

# **The Girls: A Novel Study Guide**

## **The Girls: A Novel by Emma Cline**

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# Plot Summary

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*The Girls* tells the story of the build-up to some brutal and notorious murders committed in the summer of 1969, and the involvement of a 14 year old girl named Evie Boyd with the group who committed the crimes.

In the present day, a middle-aged Evie was woken in the night whilst staying in the vacation home of her friend Dan. She feared that someone was breaking into the house and that she would be harmed, but when she got up to check on the noise she discovered that it was Dan's son Julian and his girlfriend Sasah, who had not known that Evie was staying there. Evie tried to remind Julian of who she was and Julian remembered that Evie was her dad's friend who used to be in a cult.

In 1969, Evie was spending her last summer at home in California and it was planned for her to move away to boarding school when the new school year began. Evie's parents had divorced earlier in the year and in the aftermath of their split both of Evie's parents were preoccupied with building a new life for themselves and paid very little attention to Evie. Evie spent most of her time with her best friend from school, Connie. Evie had a crush on Connie's brother Peter. After having an argument with one of Peter's friends whom Connie had a crush on, during which Evie damaged the friend's motorcycle, Connie and Evie fell out and were no longer friends. With no close personal relationships in her life, Evie became desperate for attention and companionship.

Evie saw a group of strange and intriguing girls in the park one day, diving in dumpsters in search of food. When Evie encountered one of the girls, Suzanne, getting kicked out of a grocery store, she offered to get her the things she needed. Evie's mom introduced her to her new boyfriend Frank, who Evie did not like. Evie and her mom fought over Evie being rude to Frank and her mom told her to get out of the house. Evie left the house on her bike but the chain snapped, leaving her stuck on the side of the road. A black bus pulled over and some girls got out to check if she was ok, including Suzanne, the girl from the store. The girls offered to take Evie back to the ranch where they lived with a charismatic man called Russell who was their leader. Evie went to the ranch with them and Russell coerced her into giving him oral sex.

Evie became more and more involved with the group as the summer progressed, while her mom mistakenly believed that she was staying at her friend Connie's house. Evie was introduced to a famous musician named Mitch Lewis who sometimes visited the ranch. One night Suzanne and Evie went to Mitch's house and Mitch had sex with Evie, despite her being unwilling. Suzanne, Evie and one of the other girls broke into Evie's neighbor's house. The other two got away, but Evie was caught by her neighbor and her mom sent her to stay in Palo Alto with her father as punishment.

Evie quickly became bored of living with her father and ran away. She hitchhiked back to the ranch, but since she had been gone, things had gotten a lot worse. Mitch had



failed to get Russell a record deal, which Russell felt that he had been promised. Russell ordered the girls to go to Mitch's house and teach him a lesson. Evie joined them in the car but on the way their Suzanne kicked her out of the car and left her alone on the roadside. Evie went back to her dad's apartment, where she learned whilst watching the news that three adults and a child had been brutally murdered at Mitch's house that night. Evie was too frightened to tell anyone what she knew.

Evie started attending her new boarding school and one day Suzanne visited her there while Russell and the others waited for her on the bus. Suzanne told Evie that they knew she would not tell anyone about the murders. Later, the whole group was arrested in the desert and went on to become famous for their crimes. In her older years, Evie reflected that by not being involved in the murders, she had been made permanently invisible, whereas Suzanne had gained attention and redemption for the crimes she had committed.



# “I looked up...” – Chapter 2

## Summary

The Girls tells the story of 14-year-old Evie Boyd and her involvement with a fictional commune, based on the real-life Manson Family, in the summer of 1969.

In the opening chapter, “I looked up...”, the narrator Evie Boyd reflects on the first moment she encountered the eponymous girls of the novel’s title. She watched the three women walking through a park in her hometown and became immediately fascinated by them, even as other people in the park were disturbed by them. This recollection precedes the beginning of “Part One.”

Part One opens with the chapter “It begins with...” in which Evie recalls some of the details of the gruesome murders carried out by the girls she saw in the park when she was 14 in 1969. In the present day, Evie is a middle-aged woman staying in the vacation home of her friend Dan when she is startled in the night by the noise of strangers coming into the house. The noise immediately reminds her of the break-in the girls committed before carrying out the murders.

Evie goes to investigate the noise and discovers two teenagers in the kitchen: Julian, Dan’s son, and his girlfriend Sasha. They introduce themselves to each other, and Julian asks if Evie is his father’s friend who used to be in a cult. Evie reluctantly admits that she is and Julian excitedly tells Sasha some of the details of the murders. They go to their bedroom and Evie can hear the young couple having noisy sex through the thin walls.

Chapter 1 takes place in the summer of 1969, when Evie was 14. Evie spent most of her time with her best friend from school, Connie. Her grandmother, Harriet, had been a famous Hollywood actress and her family lived off the money they inherited when she died. Evie’s parents, Jean and Carl, had divorced four months earlier after Carl had an affair with his assistant, Tamar. Jean had become interested in numerous new age activities such as astrology and vegetarianism and spent less time with Evie while she pursued her new life. After the summer was over, Evie was going to be sent to boarding school.

The day she first saw the girls, Evie watched as one of them flashed her nipple in a park full of people. The girls moved into an alley where they started searching through a dumpster for food before a man came out of a nearby building and chased them away. The girls ran towards a bus which had been painted black and they got inside. Evie remembered this was the first time she ever saw Suzanne, the girl with the black hair who flashed her nipple.

In Chapter 2, young Evie got all dressed up to go to her friend Connie’s house because she had a crush on her older brother Peter. One night when she was staying at



Connie's, she went into Peter's bedroom after Connie had fallen asleep. Peter and Evie fooled around but they were startled by a noise in the hallway and Peter told Evie to go back to bed. Another day, Connie and Evie watched Peter and his friend Henry playing on a pinball machine. The boys were discussing a porno they had seen at a movie theater and Evie lied and said she had seen it too. When Henry asked her some questions that proved that she had not really seen the movie, Evie got mad and pushed over his motorcycle, damaging it. Peter, Henry, and Connie were all angry with Evie because of her behavior.

## Analysis

In the opening chapter "I looked up..." the author begins the narrative by focusing on the girls, rather than by introducing the narrator or the historical setting, although each of these factors will also play a significant role in the novel. Although no mention is made of the violent crimes later committed by the girls in this opening chapter, a sense of menace and unease is created in the description of them as "tragic and separate" from the others in the park, and their eventual cruelty is foreshadowed in the description of them as "Sleek and thoughtless as sharks breaching the water".

The first Chapter of "Part 1" elaborates on the sense of menace created in the opening chapter through a description of the night of the murders, but at this stage it is still not clear exactly what crime was committed. The section detailing the rounding up of the victims in the house is told in the present tense ("They herd everyone into the living room") as if the narrator is there describing events as they occur, although the reader will later learn that Evie was not present for the crimes. This is a reflection of Evie's conflicted sense of belonging to the group: although in some ways she is grateful not to have been involved in their crimes, in other ways she feels a sense of disconnection and a lack of belonging because she was not present the night of the murders.

After the present tense description of the historical murders, the narrative switches to the present day and Evie as a middle-aged woman disturbed in the night by a noise. The introduction of Evie in a home being broken into sets up her character as a victim. The idea of Evie as a victim will continue throughout much of the novel, although whether she is truly anymore innocent than the other girls is a question that is left unanswered.

Sasha functions as a reflection of Evie's younger self: her intense need for male attention, her insecurities, and her acceptance of people treating her badly are all personality traits which will become evident in Evie's character during the sections set in 1969. Although the character of Russell is not introduced until later in the novel, Julian functions as a reflection of him in the modern day through his controlling, self-centered, and manipulative behavior towards Sasha.

Evie lying in bed listening to the noise of the young couple having sex next door is symbolic of the fact that Evie remains an outsider looking in on the world throughout her whole life. As the rest of the narrative unfolds, the reader discovers that Evie always felt



ignored and that she lacked a sense of belonging, and this initial chapter in her later years shows that this continues to be a problem for her after her childhood.

Chapter 1, set in 1969, lays the groundwork to explain Evie's motivations when she eventually decides to stay with the girls and Russell at the ranch. All of the circumstances of Evie's life during this section of the novel are slowly serving to isolate her from her normal existence. She has left school for the final time and will be going away to a boarding school at the end of the summer. Her parents have recently divorced, meaning that her mom is now focused on building a new life and her dad is now focused on his new relationship with Tamar. Neither of them is really paying any attention to Evie. The only person who does pay attention to Evie is her friend Connie, meaning that the argument between them provoked by Evie damaging the motorcycle is a significant turning point for Evie in the novel. It is the point at which there is no longer anyone in her life who is paying attention to what she is doing or where she is going. Evie's isolation from everyone around her makes her vulnerable to the overtures of Russell and the girls in the following chapters.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What techniques does the author use to introduce Suzanne and the other girls?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What role does Connie play in the novel?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does her parents divorce affect what happens to Evie later in the novel?

## **Vocabulary**

vague, feral, exile, blatant, otherworldliness, threshold, drowsy, idling, cryptic, heroics, formless, perpetually, subsumed, impending, jolt, maritime, approximate, submerged, hatched, solemn



## Chapter 3 – Chapter 5

### Summary

In Chapter 3, Evie went to Connie's house and discovered that Peter's girlfriend, Pamela, was pregnant and that they had run away together to live in Portland. Connie was angry with Evie because she thought that Evie only wanted to be her friend because she had a crush on Peter. She told Evie to leave her alone. Connie said she had made friends with another girl named May and that May thought Evie was trashy.

Evie went back to her own house. Her mom was not home so she got drunk and thought about how alone she felt now that she was no longer friends with Connie. She went to the grocery store where she saw Suzanne, the black haired girl who had flashed her nipple in the park. The store owner told Suzanne she had to leave because she had stolen from him before. Connie followed Suzanne out into the parking lot and offered to steal toilet paper for Suzanne but when she went back inside she got scared and paid for it instead. She took the toilet paper back to Suzanne who thanked her for her help. Suzanne told Evie that she lived with other people who moved around from one place to another but that they were low on money.

In Chapter 4, Evie's mom began dating again after her divorce. Evie remembered a party her dad had thrown at their house during which one of the guests told Evie that her dad was having an affair with Tamar. Evie looked up to Tamar and was embarrassed by her parents' home and her mom's things when Tamar visited.

Evie's mom introduced her to a married man she was dating named Frank, who was a goldminer in Mexico. Jean invited Frank to dinner and Evie asked him about his wife. Frank was rude to Evie while Jean was out of the room. Evie thought that her mom had overheard Frank being unkind and expected her to be angry with Frank, but she was angry with Evie instead.

The following morning, Jean criticized Evie for being rude to Frank. They fought and Jean told Evie to get out. Evie took her bicycle and rode away from the house until the chain on the bike broke. Evie sat on the side of the road trying to fix her bike when a black bus pulled over. A girl - who Evie and the reader later come to know as Donna - got off the bus and offered to help Evie fix her bicycle. Suzanne got off the bus too. Donna invited Evie to join them for a solstice party. Suzanne said that she was too young, but Evie lied and told them that she was 16. Evie got on the bus with her bike.

On the bus, Evie was introduced to the other girls who were excited to meet her. Evie noticed that Suzanne did not seem pleased that she was there. The girls told Evie about the leader of their group, a charismatic man named Russell, and Evie got the impression that they all had sex with him. They told Evie about a famous musician named Mitch who came to stay with them at the ranch where they lived.





In the narration, Evie recalls the relationship between Mitch and Russell, which she only found out about later: Mitch was a successful musician who was impressed by Russell's charismatic speeches about peace and love. Mitch brought them food and other supplies to the ranch and Russell and the others all believed that Russell would get a record deal through Mitch.

Evie recalled that nothing happened that day on the bus to make her suspect any of the events that would occur later. Donna asked her if she had ever heard anything about Russell and she said no.

In Chapter 5, Evie attended the solstice party at the ranch. She met Russell, who took her into a trailer and coerced her into giving him oral sex.

## Analysis

Evie's sense of isolation is heightened in Chapter 3 through her argument with Connie and her mom's absence from the family home. The absence of her parents from her life means that there is no one to help Evie deal with the emotions of her falling out with Connie. As a result, although their fight is not about anything serious or dangerous, the lack of parental guidance in Evie's life in response to the normal emotional ups-and-downs of teenage relationships ends up putting Evie in harm's way later.

With no guidance about how to deal with what she is going through, Evie is left vulnerable to the ideas of Russell and the others when she first encounters them at the ranch. Connie's new friendship with another girl named May will play a key role in sending Evie back to the ranch later in the novel, even after Evie has more awareness of the dangers of the place.

The loss of her best friend and the absence of her mother makes Evie especially interested in befriending Suzanne when she sees her in the store. The series of events surrounding the toilet paper is symbolic of Evie's relationship with Suzanne and the others as a whole. Evie is never really interested in the spiritual philosophies espoused by Russell and the others: she is only interested in feeling a sense of belonging and feeling like people are paying attention to her. In contrast to Evie, Suzanne believes in a counter-cultural approach to the world where property, possessions, and commerce are all evil forces that must be resisted and destroyed. As a result of these views, Suzanne is comfortable stealing the things she needs to survive. The fact that Evie does not believe in the philosophy underpinning the others' behavior is shown through her behavior in the store. Evie only wants to be closer to Suzanne so she is happy to pay for the toilet paper and give it to Suzanne rather than run the risks of stealing from the store owner.

The contrasting attitudes to money and commerce in the novel are developed further in Chapter 4 with the introduction of Frank who is, in some ways, the antithesis of Russell. Frank is a goldminer interested in status, moneymaking, and prestige: all of the things that Russell and his group (at least initially) claim to despise. Frank's unkind attitude



towards Evie and her belief that he is only interested in her mom because of her money combine to make her more vulnerable to Russell's attitudes when she encounters him at the ranch.

The bus pulling over to help Evie in Chapter 4 is a major turning point in the novel and in Evie's life, as it is the moment when she becomes fully involved with the commune at the ranch. The question is raised in this section about whether Suzanne ever cared for Evie and this question will crop up repeatedly throughout the novel. In retrospect, Evie wonders if Suzanne was unfriendly towards her that day because she did not want Evie to become involved with the group, knowing that it would be dangerous and harmful for her. Suzanne's reluctance, in this chapter, to fully welcome Evie into the group foreshadows her decision later in the novel to leave Evie behind on the night of the murders.

Evie becomes ensnared in Russell's world in a very similar way that Mitch did. Like Evie, Mitch has a wealthy and privileged lifestyle but it does not protect him from feelings of dissatisfaction with his life and disconnection from other people. Russell's way of life offers a new way of doing things that Mitch and Evie find attractive; neither of them suspected that Russell is really only interested in courting their attentions because he is interested in accessing the resources that their wealth affords them. Like Evie, there is a question throughout the novel about whether Mitch is a victim or a perpetrator. Mitch behaves in abhorrent ways later in the narrative but is also one of the people who suffers the most at the hands of Russell and the girls.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Evie offer to steal the toilet paper for Suzanne?

## Discussion Question 2

What factors contribute to make Evie decide to go with the girls to the ranch?

## Discussion Question 3

What happens during Evie's first visit to the ranch that shows that Russell and the others might be dangerous?

## Vocabulary

weary, bureaucratic, mythological, righteous, indulgence, calcifying, perverse, dislocating, enumerating, translucent, dissecting, grim, agitation, damask, aback, raunchy, hurtle, frittering, disorienting, efficient



## “I woke to...” – Chapter 9

### Summary

Part 2 begins with the chapter “I woke to...” which takes place in the present day. Evie wakes up in the vacation home and hears a car leaving the garage. She assumes that Julian and Sasha have left, so she is surprised when Sasha comes out of the bedroom. Evie tells Sasha that Julian has gone and Sasha pretends that she already knows he had gone and that it had always been the plan. Julian is going north to buy drugs.

Sasha and Evie spend most of the day in separate rooms and Evie can hear music coming from Sasha’s laptop. Later, they make a fire together outside and Sasha asks Evie questions about the cult she had belonged to. Evie realizes that Sasha has been researching the crimes that the group committed on the internet. Evie tells Sasha that she did not kill anyone but that sometimes she thinks that she would have been capable of doing it and that it was just an accident that she was not involved in the murders.

Sasha suggests that they go to a nearby bar. Sasha tells Evie that Julian was kicked out of college because he poisoned a professor’s pet dog. They meet a man in the bar and Sasha tells him that Evie was her mother, before kissing her on the lips. The man is disgusted and fascinated at the same time.

Chapter 6 takes place in 1969. Evie had been home for a week since the solstice party. She had been stealing money from her mother to give to Suzanne and the others at the ranch. The neighbor’s dog came into her backyard while she was swimming and she took it back to their house in her bathing suit. She noticed that the boy living there, Teddy Dutton, was attracted to her. She convinced him to give her some of his parents’ money and promised him she would use it to buy him drugs.

In Chapter 7, Evie rode her bike to the ranch to give Suzanne all the money she had been collecting. Suzanne and Russell were really pleased with Evie for bringing them so much money. Evie began to spend more time at the ranch, doing chores and helping out, and often staying overnight in Suzanne’s bed. Evie continued to have sexual encounters with Russell. Evie was introduced to Mitch Lewis, the famous musician, when he visited the ranch. An 11-year-old girl stayed with them for a while and Evie was kind to her. Her mother asked her if she ever went near the ranch and she lied and told her that she did not know anyone there.

In Chapter 8, Russell complained that Mitch was late to meet him and that they had not seen him on the ranch in a long time. Russell sent Suzanne and Evie to go home with Mitch. They drank a lot of alcohol and took cocaine. Mitch and Suzanne had sex. While she waited for them, Evie remembered meeting the caretaker who accidentally opened the door while she was in the bathroom. Later, Suzanne brought Evie into Mitch’s bedroom and Mitch had sex with Evie. Suzanne and Evie had sex and Mitch watched,



then Mitch had sex with Evie again. When they got back to the ranch, Evie was angry with Suzanne about what had happened at Mitch's house.

In Chapter 9, Frank told Evie that he knew she had been stealing money from her mom and that he would not tell her about it if she promised to stop. Frank told her to go check out a carnival in town and her mom agreed it was a good idea. At the carnival, Evie bumped into her school friend Connie who was there with another girl named May. The girls taunted Evie and May threw a can of soda at her. They left together, laughing at Evie. Evie decided to go back to the ranch.

## Analysis

In Part 1, Evie is ignored by everyone around her in the present day and during the sections set during her childhood. Her parents have both moved on to new phases of their lives and no longer have any time for her during the summer of 1969 and in the present day Julian and Sasha have noisy sex in the bedroom next to Evie, behaving as if she is not even there.

In Part 2, this all starts to change and the events that occur in 1969 and in the present day start to revolve around Evie becoming more visible and feeling more seen. Although Evie experiences this as a positive change, the things that she is getting attention for are negative. This begins in the present day when Evie bonds with Sasha after discovering that Sasha has been investigating Russell and the crimes committed by the girls on the internet. Despite the crimes being very unpleasant – the reader does not know the whole story at this point, but it is clear that a child was murdered – Evie is flattered by the attention bestowed on her by Sasha. The fact that Evie is desperate for any attention, even if it involves unsettling other people or participating in disturbing behavior, is shown through her willingness to go along with the lie that she is Sasha's mother and by allowing Sasha to kiss her on the lips.

Chapter 6, set in 1969, continues Evie's growing sense of being seen and people paying attention to her when she takes the neighbor's dog home and sees Teddy Dutton. Evie is dressed in a swimsuit when she visits Teddy and she can tell by his response to her that he finds her sexually attractive. For someone accustomed to being ignored, this gives Evie an unusual feeling of power and authority in the situation, which is a feeling that she lacks elsewhere in her life. Although Evie has been presented as a victim up until this point – in the sections set in 1969 as well as the present day narrative – this interaction with Teddy is a turning point in the narrative as it introduces the idea that Evie is willing to behave in manipulative ways towards others in order to get what she wants; she uses her awareness of Teddy's attraction to her to manipulate him into stealing money from his parents.

Chapter 7 shows even more growth in Evie's feeling that people are paying attention to her and that she finally has a sense of belonging when she takes the money stolen from her mom and from Teddy's parents back with her to the ranch. When Suzanne hands the money over to Russell, he consciously takes the time to turn the attention of the



group towards Evie so that she experiences positive rewards for the crimes that she has committed: “Little Evie’s shown us her big heart,” Russell said. “She’s shown us her love, hasn’t she?” And the other turned to look at me, a current of goodwill pulsed in my direction.”

Evie’s growing sense of belonging and her integration with the others at the ranch is shown through her behavior towards another, even younger, girl who stays with Russell for a while. Concerned about how someone so young ended up at the ranch, Evie extends kindness to the girl who responds with the same kind of hero-worship that Evie shows for Suzanne. This underscores Evie’s suggestion in the present day chapters that she was just the same as the other girls at the ranch and that she did not know for certain that she would not have behaved in the same way as the others if she had been given the chance.

Although Evie has been engaging with sexual activity with Russell at the ranch, she experiences the intercourse with Mitch as more traumatic. Although Mitch is painted as a victim in the historical accounts of the murders, his willingness to have sex with an obviously unwilling and underage girl shows him to be just as implicated in the mistreatment of others as Russell. Evie is angry with Suzanne for putting her in the situation with Mitch but her encounter with Connie and May at the carnival combined with Frank’s warnings about stealing from her mom remind her that she has nowhere else to go.

## Discussion Question 1

What are the differences between Evie's interaction with Teddy Dutton and her earlier interactions with Peter?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do Suzanne and Evie go to Mitch's house?

## Discussion Question 3

To what extent is Mitch a criminal? To what extent is he a victim?

## Vocabulary

reoccupy, mewlings, slurred, obsessive, muttering, monotony, niceties, momentum, cavalier, dismantle, propelled, slobby, puckered, gaping, solstice, cosmic, temperate, orbits, decipher, pointedly



# Chapter 10 – Chapter 13

## Summary

In Chapter 10, Evie, Suzanne, and Donna broke into the Dutton house next door to Evie's house. While they were there, Mrs. Dutton came home. The girls tried to run out of the house without being seen, but Mrs. Dutton saw Evie.

Part 3 began in the present day, where Evie is still staying at Dan's vacation house. Julian returns from his trip with a drug dealer named Zav. Julian, Sasha, and Zav asks Evie to eat with them. They drink some wine and all get drunk. Evie clears up after dinner. Zav and Julian goade Sasha into showing them her breasts, despite Evie's attempts to convince her that she does not have to do it. Julian tells Evie that she should not lecture them for their behavior because she killed someone. Evie denies this, but Julian counters that she told Sasha that she could have done it.

In Chapter 11, in 1969, Mrs. Dutton caught Evie as she tried to get out of her house, but Donna and Suzanne got away. Evie's mom discovered that she had not been staying at Connie's house all summer, as she had assumed, and she was angry with her for breaking into Mrs. Dutton's house. Evie was sent away to stay with her dad and his girlfriend Tamar in Palo Alto.

Tamar and Evie's father, Carl, were having problems, and Evie quickly came to the conclusion that Tamar would leave him. Despite this, Evie liked Tamar who was kind to her. After two weeks, Evie decided to run away. However, Evie would later learn that since she had left, things had deteriorated at the ranch. Mitch had told Russell that he would not be getting a record deal and Russell was very angry. The girls had started taking hard drugs and not eating much, so they were all hungry and listless.

In Chapter 12, Evie ran away from her father's apartment and started to hitchhike her way back to the ranch. At Berkeley she met a college student named Tom who agreed to drive her the rest of the way to the ranch. Evie told Tom about Russell and about the record deal he was going to get through Mitch. Tom seemed fascinated by the idea of the ranch, so Evie invited him to come with her when they arrived.

In Chapter 13, Tom joined the girls on the ranch for a few beers but Russell was not there. The girls told Evie that Mitch was a traitor and that he had betrayed Russell. While they were talking, Tom panicked when he noticed one of the small children who lived on the ranch jump into the swimming pool. Fearing the child might drown, Tom started running and yelling, before pulling the child out of the water. The others criticized him for interfering and said that the child was never in any danger. Tom told Evie that the ranch was a horrible place and he offered to take her back to Berkeley and let her stay in his dorm for the night, but she refused.



Russell returned to the ranch later that night. Evie later learned that he had been harassing Mitch for several weeks. That night, although Evie did not witness the event, Russell told Suzanne to take some of the others to Mitch's house to teach him a lesson.

The next day, Evie realized that Suzanne and some of the others were going somewhere. Evie asked Suzanne to let her come with them and Suzanne reluctantly agreed. Suzanne told Evie to change into dark clothes.

## Analysis

Evie starts to suffer the negative consequences of her newfound visibility in Chapter 10, when Mrs. Dutton catches her while she, Donna, and Suzanne are attempting to escape from the house. She is now being noticed by those around her, at last, but it is a result of her criminal behavior not out of any interest in her wellbeing. Mrs. Dutton's realization that Evie is one of the burglars comes in terms which are associated with Evie's feelings of being unseen. When she notices Evie trying to escape through the kitchen, Mrs. Dutton yells: "I see you, Evie Boyd."

The dynamic between Julian, Zav, and Sasha echoes the dynamic between Russell, and the girls who lived with him on the ranch. Like Russell, Julian and Zav are involved with illegal drugs and amuse themselves by coercing a woman into behaving in sexual ways with which she is clearly uncomfortable. Evie's relationship to the teenagers in this situation is undermined by her own behavior when she was a teenager. In a desire to get further attention from Sasha during their conversation the night before, Evie revealed that she felt that she could have committed the murders, even though she had not been there that night. Julian then uses this information against her when she attempts to defend Sasha against his coercion the following night. By admitting her own unethical past, Evie has lost the ability to be a moral defender of Sasha in the present.

In Chapter 11, set in 1969, Evie finally starts to get the care and attention from her parents that she has been craving since their divorce, but it is tragically too late. Evie's parents are only interested in her behavior and her wellbeing now that she is behaving badly and causing harm to others and embarrassing them.

Evie's visit to Palo Alto offers a view into an alternative life that she once would have desired. Before becoming involved with Russell and the others at the ranch, Evie looked up to Tamar and idolized her for the way she dressed and behaved. However, at this time in her life, her dad and Tamar had no interest in Evie and did not invite her to stay with them. Now that the time in Evie's life when Tamar could have had a potentially positive influence on her is over, Evie finds the domestic consumerist nature of life in their apartment to be boring and uninspiring compared with the things that she has experienced while living at the ranch.

At this point in the novel, a narrative split emerges between what Evie knew to be happening at the time and what she found out later by reading journalistic and historical accounts of what happened at the ranch. This serves two functions. On the story level, it



allows the plot to flow smoothly and the reader to have a consistent understanding of events at the ranch as they unfold, without being limited to the perspective of Evie who was not present for most of the key developments. On a symbolic level, it reinforces Evie's status as an outsider to the commune as a whole. Although she was often there, she was never really a part of what was happening so she has to rely on other people's accounts to be able to make sense of her own experiences.

The function of Tom, the student from Berkeley, is to show that Evie has completely lost her sense of perspective. At the start of the novel, having someone like Tom pay attention to her would have been everything Evie had ever hoped for. At this stage, however, she resents his attempts to take care of her and to show her how warped and dangerous the people at the ranch have become.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Evie's relationship with her parents change over the course of the novel?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What are the differences between Evie's relationship with Suzanne and her relationship with Tamar? What are the similarities?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Tom's perspective on the ranch so different to Evie's?

## **Vocabulary**

identify, intrusion, shudder, wonky, clarity, appraising, subdued, jarred, declarations, pathological, strident, flickering, purview, prompting, exhortations, teetered, gauntlet, absently, flounce, hesitant





## Chapter 14 – “Sasha and Julian...”

### Summary

In Chapter 14, Evie recalls the car ride to Mitch’s house on the night that the murders took place. Evie reached out to hold Suzanne’s hand and Suzanne became suddenly enraged with her, demanding that Guy pull over the car. Suzanne made Evie get out of the car and they left her alone on the roadside.

In Chapter 15, in the narration, Evie recounted the rumors that circulated on the news and amongst the general public in the immediate aftermath of the multiple murders that occurred at Mitch’s house that night.

After she had been left on the roadside by Suzanne and the others, Evie called Tamar who came to pick her up. Tamar took Evie back to her father’s apartment. The next day, Evie found out about the murders at Mitch’s house when she was watching the news. In the narration, Evie recounts the details of the night of the murders, including things which she could not have known because she was not there. Mitch had not been home that night, but the group had rounded up the people who were staying there: the caretaker, his girlfriend, and Mitch’s ex-girlfriend with her young son. Through the narration, Evie details the death of each of them in graphic detail.

The murders remained unsolved for several weeks, during which time Evie struggled to keep her knowledge of events to herself. Her father and Tamar installed extra locks in the apartment because everyone was so terrified by the apparently random nature of such a brutal crime.

Part Four begins in the present day in a chapter called “Sasha and Julian...”. Sasha, Julian, and Zav leave early in the morning and Evie is alone once again. Evie recalls more events from the summer of 1969. The chapter moves back and forth between the summer of 1969 and Evie going for a walk alone on the beach in the present day.

At the end of the summer, the murders still unsolved, Evie moved to her new boarding school. She quickly made friends with her roommate and began to settle into her new life. One day, someone told Evie that her sister had come to visit her. Evie went outside and saw Suzanne. Suzanne demanded to see Evie’s room so Evie took her inside to show her. Suzanne asked Evie if she liked it there and she said yes. Suzanne said she had something to show her and they went outside where Evie saw the black bus was waiting for Suzanne. Suzanne told Evie that they were going to the desert for a while. She said that Russell was not angry with Evie and that he knew she would not tell anyone anything about the murders. Suzanne and the others left.

Evie only ever saw them again in news reports. They were all arrested in the desert several weeks later, after one of the girls had boasted about the crimes while in prison for using a stolen credit card.



In the present day, Evie walks alone along the beach back towards the house. She sees a man coming towards her and believes that he is going to attack her, that she will die there on the beach, alone. When the man reaches her, he just smiles and walks by.

## Analysis

Chapter 14 reaches the point in the narrative that everything has been building towards so far: the night of the murders. It has been made clear throughout that Evie herself is not one of the people who committed the crimes at Mitch's house, but it is not until this chapter that the reader understands why she was not involved or just how close she came to being there with the others.

When Suzanne demands that Evie gets out of the car, it echoes the earlier moment in the novel when the girls first picked Evie up when her bicycle was broken and they offered her a ride. Although all of the other girls were welcoming and excited to meet Evie, Suzanne remained aloof and reluctant to welcome her on to the bus. This shows that, despite her mistreatment of Evie and her violent cruelty towards the people at Mitch's house, Suzanne does have some small element of humanity which she shows by protecting Evie from the events that were about to occur.

However, in the moment and later in her life as well, Evie does not interpret this behavior from Suzanne as an act of kindness. In 1969, Evie experiences Suzanne's behavior as an act of abandonment that leaves her utterly alone once again. Later, although it would appear on the surface that not being present the night of the murders was a blessing, Evie continues to experience it as a loss. Unlike the others in the car that night, Evie did not go on to become famous and well-known. As someone obsessed with feelings of being unseen, the fact that Evie continues to be ignored into her adult life makes her feel like she missed out on something by not committing the violent crimes that the others committed.

Although the character never explicitly admits to feelings of regret that she was not involved, her desire to be a part of the crimes is shown through her narration of the murders, the graphic details, and the inclusion of information that Evie could not possibly have known because she was not there. The words she uses to describe the event reveal how much she must have researched it and seems to wish that she could have been a part of it. Evie initially appears to be an accidental victim of Russell and the girls, but it is later revealed that it was also only an accident that she was not a violent criminal. Evie's coincidental escape from being involved in the violence is tinged with regret that she was once again returned to the realms of the unseen: "Suzanne got the redemption that followed a conviction, the prison Bible groups and prime-time interviews and a mail-in college degree. I got the snuffed-out story of the bystander, a fugitive without a crime, half hoping and half terrified that no one was ever coming for me."

Evie's sense that she would rather be involved in something horrific that would make her feel visible rather than carry on feeling alone and unseen is symbolized in the final moment of the novel when she believes that she is about to be murdered. For Evie, that



would be a better result than what does occur: simply another stranger, passing her by, paying no attention to her at all.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Sasha's relationship with Julian and Zav mirror Evie's relationship with Suzanne and Russell?

## Discussion Question 2

What impression do the other girls at the boarding school have of Evie? Are their impressions accurate?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Evie feel about not being involved in the murders?

## Vocabulary

slurred, stupor, stubborn, virtue, vigil, sunken, glimmer, murk, amended, ghoulish, reeling, scrum, mystified, inhabit, frictionless, yelping, burrowing, absented, descending, particularities



# Characters

## Evie Boyd

The main character, Evie Boyd, struggles throughout the novel with her feelings of being unseen by the world around her. This begins with her parents' divorce, before the novel begins, after which both her mom and her dad embark on new lives that do not include Evie. Evie's only real bond at the outset of the novel is with her school friend Connie, so when the two of them have a typical teenage argument over boys, Evie is left in a very vulnerable situation that leads her to fall prey to Russell and the girls at the ranch.

Evie's intense desire for attention blinds her to the worrying signs at the ranch that the people there may actually be dangerous. The lack of attention from the responsible adults in her life means that there is no one to tell her that the way Russell treats her is illegal, unacceptable, and not something that she should have to endure.

Evie's life is forever defined by the time she spent with the girls and Russell and the ranch, but it also means that she is forever defined as an outsider, living on the margins of other people's existence. The fact that Evie continues to feel like an outsider who is unseen is shown through the present day section of the narrative, wherein Evie is staying in the vacation home of a friend, and feels like an intruder into the relationship of her friend's son Julian and his girlfriend Sasha. Evie attempts to bond with Sasha by discussing her involvement with Russell, but Sasha is unable to find any mention of Evie in internet accounts of the murders.

Although, on the surface, it seems like a lucky escape for Evie when Suzanne forces her to get out of the car on the way to Mitch's house on the night of the murders, Evie looks back on this event with a certain degree of ambivalence. While she acknowledges that Suzanne saved her from participating in the brutal crimes committed that night and, as a result, saved her from spending the rest of her life in prison, Evie still thinks of her lack of participation in the events as a loss. Unlike Evie, Suzanne, Russell, and the other girls went on to be famous and very widely-known as a result of the crimes, whereas Evie continued a life of anonymity. For someone who suffers so acutely from feelings of being unseen, being widely known and noticed, even for something as terrible as the crimes committed by the others, would actually be preferable in Evie's eyes.

## Suzanne

Suzanne is one of the girls who lives with Russell at the ranch and it is Evie's fascination with Suzanne that leads to her becoming enmeshed in the lives and actions of the girls. Evie admires Suzanne and does things to imitate her throughout the novel, including offering to steal toilet paper, dressing from the shared wardrobe at the ranch, and joining Suzanne when she decides to break into the Dutton house with Donna.



Although Suzanne goes on to commit brutal crimes against innocent people, she does show a softer and more caring side to her personality through her interactions with Evie by trying to shelter the younger girl from the worst parts of life on the ranch. Unlike the other girls, Suzanne is reluctant to bring Evie back to the ranch in the first place because she feels she is too young and the ranch would not be safe for her. Later, on the night of the murders itself, she forces Evie to get out of the car rather than allowing her to participate in the crime.

## Russell Hadrick

Russell Hadrick is the leader of the group who live together at the ranch. Russell has sex with all of the women who live at the ranch, including Evie despite her being only 14 years old. Russell uses his awareness of Evie's desire to be noticed and valued in order to coerce her into doing things that she does not want to do.

Russell pretends to have no interest in capitalism and material possessions but his avarice is revealed through his obsession with becoming famous. Russell befriends the well-known musician Mitch Lewis in order to try to procure a record deal for himself so that he can be famous too. When Mitch fails to follow through with the expected record deal, all of Russell's talk of peace and love goes out of the window and he quickly turns the group towards violent revenge against Mitch.

## Mitch Lewis

Mitch Lewis is a famous musician who has become disenchanted with his wealth and fame and seeks out a different kind of life. As a result, he comes into contact with Russell and the girls but, unbeknownst to him, they are only really interested in him for his money and access to the trappings of fame. When Mitch fails to follow through with the record deal that Russell believes he was promised, Mitch is targeted by Russell and the girls and the brutal murders are carried out at his home, although Mitch is coincidentally not present that night.

Although Mitch is a victim of Russell and the girls, he also a perpetrator in the novel because he rapes Evie, having sex with her despite her only being 14 years old and clearly uncomfortable with what is happening to her. Evie's anger and confusion over what happened to her at Mitch's house influences the way she feels about the murders that took place there, adding to her ambivalence about whether she was lucky not to have been involved in the crimes.

## Connie

Connie is Evie's best friend from school and the person with whom Evie spends the most time with before she meets Suzanne, Russell, and the other girls. Evie and Connie have an immature argument over crushes and boys that seems superficial and



unimportant, but which ultimately leaves Evie in a very vulnerable position with no one to turn to when she becomes involved with activities at the ranch.

Evie avoids the ranch after what happened at Mitch's house but, after Connie and her new best friend May are mean to Evie when they see her at the carnival, she returns there because she realizes that she has nowhere else to go.

## **Peter**

Peter is Connie's elder brother and Evie has a crush on him at the beginning of the novel. Peter symbolizes Evie's desire for male attention but the unrequited nature of her crush means that Evie is safe in her fantasies. Once she becomes involved with the men at the ranch, she sees the darker side of male attention and is subjected to things that people her age should be protected from.

## **Jean and Carl Boyd**

Jean and Carl Boyd are Evie's parents. They got divorced before the start of the novel and began new separate lives that serve to isolate them from Evie subsequently causing them to miss the signs that Evie is in danger later in the novel. Jean is emotionally absent from Evie's life because she is distracted by her new-age interests and her new boyfriend Frank, whereas Carl is physically absent because he has moved to Palo Alto to live with his new girlfriend Tamar.

## **Tamar**

Tamar is the woman who Evie's dad left Evie's mom to be with. Evie looked up to Tamar before she met the girls, but Tamar is quickly replaced as an object of idolization when Evie meets Suzanne. When Evie next sees Tamar, she finds her life boring and superficial in comparison to the things that she experiences on the ranch. Tamar is arguably the most responsible adult in the novel in regards to her relationship with Evie, taking the time to get to know her when she comes to stay with them, and driving out to fetch Evie after she has been abandoned by Suzanne and the others on the night of the murders.

## **Tom**

Tom is a student at Berkeley who offers Evie a ride back to the ranch after Evie runs away from her dad and Tamar's apartment. Tom is initially impressed with Evie and imagines that she lives a glamorous and enviable lifestyle on the ranch where she is free from worldly concerns and gets to mingle with famous musicians like Mitch Lewis. However, once he sees the reality of life on the ranch, Tom is appalled and tries to convince Evie to leave with him.



## Sasha and Julian

Sasha and Julian are a young couple staying in the same vacation house as Evie during the present day sections of the novel. Their relationship echoes the relationship between Evie, Suzanne, and Russell during the sections set in 1969. Like Evie, Sasha is often uncomfortable with the way that she is treated but does not feel able to speak out or leave the situation she is in.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Vacation House

The vacation house, belonging to Evie's friend Dan, where she stays during the present day section of the narrative is symbolic of Evie's status as an outsider who lives in the margins of other people's lives, rather than occupying center stage in her own life. A vacation home of another person is an occasional part of their life, so Evie is occupying the sidelines of Dan's existence. This echoes her status in the group at the ranch, where she occupied the role of a bystander to the activities of the others, avoiding being involved in the murders as a result but also always feeling abandoned and like she did not belong anywhere.

## Toilet Paper

The toilet paper that Evie gives to Suzanne symbolizes Evie's desperate desire to fit in and be noticed by anyone who will pay her any attention. Suzanne steals toilet paper for the group because she does not believe that she should have to pay for it. In contrast, Evie has no particular beliefs about capitalism and material goods: she only offers to steal the toilet paper in order to impress Suzanne. This is highlighted by her willingness to pay for the toilet paper and lie to Suzanne about stealing it in order to impress her; Evie is not interested in the criminal activity, she is interested in Suzanne's attention.

## Bike

Evie's bike symbolizes the end of her childhood. After falling out with her mother over a fight about her new boyfriend Frank, Jean demands that Evie get out of the house, which Evie does by cycling away on her bike. On a nearby roadside, her bike breaks down, symbolizing the end of her safe and innocent childhood. Immediately after her bike breaks, Suzanne and the other girls pull over in the black bus and offer to give her a ride and take her to visit the ranch: a process that ends Evie's childhood for good.

## Black Bus

The black school bus symbolizes the dangerous nature of the community living at the ranch and the way they take positive values and turn them into something sinister and harmful. The bus was originally a school bus but Russell and the girls painted it in black in order to show their commitment to living a countercultural lifestyle. The bus goes on to become a symbol of danger when it picks Evie up on the side of the road and again, later, when the bus arrives at Evie's boarding school when Suzanne comes to visit her after the murders.





## Suzanne's Nipple

When Suzanne flashes her nipple in a park full of people, much to Evie's fascination, it is symbolic of Evie's desire to be noticed and found sexually attractive by boys. She sees Suzanne's confidence and easygoing attitude to her body and wishes that she could make the most of her own looks and sex appeal too. However, because she is so young, Evie does not understand the risks associated with sexual attraction and ends up being sexually assaulted by both Russell and Mitch who take advantage of her youth and fear about speaking out about things that she is unhappy with.

## Henry's Motorcycle

When Evie damages the motorcycle belonging to Peter's friend Henry, it symbolizes the end of her friendship with Connie. The friendship between Evie and Connie was founded on their attempts to learn tips from magazines about how to make the most of your looks and be attractive to boys. Evie knew that Connie had a crush on Henry, so when she willfully does something to anger him without prioritizing Connie's attraction to him, the basis of their friendship has been damaged. After Evie damages the motorcycle, her friendship with Connie is never the same again, leaving Evie vulnerable to the overtures of friendship she receives from the girls from the ranch.

## Meatballs

Meatballs are symbolic of Jean's belated and inadequate attempts to reconnect with Evie after their falling out over Frank. After her divorce from Carl, Jean became interested in all sorts of new-age diet and lifestyle ideas including vegetarianism. As an offer of apology to Evie for the way she has been behaving, Jean tells Evie that she is going to make her some meatballs, something that she has not done in a long time. However when Evie discovers that her mom plans to continue her relationship with Frank, even though Evie can tell that he is only interested in her for her money, Evie refuses the offer of the meatballs and claims that she is not hungry.

## Goldmine

The goldmine owned by Frank is symbolic of his attempts to use Jean for her money while pretending to have sincere romantic feelings for her. The goldmine is a pun on the term gold-digger, which is commonly used to refer to people who pursue romantic relationships with others purely out of a desire to gain access to their money. Evie's estrangement from her mom comes about in the novel because Evie tries to point out to her mom that Frank is only interested in her for her money, but Jean refuses to listen.



## Desert

The desert where Russell and the girls were arrested after the murders is symbolic of how detached from the normal lifestyle and values of society the group have become. Rather than living in a town or city, or even in a normal building, the group eventually went feral and started living entirely in the wild, off the grid, with no connections to normal society. This symbolizes the gradual moral breakdown of the group who initially claimed to be interested in peace and love but who eventually went on to commit brutally violent crimes against other human beings, never showing any remorse for their actions.

## Record Deal

The record deal is symbolic of Russell's obsession with fame. Although he claims not to have any interest in material things, Russell is interested in the influence and resources that being famous can bring, which is shown through his intense preoccupation with convincing Mitch Lewis to help him get a record deal. When it becomes apparent to him that the record deal is not going to happen and that he is not going to become famous as a result of his connection with Mitch, Russell orders the others to carry out the murders at Mitch's house as revenge.



# Settings

## Dan's Vacation House

The area in and around Evie's friend Dan's vacation house is the setting for the present day section of the narrative. The setting reinforces Evie's status as an outsider who does not have a real family, real life of her own, or any sort of sense of belonging. She is automatically an outsider because she is staying in someone else's house and this is reinforced by the arrival of Dan's son Julian and his girlfriend Sasha who have more of a claim on the place as home than Evie does, further marginalizing her.

## Evie's House

Evie's house is a location associated with boredom, sadness, and a lack of emotional connection. This begins with the divorce of Evie's parents and the subsequent lack of interest and attention that Jean and Carl bestow on the daughter as they begin their new lives. Evie returns to her house throughout her time staying at the ranch, but only in order to do things like shower and steal money from her mom before returning to the ranch which is where she wants to be.

## Connie's House

At the beginning of the novel, Connie's house is a safe space for Evie where she can feel at home and welcomed, in stark contrast to the way she feels in her own home. This makes it all the more difficult for Evie when she falls out with Connie, meaning that she can no longer go to her home as a place of sanctuary from her own family. Throughout the summer of 1969, Jean mistakenly believes that Evie is staying on Connie's house, which prevents her from realizing the danger that Evie is in when she is staying at the ranch.

## The Ranch

The ranch is the setting where Russell and the girls are living when Evie first encounters them. To begin with, the ranch offers Evie the promise of a whole new world where people do not have to go to school or have jobs, and where they casually interact with famous musicians. Evie's awe at the glamor of the ranch blinds her to the signs that the people there are dangerous. Evie's lack of perspective on what it is really like at the ranch is shown through the contrasting perspective of Tom, a student from Berkeley, who tells her what a terrible place that it is.

## **Carl and Tamar's Apartment**

At the start of the novel, Evie would have been impressed with the comfort and material goods at her father and Tamar's new apartment. However, her experiences at the ranch open her eyes to a more exciting and glamorous (in Evie's eyes) kind of world that means by the time Evie is invited to stay with Carl and Tamar she finds their lifestyle boring and stifling. Evie only lasts a matter of weeks amongst their material comforts before running away and hitchhiking back to the ranch.



# Themes and Motifs

## Attention

The central theme of the novel is attention which is explored through Evie's growing sense during her adolescence that she would rather be noticed and paid attention to for negative and harmful reasons than be completely ignored.

At the start of the novel, Evie's world is defined by the extent to which everyone around her ignores her or pays her less attention than she would like them to. Her father has moved away to live with his new girlfriend after divorcing her mother, and her mother has become so focused on building a new life for herself that she pays very little attention to Evie. Evie's feelings of being unseen are heightened by her unrequited love for Connie's brother Peter, who never fully reciprocates her feelings for him. Evie's feeling that no one pays attention to her makes her especially happy when Suzanne shows an interest in her when they first encounter each other in the grocery store. At this stage, Evie has very little reason to feel so drawn to Suzanne, so it is merely the act of her paying attention and acknowledging Evie that begins Evie's intense bond with Suzanne. As part of the system of indoctrination at the ranch, Russell capitalizes on Evie's insecurities about being unseen by getting the group to pay special attention to her when she brings them money. In both of these cases, Evie is being rewarded with attention as a result of stealing (or, in the case of the toilet paper, pretending to steal).

Once Evie's behavior becomes worse, she finally starts to receive attention from her parents, but for all the wrong reasons. The moment when Evie finally becomes visible to the adults in her everyday world occurs when Mrs. Dutton catches her trying to escape from her house after Evie, Donna, and Suzanne have broken in. As Evie tries to run, Mrs. Dutton calls out: "I see you Evie Boyd." Evie's criminal behavior finally forces her parents to pay attention to her, but it is by this point too late for them to reverse the damage done to Evie during her time staying at the ranch.

In her older years, Evie continues to be haunted by a feeling of invisibility and craves the attention that the others from the ranch received as a result of the murders. When Sasha investigates the crimes on the internet she informs Evie that "There wasn't anything about you" and in response, Evie feels the need "to tell her something valuable, my existence traced with enough care that I would become visible." In the final moment of the novel, Evie fantasizes about being murdered by a stranger which would at least involve someone acknowledging her life by seeking to end it. Instead, she discovers that the stranger, like everyone else, is not really paying any attention to her.

## Fame

The pursuit of fame in the novel is portrayed as a replacement for the pursuit of wealth and material things. Russell and the others at the ranch claim to have no interest in



material possessions and instead say that they are devoted to a spiritual path rather than a consumerist lifestyle. However, the attitude of Russell and the girls to fame reveals that they are interested in the trappings of being well known, even if they are not interested in material wealth in a traditional sense.

Russell's relationship with Mitch – which ultimately leads to the murders – began because of Russell's interest in becoming a famous musician. This is an ironic reversal on Mitch's reasons for becoming involved with Russell, because he felt that his wealthy lifestyle as a famous musician was unfulfilling and saw something in Russell's non-materialist attitude to life that attracted him. Both men see something in the other that they want to have for themselves, which is a very acquisitive attitude rather than the balanced and spiritual attitude they pretend to have.

The group at the ranch does not have any material possessions to boast about, so they boast about their connections to famous people instead. When Evie first gets on board the black bus, the other girls almost immediately start to boast about their connection to Mitch and claim his fame as their own, certain in their belief that Russell, too, is “gonna be famous, like that.” Later, Evie's complete indoctrination in the group is symbolized by her casual use of Mitch's name to boast to Tom, the student from Berkeley who gives her a ride back to the ranch.

Although the imagined record deal for Russell, which the girls are so sure will make him famous, never materializes, Mitch is nevertheless still responsible for the ultimate and enduring fame of Russell and the girls. As a result of failing to provide the record deal that Russell believed he had been promised, Mitch's house was targeted for the murders that would make the whole group famous for decades afterwards. The girls involved in the murders spent the rest of their lives in prison with no material possessions while Evie lived off her inheritance from her movie star grandmother (money which was earned, ironically, through the fame of someone else while Evie herself remained unknown). On the surface it would appear that Evie escaped the terrible fate of the others, but she does not see it this way. Evie craves the fame that the other girls received and rates the experience of fame more highly than the material comforts of boarding school and her grandmother's inheritance that she was able to experience. Instead of feeling that she had a lucky escape from the fate of the others, Evie resents Suzanne's notoriety and her “prime-time interviews.”

## Female Friendship

The female friendships in the novel are depicted as a damaging cycle of idolization and imitation that continues across multiple generations. Evie's desire to be more like Suzanne is shown through her imitating her behavior (for example by offering to steal the toilet paper, although she does not go through with this first attempt at imitation) and again when she first visits the ranch and she wears a dress from the shared clothes of the girls there.



The fact that Evie has become one of the group, no longer an outsider, is demonstrated through her relationship to an even younger girl named Caroline: an 11 year old who is the cousin of one of the other girls living on the ranch. After they had all taken some drugs, Evie notices that Caroline seems frightened. She comforts the clearly distressed girl in terms which echo the way the others spoke to and behaved towards Evie when she first came to the ranch. Evie offers Caroline a friendship bracelet that she's making and admires Caroline's shirt: "Beautiful," I said, lifting Caroline's wrist. "Nothing but beauty." This act of kindness turns Evie into a figure of idolization for the younger Caroline, echoing and repeating the dynamic between Evie and the older Suzanne. Just as Evie follows Suzanne around the ranch and clings to her side, Evie recalls that after her offering of the friendship bracelet "Caroline followed me around like a stray dog." The reader never discovers the fate of Caroline, only learning that she left the ranch while Evie was staying with her dad and Tamar in Palo Alto.

The repetition of the cycle of idolization between Evie and Suzanne continues when Evie starts boarding school and realizes that she is considered to be mysterious and glamorous by the other girls at the school. Evie was initially drawn to Suzanne due to her aloof mystique, although the reader later comes to understand Suzanne's behavior as being a result of suffering a lot of trauma and abuse in her life. Later, after Evie has suffered similar abuse at the hands of Russell and Mitch, she appears cool to her other less experienced schoolmates, who mistake her fears about the murders for something exciting: "My dread appeared to others as a rarefied air, my isolation the isolation of weary experience." However, the reader (and Evie) understands what price has been paid for her experience. Evie's roommate at the boarding school, Jessamine, looks up to Evie "in jealousy and wonder" which makes Evie think of "The way I had looked at Suzanne."

Finally, Sasha, too, becomes enchanted by the mystique of Russell and the girls and wishes to partake in what she feels is a glamor surrounding Evie because of her involvement with them. Evie encourages her in her desire to hear more about the murders because she enjoys the feeling of adulation and being looked up to, perhaps because it reminds her of her dynamic with Suzanne during her youth. When Sasha waits for her to elaborate on one of her answers, Evie feels "Her silence seemed like a kind of love."

## Love

For all the characters in the novel, their feelings of love towards others are really only a desire to obtain the type of life that they believe that person can provide for them. In retrospect, Evie realizes that she had been taught that her life "was really just a waiting room until someone noticed you." Because Evie feels like her life cannot truly begin until she is noticed by others, she becomes obsessed with obtaining the attention of boys in particular. Her feelings for Peter feel to her to be about love and attraction but are really about her belief that if he notices her and reciprocates her feelings, then it means that her real life can begin at last. Later, Evie realizes of herself and other girls her age "how



impersonal and grasping our love was, pinging around the universe, hoping for a host to give form to our wishes."

This belief that a man can provide the life that a woman is lacking is mirrored in the relationship between Evie's dad Carl and his girlfriend Tamar. When Tamar came to visit Evie's house, before her parents had divorced, Evie remembered that Tamar had gone through her mother's things even going so far as trying on some of her lipstick. Tamar was imagining the life that she could get by becoming involved with Evie's dad and when she tried on Jean's lipstick Evie saw Later, Tamar gets everything that she had hoped for when she moves in with Carl and sets up her own life of domesticity, but she quickly becomes dissatisfied with her life because it is based on her desire for material comforts and commercial acquisitions, rather than any real or lasting connection with Carl.

Russell tempts Mitch into becoming involved with the group at the ranch through his promises of peace and love, but he is really only interested in Mitch's material wealth and his fame. Through Mitch, Russell can envisage a life in which he is a famous musician with limitless resources and he uses a façade of caring about Mitch as a person in order to pursue this goal and take advantage of him.

Likewise, Jean's boyfriend Frank is looking for someone who can invest money in his goldmine (a pun on the term "gold digger") and Evie is angry that her mom is unable to see that he is only interested in her because of the money she can provide him, not because of anything to do with her personality or his feelings for her.

## Movies

Movies are used as a metaphor for disconnection in the relationship between certain characters and the disconnection between individual characters and their own actions. The novel is set in California and the spirit of the moviemaking industry permeates the language of the text, highlighting when the behavior of the characters is disconnected from reality.

When Evie, in her older years, tries to share with her friend Dan what had happened to her during the time she spent with Russell and the girls on the ranch, he distances himself from the seriousness of the revelations in a way that makes Evie feel that he does not believe she had truly been involved with them or implicated in any of their actions. Evie remembered that Dan "talked about the ranch with that same parodic goof. Like a horror movie with bad special effects, the boom microphone dipping into the frame and tinting the butchery into comedy." Evie appreciated Dan treating her revelations like they were something out of a movie because it let her "exaggerate my distance," allowing her to feel disconnected from the implications of her actions and her involvement with the people who committed such brutal crimes.

During the meal at Dan's vacation home between Evie and Julian, Sasha, and Zav, Evie experiences her disconnection from the younger people in cinematic terms, observing





them talking to each other whilst “lit like a scene from a movie I was too old to watch.” The disconnection between Tamar’s sense of reality and her sense of fantasy is also described in cinematic terms when she visits the Boyd’s household and goes through Jean’s possessions in the bathroom, trying on her lipstick as if also trying on her life. Evie watches the expression on her face when she tries on the lipstick and says “it was as if I’d interrupted a movie she was watching.” These instances heighten the depiction of Evie as an outsider who is disconnected from the people she interacts with, watching them like she would watch a movie rather than forging true connections or being involved in the story herself.

The money that Evie’s grandmother made when she was a Hollywood movie stars serves to keep everyone who inherits it disconnected from the realities of everyday life. Neither Evie nor her mother, Jean, has to worry about working for a living because the inheritance still supports them. However, this causes them to make poor decisions that disconnect them from each other. Jean becomes prey to men who are only interested in her money, just as Evie becomes further enmeshed in the group at the ranch by stealing the money in order to give it to Suzanne and Russell.

# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is told from the point of view of Evie Boyd, both in the present day sections of the novel when Evie is middle aged and during the sections set in 1969 when Evie was 14 years old. It is made apparent throughout the sections set during 1969 that Evie is looking back on events a long time after they happened, although it is not made clear exactly how old she is when she makes these reflections and whether they are occurring concurrently with the story happening in the present day with Julian and Sasha. It is clear that Evie is narrating the events of 1969 in retrospect because she includes details from sources such as the police reports of the crimes, which she would not have had access to nearer the time.

The use of Evie's point of view serves to highlight the moments where the character discusses things which she did not personally witness, specifically in relation to the night of the murders. This reveals how much she wishes that she had been more involved in the group, despite the terrible acts that they committed. When describing the build up to Suzanne and the others going to Mitch's house, for example, Evie suggests that she can imagine Russell "twisting a lock of Suzanne's hair around a finger and pulling, the barest tug so she wouldn't know if the throb she felt was pain or pleasure" a detail which she could not possibly know from firsthand experience and has instead invented as a way to feel more involved in and central to events.

Evie is obsessed with what other people think of her and how much attention they are paying to her. By writing the novel entirely from her character's perspective, the author withholds from the reader the same thing that is withheld from Evie: any knowledge about what the other characters think about her and whether or not their feelings for her are genuine or just something that Evie imagined.

## Language and Meaning

The language in the novel is reflective of its setting in California, with a heavy reliance on metaphors surrounding the film and television industries. Movies and TV are used as a metaphor for superficiality and detachment, showing when characters are imagining themselves as part of a different life or viewing someone else's existence as if it is a work of fiction rather than something that really happened.

When Evie sees Tamar trying on her mother's lipstick, she notes that she felt "as if I'd interrupted a movie she was watching. Her face rapt with the presentiment of some other life". Rather than being fully present in her own life, Tamar is caught up with a vision of what her life could be if things were different and she was married to Carl instead of Jean.



When Evie reflects on what happened when she first told her friend Dan about her involvement with Russell and the girls, he treats it as a joke in order to lessen the seriousness of what occurred and to detach both himself and Evie from the visceral brutality of the crimes they committed: Dan “talked about the ranch with that same parodic goof. Like a horror movie with bad special effects, the boom microphone dipping into the frame and tinting the butchery into comedy”. Evie’s sense of isolation and her detachment from the world inhabited by Julian and Sasha is communicated in cinematic terms when she said that watching them made her feel like they were “lit like a scene from a movie I was too old to watch”.

## Structure

The novel is divided into two distinct time periods, one in the present day and one in the summer of 1969. The chapters set in 1969 are numbered and occur chronologically. The present day chapters are also written in chronological order but they are not numbered, keeping them separate from the 1969 narrative.

The key use of structure is the introduction, very early in the novel, of the fact of the murders. There is very little suspense to be generated by the question of the crimes because by the time the story reaches the point where Suzanne and the others go to Mitch’s house to carry out the murders, the reader already knows most of the details of what occurred that night. Instead, the tension comes from how Evie managed to avoid being involved in the murders and whether or not she is a reliable narrator.

As the murders get closer and closer, the reader starts to suspect that Evie may not be as innocent as she claims to be during the present day chapters. Hints such as her confession to Sasha that she could have been capable of the same things as the other girls and her mistreatment at the hands of Mitch earlier in 1969 all add up to suggest that maybe Evie was involved in what happened after all. The fact that Evie is chucked out of the car right before the murders occur functions as an anti-climax for both Evie and the reader. The moment that could have defined Evie’s entire life does not occur, leaving her as a bystander in the story and cutting the reader out of the position of insider knowledge just as the most dramatic incident in the story is about to occur.



## Quotes

It helped that I wasn't mentioned in most of the books. Not the paperbacks with the title bloody and oozing, the glossed pages of crime scene photographs. Not the less popular but more accurate tome written by the lead prosecutor.

-- Narration ("It begins with...")

**Importance:** At the outset of the novel, Evie pretends to herself and to the reader that she is grateful for her lack of notoriety and for the fact that she was ignored in the historical accounts of the murders committed by the other girls. As the narrative progresses, however, it is revealed that not being involved in the crimes committed by the group exacerbates Evie's feelings of being unseen and unknown. The fact that Evie may resent not being mentioned in the books is hinted at through her extensive knowledge of everything that was written about the murders, showing how thoroughly she has searched for any mention of her name.

It would occur to me later that Suzanne was the only one who didn't seem overjoyed to come upon me, there on the road. Something formal and distant in her affect. I can only think it was protective.

-- Narration (chapter 4)

**Importance:** Although Suzanne places Evie in a number of dangerous and harmful situations throughout the novel, she shows occasional moments of care towards her that imply that they had a genuine emotional connection and that Suzanne was seeking to protect Evie from harm. Her lack of enthusiasm for bringing Evie back to the ranch with the other girls foreshadows her decision to leave Evie alone on the roadside on the way to Mitch's house on the night of the murders.

There wasn't anything about you," Sasha said. "Not that I could find." I felt a lurch. I wanted to tell her something valuable, my existence traced with enough care that I would become visible.

-- Sasha / Narration / Evie ("I woke to...")

**Importance:** Rather than being relieved that she was not involved in the brutal crimes committed by the group, Evie feels a perverse sense of loss that she was not more involved in what went on to be so notorious and well known. This is shown by her feelings of inadequacy, rather than relief, when Sasha informs her that there is no mention of her name in internet accounts of the crimes.

Little Evie's shown us her big heart," Russell said. "She's shown us her love, hasn't she?" And the others turned to look at me, a current of goodwill pulsed in my direction.

-- Russell / Narration (chapter 7)

**Importance:** Russell knows how to manipulate the vulnerable women and girls he comes into contact with. When Evie brings money to the group, he responds by making sure that she is showered with positive attention from the others, sensing her feelings of



insecurity around being unseen and ignored. Evie only starts to feel seen in the novel once she starts participating in illegal activities, stealing from her mother in this instance.

Recognition tightened her face. "I see you," she called from the floor, struggling to right herself, her breath going wild. "I see you Evie Boyd.

-- Mrs. Dutton / Narration (chapter 10)

**Importance:** Evie's path towards finally being seen and acknowledged by the adults in her everyday life comes to a culmination when Mrs. Dutton catches her trying to flee her house after Evie breaks in with Donna and Suzanne. Although Evie has an intense desire to be seen throughout the novel, she cannot get any responsible adults to pay attention to her without resorting to misbehavior and crime.

The actual moment Russell told Suzanne to go to Mitch Lewis's house and teach him a lesson – I kept thinking I had witnessed it: the black night, the cool flicking chirps of the crickets, and all those spooky oaks. But of course I hadn't. I'd read about it so much that I believed I could see it clearly, a scene in the exaggerated colors of a childhood memory.

-- Narration (chapter 13)

**Importance:** Evie's feelings of exclusion and having been abandoned by Suzanne are communicated through Evie's account of how the murders came to pass. Rather than relying on her own memories and experiences, Evie recounts details which she did not witness but later learned about by obsessively reading about the crimes, hoping to make herself feel like more of a central part of the events by retrospectively imagining that she really had been there.

I think that night they might have been newly struck by the house, faceted and bright as rock candy. Its inhabitants already doomed, so doomed the group could feel an almost preemptive sorrow for them.

-- Narration (chapter 15)

**Importance:** Evie's desire to be a part of the group who committed the murders is shown through her imagination and her desire to empathize with and recreate the feelings that the others experienced on their way to Mitch's house after Evie was left at the roadside.

The second photo was of a smeary back of someone's head, turning away, and I stared at the image for a long moment before I realized that person was me.

-- Narration (chapter 15)

**Importance:** After finding some photographs taken at the ranch while packing to move to boarding school, Evie fails to recognize that the girl in one of the pictures is her. This demonstrates how much Evie has been changed by the time she spent with Suzanne and Russell, while also furthering the sense of Evie as a character who is unseen. Evie



ignores herself, just like everyone else ignores Evie, to the extent that she cannot recognize her own image in a photograph.

And it was true: I hadn't said anything. My silence keeping me in the realm of the invisible.

-- Narration ("Sasha and Julian...")

**Importance:** Initially, Evie's fear of what might happen to her if she reveals what she knows about the murders prevents her from telling anyone about what happened. Although this protected her from harm at the time, it later meant that she was left out of all the historical accounts of the crimes, exacerbating her feelings of irrelevance, inadequacy, and invisibility.

Suzanne stopped me from doing what I might be capable of. And so she set me loose into the world like an avatar for the girl she would not be.

-- Narration ("Sasha and Julian...")

**Importance:** Evie interprets Suzanne's behavior towards her as an attempt to stop the cycle of idolization and imitation that had been occurring in their relationship so far. Suzanne went on to commit brutal crimes, but cared enough about Evie to stop her from going that far herself. This is one of the many instances in the novel when Evie reflects that it was a coincidence that she did not commit the murders, not a reflection of her being a better or less violent person than the other girls.

The times I thought, with a horrified twist, that none of this was a gift. Suzanne got the redemption that followed a conviction, the prison Bible groups and prime-time interviews and a mail-in college degree. I got the snuffed-out story of the bystander, a fugitive without a crime, half hoping and half terrified that no one was ever coming for me.

-- Narration ("Sasha and Julian...")

**Importance:** Although Suzanne was responsible for stopping Evie committing the murders, Evie later counterintuitively reflects that she might have missed out on a better life by not having participated in the crimes. As someone who suffers intensely from feelings of being unseen, the idea of the attention and notoriety bestowed on Suzanne and the others seems more attractive to Evie than the life of anonymity which she went on to lead.

He smiled at me as he passed, and I smiled back, like you would smile at any stranger, any person you didn't know.

-- Narration ("Sasha and Julian...")

**Importance:** The final moment of the novel involves Evie imagining that she is about to be violently murdered before realizing that she is just passing a stranger who is not paying any attention to her. This reflects her conclusions about what happened to her in the summer of 1969 and her ultimate belief that it would be better to have a horrible experience in which you were noticed and seen than to be irrelevant and invisible in the eyes of others.