

Growing Up Study Guide

Growing Up by Russell Baker

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Plot Summary

Russell Baker's memoir describes his childhood in rural Virginia, his youth growing up in the Great Depression, and his young adulthood in Baltimore with his mother. Russell's reminiscences are centered on his relationship with his mother, a single parent through much of his youth, who eventually grows senile and is unable to tell him about her own life growing up.

Lucy is the daughter of a gente Virginia lawyer who dies unexpectedly, leaving Lucy to drop out of college and take teaching jobs in rural areas. She meets Benny Baker, a son of a large local family, and gets pregnant. The two marry over objections by Benny's matriarchal mother Ida Rebecca. They have three children, Russell, Doris, and little Audrey, and Lucy fails to reform Benny from drinking. Benny is diabetic, and he dies an early death, leaving Lucy with three children. One of Benny's brothers adopts Audrey, and Lucy moves in with her brother Allen. The Great Depression begins, and Lucy can't get a job.

Allen takes in Lucy, Russell, and Doris, as well as his brother Charlie. His fast-talking, money-grubbing brother Hal soon joins them, and he gets Lucy to give him \$75 of her hard-earned money to start a lumber business that never happens. Lucy takes what little she has left to move out to Baltimore. In Baltimore, Russell takes a paper route and learns to get along in the big city. He's embroiled in fights, but he's good at school. Meanwhile, his mother tries to make a living, selling magazine subscriptions for commission. At one point, they have to get government handouts to eat.

Eventually, Lucy meets and marries Herb Orrison, who works on the railroad and makes enough money to support her family. Russell hates his stepfather, who has replaced him as the man of the house. Lucy has another daughter, and the family moves to a house. Finally, Lucy has had the home of her own that she's dreamed about. Russell is about to graduate high school, but he can't afford college and doesn't know what he'll do for a job. A friend tells him about scholarships offered by Johns Hopkins University, and Russell gets accepted, with a scholarship to pay his tuition.

During World War II, Russell drops out of college to become a pilot in the Navy, but just as he's finishing his training, the war ends. Russell comes back and eventually finishes college and goes to work for the Baltimore Sun. Meanwhile, he meets Mimi, a modern girl. His mother disapproves, and Russell doesn't think she's the right kind of girl to marry. Still, he can't live without her, and after four years they marry. Years pass; his mother grows older. Herb dies. Russell has children and grandchildren. In the end, his mother is confined to a nursing home, where in her senility, she relives the days of her past in a world of her own.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

Russell Baker's memoir describes his childhood in rural Virginia, his youth growing up in the Great Depression, and his young adulthood in Baltimore with his mother. Russell's reminiscences are centered on his relationship with his mother, a single parent through much of his youth, who eventually grows senile and unable to tell him about her own life growing up.

In chapter one, Russell Baker describes his eighty-year-old mother, who is in a hospital after the last bad fall she will experience. His mother is senile, and she lives in her memories. She sometimes thinks Russell is still a little boy, sometimes that she is a still little girl. One morning, she phones Russell to ask if he's going to her funeral that day. Russell knows his mother as a woman who always speaks her mind, saying it's too bad if they don't like it. She is determined to conquer the world, whether it's killing a chicken or making the beds. She is always running around the house.

At first, when Russell's mother becomes senile, he tries to argue her into reality. Then, he realizes that as she's grown old, she's grown unhappy and lonely. He recalls writing a letter after one of his visits, advising that she look on the bright side, not recognizing the human frailty of his parent. When her mind wanders freely through the past, she regains her happiness in the world of her memories. Russell thinks about parents and children as he sits at her bedside. He recalls how he scolds his own children about how it was "in my day". Now that it's too late to talk with his mother, he wishes that he knew more about the past, and he thinks that someday his own children will wish the same thing.

In chapter two, Russell is eight, and his mother thinks he is lazy, with no "gumption", unlike his six-year-old sister Doris, who is always helping around the house. Since girls can't become anything but a nurse or teacher, Russell's mother decides he must make something of himself, despite his lack of gumption. When an uncle asks Russell if he wants to be president, Russell instead says he wants to be a garbage man. His mother shows her disapproval by calling him "Russell" instead of "Buddy". Soon, Russell's mother confers with a representative of the Curtis Publishing Company, publishers of the Saturday Evening Post, Ladies Home Journal, and Country Gentlemen.

After an interview where Russell's honesty, work ethic, and ability is questioned in front of his encouraging mother, Russell gets a job selling the Saturday Evening Post in his hometown of Belleville, New Jersey, in 1932. Russell's father died two years ago, and he, his mother, and his sister live with Uncle Allen, a married salesman for a soft-drink bottler earning \$30 a week. On his first day, Russell simply stands on a street corner and sells nothing. Uncle Allen decides to become a subscriber, and his mother instructs her reluctant son in salesmanship, the beginning of a life-long struggle to get him to have something better than his father's low-paying manual labor job. Russell continues

to be a poor salesman. His sister is much more talented, helping him get rid of some of his unsold magazines. Eventually, his mother realizes Buddy will never succeed in a competitive business. When, at eleven years old, he brings home a good composition he wrote in school, his mother says that maybe he could be a writer. Buddy, who loves stories, latches on to this idea.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Russell's mother, Lucy, is a feminist, having argued for women's right to vote in a high school debate in 1913. She also wants to be a lady and believes that men are brutes who need a good woman's guidance. Her father, Papa, is her ideal of manhood, though the Tidewater, Virginia lawyer invests unwisely in timber and believes that insurance is a sin, gambling against God. He leaves his wife and children with nothing when he dies of a heart attack at fifty-three. Lucy has to drop out of college and take teaching jobs among the poor communities to the north.

In Loudon County, a bootleg whiskey still operates near the schoolhouse, and Lucy first sees her future husband Benny when his car breaks down in front of the school. He politely hides his whiskey when he sees the teacher. Lucy is staying with local successful farmer Ep Ahalt, and she meets Benny when he comes to visit one of Ep's sons. Though he is rough and uncouth compared to her father, the two begin seeing each other, and soon Lucy is pregnant. Over his mother's objections, Benny marries Lucy, and Russell is born in Morrisonville, Virginia.

Most residents of the town are descendants of the Baker family. Russell's great-grandfather Daniel Baker was a gunsmith, and his son George was a blacksmith and married Ida Rebecca Brown. They had twelve sons and a daughter, and the eleventh son, Benjamin, was Russell's father. George died at fifty-two of a stroke, and Ida was puzzled by his last words, which she heard as "into midget and out of midget". Lucy was the only daughter-in-law who dared challenge the matriarch Ida. Ida was powerful and anti-intellectual, next to the slight schoolteacher Lucy.

After marrying, Benny and Lucy don't have enough money to move away from Ida. They move in with Benny's oldest brother. Russell is born August 14, 1925. His earliest memory is of waking up to a cow looking in his crib. The family moves to a house across the street from Ida, a doting grandmother. One day, Lucy catches Ida giving Russell bread and jam. The bread becomes a contest of will, with Russell finally forced to eat it against his mother's orders. Lucy wants her son to stay on his side of the street but knows it's impossible. Russell recalls being woken up and brought to Ida's to see a strangely decorated tree: his first Christmas. He gets a toy steam shovel.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Benny is discharged from the Army after five days in 1918, due to illness that in reality is diabetes. In 1921, insulin is discovered, but Benny never uses it. Early death is common, a part of everyday life, and most ills are treated with folk medicine and even witchcraft. Benny doesn't give in to illness. His daughter Doris is born in 1927, and Audrey is born in January 1930. Benny is a good family man, though his wife fails to stop his drinking even when the alcohol makes him horribly ill.

One day, Benny comes home late, drunk, with toy dishes for Doris. Lucy harangues him, throwing the waste-of-money present away, leaving Benny sick and defeated. Another time, Russell is paralyzed when faced with his first book, and his father gently leads him through. Russell enjoys the rural life of Morrisonville, but it is hard toil for women keeping up the homes. In the evenings, men come in from the field, and everyone gathers on the porch for conversation filled with standard platitudes.

Uncle Harry, a widower engaged in a scandalous affair with a single mother, is usually the first to leave. Ida's neighbor Annie Grigsby, a former slave, doesn't attend the porch gatherings. Russell once sees Annie slaughtering a turtle for soup, and giggles to his mother that black people eat turtles. His mother believes in equality, but no one else in the town does. Russell's Uncle Etch lives in the nearby town, Lovettsville, and owns a horse-drawn hearse. Etch's son Leslie works with his maternal grandfather as an undertaker, and their supplier sends them a heavy, expensive, unsellable glass coffin. Then, Sam Reaver the bootlegger dies, and his wife buys the glass coffin with the mason-jar-like rubber seal, representative of his profession.

The next big town is Brunswick, with its impressive railroad. Brunswick opens Russell's eyes to the vastness of the world. Train engineer Uncle Harvey, blacksmith Uncle Tom (wealthy owner of an indoor bathroom and a car), and barber (and reputed ladies' man) Uncle Lewis live there. Once, after a glorious haircut by Lewis, Russell and his father go to visit Tom. Tom's wife Goldie greets them, and Russell insists he must visit the luxurious indoor bathroom, the height of lavish wealth and the essence of Brunswick.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

One November, Russell's family heads to Uncle Miller's in Taylorstown for a hog-butchering celebration. Miller likes to drink and bargain for antique furniture, and his wife Edmonia keeps him in check. Lucy is happy to be going. Ida has told Russell that birds coming into the house are omens of death, and Russell witnessed Ida claiming to see the ghost of her dead son Russell. Lucy objects to Ida's superstitious influence.

The family arrives at Miller's, and Benny has some alcohol and is sick after dinner. The festivities are off. A doctor comes and takes Benny to the hospital. While Russell's mother is at the hospital and his grandmother cares for his sister, he is on his own. His cousins Kenneth and Ruth Lee come to tell him his father is dead. Russell doesn't believe it and runs home crying, but it's true. His father's diabetes has killed him.

Russell's mother is still away, and he is sent to Bessie Scott's house, where he cries himself out and acquires the conviction that God is indifferent to man. Meanwhile, the women of Morrisville cook and clean in response to death. The men arrive in dark suits and stand around uncomfortably. After most of the people have gone and his mother has returned, Russell goes to see his father's body and is impressed by his motionlessness.

After Benny's funeral, Lucy decides to leave Morrisville and stay with her brother Allen. Ida wants to take all the children. Finally, faced with poverty and no way to earn a living, Lucy is convinced to give ten-month-old Audrey to childless Tom and Goldie, a decision she later regrets.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Salesman Uncle Allen has worked himself up from job to better job from fourteen. In 1931, with bad economic times beginning, he is still optimistic and welcomes his sister's family, chastising her for giving up Audrey. Depression firings open up opportunities, and Allen ups his income \$5 a week with a new job. Russell loves his boisterous Aunt Pat, a city girl who instills a love of newspapers in Russell. Once, a newsboy tantalizes her to buy a paper, saying a comic strip character shot his horse. She laughs when she finds she's been tricked.

Newark is an adjustment. Five-year-old Russell is lured by a local girl who takes off both her pants and his, and afterwards he is not allowed out alone, except in the hateful backyard. He hates the cod liver oil his mother gives him, and comes down with whooping cough despite it. Soon, the Newark health department decides Russell's posture must be corrected, and he starts hateful exercises at the gymnasium. After his mother sees Russell's poor performance, she buys him a baseball glove and says he should play baseball instead.

Meanwhile, Lucy finds no jobs in the deepening depression. She starts thinking of remarrying, and asks Russell if Oluf, a baker who sometimes visits, would make a good father. Russell is scared at the idea and plagued with fears of losing his mother. Then, Oluf learns he is losing his job. He writes Lucy letters, expressing his love and mentioning possible job opportunities. He gets a job selling new spices but has to quit, and tries to sell houses but finds no market. He is away on the road for months, finding little and undesirable work, while his letters show a growing passion. Meanwhile, Pat has a daughter, Kathleen.

In December, Lucy sends him a Christmas present, which he chastises her for in the bad economy, still promising to come to her as soon as possible. Finally in February 1933, he hears good news of a job at Rice's Bakery in Baltimore, but as Roosevelt takes office, the job evaporates like the rest. By April, he is \$1,000 in debt. The city takes everything he owns for back taxes, and in despair, he asks Lucy not to write anymore. He tries to leave for his native Denmark but can't raise money. Lucy continues to write a few letters, but Oluf has given up on everything.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter seven begins in 1932, when Allen and Lucy's families move to suburban Belleville, which Russell likes. Aunt Pat hates the landlady and is horrified when she puts a poster for Hoover on her door. Pat raves to Russell about how Hoover is destroying people's lives. Uncle Allen barely stops her from pulling down the poster, convincing her to put up a Roosevelt poster instead. Russell goes with Pat to walk to the far-off campaign office. He is caught up in the excitement and becomes a Roosevelt Democrat, while too young to truly understand.

Russell, not thinking of himself as poor, enjoys Belleville and does well in school. He is unaware of the growing love between his mother and Oluf, and the tragedy of their breakup. However, with hopes of marriage dashed, Lucy begins grooming Russell to make something of himself and become the provider. She buys him a suit and begins taking him to church. Meanwhile, Dorris learns dancing and housekeeping. At this time, Russell goes to work selling the Saturday Evening Post, and his mother puts a dime of his earnings in saving and takes a nickel for the household, for a net profit of ten or twenty cents.

When Russell misbehaves, Lucy thrashes him with a belt. He refuses to cry; in fact, he never cries. Lucy is the one who collapses in tears, causing Russell to run to her and beg forgiveness. After two and a half years, Lucy finally finds employment for \$10 a week, sewing. She earns up to \$11 by beating her quota for the week. Her money is divided between helping with household expenses and saving up for a place of their own. Allen and Pat have a second daughter, and are getting restless to have their own home again. The Depression is still taking its toll, though. Uncle Charlie comes to live with them, and soon Uncle Hal will arrive.

In chapter eight, the family is living in a two-story house that even has a cellar and a pool table when Uncle Hal arrives with three walnut boards he says are worth a fortune. Pat exclaims her typical "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" and makes coffee. Hal has followed in Papa's walnut veneer trade, and says he's on the way to a business deal in New York. Pat invites him to stay, and he accepts. The family calls Hal "Colonel", and he's full of big talk about big deals. Allen seems quietly skeptical and ignores Hal's ongoing advice that Allen's favorite foods will give him ulcers.

Hal's business deal never happens, and his visit becomes a permanent living arrangement, boards and all. Promises of financial salvation dwindle, but Hal begins plotting to get Uncle Charlie, whom he dislikes, to move out. Charlie is scrawny, lazy, and brilliant, and he never leaves the house. Russell likes him. Charlie is an ex-newspaperman who worked for the Brooklyn Eagle, and Allen and Lucy tell Russell that Charlie decided to retire from the world after being repeatedly mistaken for someone



named Moe Simon. Now, Charlie sleeps, reads history and politics, smokes, and drinks coffee. Charlie is a Republican who tells Russell that socialism is evil.

Hal is Charlie's opposite, a talker instead of a thinker, who thinks little of Hal's big plans. Through Charlie, Russell begins to realize that Hal's stories don't ring true. One day, Russell comes home to find Hal yelling at his brother and threatening to beat him. Charlie, refusing to rise and fight, asks Russell what he wants. Hal drops his fists when he realizes Russell is there. Hal's long-term plan is to ship Charlie to Lucy's favorite brother Willie in San Francisco, who works for the state of California. Willie, however, who is already helping Lucy with money each month, gently declines Hal's requests to take in Charlie. Hal begins hatching a plan to move Charlie, Lucy, Doris, and Russell south to Baltimore. He sets out to borrow \$150 of Lucy's savings to start a lumber company with a branch office in Baltimore.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Often, Russell awakes in the night to hear his relatives down in the kitchen talking and drinking coffee. The most fantastical story is Papa's trip to England to find the family's lost fortune. The family is supposedly descended from a rich bishop, but the family never collected the fortune, which "reverted to the Crown" and was lost. After Doris expresses disbelief in the fortune, Russell stops believing in it, too. The family talks about everything, including Uncle Edwin, managing editor of the New York Times, who is beyond the scope of his less successful family. Everyone reads his weekly column.

Lucy holds Edwin up as a model for Russell, who doubts his ability. After he struggles with selling papers, his mother takes a chance on banjo lessons for him. Russell fails miserably, and becomes even more determined to be a writer. His mother is insistent on constantly improving his work, to the point that an essay on wheat ends up with almost none of Russell's own ideas. The final result gets published in the paper, his first publication.

Local Irish bully and loner Walter often beats up Russell. One day, in the midst of a beating, three of Russell's friends, Frankie, Nino, and Jerry, pull Walter off him, but only so that Russell can take off his skates and prepare to fight. Russell hates to fight and cause pain, but he feels he must. Unexpectedly, Walter objects to the three Italian kids watching and acts scared. Russell takes the upper hand, and Walter gives up and never bothers Russell again.

Russell's family is biased against the low-class Italians, which angers Russell. He introduces his friends to his mother, winning her over. Frankie is a charmer, even making a date to kiss the prettiest, smartest girl in school. Russell knows little about sex. He and his mother are both relieved when Pat's brother Jack offers to explain the facts of life. Russell is even more relieved when Jack doesn't actually tell him anything, but tells Lucy that he has.

Meanwhile, Lucy is getting interested in moving to Baltimore, where her sister-in-law, known to Russell as "Aunt Sister" lives. Hal's plan is for her to move to Baltimore with Charlie and take a temporary job while he starts his lumber business. She gives him \$75 and awaits having enough money to move. Hal goes off to start the company. After a month, he asks for more money. The next January, Lucy decides to move, despite having nothing from Hal but \$10.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

In Baltimore, the family lives near enough to Aunt Sister to walk over to visit. Aunt Sister's husband Harold Sharp is a famous liar and ex-Marine, who tells Russell he was shot between the eyes in World War I. Russell loves listening to Harold's wild stories. Harold works at a cemetery, and in Baltimore, Russell has become fascinated with death. The landlord at their apartment holds bodies for an undertaker in the parlor Russell must pass through to get home. One day, one of these bodies inspires Harold to tell stories about being buried alive. To Russell's dismay, Harold hates Russell's hero Roosevelt, claiming Roosevelt is using the presidency to get rich, a story debunked by Russell's mother. Harold is proud to live near writer H.L. Mencken, though it's doubtful he ever read Mencken's work. Russell learns to love Harold as a romantic and a storyteller.

Aunt Sister is a practical, unimaginative matriarch over her husband, though she smokes, chews gum, and swears. Aunt Sister and Uncle Harold dote on Doris, who has stayed with them over summers in the past. One summer, Sister and Harold arrange Audrey, who knows she is Doris's sister, to visit. They dress Doris up in her finest, but still Doris is stunned by her pampered, beautiful sister. Though at first shamed in comparison to her sister, Doris and Audrey become lifelong friends. Harold, seeing Doris's first reaction to her expensively dressed sister, buys Doris a pretty robe. Later, Harold goes into the hospital after several heart attacks. Only Doris and Sister are allowed to visit. He knows he's going to die, and passes away. Russell always remembers him as a teller of fantastic tales, like his memory of his own birth.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

In Baltimore, Lucy can only find a job selling magazines door to door, and Hal's company quickly collapses. He comes to Baltimore; Charlie has long since returned to Belleville, depressed at the constant funerals. After a few months, Hal leaves, too. Russell is trying to survive in the city and is unaware of Lucy's financial struggles. A bully Pete beats him up at school. Even after they are taken to the principal's office and threatened with expulsion, Pete wants to keep fighting. After that, Russell spends his time avoiding Pete.

Russell gets a job delivering papers, and lately the news is about Hitler and Mussolini. Early one morning, Russell opens his paper to find that a dissected body has been found in the sewer, all but the head. Russell starts his route, shrouded in fear. He refuses to go into unlit apartment buildings, leaving the papers outside. As he picks up his third bundle of papers, he hears a man's footsteps. Russell hides in an alley until the man leaves, and Russell tells himself that it was probably just a drunk. Later, he runs into the man again. He is well-dressed and follows Russell, trying to talk and inviting Russell to a party. Finally reaching home, Russell tries to bolt into the house, but the stranger grabs him. Russell hits him ineffectively with his newspaper pouch strap, and then again, effectively. The man goes off, and Russell goes inside, telling no one about the encounter.

After about a year in Baltimore, Lucy brings the kids with her to get food, and to Russell's shamed dismay, they're collecting government food. On the way home, Russell and his mother take their coats off to hide the shameful food. Russell is growing up, and his mother buys him long pants, a mark of adolescence. He gets a green suit with gray stripes, though Russell thinks they can't afford it. His mother pays \$3 a month. Around Christmas, Russell accidentally discovers that his mother has bought him an expensive bike. Russell pretends he doesn't know and plans to feign surprise. Lucy goes all out each Christmas, with food, a tree, and presents secreted in the night. On Christmas morning, there is no bike. Then, Lucy says she's forgotten something and reveals the bike. Russell doesn't have to fake surprise and joy.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

In 1939, Lucy begins dating Herb Orrison, who works for the B&O Railroad, but Russell is too self-absorbed to really think about it. Awkward with girls, he relishes tantalizing sex scenes in pulp detective fiction, while idolizing Laraine, who lives on his paper route. One day, Russell mentions Laraine, and Doris says she's a "cafe trotter". Russell doesn't know the term, but feels betrayed, imagining the horrible meanings behind it. He's also plagued with embarrassment, and never takes off his shirt to expose his skinny body. Swimming class is torture.

Russell throws himself into school, where he's in an advanced course at City College high school that will allow him to skip a year of college, though he knows he can't afford college. Russell becomes conceited and starts surpassing his mother's education. One day, he pretends to have trouble with a passage of Latin, in order to outdo his mother with his already finished translation. Russell is shocked when, one day, his mother announces she's married Herb. Herb has supplanted him as man of the family. The next day, Herb moves in. Soon, a telephone is installed, so the railroad can call Herb if they need him. The hard times are over, but Russell is filled with anger.

Herb's first memory is of seeing his mother burn to death when Herb was five in 1899. He lived with relatives and worked in the fields as a quiet boy who dreamed of the railroads. As a quiet man, he's a railroad fireman, the last back-breaking step on the journey becoming an engineer. Russell resents his lack of schooling. He ignores Herb as much as possible and starts conversations on intellectual topics he knows Herb is ignorant of. Herb tries to befriend him by inviting him to ball games and offering to teach him to drive. Russell rejects these overtures. When Russell parodies Herb's walk to his mother, she is furious.

Herb gets promoted to engineer, and since he works at all hours, he has trouble getting sleep in the noisy building. One day, after getting home at midnight, a prank caller phones at 2 a.m., pretending to be Mussolini. Herb flies into a rage, but is quickly calmed; he's a gentle man. Herb is a fan of the Washington Senators, following all their ball games. His only vice is betting on horses. Herb drinks seldom, for medicinal reasons, and can eat huge meals. He lets Lucy boss him and run his life, and he teaches Russell that letting Lucy win at cards can make life easier. In 1940, Herb and Lucy have a girl, Mary Leslie. In 1941, they buy a four-bedroom house for \$4,700, the home Lucy has dreamed of. Russell loves the house, but still hates Herb.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

As Russell gets nearer graduating, he worries he can't afford college and is unqualified for jobs. Since moving, he works at a grocery store managed by joking, cursing Mr. Simmons, who blackmails black customers to buy groceries so he'll cash their checks and peeps up women's skirt from a hole in the cellar ceiling. Simmons won't let Russell learn the cash register, choosing even a black employee above him.

In Russell's third year of high school, his English teacher is Mr. Fleagle. First they study Macbeth, then informal essays. Russell is extremely bored, until he notes an essay topic: The Art of Eating Spaghetti. He is inspired to write about the family eating spaghetti at Uncle Allen's, intending to write a proper essay later, but he runs out of time. He turns in the essay he's convinced will fail and is pleasantly shocked when Mr. Fleagle reads it to the class and gives it an A plus. Russell's desire to be a writer is rekindled, but after his mother talks to Herb about college expenses, the result is that he thinks he could find Russell a job with the railroad.

Russell doesn't know what to put as his ambition in the yearbook, settling on "newspaper columnist", though it's not really his interest. In reality, he's wondering if he can work in groceries or on the railroad. He sees Charlie Sussman, a school friend, filling out college applications, and for the first time learns about scholarships. Charlie insists that Russell apply. Russell's mother helps him study relentlessly for the scholarship exam, and he takes it in May. Though he has had no faith in God, Russell prays before the four-hour test and comes out with no idea how he's done. Two weeks later, a letter arrives from John Hopkins University. He has earned a scholarship covering tuition for two academic terms of 1942 and 1943. His mother says she always knew he could do it.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

The U.S. is at war when Russell starts college. In 1939, when Germany invades Poland, Russell doesn't believe it has anything to do with the U.S., but Herb is sure the U.S. will join in. With the war news, Lucy makes Russell try to sell the extra papers the newspaper charges him for. In fifteen minutes, every paper sells. Russell's knowledge of and interest in politics and culture are limited. He sees Mussolini and Hitler as bad guys and Americans as good guys. He has infinite confidence in America's goodness and ability, with an unclear picture of the rest of the world. The high school Honor Society promptly rejects him when he reveals that he's never even heard of Trotsky and barely knows who Stalin is, despite his high marks.

Lombard Street stands in contrast to Russell's intellectual classmates. The street-corner conversation centers on why God would allow a black man, Joe Louis, to become heavyweight champion. Even Russell's mother, who taught him to hate bigotry, says Negroes should "know their place". The white community resents each time Joe Louis wins a fight, when the black community on Lemmon Street celebrates. Joe Louis is scheduled to fight German Max Schmeling a second time, the only boxer to have beaten him. The white community anticipates reclaiming glory, but Schmeling is destroyed in two minutes, nine seconds. Blacks spontaneously turn out into the streets for a five minute march into white territory, the first Civil Rights march Russell ever sees.

In 1941, Russell is shocked at the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. By the time he starts college, he realizes that he'll have to go to war. He's struggling in college and dreams of becoming a pilot. He applies to the Navy Air Corps, which he perceives as glamorous, though his mother objects that he can't even swim. On his first physical, his blood pressure is too high, and the doctor says to stop eating potatoes and come back in three days. He passes, and after turning eighteen, he enthusiastically goes off for training. Twelve hours later, he's homesick.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Russell spends eighteen months in training throughout the South, and when Germany surrenders, he's sent to Pensacola, Florida. In the summer of 1945, he's flying out of Whiting Field and making trips into Pensacola several nights a week to have a chaste romance with Karen, the nursing school student he's in love with.

Russell learns to swim with ease after his instructor, not caring that he can't swim, makes him jump into the fifteen-foot pool with everyone else. He learns to fly from Jim, a nervous civilian pilot who sends Russell out solo before he's ready. Russell spins violently on his first landing and ends up in the grass. He moves on to Navy instructors. Everyone tells him it's like driving a car, and Russell's ashamed to admit he's never driven. After failing one flight, his reexamination is scheduled with "Total Loss" Smith, one of the harshest instructors. Over the weekend, he gets drunk with his friends. After the hangover subsides, a calm comes over him, and suddenly he's able to control the plane.

Russell is still a virgin and is regaled with his fellow pilots' tales of sexual prowess. With girl after girl, Russell fails to have sex. One girl brings him home, but he discovers her mother is in the kitchen, separated from them only by a sheet. In Pensacola, he and two buddies are picked up by three older Naval wives. Russell ends up spending the night on a couch, and though the woman comes to seduce him, he can't bring himself to sleep with a married woman.

Russell meets Karen, a good girl, and is freed from his sexual quest. Russell looks forward to flying in the planned invasion of Japan, but then the atomic bomb is dropped at Hiroshima. Russell and his mother continue to write over mundane matters. Then Nagasaki is bombed. The war is over. Russell is disappointed, but doesn't tell his mother. His mother warns him against marriage, hoping he'll go to college. Absent from their letters is any indication of the horrific and historic nature of the atomic bomb.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis

Russell brings home Miriam Emily Nash, known as Mimi. She is not the "good woman" Lucy wants for her son. She wears makeup, lives alone, drinks, has a tenth-grade education, and works at a department store makeup counter. She is too beautiful, and Russell is jealous. Once, he sees her kissing someone at a party and has a fit. She throws back that he's the one who doesn't want to get married.

Mimi's mother is epileptic, and her father is an angry alcoholic. Mimi winds up in an orphanage, the Sheltering Arms. Mimi quickly sickens of the fundamentalist Protestant matron who forces the children to attend faith healings and takes the best donated sweets before giving the rest to the children, as well as the community organizations that expect the orphans to appear at Christmas party expressing gratitude for once-a-year gifts. Mimi runs away and is brought back by the police. She goes to see the Catholic bishop for help, but he tells her to be obedient. At sixteen, she runs away again, gets a false identification, and begins working at a grocery store.

Mimi is taken in by a woman's family, has a romance with the son, and after he moves away, becomes scandalous for associating with a married man. Her father reappears, and she goes away to meet him at his new home. He doesn't show up for days, and then leaves again, disappearing completely. Mimi eventually moves to a rooming house in Baltimore. Russell, meanwhile, is looking for sex in bars. His friend George Winokur convinces him to try to date musicians, and eventually they get dates with two girls from Mimi's rooming house. The dates are unexciting, but Russell meets Mimi and is taken with her. Influenced by George, Russell thinks of her as an Eliza Doolittle, a diamond in the rough, who he can tutor into becoming a real lady. However, she keeps turning him down for dates.

Finally, Mimi consents to a couple of movie dates with Russell. Then, he takes her to Washington for the day, lecturing her on history, politics, and even art. When she gets exhausted and bored, he finally asks her about herself and hears the story of her life. He begins to feel protective toward her, and he buys an expensive dinner and movie tickets. He's fallen for her.



Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter seventeen, three months after Russell and Mimi start dating, he brings her to Sunday dinner. Russell is worried, suspecting his mother will dislike Mimi. Mimi dresses up with makeup, a modern hairstyle, and a sexy dress, heightening Russell's fear. Lucy is pleasant and polite, but afterwards, Mimi says Lucy doesn't like her. The next day, Lucy tells Russell that Mimi might not look bad, if she didn't wear so much makeup.

Mimi comes to more dinners, but she and Lucy continue to be at odds. Russell's mother starts waiting up for him at night. When, creeping in one dawn, he finally admits to being at Mimi's, she accuses him of being just like his father. Mimi stops coming to dinner. Russell doesn't think she's the right kind of girl to marry, but he doesn't want to end his relationship. Over their four years together, he repeatedly tells Mimi that marriage isn't in the cards for them.

Russell graduates from Johns Hopkins and goes to work for the Baltimore Sun as a police writer, scouring the streets and police station at night for often unsavory news to phone in to the rewriters. He becomes closer and closer to Mimi, spending time with her late at night after he's off his shift. Mimi moves from job to job, trying to increase her income. She quits a job where they want her to keep false books to evade taxes, and she shies away from the seamy world of show business after a couple of attempts to find jobs. Finally, she gets a clerk job, but can't pay her rent. Fed up with Russell's insistence that they'll never marry, she breaks up with him and moves to a cheap room.

Russell misses Mimi terribly, and even his mother advises him that the most important thing is his happiness. Meanwhile, Russell has taught himself to type by banging out a 70,000 word novel that's garnered nothing but rejections. Because he can type, he's called upon to fill in as a rewriter one day, and after proving himself, moves to a \$70 a week job. He goes to see Mimi, and they get back together. He still won't marry her, though, and she takes a job with a detective agency in Washington. Over Christmas, she takes a six-week assignment in the Carolinas, with another girl and a former football player nicknamed "Kid Muscles". Russell is overwhelmed with jealousy, especially after he can't reach her on Christmas night. He takes out a college woman named Beverly, who he classifies as a good woman, only to find out she wants to go to a strip club and then take him back to her apartment for sex. When Mimi returns, Russell meets her at the station and asks her to marry him.

In chapter eighteen, Mimi and Russell visit Russell's old home years later, reliving memories. After living there for thirty-five years, Doris finally had to bring Lucy to live with her and sell the house, something Lucy never accepted. Russell remembers telling his mother he was marrying Mimi. She graciously accepted the fact, even helping him financially and hosting the reception at her house. However, she insisted on a church wedding neither Russell nor Mimi want. Russell and Mimi visit her in the nursing home,

but Mimi waits out in the car. Lucy doesn't recognize her son, but smiles when he tells her about her new great-granddaughter. Before she falls asleep again, though, she forgets who Russell and Mimi are.



Characters

Russell Baker

Russell Baker chronicles his own life in the autobiographical memoir *Growing Up*, and he also chronicles his mother's life, as he knows it. Russell is a small boy when he lives in Morrisonville, and he remembers it with the nostalgia of youth. Morrisonville is a place of hard work and suffering, but it is also a place where the family gathers on the porch in the evening, talking in time-honored clichés. Russell's deep love of family gathering together appears in his description of these evening conversations, as well as the similar scenes of evening conversations that take place in Uncle Allen's kitchen over pots of coffee, after Russell has gone to bed. His first true writing success shows his love of family, too. It is an essay on the eating of spaghetti, inspired by a family meal in his Uncle Allen's household.

Russell wants to be a writer from a young age. He is not athletic, and he is smart without being intellectual. He has no "gumption" according to his mother. Russell is lazy and hates the job his mother gets him selling newspapers. He would always rather play than work. His mother suggests writing as a possible career for him, and Russell latches onto this as a career that requires no work at all. Russell gets into college on a scholarship, but he finds it hard work and has trouble with math and science. He is glad to join the Navy Air Corps after he turns eighteen, hoping to find glory in World War II that he never has the chance to attain.

Russell is naive about the world, politics, women, and war. He has low self-confidence and suffers from anxiety, which gives him trouble learning to fly. Russell is also influenced by his mother's constant reinforcement that he should "make something of himself" and that a man needs a "good woman." His mother's influence makes him reluctant to marry Mimi, who doesn't fit his mother's idea of a good woman, despite his deep feelings for her.

Lucy Baker

Lucy is Russell's mother. When she is a young woman, her father dies, and she must drop out of college. With her minimal education, Lucy can only find work as a schoolteacher in rural communities that she considers backwards. She meets Benny, her future husband, in one of these communities, and has three children. Lucy is a strong, matriarchal woman, who tries to reform her husband's bad habits, such as drinking. She believes in equality, even if she sometimes falters in putting that belief into practice. She values education and she also values hard work. She believes that Russell can make something of himself if he only tries.

Lucy is left a widow with three small children when her husband dies after falling into a diabetic coma. She has to rely on her brother's family to help support her, but she longs



to have a home of her own. After a failed romance with Oluf, who she is deeply attached to but who drifts off into despair during the Great Depression, Lucy moves with her children to Baltimore, where she hopes to earn a living. Though Lucy has an apartment in Baltimore, she can barely afford to pay the bills for herself and her children, falling back on the humiliation of accepting free government food.

Lucy meets and marries Herb, her second husband, and her life turns around. She finally gets the house she's dreamed of for years, since her first husband's death. Lucy gets married suddenly, without warning to her children, expecting them to simply accept Herb into their life. Her son Russell is deeply offended by Herb's appearance as stepfather. Lucy is the matriarch over her family, hosting Sunday family dinners and cajoling Herb into whatever she thinks is right. She is protective of her son, and she worries both when he joins the Navy Air Corps and when he becomes involved with Mimi.

Miriam

Mimi's mother is an epileptic, and she is confined to a hospital during most of Mimi's life. Mimi's father is a drunk, and during Mimi's childhood, he often comes home angry and raging. He also disappears for days at a time, and when Mimi's mother is in the hospital, he deserts Mimi. Mimi winds up in the Sheltering Arms, an orphanage, which is run by a fundamental Protestant matron who forces the girls to attend religious services that include faith healing in an hysterical atmosphere. Mimi loses faith in both charitable organizations and religion through her experiences, and she runs away to take care of herself.

Mimi makes her way in the world working at any job that she can get, and she lives on her own. She falls in love with Russell and wants to marry him. He won't hear of marriage, though. Mimi is too modern, and with too low-class a background, to make a good wife. Mimi is hurt by Russell's refusal to marry her, and tells him that he needs to treat her like a person. She leaves Russell, first breaking up with him and later, after drifting back into a relationship with him, moving to Washington for a better job. Mimi hates the fact that Russell's mother won't accept her and feels slighted at not being considered good enough for marriage. However, when Russell finally proposes to her, she accepts him.

Doris

Doris is Russell's younger sister. She is two years younger than him and she has "gumption", something his mother always tells Russell that he lacks.

Papa

Papa is Lucy's father. He died before Russell was born, but Lucy holds him up as an ideal of gentile manhood.



Ep Ahalt

Ep is the farmer who Lucy boards with while she's working as a teacher, when she meets her future husband Benny.

Benny Baker

Benny is Russell's father. He is a drinker, a habit that his wife Lucy hates but which she cannot break him of. Benny impregnates Lucy before they're married, and against his matriarchal mother's wishes, he marries her. Benny is diabetic, but he has no treatment for his disease. He dies of his diabetes at a young age, leaving Lucy with three small children.

Ida Rebecca

Ida Rebecca is Benny Baker's mother, the matriarch of their family. She greatly disapproves of Benny's intellectual wife, who she thinks puts on airs. Ida loves her grandchildren, and she goes against Lucy's wishes to influence them. She gives the children treats like jam and bread that they aren't supposed to have, and she passes on rural superstitions about omens and ghosts.

Audrey

Audrey is the youngest of Benny and Lucy's three children, and when Benny dies, Audrey is adopted by her aunt and uncle.

Sam Reaver

Sam is a bootleg whiskey maker in Morrisonville, Virginia. When he dies, his wife buys him an expensive and heavy glass coffin with a seal like the Mason jars Sam sells his liquor in.

Uncle Harvey

Russell's Uncle Harvey, Benny's brother, is a train engineer in Brunswick.

Uncle Tom

Russell's Uncle Tom, Benny's brother, is a blacksmith in Brunswick. He owns a car and an indoor bathroom, signs of fabulous wealth. After Russell's father dies, Uncle Tom and his wife Goldie adopt Audrey.



Aunt Goldie

Goldie is known for her perfect housekeeping, and there isn't a spot of dust in her house. Goldie and her husband Tom adopt Audrey after Russell's father dies.

Uncle Lewis

Uncle Lewis, Benny's brother, is a barber with a reputation as a ladies' man who lives in Brunswick.

Uncle Allen

Russell's Uncle Allen, Lucy's brother, is a hard working successful salesman who Lucy and her children live with during the Great Depression after Lucy's husband dies.

Aunt Pat

Pat is Uncle Allen's wife, a boisterous woman who exclaims "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" whenever something happens.

Oluf

Oluf is a Danish baker who Russell's mother falls in love with, after moving in with her brother Allen after her husband's death. They exchange many letters, while Oluf searches for work during the Great Depression. When Oluf finally gives up on finding gainful employment, in despair, he breaks off his relationship with Lucy, who he calls Elizabeth.

Uncle Charlie

Russell's intellectual Uncle Charlie is a Republican in a house full of Democrats. He tries to teach Russell that socialism is evil and that he shouldn't admire his hero, Roosevelt. Charlie has no job and he doesn't look for one, preferring to live off of his brother. He spends his time sleeping, reading, and drinking coffee. Charlie reads primarily about politics and history.

Uncle Hal

Russell's Uncle Hal, known as "Colonel", is a braggart who likes to talk about the big business deals he's got in the works. None of his deals ever go through. Hal borrows \$75 from his sister Lucy to start a lumber business, promising to help her move to



Baltimore and live on the profits. Neither the business nor any profits ever materialize. Hal sends Lucy only \$10 when she asks for her money back.

Uncle Willie

Lucy's favorite brother Willie lives in San Francisco, and he sends his sister money to help support her during the Great Depression.

Uncle Edwin

Lucy's successful brother Edwin is the managing editor of the New York Times, and Lucy holds him up as a model of what Russell can achieve.

Walter

Walter is an Irish bully who beats up Russell, but who is too upset by being watched to beat up Russell when Russell's friends look on.

Aunt Sister

Aunt Sister is the only girl in Russell's father's siblings, which is why she's known as Sister. She lives in Baltimore, and Russell's family spends time with Aunt Sister after moving near her.

Uncle Harold Sharp

Harold is an ex-Marine and Aunt Sister's husband. With a straight face, he spins wild and fanciful tales to his nephew, something Russell comes to appreciate.

Pete

Pete is the vicious bully who beats up Russell when he first comes to Baltimore.

Herb Orrison

Lucy begins dating Herb Orrison after she moves with her children to Baltimore. Herb works for the railroad and makes a good living. He is a kindly, quiet man, and he marries Lucy. He tries to befriend his new stepson, Russell, but Russell is offended that he's been replaced as the man of the house. Russell ignores Herb as much as he can, tries to engineer conversations that will humiliate the undereducated Herb, and refuses to go to ballgames or learn to drive with Herb.



Mary Leslie

Mary is Russell's youngest sibling, his half-sister. She is Lucy and Herb's daughter.

Mr. Simmons

Mr. Simmons is the manager of a grocery store that Russell works for in Baltimore. Mr. Simmons is bawdy, both jovial and cruel. He berates the black customers who come to the store to have checks cashed, and he peeps up women's skirts through a peephole in the cellar. He hates Russell and refuses to allow him to cashier.

Mr. Fleagle

Mr. Fleagle is Russell's eleventh grade English teacher, who amazes Russell by reading his essay on Spaghetti aloud and giving it an A plus. This event confirms in Russell's mind the idea that he should become a writer.

Charlie Sussman

Charlie is a schoolmate of Russell's who tells Russell about scholarships available to Johns Hopkins University.



Objects/Places

Morrisonville, Virginia

Russell is born in the small town of Morrisonville, where his mother and father live across from Russell's matriarchal grandmother, Ida Rebecca.

Brunswick, Virginia

Brunswick is the largest town near where Russell spends his youngest years. Three of his uncles live in Brunswick, where the railroad is.

Newark, New Jersey

Russell moves to Newark, New Jersey after his father's death to live with his Uncle Allen. Russell hates the urban Newark.

Belleville, New Jersey

Belleville is a suburban town where Russell moves with his family and his Uncle Allen and Aunt Pat during the Great Depression. Russell enjoys living in Belleville.

The Saturday Evening Post

Lucy gets Russell a job selling the Saturday Evening Post when he is a young boy in Belleville. Russell is terrible at selling and hates this job.

The Walnut Boards

When Uncle Hal arrives at Uncle Allen's house, he brings with him three large walnut boards that he says are worth a fortune. They gather dust in the hallway of the house, as Hal fails to complete the big business deal he brags that he's making.

Baltimore, Maryland

Lucy moves to Baltimore with Russell and Doris to have a place of their own. She finds it a struggle to get by financially in Baltimore, until she marries her second husband.



City College

City College is a high school where Russell takes an advanced course of study that will allow him to skip a year of college.

The House on Marydell Road

Lucy and Herb buy a four-bedroom house on Marydell Road in Irvington, Baltimore. This is the home of her own that Lucy has been dreaming of for years, and she lives there for thirty-five years.

Johns Hopkins University

Russell attends Johns Hopkins University on a scholarship, but he struggles with his schoolwork there. He finally graduates after coming back from the Navy Air Corps following World War II.

Sheltering Arms

Sheltering Arms is the orphanage where Mimi spends most of her childhood, and which she runs away from.

The Baltimore Sun

Russell works at the Baltimore Sun after he graduates from college. He is a police beat reporter at first, who calls in stories to rewriters. Later, he becomes a rewriter.



Themes

Women

Growing Up is as much the story of Lucy's life as Russell's, and in both their lives, the position of women in the family and in society is an important element. Russell presents Lucy's split perspective early in the book. Lucy, in high school, argues heartily for women's suffrage, declaring it a moral right. However, Lucy also sees women as the force behind successful men, instead of people who are successful in the world in their own right. A woman can, at best, become a teacher or a nurse. A woman's true calling is to be the matriarch who reforms a man and keeps him on the path to success.

Russell absorbs many of Lucy's notions about women, and he grows up with the idea that he must marry a "good woman" who will help him succeed. Russell is ignorant of women in many ways. He doesn't understand sex. He divides women into good girls and bad girls, and he expects love to be virtuous and chaste. He expects girls who have sex to be objects of fun, ways to have a good time, while waiting for the chaste good girl who is worthy of bringing home to mother and becoming the force behind his own success.

Russell's encounter with Mimi at the end of the memoir is one that forces him to evaluate his own view of women. He falls in love with Mimi, despite the fact that she's not a "good woman". Hearing the story of her life, he begins to see her as a person, not merely a woman. He dates Beverly, and discovered this assumed "good woman" to be a very sexual being. Russell must overcome his opinions about women to get a new perspective and finally win Mimi as a partner.

Growing Up

The memoir is entitled Growing Up, and it chronicles Russell Baker's experiences in childhood as he grows into a man. However, the flip side to growing up is growing older, and Russell contrasts himself coming into self-awareness and manhood with his mother's slow aging and exit from the world into senility. Russell sees childhood as a time of blissful blindness. During the Great Depression, he never envisions himself as poor. He doesn't realize the struggles that his mother goes through to keep her children fed and sheltered. Russell also doesn't recognize his mother's loves after she is widowed. He sees only a limited, narrow reality, recognizing little about the world outside of his own perspective. This applies to the greater world of war and politics as well as the world of his mother's life.

Because childhood is a time of naive, narrow vision, the process of growing up is one of learning truths about the world and acquiring wisdom. Russell, in his youth, knows little of women. They are mysteries for him. He absorbs his mother's ideas of what a good woman is, without understanding women as people and love as a partnership. He has



to do a lot of growing up to stop looking at women as sex objects or goddesses and begin seeing Mimi as a woman he loves. Through his naiveté, Russell misses out on viewing his mother as a person, as well. Only when he is very much an adult, sitting at his mother's bedside, does he realize that he's never fully shed the narrowness of vision that caused him to see Lucy only as a mom and not as a person. The memoir is, in part, an attempt at that final stage of growing up, to step out of childish blindness and see who his mother is and was.

Success

Throughout Russell's life, his mother pushes him to "make something of himself". She wants her son to be a success, and she believes that with hard work, success will follow. Russell's mother defines success for her son as a good job, making a good living. She also wants him to have a good woman. However, when Russell breaks up with Mimi, his mother sees that he's unhappy, and she realizes that happiness, too, is part of success. If Mimi makes him happy, then perhaps that's more important than her idea of a good woman for her son.

Russell doesn't have great ambition in his youth, but his mother's desire for his success rubs off on him. When Russell can't succeed in many things, like selling newspapers and athletic activities, he easily gives up on them. However, he seeks out parts of life that he can be successful at. In Russell's case, this means schoolwork and writing. One of the reasons for this is Russell's lack of "gumption". He wants the success that his mother urges him toward, but not at the cost of having to work at something distasteful, embarrassing, and frustrating. Russell's low self-esteem complicates this, since he is often too humiliated to do what success requires. He can't fly a plane or sell newspapers, more because of his own anxiety than anything else. The same anxiety prevents him from losing his virginity. Russell shies away from many paths to success that cause him anxiety and humiliation, and so he is funneled toward a comfortable success in writing.

Style

Perspective

Growing Up is an autobiographical memoir told in the first person, from Russell Baker's point of view. However, Russell doesn't strictly tell the story from his own perspective. He also narrates part of his mother's life, before he was born and when he was very young. He tells about his mother's relationship with Oluf, which he was largely unaware of at the time. Russell becomes a narrator of his mother's story during these parts of the memoir, often explaining her thoughts, opinions, and point of view as part of his narration.

Russell looks at the events of his life from two perspectives throughout the novel. He gives his perspective at the time, such as the adolescent self-involvement that makes him almost completely ignore Herb's existence before his mother marries him. He also gives his more enlightened perspective from the future. A notable instance of this is Russell's treatment of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the time, Russell exchanges letters with his mother, expressing joy at peace and talking of mundane matters. He writes a naive essay about peace. He is secretly upset at missing out on the glory of war. Only from his future perspective does he look back on the momentous nature of the atomic bomb.

At times, Russell tells his story using snippets of letters. He utilizes both his mother's letters with Oluf and his own letters with his mother to show the voices of himself, Lucy, and Oluf at these points in time. From his perspective in the future, he provides commentary on these voices from the past.

Tone

The tone of Russell Baker's memoir is nostalgic and also self-deprecating. Family is a central element of the memoir, and most of his family is portrayed with love and affection, while recognizing his relatives' flaws. Russell learns from his Uncle Charlie, who lectures him on conservative politics, and from his Aunt Pat, who raves about the evils of Hoover. He lovingly remembers his storytelling Uncle Harvey, and he treasures memories of family gatherings, with everyone talking late into the night.

Even more specifically, Russell is writing about his mother, and he admires her strength in the face of adversity throughout life, her dedication to raising and teaching her son, and the life he's given her. He writes about his mother's trials and her efforts to raise her son into a man who will make something of himself. She passes on to Russell her values, for both good and ill. Russell's tone is tinged with sadness, because the story of his mother is inspired by her senility and death. His mother's old age is not happy. She cannot stay in the home that she fought so long to achieve, and age robs her of activity and matriarchy.



Russell's view of himself is far from admiration. Russell considers his younger self naive at the best, and often self-centered and lazy. At the beginning of the novel, Russell regrets not knowing his mother and her life better, and that regret is informed by Russell's view of his youth as self-absorbed. Though as a child, Russell is bound to have an incomplete picture of the world around him, the grownup Russell is critical of the child's ignorance of both his family's true position and the events of the world.

Structure

The structure of Russell Baker's memoir is mainly chronological. However, the book is also bookended with scenes of his mother at the end of her life, stricken with senility and confined to a nursing home. These bookends create a circular structure, reflecting in some degree the circular structure of life, as people are born, grow old, and die, passing the world to the next generation. His mother is a parallel to Russell's own life; she fades back into her memories just as Russell himself has journeyed into his life's memories to write his autobiography.

Russell's memoir begins before his birth, making it a biography not only of himself but of his mother Lucy. The book is a book of their relationship more than a biography of one or the other person. The first half of the memoir is more about Lucy, detailing her life while Russell is too young to know much about what is going on. As Russell grows up and becomes more aware of himself and active in his own life, the memoir's focus shifts, becoming more about Russell's life than about his mother's.

When Russell meets Mimi, the memoir focuses on his relationship with the new woman in his life. His mother has been the matriarchal force in his world, but now he passes his allegiance to a new woman in his life. His mother's role is diminished, and Mimi takes away the focus. This is part of the tragedy of Lucy's aging. She loses her family to new lives with new people.



Quotes

"When she stood, though, she projected physical power and moral authority."
Chap. 3, p. 28

"The timelessness of it: Nothing new had been said on that porch for a hundred years."
Chap. 4, p. 44

"While I was experiencing the routine miseries of childhood, my mother was discovering the Depression."
Chap. 6, p. 75

"If I had lived upstairs with the landlady I would probably have become a hard-money Republican, but chance had put me on the lower level where the Depression stirred such passion that even a child could not resist."
Chap. 7, p. 93

"Most likely she didn't actually hate my friends because they were Italian; she was probably just angry at me for choosing friends who couldn't pass muster in the world of people who had made something of themselves." —Chapter 9, page 128

"To me he was the man playing Parcheesi and drinking cocoa in a two-room flat so close to H.L. Mencken, the man who infected me with the notion that there might be worse things to do with life than spend it in telling tales."
Chap. 10, p. 148

"One of the oldest links in the chain binding us together had snapped. She was no longer my ultimate schoolteacher."
Chap. 12, p. 170

"Though I'd never told this to my mother and went to church regularly to please her, I'd grown up a fatalist with little faith."
Chap. 13, p. 193

"Everybody was enlisting in the Army Air Corps, but the Navy Air Corps was different. It was more dangerous, I thought, therefore more glamorous."
Chap. 14, p. 209

"In this eerie state of relaxation nothing seemed to matter much, not the terrible Total Loss Smith, not even the end of my flying days."
Chap. 15, p. 218

"Mimi did not fit my mother's idea of 'a good woman.'"
Chap. 16, p. 233

"I had no thought of marrying Mimi and no intention of giving her up."
Chap. 17, p. 253



Topics for Discussion

In Russell Baker's memoir, what is the role of women in families and in the world? How does it change over the course of Russell's life?

Is the memoir mostly about Russell or mostly about his mother Lucy?

How does Russell's view of his mother change over time, as he moves from childhood to adulthood?

How does Russell Baker address issues of racism in his memoir? How do the issues of racism in the memoir compare to the issues of feminism?

How does Ida Rebecca's relationship with Lucy parallel and differ from Lucy's relationship with her own daughter-in-law Mimi?

Why does Russell begin and end the memoir with scenes of his senile mother in a nursing home at the end of her life?

Why does Russell's mother want him to "make something of himself"? In what ways does her desire that he succeed affect Russell's life?