.

The Former Church of Scotland

The former church has been turned into a music hall. It is where Catherine's symphony, *Vernicle*, is being broadcast live by the BBC.

Themes

Depression

Catherine is fighting her way through depression throughout the novel. She does not know how long she has been depressed. She only knows that things got worse after she had Anna. Her doctor diagnoses her with postpartum depression and she takes medication for it. Her postpartum depression manifests as fear. She is afraid that she will hurt her child or that she does not love her child enough. She has to force herself to control her thoughts when the depression takes hold of her.

Catherine is also suffering depression in the form of grief. She is grieving the death of her father. She is also grieving the loss of her familial relationship. When she decides not to visit for Christmas in order to meet the Melnichucks, her father tells her never to come home again. Catherine takes him at his word. She is never able to tell her father that he has a granddaughter, and she is never able to tell him that she loves him before he dies. She tries to make amends. She tells her mother about her depression, and then she tells her mother about her baby. Her mother does not react well and is in a form of shock as Catherine leaves. Her mother does, however, offer to let Catherine and Anna live with her.

In the end, Catherine never overcomes her depression. She has simply learned methods of coping with it. She focuses on the joy of having Anna in her life and the music she can make. She is triumphant after the performance of her musical composition, and for a time, the depression is pushed away.

Music

Music is a central theme of this work. Catherine's childhood is full of different types of music. From the drums of the Orangemen, to Granny Boyd's "kitchen rounds," to her first real music lessons, Catherine is surrounded by music. Her father teaches her about the music he likes and won't allow pop music in the house. Catherine is always counting rhythms and hearing sounds as though instruments were playing them.

The musical theory of grace notes is evident throughout the book. Catherine's thought processes run on a repeating rhythm of depression and happiness. In between these thoughts, there are small or major memories that act as grace notes to her internal symphony. An example would be when she gives birth to Anna. The process of labor is punctuated by Catherine's memories of childhood, music and breathing. These small things are not a part of the labor, but they are a product of the process of labor.



Birth and the Creative Process

Throughout the novel, Catherine thinks of the process of creating music. She uses the tools of inner hearing and pre-hearing to compose music. The music stays inside her until it is complete. It is a gestation period for her composition to grow inside her. Once she can hear it exactly the way it should sound, she can write it down.

Catherine compares this process to giving birth. While Catherine is pregnant with Anna, Anna is simply a thought, an incomplete sound. As Anna grows inside Catherine, she becomes more and more complete. Even as Catherine goes into labor, she does not consider Anna real. It is not until Catherine has given birth that she considers Anna a real and complete creation.

Anna is also an inspiration for Catherine. As Catherine watches her play on the beach against the background of the rhythmic ocean waves, she hears the first strains of a symphony. The more she focuses on Anna, her own creation, the more the music grows inside her. The birth of her daughter inspires the birth of her musical composition, *Vernicle*.



Style

Point of View

Even though an omniscient narrator tells the story, it is told completely from Catherine's point of view. Because the novel deals with Catherine's depression and grief, the reader is privy to all of her thoughts. Her thoughts flow rhythmically from past to present with small bursts of insight in between. Catherine views the world as being full of music. She finds sounds and rhythms in everyday things and creates music from combining these things with the lessons of her childhood.

Catherine infuses every plot point with her history. Her arrival in Ireland is filtered through her remembrances of childhood and her own child. While she is in labor, she remembers the different things her various music teachers taught her over the years. The birth of Anna brings back memories of her parents and her current relationship with them. As she waits for the movers to arrive so that she can leave Dave, she remembers the last time she saw her mentor Melnichuck. Catherine's point of view is that of a musician. Everything starts in her head. She sees and hears everything completely and analyzes before she can put it outside of herself and allow it to be real.

Catherine also applies a soundtrack to every instance. When she gives birth to Anna, she hears a choir singing hallelujah. As she walks along the beach, she hears the rhythm of her feet slapping against the wet sand, and later, as the waves crash on the shore, she hears the first strings of her symphony for Anna.

Setting

The novel has several different settings. Catherine attends her father's funeral in Ireland. While there, she visits with Miss Bingham and her childhood friend Geraldine Scully at their respective homes. She also thinks about her time in Kiev with the Melnichucks and her time away at school in England. All the while, Catherine lives with Dave in Scotland and teaches there before she gets pregnant. During her labor, she remembers her time in Kiev and her childhood in Ireland. After she gives birth, she moves in with her friend Liz in Glasgow. While living in Glasgow, she begins to compose *Vernicle*, her symphony for the BBC's *Cutting Edge* series. The entire course of the novel takes place over about two years, but the book ranges from Catherine's childhood through her adulthood.

The most important setting of the novel is Catherine's mind. Everything takes place in her head before it happens outside of her body. As a consummate musician, Catherine must hear and see it all completely in her head before it can be allowed out in the word. Each time there is an outside action, Catherine has an internal memory or reaction, and the reader is privy to it. Having so much of the novel's action take place in Catherine's



mind and memory allows the reader to become a part of Catherine's world as well as her neurosis.

Language and Meaning

The novel *Grace Notes* is told in terms of music; it is about the creation of music. It is also about the redemption that can come from music. The language of the novel has its own rhythm, as though MacLaverty were writing a musical composition rather than a novel. The rhythm of the novel is most apparent when the reader sees inside Catherine's thoughts and memories. The memories begin as complete sentences, and then sentence fragments break the thoughts. The fragments, rather than breaking the flow of the thoughts, unexpectedly add to the rhythm.

The language of the novel is also the language of panic and neurosis. Catherine is in a depressed mental state. Much of the content of the novel actually takes place inside Catherine's mind and memory. The reader witnesses an actively neurotic mind trying to control itself. The reader sees someone who compulsively thinks of the worst things that could happen trying to refocus those thoughts on memories. Since Catherine cannot make herself happy, the most she can do is remember times when she was not so sad. Controlling her thoughts gives Catherine a way to exert control over her depression and her life. The language she uses to control her thoughts is a stream of conscious method of allowing her mind to move from the current event to a past memory. In this way, Catherine can put off the thoughts of depression rather than letting them take over and control her.

Structure

The book is structured like a symphony in two parts. The first part deals with death, and the second part deals with birth. Both parts are almost exactly the same length. Part two is one page longer, but that last page is not numbered. The reader should see the last page as the applause for the symphony that has been performed.

The structure of the book mimics Huang Xiao Gang's ideas of what a musical composition must contain. It is balanced, with death on one side and birth on the other. Gang's theory that a composer hears the piece in his her head first and then writes it down also plays out in the structure of the novel. Catherine hears everything in her head and must direct her thought process as a means of exerting control over her mind. This leads to shifts in the narrative between past and present.

The novel also uses elements of a mass. One gets the sense that Catherine is writing her life's mass, and part one is her Credo while part 2 has yet to be named. In a Catholic mass, Credo literally means, "I believe." It is used primarily for baptisms and is generally the longest text of the mass.



Quotes

"They're supposed to be able to play different rhythms, different tunes - *Lilliburlero* and what have you - but it all sounds the same to me. A bloody dunderin. On the Twelfth they thump so hard and so long they bleed their wrists. Against the rim. Sheer bloody bigotry." Part 1, pg. 8

"She used to eat the tar of the roads in the summer. Everyone said there was a wee want in her. Chalk in the classroom - touched to the tongue, grasped - it was so dry. Chewed, it made her feel better." Part 1, pg. 30

"Do you compose music or does the music compose you?" Part 1, pg. 32

"One pronunciation threw her. Peach. She thought he was referring to the fruit but he said it several times and she realized by the context what it was. For him peach and pitch were homophones." Part 1, pg. 33

"A composer does not grub around changing this note and trying that note instead. A composer hears the thing in his or her head and writes it down." Part 1, pg. 35

"I wish I had the luxury of not knowing the time. A woman with a family *always* knows the time." Part 1, pg. 41

"She found it very difficult to talk about music. When she said things out loud it sounded so awful. So phoney." Part 1, pg. 62

"She allowed her musical self to be in charge, so there would be no tears." Part 1, pg. 72

"Being organist meant that she was spared the decision of whether or not to take communion to please her mother." Part 1, pg. 75

"People must be allowed to make up their own minds. There should be no interference." Part 1, pg. 90

"I feel bad no matter what happens. Practically all the time. I've got ten tons of bad stuff and I can hang it on anything that comes along." Part 1, pg. 93

"Brendan, we have a very special girl here. She is learning faster than Miss Bingham can teach her. Miss Bingham says it's all inside her head and all she has to do is draw it out." Part 1, pg. 99

"A vernicle is a pilgrim's medal. Chaucer's Pardoner had one sewn on to his hat to show where he'd been." Part 1, pg. 104

"A difficult word for difficult music. It's not the kind of thing I'd listen to doing the dishes." Part 1, pg. 104



"No. I owe it to the composer to listen to the music with the same intensity as it was composed." Part 1, pg. 109

"I haven't thought all this out yet but you must always remember that there's a home for you here. And your baby. And your man if it comes to that. Especially now. That place is too big for the likes of me - by myself." Part 1, pg. 117

"I can see music as the grace of God. Through all the communist times they did not allow religion. For us music was a way of praying, music was a way of receiving God's grace." Part 1, pg. 125

"Then she knows with certainty what it is. The Credo. Her Credo. The linchpin of the mass she is writing. Credo in unum... Voices barking one sound at a time - single syllables. Nonsense syllables." Part 1, pg. 132

"There was something positive about him going to work. She hated him lying in bed, the hangover, the aimlessness of the winter weeks when she was teaching at school. When he had to sign on, when there was nothing to do." Part 2, pg. 143

"My granddaughter. Grand by name and grand by nature. Did I ever tell you - on the day you were born I said - SHE is mine. She's my hen of gold. I thought you'd be the first of many - but it wasn't to be. The Lord works in mysterious ways." Part 2, pg. 146-147

"What she was about to produce had a head, a body and a tail. If it had a tail then it would be a boy. But she wanted a girl." Part 2, pg. 157

"The patron saint of childbirth was St. Gerard Majella - how like the Catholic Church to appoint a man to the role - but she swore she would believe in him if only all this would stop." Part 2, pg. 162

"There was the baby she had carried inside her head and there was the baby she had carried in her body. They were not the same. The one in front of her was better by far." Part 2, pg. 171-172

"May we all be happy - and may our enemies know it." Part 2, pg. 225

"She knew he intended to come back to her, having dried out, saying he had reformed, but she would not be here to meet him. The bird would have flown. Her life had changed - would change." Part 2, pg. 233

"Each important shrine in Europe produced its own badge - a vernicle. The word appealed to her - it had a good ring to it." Part 2, pg. 245

"The skills gained in past work were of little use in solving the problems of the present. She had to begin to learn all over again for the new thing she was setting out to make." Part 2, pg. 248



"Nonsense - a good drummer's wrists never touch the rim... That's Roman Catholic propaganda - to make us look like fanatics." Part 2, pg. 259

"Catherine Anne's vision. A joy that celebrates being human. A joy that celebrates its own reflection, its own ability to make joy. To reproduce." Part 2, pg. 276



Topics for Discussion

How do Huang Xiao Gang's Taoist beliefs influence the overall structure of the novel?

Discuss the use of homophones both symbolically and structurally in the novel.

Compare and contrast the process of giving birth with the process of composing music in the novel.

What is the significance of Dave trying to break Catherine's fingers during his last attack on her?

Catherine is estranged from her parents due in part to a disagreement about religion. How do the aspects of religion and spirituality play out through the novel?

Could Anna be considered a major character in this novel? Why or why not?

A vernicle is a badge that a pilgrim would wear to show where he has been. What is the significance of using the name as the title of Catherine's symphony?

Describe how the use of the Orangemen in the final symphony brings Catherine's story full circle.