

The Gravity of Birds Study Guide

The Gravity of Birds

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Gravity of Birds Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 - 2.....	5
Chapters 3 - 4.....	8
Chapters 5 - 6.....	11
Chapters 7 - 8.....	14
Chapters 9 - 10.....	17
Chapters 11 - 12.....	20
Chapters 13 - 14.....	23
Chapters 15 - 16 and Epilogue.....	25
Characters.....	28
Symbols and Symbolism.....	34
Settings.....	37
Themes and Motifs.....	39
Styles.....	44
Quotes.....	46



Plot Summary

A famous painter, Thomas Bayber, reveals a portrait that he has kept hidden for more than 30 years of his career. The painting shows a younger version of Thomas with two sisters, Natalie and Alice, and is missing two panels. Thomas enlists an art critic, Dennis Finch, and an art appraiser, Stephen Jameson, to find the missing panels of the painting--and, in turn, to find the two Kessler sisters, with whom he lost touch more than 30 years before. Though Finch and Stephen initially don't get along, they agree to take on the task--Finch, out of a sense of duty to Thomas, and Stephen needing the help to re-invigorate his flailing career. Together they search for clues to uncover the mystery of the Kessler sisters, which is complicated further when Thomas has a heart attack and becomes virtually comatose.

In flashbacks, the truth about Thomas's relationship with the Kessler sisters is revealed. Thomas was their neighbor at a summer lake house, where he carried on a secret affair with 17-year-old Natalie, who has changed dramatically over the summer, becoming sullen and resentful of her family. 14-year-old Alice also has a crush on Thomas, and the two seem to have a connection, until she discovers the truth about him and Natalie. Several years later, Alice returns to the summer house and meets up with Thomas again. Thomas tells her she misunderstood his relationship with Natalie, which Alice believes, and the two begin a romantic relationship. Alice discovers that Thomas has been lying to her and leaves, stealing a figurine of a bird as she goes.

Alice soon discovers that she is pregnant with Thomas's child. Alice keeps this from him, and also doesn't reveal the truth about the father to Natalie. She gives birth in her parents' home, after which Natalie tells her that the baby was born stillborn, though Alice thinks she remembers hearing the baby cry. Natalie shortly thereafter sells the house and forces Alice to move to a town named Orion. Alice has rheumatoid arthritis, and her condition has worsened over the years, forcing her to be dependent on Natalie as her caregiver.

In modern day, unaware that Thomas is searching for her, Alice's complicated relationship with Natalie continues, even after Natalie's death. Going through Natalie's things, she discovers that Natalie was pregnant as a teenager but forced to have an abortion by their parents, which left her unable to have children. Fiercely jealous of Alice-- not only for being able to have a child, but having a child with her former lover Thomas-- Natalie lied to Alice about her baby. She raised the child as her own and sent letters and photographs to Thomas, taunting him with the child he would never meet. Alice discovers the last known address for her daughter and travels to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to meet her.

In the meantime, Finch and Stephen have managed to piece together the same information and meet up with Alice and her daughter, Agnete, in Santa Fe. Thomas dies before he can be reunited with Agnete and Alice, but Finch and Stephen are able to find the missing panels of the painting. In the process, they also discover that Stephen is Thomas's biological son, which is why he was chosen to search for the paintings.



Stephen and Finch have bonded over the journey, which they also realize was part of Thomas's intent when they find his last letter. Finch, Stephen, Alice, and Agnete began the novel feeling alone but have now been brought together and have each other to depend on.



Chapters 1 - 2

Summary

August, 1963. 14-year-old Alice bird watches and reads a book of poetry in the forest near her family's summer cabin. She spies on her neighbor, Thomas Bayber, a handsome painter. Alice has spent a lot of time over at Thomas's place, discussing poetry and art. The family has heard rumors about him--namely, that he is a wastrel living off his parents' money. Alice overhears her parents whispering about her sister, Natalie. Natalie refuses to join in the family fun and seems angry and distant. Alice likes Thomas for his frankness and notes that he is an observer of people, like she is. Thomas offers to sketch the family. He seems unaware of Natalie, who is beautiful and impulsive and usually draws strangers' eyes. Natalie also ignores him, which Alice finds strange.

Alice visits Thomas at his house and thinks she's interrupted him from a nap because he is disheveled. Alice critiques one of Thomas's paintings, calling it ugly, though he tells her it's his job to make people look at things in a different way than they're accustomed to. Thomas notices her difficulty with her stiff joints, which Alice hasn't revealed to even her parents. Thomas sketches her and encourages her to celebrate her perfections instead of looking for her imperfections. Alice leaves the house but realizes she's left behind her book. When she goes inside, she finds a sketch that's been done of her sister in the nude.

October, 2007. Professor Denny Finch remembers his recently deceased wife, Claire, as he goes to meet with Thomas, knowing she wouldn't approve--she didn't understand the relationship between Finch and Thomas, which is mostly Finch giving and Thomas taking. Finch regrets making Claire feel as though she wasn't important enough to understand Thomas's art. He recalls his first meeting with Thomas, when he was supplementing his art history salary by writing art reviews. At Thomas's art show, he was overwhelmed by his arrogance, but when he saw the artwork, he realized it was justified.

Modern-day Thomas has long been looked after by Finch and doesn't know how to take care of himself. Finch has catalogued all of his work over time and is taken by surprise when Thomas tells him about a painting he's kept secret over the years. Finch sees this as a slap to the face, showing how little Thomas values him. Thomas asks him to help sell it, with the help of art appraiser Stephen Jameson, whose work has recently been overshadowed by scandal.

Analysis

One of the recurring themes of the novel is keeping secrets. The author makes the first introduction to this in the first chapter, when Alice overhears her parents whispering



together about Natalie. She also notices a drastic shift in Natalie's mood and her behavior toward the family, which Natalie refuses to explain. Alice comes across the sketch that Thomas has done of Natalie, implying a secret relationship between the two. The second chapter continues this when Finch realizes despite his assumed closeness with Thomas, Thomas has kept a painting hidden from him over all the years. These secrets all serve to cast people in a new light and make them appear differently than they first did.

One such person is Thomas. Alice initially values him for his honesty and forthrightness; he speaks to her frankly and seems to not hide behind his words and platitudes like most of the adults she knows. She notes his honesty in his artwork and even in the furnishings of his home that seem to reflect the kind of person he is. However, when she finds the hidden sketch of Natalie, Alice realizes that Thomas has not been so honest as he tries to make himself seem. Not only has he been carrying on a clandestine relationship with Natalie, but he has kept it from Alice, all while encouraging a closeness between them.

Natalie is portrayed as being very beautiful and enticing, though she more than almost anyone else in the novel is the keeper of many secrets. At one point, Alice compares her to a water sprite watching over the family, although she notes that there is something very ominous in the way Natalie looks at them, as though she wishes the family harm. Coupled with the secrets that Mr. and Mrs. Kessler have been keeping about Natalie and Natalie's drastic shift in mood, all of these things foreshadow the secrets that will be revealed about Natalie throughout the text, both those she keeps and those that are kept about her.

Another recurring motif that is first introduced in the opening chapters is the idea of unknown heritage. Alice asks Thomas what kind of dog he has, and he responds that he doesn't know, and jokes that he has his suspicions about a few dogs in town and the potential affairs they might have had. As the novel continues, various characters will learn that what they believed to be true about their parentage is actually untrue, and virtually all of these instances are formed around affairs that happen throughout the text. Though Thomas's comment may seem like a throwaway joke, it foreshadows some of the major plot twists to come.

Discussion Question 1

How do Thomas and Alice see the beach in his painting differently? Why is Thomas able to find beauty in Alice's condition when she does not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Finch regret using the words "you just don't understand" to his wife, and take offense when Thomas uses them on him? What do these words imply?



Discussion Question 3

The author introduces two different versions of Thomas in the first and second chapter, separated by many different years. On first impression, how has Thomas changed over the years? How has he stayed the same?

Vocabulary

lingering, careened, vivid, inconspicuous, ferrying, assortment, conspirators, stanza, imprinted, decipher, coddling, bartering, severing, impaling, avian, antidote, frenzied, expertise, myriad, fawning, ritual, contrails, citron, shaft, pungent, weathered, undeterred, tranquil, pert, somber, idyllic



Chapters 3 - 4

Summary

Stephen Jameson mourns the future he might have had. He is undervalued by his boss and bullied by the boss's secretary, and he comes up with lies to get out of meeting with them because he knows his work will ultimately prove to be a disappointment. He remembers what has derailed his promising career: an ill-advised affair with the wife of the head of acquisitions for Foyle's New York. Unaware that Chloe was married, Stephen saw her picture in the man's office and blurted out she was his girlfriend. Stephen enjoyed the envy he felt from other men by being with her.

Not only was Stephen fired, but he lost Chloe, too; unable to get another job, he knew he was a disappointment to his father, Dylan Jameson, particularly since his father was such a respected man in the world of art. Stephen was traveling in Rome when Dylan died and didn't get a chance to say goodbye, a fact which he has felt guilty about ever since.

Finch calls Stephen and tells him about the new Bayber painting. They arrange to meet up. Stephen is excited about what this will mean for his career. Stephen takes along his boss, Cranston, who is annoyed that Stephen has been singled out and tries to take the lead. Finch tells them about the new painting, and Cranston is skeptical about its possibilities. Thomas makes his entrance and Stephen pities Finch for having to act as his lackey.

Thomas reveals the painting, which Stephen and Cranston work to authenticate. It is of Bayber and two young girls, and something in the nature of it makes Stephen uncomfortable. Thomas claims he doesn't remember much about the painting but says the girls did not sit for it--it was drawn from memory. Against Cranston's wishes, Stephen removes the canvas from the frame and in the process discovers that two pieces of the painting are missing.

Analysis

Secrets continue to play an important role in these chapters. One of these secrets is foreshadowed in the conversation that Stephen remembers having with his father in chapter three. Stephen mourns the loss of the relationship he had with Chloe, who kept hidden from him that she was married. Stephen complains that she should have left her husband, but Dylan suggests that people in marriages have to make accommodations sometimes to stay married. Stephen claims he doesn't care about the husband's feelings in the situation, and Dylan tells him he hopes he doesn't mean that.

This conversation can be taken on the surface level as Dylan wanting Stephen to be more sympathetic to other peoples' feelings, but it also foreshadows a secret that will be revealed later in the narrative: that Thomas is actually Stephen's biological father, a fact



which Dylan knows, though he raises Stephen as his son anyway. In this new light, the conversation takes on an entirely different meaning, with Dylan not only wanting Stephen to show more sympathy to a man who is in the same position he was in years before with Stephen's mother, but also hoping that Stephen will become a better man than his biological father was. This shift in meaning also shows the ability of secrets to change assumptions and alter the way that loved ones are perceived.

The introduction of the missing painting pieces is one of the most important plot points of the novel and will provide much of the conflict to propel the rest of the story. It also serves as symbolism for many of the other plot points, which revolve around missing people and missing things (most notably, the missing bird figurine, and Agnete, Alice's and Thomas's missing daughter). This idea will be repeated in various forms throughout the rest of the novel.

The number three also proves to be symbolic. There are three panels to complete the painting; three subjects in the original painting (Thomas, Alice, and Natalie); and three points of view to tell the narrative (Alice, Stephen, and Finch). Much like the panels of the painting, it is not until all three of the pieces from each group are united that they become complete. For example, not all of the secrets are revealed until Finch, Alice, and Stephen finally meet at the end of the narrative; though Alice, Thomas, and Natalie are never reunited in life, but each has contributed to creating and raising Agnete, who represents the best of all three of them combined and provides hope for a better future.

Discussion Question 1

Stephen describes himself as having "an exceptional gift for misunderstanding" people. How is this portrayed in the text? Are there times when Stephen seems to understand people better than he gives himself credit for?

Discussion Question 2

Does what Stephen observes about Finch's relationship with Thomas echo the way that Finch has described his relationship with Thomas in previous chapters? How so? Are there any differences?

Discussion Question 3

What about Thomas's painting makes Stephen uncomfortable to look at it? How does the painting change from Stephen's first impression to when he begins to notice the smaller details?



Vocabulary

clotted, adjacent, punctuated, warped, entombed, frenetically, trajectory, intemperate, obsequious, inventory, synced, undermine, fidelity, acquisitions, credenza, concave, immaculate, superlative, proxy, inexplicable, subsequent, blacklisted, bemoaning, vacillated, genial



Chapters 5 - 6

Summary

Thomas reveals that the missing panels of the painting are with the Kessler sisters. He's lost touch with them over the years and needs Finch and Stephen to track them down. Finch is afraid to fly; Stephen can't drive, which will make their journey complicated. Finch remembers always taking care of Thomas, making sure he paid his bills, had groceries, a place to live, etc., though he resented the suggestion that he was Thomas's secretary. Finch enlisted Mrs. Blankenship to help him look after Thomas. Claire resented how Thomas took Finch for granted and how Finch let him.

Finch receives a phone call from Mrs. Blankenship, informing him that Thomas has had a stroke. Finch reassures Thomas that he and Stephen are searching for the Kessler sisters. Finch and Stephen bicker in the car as they begin their journey. Finch reveals he hasn't been to an airport since his wife died in one. Stephen remembers his father and knew he was a disappointment to him. Finch doesn't agree--he believes Dylan was proud of Stephen.

October, 1971. Alice returns to the lake house to take a break from school and from Natalie. Her parents have passed away in a car accident, and her rheumatoid arthritis has grown worse over the years, giving her a hard time at school and with her dream of studying ornithology. Her relationship with Natalie is still strained and she has escaped into her schoolwork to get away. She remembers Natalie giving away all of her parents' things without asking her. At the lake house, Alice deals with the owner, George, Jr., who has been infatuated with Natalie for years. Alice remembers better times with her parents and Natalie.

Alice sits in a boat that drifts away from the dock, and she doesn't have the strength to row back. It begins to storm. Thomas comes to her rescue. Alice has been following his career for some time, but still resents him for what happened with Natalie. Thomas takes her to his cabin, where Alice finds a model of a bird in a cage, which Thomas admits to stealing from his mother. Thomas tells Alice that nothing happened with Natalie--she wanted him to sketch her in the nude, but that was the extent of their relationship. Alice reveals how much of a struggle her disease is. Alice and Thomas make love and enjoy each other for a few days. Alice finds a scar on Thomas and remembers Natalie telling her about it. She realizes that Thomas has been lying to her and leaves, stealing the bird as she goes.

Analysis

The theme of secrets continues into these chapters, beginning with Finch noticing a hidden sadness in Thomas's eyes in the paintings with him and the Kessler sister. Finch is probably Thomas's closest friend, yet instead of just confiding to him the truth about



what the paintings contain, Thomas sends him on a roundabout journey. This suggests that Thomas is ashamed of his past, or perhaps that it is too painful for him to address directly. For the most part secrets serve to drive people apart in the narrative, but sometimes--such as in the case of Thomas sending Finch and Stephen on this quest--it can arguably be seen as a way to bring people back together.

More secrets are being kept as Alice drops out of school without telling Natalie, partially in retaliation for Natalie giving away all of their parents' possessions behind Alice's back. Thomas also foreshadows that there is more to Natalie's relationship with her parents than Alice understands, a secret that will dramatically change the way that Alice views her sister and her parents.

Despite warning Alice about the danger of secrets, Thomas tries to keep the true nature of his relationship with Natalie hidden from Alice; however, Alice discovers the truth in part because of a secret Natalie told her years ago about seeing one of Thomas's scars, one of the significant symbols/objects contained within the story. In this section, the author also hints at emotional scars that many of the characters bear that may not be as easily noticed, such as Finch's fear of airports due to his wife's death and Stephen's fear of not living up to his father's expectations.

Another symbol/object which is first introduced in this section is the sculpture of the bird which Alice finds in Thomas's house. The bird is said to have been created by Dorothy Doughty, a real-life artist who bridges Thomas's and Alice's worlds by bringing together art and ornithology. The statue of the bird also brings Thomas's and Alice's worlds together when Thomas first takes the bird from his mother, and then Alice takes the bird from him. Thomas reveals he took the bird so his mother would experience real loss; Alice and the bird come to symbolize perhaps the only real loss that Thomas has ever experienced, and the image recurs throughout his paintings, featuring in the self-portrait of himself with the Kessler sisters as a clue to their connection together.

Discussion Question 1

Finch compares looking at Thomas's portrait to feeling like a voyeur. Why do people like looking at art that makes them feel uncomfortable? What is the value of books, films, and artwork that makes the reader feel uneasy?

Discussion Question 2

What does Finch mean when he says losing a father and a wife might be the same thing?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Thomas lie to Alice? Why has her good opinion meant so much to him over the years?

Vocabulary

authenticate, accommodate, semblance, indulgently, blanched, looming, vested, cursory, visceral, inevitable, obscure, unnerving, cordoned, accolades, curators, anarchy, superlatives, vehemently, sterile, intermittent, meager, meticulous, alleviated, retrospect, fetid, beckoning



Chapters 7 - 8

Summary

November, 2007. Finch and Stephen visit Thomas's summer house. They learn it doesn't belong to Thomas, even though his parents have passed on. They discover the real-life birdcage portrayed in the painting, though the bird is missing, and make the connection that it was made by Dorothy Doughty. Otherwise the search is a dead end. They bicker in the house and in the car, where Stephen fears Finch's wild driving. Over dinner, Finch reveals that he's skeptical about finding the paintings--he suspects Thomas is up to something. Finch reminds Stephen of his father. Stephen worries if they don't find the paintings that his career will be over.

Finch and Stephen visit Natalie's and Alice's childhood home to discover they have moved without a forwarding address. The family living there currently is renting, but pay all their rent through the property management company, not the Kessler sisters. The Kesslers left the house furnished, including the family portrait Thomas sketched of them in 1961. Finch realizes there's still a lot he doesn't know about Thomas.

August, 1972. Alice and Natalie move to a new home in a town called Orion, despite Alice's protests that she wants to stay in the home she grew up in. Alice reveals that she had a daughter who died after childbirth, and Natalie claims the move to the new house was to help Alice recover from this. Alice and Natalie bicker about Alice's recovery, and Alice learns they are out of money, despite the money she thought they had from the sale of the house.

Alice's housekeeper, Saisee, tells her that the townsfolk in Orion are notoriously unwelcoming, though Alice meets their neighbor, Phinneas, who has a reputation for being secretive about his past. Natalie intentionally belittles Alice in front of Phinneas, which embarrasses her and sets them off on the wrong foot. Alice watches Phinneas from her window and he catches her. They become friends and Alice shows him her bird figurine. Phinneas enlists her to help the local boy scouts with bird watching.

Analysis

Though only remembered through flashbacks, Stephen's father, Dylan, remains a vivid presence in the text--as much as Claire, who has also died before the story begins, but continues to "speak" to Finch as his conscience. The fact that Stephen remembers his father as he converses with Finch suggests not only that Finch encourages the same kind of growth and introspection in Stephen as Dylan did, but that Stephen is searching for a father figure to fill the role of his deceased parent. This provides foreshadowing for the revelation at the end of the novel that Thomas is Stephen's biological father.

The detail that Natalie and Alice have left behind so many things in their home and left no forwarding address suggests something hurried and perhaps desperate about their



disappearance, which makes sense as further plot points are revealed, and explains why Thomas was not able to find them sooner. Of particular note is the sketch of the family which has been left behind. Even if the sisters left in a hurry, it would be relatively simple to take along a picture. The subject material that it portrays--the family--and the fact that it has been left behind suggest that things have not been repaired between the sisters since the last time the author visited them in the text, and that secrets continue to pull the family apart.

This section gives an example of Alice's connection to birds. In chapter eight, she describes the birds outside as being "sluggish," which mirrors her descriptions of her own depression and difficulty moving around the house. Alice's connection to birds extends deeper than her interest in ornithology. She is often connected to birds throughout the text, both literally--with the bird statue she steals and the bird in her panel of the painting--and metaphorically, with allusions to being trapped inside her body like a bird is trapped within a cage.

Many small details are offered about Natalie's relationships with men throughout the text. In previous chapters, it has been revealed that Natalie slept with Thomas and had some kind of relationship with George Jr., the owner of the lake houses. In this chapter, she is seen to influence the family lawyer and begins dating her married boss at the bank. She also sizes Phinneas up but decides he won't be of value to her so dismisses him, until she begins to notice Alice's interest in him. These displays of casual but deliberate manipulation foreshadow Natalie's role in the family drama which will soon be revealed, and indicate someone who desperately needs to find validation from other people because she cannot find it in herself.

Discussion Question 1

How does Natalie appear different from the other members of the family in the sketch Thomas did of the Kessler family? What does this suggest about her relationship with her family? Her relationship with Thomas?

Discussion Question 2

Alice and Natalie leave their home in the 1970s. How was the world different in those days? How might it have been easier for someone to disappear without a trace?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Alice showing Phinneas the bird figurine? Why does she reveal to him that she stole it?

Vocabulary

abscond, ramrod, ransacking, absentia, moldering, chided, inscription, prototype, residue, jettisoning, adverse, intuit, entirety, clamored, contagion, tandem, dishevelment, counterculture, furnished, perfunctory, fissure, akin, plush, probate, dwindling



Chapters 9 - 10

Summary

November, 2007. Stephen is invited to dinner at Finch's daughter Lydia's house, whom he nurses a crush on despite the fact she's married. Lydia points out that he and Finch have a lot in common. Stephen and Finch have decided to divide and conquer the work to try to find something about the Kessler sisters. Stephen runs Thomas's work through some high-tech machinery, which can trace an artist's signature and any changes in their mental or physical state. After finding something on the machine, Stephen goes to visit Thomas, who has deteriorated greatly since his stroke. Stephen feels guilty for not being there for Dylan in his last moments.

Stephen tells Thomas that he can see the painting has been painted over in certain parts. In the original painting, Alice's hand wasn't resting on the birdcage, but was holding someone else's hand. From the details of the hand, he can gather that Alice is holding hands with an older version of herself in the missing panel. Stephen pieces together that Thomas is less interested in finding the missing panels of the painting than finding the Kessler sisters. Thomas tries to tell Stephen something but can't. Stephen continues to search for the Kessler sisters.

In modern day, Alice continues to live in the house in Orion. Natalie has just passed away, though she and Alice never repaired their relationship. Alice spends a lot of time with Phinneas and his nephew, Frankie, whom he has taken in. Natalie remained secretive with Alice until the very end, refusing to have mail delivered to the house but always picking it up herself at the post office, etc. She also taunted Alice about Phinneas dating other women. Natalie died suddenly, and her last words to Alice were that she was sorry. Alice worries that without Natalie, she won't have anything to fight against, and will give up hope. She remembers one night when Natalie seemed to soften toward her, but the next morning, Natalie became cruel again.

Phinneas and Alice talk about imperfect siblings and how to love them. Alice reveals that she still hates Natalie, even after her death. Phinneas goes through Alice's records to try to help her with her money problems. He discovers that Natalie didn't sell their old home but was renting it out. They also find some old love letters from Natalie to an unspecified person, as well as some old photographs, which reveal that Natalie was pregnant at one time. They also discover photographs of Alice, pregnant, that were taken without her being aware.

Analysis

More clues are being laid for the truth about what Thomas is hiding--not just in his paintings, but his relationship to Stephen. While visiting Thomas in his sickbed, Stephen reflects how sorry he is that he wasn't there with his father in his final days, to be there



for him in his degeneration. He cannot change the past to be there for the man who has acted as his father, but Stephen does get the chance to be there during the final moments for his biological father. Later, Stephen wakes up after a sleepless night and reflects, based on the position he's in, that he's acting as Bayber's double. These clues don't explicitly name Thomas as Stephen's father, but foreshadow such a revelation being made.

Natalie's and Alice's relationship has been difficult for some time, and continues to be difficult even after her death. Certain moments indicate that Natalie regrets the state of things, though she is in large part responsible for it. Alice remembers a few instances where Natalie seems to soften toward her, only to quickly revert back to form. Her last words to Alice are an apology. One of the recurring symbols in the story is a birdcage, which is most obviously connected to Alice, both in the birdcage which is included in her portion of the painting, and in her physical condition which acts as a kind of cage. The birdcage is less obviously associated with Natalie, though she, too, is trapped by her grief, anger, and regret. The difference is that Alice cannot escape her cage; she has been trapped by something beyond herself. Natalie could escape her cage if she truly wanted to, since she is the one trapping herself, but finds herself unable to do so all the same.

Another recurring symbol is that of letters and photographs, which do much to move forward the plot of the novel. It is only through discovering Natalie's letters and photographs after her death that Alice is able to learn the truth about Natalie's pregnancy, the role of her parents in encouraging her abortion, and Natalie's continuing correspondence with Thomas over the years. The photographs of Alice, pregnant, also imply what Natalie may have been writing to Thomas about. There is an intimacy in reading other peoples' letters and seeing their photographs; Phinneas is embarrassed to have seen the photos of Alice, feeling as though he has stumbled across something he shouldn't have seen. Natalie has kept herself distant from Alice for so long that these letters and photographs are the only way to see past the walls she's built and discover the truth about the secrets she's been keeping.

Discussion Question 1

Stephen often blurs Natalie and Chloe together in his mind. Based on what's been revealed about these two women, what similarities can be seen between them?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Natalie continue to make so much effort in keeping up her appearance as she gets older?



Discussion Question 3

Alice and Phinneas seem to have feelings for each other but have not acted upon them, even after all these years. What is keeping them apart?

Vocabulary

effusive, null, inflammation, exasperated, interjections, clandestine, initial, aberrations, inherent, muted, cadre, immaterial, peeved, presumptuous, keenly, translucence, diminishment, consolation, irrefutable, intersecting, tedious, rendering, doppelganger, deference, envision, ferocity



Chapters 11 - 12

Summary

Finch spends the holidays with his daughter and remembers previous holidays spent with his wife. No progress has been made with the Kessler sisters and he is beginning to regret his involvement with the whole business. Finch is annoyed when he discovers Stephen has been invited to dinner. Finch and Stephen argue about the role of emotion in painting. Finch suspects Stephen's crush on Lydia and resents him. Finch searches through Thomas's files. He finds a letter from Natalie with the photographs of pregnant Alice. Finch re-examines Thomas's work from the time that the letter arrived and recognizes the motif of a bird that begins to appear in his paintings.

Finch finds more letters and photographs of Natalie, now including Thomas's daughter as she grows. Finch notes that Natalie still looks attractive over the years but also seems cold. He wonders what Alice's role in all of this was. Finch goes to dinner at Lydia's and realizes he's been set up on a blind date with a woman who works with his son-in-law. Finch befriends the woman, but explains to Lydia that he isn't ready to move on. Stephen shows up with a bruise--he's been hassling one of the technicians into helping him learn more about Thomas's painting. Stephen and Finch compare notes and prepare to go to Tennessee.

Alice tries to explain Thomas to Phinneas. They argue over her refusal to acknowledge how much the truth about her baby has hurt her. He accuses her of holding everyone at a distance, including him. Alice explains her relationship with Natalie to him. Alice recalls giving birth to her daughter. There was a storm, and they couldn't make it to the hospital, so Alice had the baby in the attic with Natalie and their maid Therese to help her. Natalie told her the baby was stillborn, though Alice remembers hearing the baby cry. Natalie lets Therese go afterward.

Phinneas looks into things and discovers Natalie has been sending monthly checks to Therese to look after Alice's daughter, Agnete. Phinneas encourages Alice to go to the last known address for Agnete and try to find her. Alice wants to but is afraid. She doesn't want to ruin her daughter's life.

Analysis

As Finch goes over Thomas's old work, he recalls the recurring motif of the bird that has appeared in Thomas's paintings since 1972, the same year dated on the letter that Natalie sent to him, revealing that he had a child. Finch connects the sudden use of the bird motif to that revelation, but isn't certain whether the bird refers to Alice or the missing daughter or both. Finch notes that the bird is often hidden within the painting, so that one can only see it if one is looking for it. The same can be said for Thomas's daughter. Virtually no one knows of her existence; she could only be discovered if



someone knew to look for her, but she has haunted Thomas's life--and his work--all the same.

In chapter twelve, Alice refers to herself as a work in progress. She is still discovering who she is and what she is capable of. This metaphor makes allusion to the act of painting, and one of the key themes of the novel, re-painting. In particular, this metaphor can extend to the portrait which Thomas made of the Kessler sisters, which began one way, but which Stephen has discovered has been altered over time. The more that Thomas learned the truth about his daughter, Alice, and Natalie, he was forced to paint over his original idea of them to allow for his new vision of them.

This notion suggests that nothing is set in stone, and that the readers' opinions about characters may change the more they discover about them, just as Thomas's view of the Kessler sisters has changed over time. This will eventually extend to other characters in the novel as well, as they uncover more and more secrets that change the way they view each other, and in essence "re-paint" their view of the past. In the same vein, characters may surprise themselves by what they are capable of, "re-painting" their self-image.

Continuing the symbolic use of letters, Alice expresses disappointment at not finding a letter from Natalie after her death, explaining her actions. Natalie is no longer alive to provide her side of the story, but a letter may have given some insight into her motivations, her grief, and made her a more sympathetic character. Instead, Alice must piece together what happened on her own and try to forgive her sister as best she can on her own.

Discussion Question 1

What does "Claire" mean when she tells Finch that he has acquaintances, not friends? Does this parallel Thomas in any way?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Finch assume Thomas didn't want to be a father?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Phinneas accuse Alice of keeping everyone at a distance? How has she kept other characters in the novel at a distance?

Vocabulary

festooned, trill, muddled, giddy, dastardly, precariously, ventilated, forgeries, ludicrous, exploit, belligerence, bovine, singed, usurp, chiding, stingy, rarefied, opt, sought, symbiotic, impaired, finessed, aggregate, decapitated, landscape, beseeching



Chapters 13 - 14

Summary

Alice travels to the last known address for Agnete. Phinneas suggests she takes a plane, but Alice takes the train and then a bus instead to give herself time to process. Alice worries about how to introduce herself to Agnete. At the hotel in Santa Fe, Alice realizes she is alone for the first time in decades. She buys Christmas presents for Frankie and Phinneas. She mourns what she has missed in her daughter's life thus far.

At an art gallery, Alice sees Thomas's work for the first time. She learns that his work underwent a metamorphosis in 1972--the same year she got pregnant--and that ever since, Thomas has included in all of his paintings the image of the bird she stole from him all those years ago. Alice dreams of a confrontation with Thomas and apologizes for keeping Agnete a secret. Alice goes to Agnete's last address. A woman answers the door, and Alice recognizes Thomas in her features. Alice tells Agnete that she's her mother.

Finch faces down his fears and flies to Tennessee with Stephen. They meet Frankie, whom they originally mistake for Alice's son, and learn that Natalie has passed away. They also meet Phinneas, who is protective of Alice and refuses to give any information about her whereabouts. Stephen and Finch explain they've come for Thomas's missing painting. Stephen goes through Alice's calendar and figures out where she's gone.

Stephen and Finch argue about going out to New Mexico to find Alice and Agnete. Finch thinks they've reached the end of the line, but Stephen is determined to move forward. Finch suggests that Thomas only brought Stephen onto the subject because he felt sorry for him. Stephen decides to continue searching on his own.

Analysis

As Alice travels across the country, she realizes how trapped she's been in her life. This ties into the symbolism of the birdcage, implying that Alice has not only been trapped by her physical condition, but by her inability to see the things she's wanted to see and pursue the dreams she wanted to fulfill. Though she is still unable to trek into the wilderness and do the kind of birdwatching she'd want to do, she "frees" herself by taking this journey on her own instead of relying on somebody else to do things for her as she's had to do for most of her life.

During this journey, Alice also realizes an interesting dichotomy in her relationship with Natalie and the "daughter" they have shared. Natalie was physically unable to have a child but had the physical ability to care for one; Alice was able to bear a child but wouldn't have been able to keep up with a small toddler on her own. If the two sisters had worked together, they may have been able to have a happy family life and raise Agnete together. Instead, their relationship with Agnete is split into another dichotomy:



Natalie is the sister who knew Agnete the best but was unable to fully love her because of her emotional hangups; Alice can love Agnete completely but will never know her daughter as well as Natalie did since she missed so much of her life.

Alice's dream about Thomas addresses some of her guilt in keeping Agnete from him. Though Alice didn't realize that Agnete survived, she still could have told Thomas during her pregnancy, or informed him of her "death" afterward. Thomas suggests that he may have been open to having a family, and that their lives could have been very different together. This conversation with Thomas is ambiguous; it is uncertain whether this is merely Alice's subconscious working through her regret, or if she and Thomas share an actual metaphysical connection through their dreams. The author perhaps leaves this purposefully unclear so the reader can decide for him/herself what the dream means and whether this resolution was actually achieved or only exists in Alice's mind.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Alice insist on traveling on her own instead of letting Phinneas come with her?

Discussion Question 2

Alice mentions earlier in the novel that she'd wanted to name her daughter Sophia, which ends up being Agnete's middle name. What does it suggest that Natalie gave her this name as a middle name?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Finch feel disappointed when he realizes Alice and Phinneas are involved, when he's never even met Alice, only seen her picture?

Vocabulary

squabbling, wheedling, jostle, repercussions, extent, anonymity, burgeoning, dense, atone, endemic, verdant, emanating, discreetly, adobe, atmosphere, self-sufficient, clarifying, appraisal, ministrations, lulling, stilted, immense, resin, equated, inevitable, instill, meticulous, pennaceous



Chapters 15 - 16 and Epilogue

Summary

Finch changes his mind about giving up on the paintings after "consulting" with Claire and apologizes for what he said to Stephen. They fly to New Mexico, where Finch discovers his daughter Lydia is pregnant. Stephen and Finch search the hotels in town for Alice but find nothing. They spot a sculpture in an art gallery signed A. Kessler, which Finch pieces together is 'A.' for Agnete. Stephen tells the gallery owner that he wants to buy some of Agnete's pieces and gets her information. Finch thinks they should leave it to Alice to tell Agnete the truth, but Stephen convinces him they have to see things through.

Stephen gets in contact with Agnete. She picks them up at the hotel and Finch recognizes both Alice and Thomas in her. She drives them to her house and they learn she never studied anywhere formally: hers is a natural gift. Agnete takes them inside, where they meet Alice, who has been anticipating them, for the first time. They also discover one of the missing panels, which shows Natalie holding a young Agnete.

Alice has told Agnete that Thomas is her father but hasn't yet revealed the truth about Natalie. Alice confides her fear in ruining Agnete's memories of Natalie by telling the truth. Finch encourages her to do so. She asks him if he thinks Thomas would have made a good father. Finch believes he could have been a good man. Alice shows him the bird she stole. Finch tells her she's been in all of Thomas's paintings, but Alice believes the bird represents Agnete.

Agnete and Stephen bond over her work. She tells him she's always felt displaced, and Stephen empathizes. Agnete reveals that Natalie told her about Alice growing up, but claimed that Alice had died during childbirth. Agnete believes Natalie may have wanted to take it back over the years, but couldn't find a way to do so. Finch takes a picture of Stephen and Agnete together and realizes they share a remarkable resemblance. He pieces together that Stephen is Thomas's son. Finch worries about telling him, but "Claire" encourages him to do so.

Thomas dies. Stephen mourns, believing his has let him down, but Finch reassures him that he did his best, and asks him to help Agnete, who never got a chance to meet him. They go back to the house in Orion, where they discover the last panel. Finch receives a last letter from Thomas intended for Stephen, in which Thomas reveals his true estimation of Finch as one of the best men he knows.

Analysis

Stephen's search for a father is emphasized strongly in this section as he begins to narrow in on the last leg of the search for Thomas's missing panels. He daydreams about Thomas, Finch, and his boss Cranston all in one room together, telling him that



his father would have been proud. These three men represent the father figures Stephen has been searching for to give him validation since Dylan's death, particularly as Stephen feared that things were not right between him and his father at the end of his life. The novel concludes with Stephen successfully receiving approval from all three men: he finds the painting, as Cranston wanted him to do to secure wealth and prestige for their company; he has become like a son to Finch; and he discovers that Thomas is his biological father, who has long cared for him and looked after him.

In chapter fifteen, it is discovered that Lydia is pregnant. This is the third pregnancy in the book and the least dramatic: Lydia is married, an adult, and her child will be born legitimately and into a family that can love and care for it. Lydia represents a sense of home for Finch (and eventually Stephen), and this pregnancy brings full circle her domestic happiness and creates a contrast to the other pregnancies and families within the novel. Yet there is also a strong emphasis on formed families in the book--not just the ones people are born into, but the ones they create, which can provide its own sense of security and home.

Once Finch meets Agnete, he describes her as having the best of Thomas, both in her physical features and in her talent, intelligence, and confidence. Agnete also represents the best of what Thomas could have been. Though it remains uncertain what kind of father Thomas would have made if given the chance, the loss of Agnete in his life has deeply impacted him, making him into a more thoughtful artist and a more thoughtful person. Though he is still not perfect, the impact of having Agnete taken from him shows that he was at least capable of change; he may not have had a chance to be a father to Agnete, but the knowledge of her has contributed to his best artwork and the best parts of his humanity.

The discovery of the missing panels coincides with the revelation of all of the novels' secrets, coming to a head alongside each other. This emphasizes that, although the main thrust of the plot seems to revolve around finding the paintings, in actuality the discovery of these secrets--and the revelations made about each character in the process--are the most important parts of the narrative.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Stephen feel that finding the painting can make things right with his father, even though he is dead?

Discussion Question 2

Alice describes herself as feeling uncertain whether to portray herself as perpetrator or victim in her history with Natalie when she describes it to Agnete. Why is she so unclear? Is it possible to be both?



Discussion Question 3

How does Natalie change as she is depicted through Agnete's memories?

Vocabulary

swayed, fostered, initiate, wary, hues, sparring, doting, disperse, sensuous, wistful, commission, sordid, scruples, pertinent, rendered, spritely, imbued, clambered, melding, langorous, perpetrator, cryptic, mechanics, phantom, regimen, ornithology



Characters

Alice Kessler

Alice Kessler begins the novel as a 14-year-old girl who experiences her first pangs of love and jealousy one summer at her family's lake home. She is also beginning to suffer from rheumatoid arthritis. Alice feels that her parents are keeping a secret from her, and notices that her sister, Natalie, has recently grown distant. Alice has a connection with her older neighbor, Thomas, and develops a crush on him, but is devastated when she discovers he's been sleeping with her 17-year-old sister.

A dedicated birdwatcher, 21-year-old Alice studies ornithology at the university, though her teachers remain skeptical of how well she'll do with her arthritis, which has grown worse over the years. Alice's relationship with her sister, Natalie, has also grown worse, even after their parents' death. Alice returns to the summer home for a break away from school and Natalie and runs into Thomas again. Thomas reassures her that she was mistaken about him and Natalie, and he and Alice begin a romantic relationship. Alice discovers that Thomas was lying about Natalie and leaves him.

Alice becomes pregnant and debates whether or not to tell Thomas, though she ultimately loses the baby. Natalie abruptly moves them to a new home and continues to belittle Alice, particularly Alice's dependence on her because of her condition. Alice befriends a neighbor, Phinneas, whom she loves, but whom she also keeps at a distance. More than 30 years later, after Natalie's death, Phinneas and Alice discover that her daughter didn't die at childbirth, but that Natalie hid her and has raised her as her own. She also sent letters and photographs to Thomas, taunting him with the daughter he would never know. At Phinneas's encouragement, Alice tracks down her daughter, Agnete, and reunites with her. The journey helps her to overcome her fears and doubts, and the ending of the novel implies that she will at last break down her walls with Phinneas and let him into her heart.

Alice is described as being the less beautiful of the two Kessler sisters, though she is intelligent, observant, and kind, which ultimately makes her the more unforgettable. Though Alice has been bullied by Natalie for years, Alice still attempts to find empathy and forgiveness for her sister. Of all the point of view characters, she has the most physical and emotional obstacles to overcome. Alice is often associated with the birds she takes such pleasure in watching, as well as the symbolism of a birdcage that correlates with the restrictions caused by her arthritis, as well as the emotional difficulties of losing her daughter, being alienated from her sister, and having a difficult time trusting those around her.



Natalie Kessler

Natalie is the elder of the two Kessler sisters and begins the novel at 17 years of age. She and Alice used to be close, but lately there has been a distance between them. Natalie seems deeply resentful of her parents and to the family as a whole. Later, it is revealed that Natalie became pregnant and was forced to have an abortion by her parents. Natalie never forgives them for that, and takes out her resentment on Alice, to whom she is forced to be caregiver after their parents die and Alice's arthritis prevents her from working.

Throughout the novel at various stages of her life, Natalie is remarked upon for being beautiful and alluring, and she uses this to manipulate men into helping her. Natalie seems to feel a deep sense of sibling rivalry toward Alice, perhaps because she sees Alice as her parents' favorite, and becomes especially resentful when she discovers that Alice has become pregnant with Thomas's baby. This resentment is twofold: one, because Natalie developed an infection from her abortion and can never have children; and two, because Natalie used to be romantically involved with Thomas, who ultimately preferred Alice.

Natalie arranges to take away Alice's baby and raise it as her own, all without Alice's knowledge. She also taunts Thomas with the knowledge of a daughter that he will never know, and hides herself and Alice away so that Thomas will never find them. To her dying day, Natalie continues this plan, showing only a few moments of weakness. She dies without ever telling Alice the truth, though her last words are an apology, suggesting that she may have regretted her behavior but after so many years saw no way out of it.

Natalie is not a point of view character, so the reader never receives her side of the story. Everything about her is gleaned through others' impressions of her, particularly Alice; through her actions; and through brief letters and photographs that are found in Thomas's possessions. The fact that Natalie never gets to speak for herself helps to maintain the mystery at the core of the book until it is resolved, but it also creates an emotional distance between Natalie and the reader, as she never gets a chance to explain herself.

Thomas Bayber

Thomas Bayber is the neighbor of the Kesslers in their summer home and becomes embroiled separately with the two very different daughters. Although he is sexually attracted to Natalie and carries on an affair with her when she's a teenager, he develops a strong emotional connection with Alice, and the two later pursue a relationship when she is in her 20s that ends when Alice discovers the truth about his previous relationship with Natalie.

Over the years, Thomas has become a famous artist, known for his talent and his arrogance. He pursues various relationships, including with married women, though



ultimately keeps everyone at a distance, including the man who by all accounts should be his closest friend, Professor Dennis Finch. Thomas enlists the help of Finch and an art curator named Stephen Jameson to find one of his missing paintings, a painting he has kept a secret from everyone, including Finch, who has built his career around cataloguing Thomas's work. Thomas remains mysterious about his reasons for wanting the painting found now, and dies before he can fully explain himself.

Through the course of the novel, it is revealed that after leaving Thomas, Alice discovered that she was pregnant; before she could decide whether or not to tell him, she lost the baby in childbirth and decided to leave him none the wiser. Through letters, it is revealed that Natalie actually took the baby to raise as her own and taunted Thomas about this for the majority of his life. In actuality, the real purpose behind finding the painting is so Thomas can find his missing daughter. Her loss has been the greatest loss in his life, and though he seems to believe she was better off without him, she haunts many of his paintings in the form of a metaphorical bird.

It is also revealed that Thomas enlisted Stephen to find the missing panels because he is his biological son. Thomas seems to have made little effort to get to know Stephen in his lifetime, perhaps out of respect to his parents, or perhaps because he suspects he would not be a very effective father. In the end, he makes clear his awareness of his own failings as a human being, entrusting Stephen to Finch's care, whom he deems to be the far better man.

Dennis Finch

Dennis Finch is an art professor who has spent the majority of his career keeping track of Thomas's career and acting as his right-hand man (or, as his wife argues, his lackey). Though Finch is arguably one of the closest people to Thomas, Thomas consistently holds him at a distance and seems to undervalue their friendship, though he can objectively acknowledge that Finch is a much better man. Finch has long struggled with feeling as though he lives in Thomas's shadow, which sometimes negatively impacted his relationship with his wife, Claire. Claire has died before the novel begins, leaving Finch feeling guilty for never fully appreciating their life together the way he should have, instead always looking to the glamour and prestige of Thomas's world. He continues to hold conversations with Claire in his mind, who acts as his conscience.

Finch is enlisted, along with Stephen, to find the missing panels of Thomas's paintings. At first, Finch takes this as further proof of Thomas's lack of respect for him: Thomas is sending him off on yet another fruitless, impossible errand. Many times Finch is tempted to give up but is encouraged to keep going by Stephen's tenacity and Claire's prodding. Finch is initially annoyed by Stephen but eventually comes to see him as a true friend. Discovering a final letter written by Thomas, Finch learns how much Thomas valued him as a person, entrusting him enough to look after his biological son and daughter in a way Thomas knows he could not have done on his own; Finch is the better man in the end.



Stephen Jameson

Stephen Jameson is an art authenticator who is enlisted by Thomas to help find and verify the missing panels of his paintings. Stephen is socially awkward and abrasive, never seeming to fully understand the social niceties that other people live by. Being singled out by Thomas comes as a surprise, since he has no particular relationship with Thomas, and since his once-promising career has been tainted by scandal after he was caught having an affair with his colleague's wife. Stephen does not accept full responsibility for the affair, blaming his desire for beautiful things and his ignorance of her marriage, though later he schemes to win over the very married Lydia Finch, suggesting that his morals are not as infallible as he claims.

Stephen is haunted by the death of his father, Dylan, whom he looked to as his moral guide in life. Stephen feels he was a disappointment to his father when he died and mourns his inability to make things right. Though on the surface, his determination to find Thomas's paintings may seem driven by his desire to reignite his failing career, it can also be seen as a way to earn back his good name and make his father proud. In the process of searching for the paintings, Stephen learns to become a bit more socially adjusted and makes an unlikely friend in Finch, who becomes like a father figure to him, replacing the moral center that Dylan was for him in his life.

By the end of the novel, Stephen takes on a more literal family, learning that Thomas was actually his biological father, and that Agnete is his half-sister. Though Thomas may have enlisted Stephen in this search to help him reclaim his name in the art world, it seems more likely he was attempting to give Stephen connections to his biological family (Agnete) and a surrogate family (Finch, Lydia, Alice) so that he won't have to be so alone in the world.

Mr. and Mrs. Kessler

Mr. and Mrs. Kessler die shortly after their first introduction into the novel and are portrayed mostly through Alice's memory; she remembers them as loving, affectionate parents who adored each other. This depiction may not be entirely untrue, but it is also incomplete; Thomas suggests to Alice that her parents carried a dark secret, which is later revealed to be that they forced Natalie to abort her child when she became pregnant as a teenager. This resulted in Natalie developing an infection that prevents her from having children. Natalie's relationship with her parents seems to have been drastically different than Alice's, supported by her anger toward them even after their deaths. Ultimately, they remain incomplete characters since the reader never fully knows the true story of what happened with them and Natalie and why they did what they did.



Claire Finch

Claire is Finch's departed wife, though her presence is still very much felt in the book. Finch recalls various conversations with her when she was still alive, and still "interacts" with her as the voice of reason in his head. Claire worried about Finch's dependence on Thomas and wanted him to see how fulfilling his life was without him. One of Finch's major regrets is the fear that Claire died without knowing that he finally understood what she meant by that, though in truth it takes most of the novel for him to truly realize that he is better off with the life he had than Thomas's. Claire also continues to impact Finch in other ways, including his fear of flying, caused because she died in an airport.

Agnete Kessler

Agnete is Alice's and Thomas's daughter who has been kept hidden from both of them for the majority of her life. Alice was told by her sister, Natalie, that Agnete died at childbirth, when in actuality Natalie took Agnete to raise her as her own. Alice also believed that Thomas never knew they had a child together, but Natalie sent pictures of Agnete to Thomas to taunt him in knowing he had a daughter he would never meet. Despite this, Natalie seems to have truly loved Agnete and used her as a replacement for her own child that her parents convinced her to abort when she became pregnant as a teenager. Agnete doesn't learn the truth about her parentage until after Natalie dies, and she also learns that she has a biological half-brother, Stephen. Much like her father, Agnete is very artistically talented, though her skill lies in sculpture instead of painting. She also does not seem to be plagued by as many demons as Thomas. Alice begins the book by having a symbolic tie to birds, but she suggests that the birds in Thomas's paintings actually represent Agnete, who was stolen from him much like he stole the bird figurine from his mother.

Phinneas

Phinneas is Alice's and Natalie's neighbor in their house in Orion. Like Alice and Natalie, he guards some secrets about his past, acting as a figure of mystery in the small town, though as he grows closer to Alice, he begins to open up and reveal more about himself. Phinneas and Alice develop a strong bond but feel inhibited about acting on it for many reasons: Alice's arthritis, which makes her self-conscious, but more so the secrets between them that keep them from being fully honest with each other. It is only when Alice's secrets are out in the open that she is able to also be honest about her feelings for Phinneas and give them the potential to move forward.

Dylan Jameson

Dylan is Stephen's deceased father--or at least, the man who has raised Stephen as his son, though it is later discovered that Thomas is Stephen's biological father. Dylan was a respected man in the world of art and raised Stephen as his own, even seemingly



knowing that Stephen was not his biological son. Though Dylan dies before the beginning of the novel, he remains present as Stephen's conscience, and Stephen often uses him as a measuring stick in his actions and behaviors toward other people. Stephen mourns his death, particularly that things were not quite right between himself and Dylan when Dylan passed away. Finch reminds Stephen of Dylan in many ways, and soon begins to act as a sort of father figure to him as the novel progresses.

Lydia Finch

Lydia is Finch's daughter and Stephen's unrequited crush. She is married and expecting a baby by the end of the novel. She represents a stabilizing, domestic force that counters all of Finch's and Stephen's traveling on the road, and her home is the place where they are forced to come together and begin to acknowledge each other as friends.



Symbols and Symbolism

Bird

Birds are referenced throughout the text and in a variety of ways. Dennis Finch's surname, Finch, is also a type of bird, though ironically, Finch is afraid to fly; Alice is an avid birdwatcher and is studying ornithology in graduate school when she becomes pregnant with her daughter, Agnete. The physical recurring image of a bird that occurs throughout the text references back to the figurine of a bird that Alice first sees in Thomas's summer house, which he confesses to having stolen from his mother. In retaliation for Thomas's dishonesty, Alice steals the bird from him. After Thomas learns of his daughter whom he will never get to meet, the bird begins appearing throughout his paintings as a symbol of loss. Later, Finch and Stephen discover that the original bird figurine was made by famous artist Dorothy Doughty and is a statue which exists outside of her known oeuvre of work, just as Thomas's painting of the Kessler sisters (which contains his first use of the image of the bird) is a piece of work that has been kept out of his known repertoire.

Painting

Paintings play a pivotal role in the main conflict of the novel. Thomas, one of the main characters, begins the novel as an amateur painter and by the end is a world-famous artist. Two other main characters also have lives which revolve around paintings: Finch is an art professor who has built his career around Thomas's work, and Stephen is an art appraiser. The discovery of Thomas's hidden painting and its two missing panels compels the action of the narrative, in which Finch and Stephen search for the Kessler sisters. The original painting has been kept a secret from everyone, and the missing panels are similarly tied to the revelation of further secrets. The closer Finch and Stephen come to discovering the panels, the more secrets about the characters are uncovered, until at last the panels are found and all the secrets are revealed.

Photographs

Photographs also play an important role in revealing secrets. Stephen reveals that he has (unwittingly) been having an affair with a married woman when he sees her photograph in her husband's office and says she's his girlfriend. It is through the photographs found in Natalie's belongings that Alice learns Natalie had been pregnant as a teenage girl and was forced to have an abortion; she also learns that Natalie sent photos of Alice when she was pregnant to Thomas to taunt him with the daughter he would never know. Later, Finch recognizes that Agnete and Stephen are siblings only after taking a photograph of them and comparing them to each other side-by-side.



Letters

Letters similarly play a role in helping to reveal secrets (such as the correspondence that Alice finds between Natalie and her former lover, as well as her blackmailing of Thomas) but the lack of letters also plays an important role. Letters are often how people reveal their truest, deepest feelings and can give people an opportunity to explain themselves in a way a face-to-face conversation might not (such as the final letter Thomas writes to explain himself to his biological son, Stephen). Alice regrets not receiving a final letter from her parents before their death, as well as a final letter from Natalie. She also regrets never sending Thomas a letter to tell him he was going to be a father, not knowing that Natalie had already done the same with her own letters and photographs.

Scar

Thomas's scar, caused by a bite from his dog, gives away the fact that he has been dishonest with Alice and in effect sets in motion all of the events of the novel. Earlier in the text, Natalie tells Alice about a scar she's seen on Thomas. Suspecting Thomas of having an affair with the underage Natalie, Alice breaks off all contact with him; when they meet up again several years later, Thomas reassures her that their relationship was never sexual, which Alice believes until she sees the scar and realizes Natalie couldn't have known about it unless she saw Thomas naked, implying an intimate relationship between the two. Without this physical evidence of Thomas's dishonesty, he may have been able to continue lying to Alice, or may have explained it to her in a way that wouldn't have made her run off, and the outcome of the novel might have been very different.

Airplanes

A large portion of the narrative follows Finch and Stephen on the road as they search for the Kessler sisters. A majority of this traveling takes place in a car, since Finch is afraid of flying, which forces Stephen and Finch to spend more time together and become closer than they might have in an airplane. To Finch, airplanes and airports remind him of the death of his wife, which took place in an airport. Finch's grief over Claire's death has caused him to question his life, which is in essence "grounding" him and keeping him from fulfilling his potential. During his journey with Stephen, Finch learns more of who he is and what he's capable of, which allows him to overcome this fear of flying and get back on a plane.

Cars

The emotional difficulty of Finch's and Stephen's journey to find the Kessler sisters is symbolized by their physical difficulties: Finch is afraid of flying, and Stephen gets car sick and doesn't know how to drive. A large part of the novel is spent in the car,



traveling. Confined to the car and forced to spend more time together than they would have if they were flying, Finch and Stephen bicker and bond and eventually become like family. Stephen has been subconsciously searching for a new father figure after the death of his father, and it is partially through many of their experiences that take place in the car that Finch becomes this person for Stephen. Their journey toward becoming like family is a slow process, reflecting the slower nature of traveling by car vs. traveling by plane.

Water Fairy

Early in the novel, Alice compares Natalie to a water fairy watching over their family as they swim in the lake by their summer home. Fairies can be considered benevolent good luck charms, but they can also be mischievous and malevolent, wreaking havoc on the lives of those around them. They are beautiful but dangerous, which fairly accurately summarizes Natalie's character and foreshadows early on the role she will play in the events of the novel as they unfold. Natalie, too, is beautiful but destructive, so driven by her grief and anger that she allows it to ruin her relationship with her sister and taint the kind of relationship she could have had with Agnete.

Nursery Rhymes

Stephen uses familiar nursery rhymes to keep himself calm and control his brain as he appraises paintings. Nursery rhymes are most often associated with children, and are similarly used as a way to calm them down, often before they go to sleep at night. In many ways, Stephen is the "child" of the novel: he says inappropriate things, has a hard time reading other peoples' moods, and often has difficulty staying still. He is also the character searching for a father figure and learns throughout the course of the novel that he has a new biological father and older sister, placing him in the role of a son/little brother, rather than one of the adults of the family unit.

Phinneas's Tattoo

Phinneas bears a tattoo of a bow bisected by a flaming arrow. The first time Alice asks Phinneas about it, he snaps at her, but as they become closer, he reveals the truth of it to her. When he was stationed in Vietnam, his best friend in the army told him about his home town, Orion, named after the constellation in the shape of a man shooting a bow and arrow. After the best friend dies, Phinneas gets the tattoo in his honor and moves to the town, where he meets Alice. In this way, Alice and Phinneas could be said to be fated to meet each other--that their love is written in the stars--since they wouldn't have met if not for both moving to a town named after a constellation.



Settings

Lake House, 1963, 1971, and 2007

The novel begins with the Kessler family and Thomas Bayber being neighbors in their respective lake houses, and many of the important events in the novel occur in this location as well. Thomas's house, in particular, hosts some of the most pivotal moments, such as Alice discovering the truth about Thomas and Natalie, and Thomas and Alice beginning and ending their affair. The houses border a lake and are surrounded by woods, where Alice often goes to search for birds and read poetry. Though the author never has the townsfolk interact on the page with the characters, through the discussion between the characters, it can be gleaned that this is a place where the same families visit often, where people know everything about each other, and where gossip thrives.

Orion, Tennessee, 1972 and 2007

Orion is described as a small town, which Natalie randomly selects when she sells her parents' home after their death and forces Alice to move. Their house is described as dilapidated, with two stories with such a steep staircase that Alice has to stay on the first floor due to her arthritis. The attic of this house acts as an important site for many of the discoveries of the novel, including Natalie's letters and photographs to Thomas, and eventually the missing painting panels. Much like the Lake Houses, Orion is a small town full of gossip and speculation, particularly centering around the two young Kessler sisters who mysteriously move into town. Alice makes very few friends there, except for Phinneas and his nephew Frankie, and the place proves to be very isolating for her, with Natalie purposefully cutting her off from other people so she'll be entirely dependent on her.

Art Galleries

Various art galleries act as the setting throughout the novel. Many of the main characters have lives which center around the art world--including Thomas, Finch, Stephen, and Agnete--so the narrative bounces back and forth between different galleries in different locations and times. An art gallery is where Finch and Thomas first meet at one of Thomas's shows; Stephen's livelihood depends upon traveling to various galleries to search for new potential clients; Alice is introduced to Thomas's work at an art gallery in New Mexico, where she learns he has painted the bird into all of his paintings after her disappearance; and finally, it is an art gallery's showing of Agnete's work which leads Finch and Stephen to find her and in turn finally connect with Alice.



On the Road

Much of the narrative takes place with Finch and Stephen on the road, searching for clues about the Kessler sisters in order to find the missing panels of the painting. The initial differences between traveling preferences-- Finch is afraid of flying after his wife's death, and Stephen gets carsick and can't drive -- originally causes discord between them, but eventually it is through these traveling experiences together that their friendship truly forms. The majority of this traveling takes place in the car, though eventually, through Stephen's encouragement, Finch is able to face his fear of flight and get on a plane.

Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2007

Santa Fe is described as a bohemian, cultured city, centered around various art galleries and other artistic movements. The town is described in more idealized terms than any other setting in the novel, with the author writing that it looks as though it is bathed in gold because of all the sunshine. This is generally true in the southwest, but may also be symbolic of many characters "coming out of the dark" at this point in the novel. Santa Fe is where Alice and Agnete are reunited and Agnete learns the truth about her parents; Finch and Stephen finally meet Alice after months of searching; and the truth is discovered about Stephen's paternity and his biological sister.



Themes and Motifs

Birds and Flight

Birds are a running motif throughout the narrative and appear in various forms. Some are ironic, such as the character Finch being named after a bird and being afraid to fly in an airplane. Some are literal, such as the figurine of the blue grosbeak which Thomas steals from his mother, and which Alice then steals from him. Some are symbolic, such as Thomas's inclusion of the bird as a hidden part of all of his paintings done after 1972, once Alice and his daughter go missing.

In almost all instances, birds represent some sense of loss. Finch is afraid to fly because of the death of his wife in an airport; Thomas steals the blue grosbeak to make his mother feel a sense of loss since it is an item that she treasures more than her relationship with him; Alice feels a loss of innocence after she trusts Thomas and realizes he has been lying to her, and so steals the figurine in retaliation; and Thomas hides the bird in his paintings to represent not only the loss of Alice and Agnete, but of the kind of man he might have been if he'd had the chance to be a father.

The bird in the paintings is most explicitly tied to Agnete, though Alice is also deeply connected to birds. The novel begins with her pursuing her amateur hobby of birdwatching; later in the book, she studies ornithology at the university, pursuing her master's degree. Alice describes birds as being perfect, though one has to look closely to truly appreciate them. The same could be said for Alice, who is not as immediately striking as her sister Natalie, but who possesses deeper, quieter qualities of beauty which are not as immediately noticeable.

Finch's tie to birds also runs deeper than just his name. Finch's fear of flight is symbolic of more than just a feeling of loss at his wife's death. In many ways, Finch has always been afraid to fly. Finch has lived in Thomas's shadow for most of his life, devoting his career to studying and promoting Thomas instead of branching out to discover other interests. He has also never been certain whether or not Thomas respects him or even considers him a friend, which has held him back from respecting himself and becoming the kind of man he wants to be. Learning more about his place in the world without Thomas allows Finch the bravery to get on a plane, and to more symbolically "take flight" in his ability to believe in himself and move on with his life.

Secrets

Nearly every character in the novel keeps a secret of some sort throughout the course of the narrative. Alice hides her affair with Thomas. Finch hides his fears of his inadequacies. Stephen hides his grief about his father. Thomas hides his complicated past with the Kessler sisters. Alice's parents hide their role in Natalie's abortion. The



narrative moves forward with the revelation of these secrets, many of which culminate and coincide with the discovery of the missing panels of Thomas's painting.

These panels are another important secret which is revealed throughout the course of the novel. Thomas has kept his painting a secret from everyone, including Finch, who has built his career around documenting Thomas's work. This is done in part, perhaps, because the painting itself reveals so many secrets: Thomas's affairs with Natalie and Alice, his secret love child, and the role which Natalie has played in all of this. Thomas has also kept his affair with Stephen's mother a secret, which means that no one knows Stephen is his son.

Of all the characters, Natalie is probably the keeper of the most secrets. The narrative begins with Alice noticing a dramatic shift in Natalie's personality which has been caused by her secret pregnancy and abortion, and the resentment this has caused between herself and her parents. Natalie then carries on a secret affair with Thomas. After discovering Thomas's subsequent affair with Alice, Natalie uses Alice's pregnancy to taunt Thomas with the wife and child she has hidden away from him. Natalie then convinces Alice that her daughter has died at birth, when in actuality, Natalie raises Agnete on her own.

Natalie carries all of these secrets to her grave, though the truth eventually comes out anyway. Particularly where Natalie is concerned, secrets generally act as a form of punishment, whether against the person from whom the secret is being kept, or as a form of self-punishment against the person who is keeping the secret, or both. For instance, Natalie keeps Agnete a secret from Alice as a form of punishment for having an affair with her former lover (and for being the one he ultimately preferred), but this also ends up punishing herself, since she has to remain distant from her sister her entire life and never truly forms a bond with Agnete because of her guilt and emotional repression. In the end, she dies alone, when she could have made more meaningful connections if she weren't using these secrets to form a wall around herself.

Cages

A birdcage is another recurring motif throughout the novel which also acts as a symbolic theme. Various characters are "caged" within the novel, whether by forces outside themselves or by their own doing. Alice is the most immediate example of this, since she as a character is often connected to birds, and since she suffers from a debilitating case of rheumatoid arthritis which prevents her from pursuing her dream of birdwatching and from moving forward in a relationship with Phinneas. Alice is also "caged" by her dependence on Natalie, who belittles her and does everything she can to break Alice's spirit and keep her imprisoned.

This caging works both ways, however; in some ways, Natalie is equally caged by Alice. The conditions of their parents' will left most of the money and assets to Alice, which means that if Natalie wants to receive any of this, she must act as Alice's caregiver. This must have been doubly painful for Natalie, who had a deeply strained relationship with



her parents and always felt that Alice was the clear favorite. Because of Alice's condition, Natalie is the only one who can work and has to provide for all of Alice's needs. She certainly does not do so gracefully, but she is still trapped within this role.

Perhaps even more so, Natalie is caged by herself. Natalie could have confided in Alice at any point and asked for her forgiveness; in fact, some of Alice's memories indicate that Natalie wishes she could do so, but feels trapped by the actions she's already taken. This also applies to her relationship with Agnete, who believes that Natalie wanted to tell her the truth at various points but couldn't find a way to do so. Natalie is so overcome with her grief, anger, and resentment that she has built a cage around herself. She is the only one who can let herself out of this cage, but refuses to do so, even until the very end.

Finch is similarly caged by his feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness. Stephen is caged by his social awkwardness and by the affair he had before the book began which has jeopardized his career. Thomas is caged by his sense of loss, which recurs in all of his paintings and keeps him from ever fully accepting responsibility for himself and his actions. All of these are cages which the characters can be freed from, but which they will need to work to do so.

Re-painting

Using his technological method of studying paintings, Stephen is able to determine that Thomas's painting of the Kessler sisters has been re-painted over from its original form. This was done because Thomas learned more about the Kessler sisters and had to re-imagine his original idea for the painting. Where Alice was once holding the hand of her future self, she is repainted to show a pregnant version of herself. Natalie similarly is painted holding Agnete in her arms.

Though this is the only instance in the narrative of a physical re-painting, a symbolic repainting can be found throughout the rest of the novel with many of the characters. Thomas, for instance, could easily be viewed early on in the novel as a lecherous cad who sleeps with teenage girls. This seems to be confirmed even later in life when Finch notes that Thomas lives like a vagabond, moving from woman to woman, not committing to anyone or anything. However, once it is discovered that Thomas has painted a hidden bird in his paintings for over 30 years to mourn the loss of his child, he begins to be painted in a new light. This continues when Thomas has his "dream conversation" with Alice which confirms that he would have wanted the chance to be a father and have a different life, and also in his final letter to Stephen, where it becomes clear how much he wanted to be a father to his son.

In fact, the entire search for the missing panels is "repainted" throughout the course of the narrative. Finch originally is angry at Thomas for keeping the painting hidden, and suspects him of having ulterior motives. However, as more of the novel unfolds, it seems that Thomas's intentions were not so much mercenary as a desire to get to know his biological son better in the process of finding his hidden daughter. Thomas could



have easily accomplished the same by insinuating himself into Stephen's life after Dylan's death, but he shows restraint and sensitivity by allowing Stephen time to grieve, and even introducing a man into his life-- Finch-- who will be a better father figure to Stephen than Thomas himself could be.

Even Natalie, who can be viewed as the antagonist of the novel, has moments of repainting that occur within the narrative. Natalie never gets the opportunity to tell her side of the story; she dies before she can explain herself without leaving behind so much as a letter, and she does not get her own point of view chapter, which might rewrite the way she is viewed by the reader dramatically. However, there are small moments included in Alice's memories of her which provide moments of empathy for Natalie, such as learning about the abortion she was forced to have, and Alice recalling times when Natalie temporarily broke down her walls to be kind to Alice when she needed it the most. Though these moments, perhaps, do not make up for all the things Natalie has done, they allow Natalie to be viewed in a new, more complicated light.

Family

Family relations play an important role in the text--both the families into which people are born and the families which people make. One of the foremost examples is Natalie and Alice, whose bond as sisters is deeply complicated. Alice recalls when they were younger that the two were still vastly different from each other, but those differences used to complement each other. Natalie used to look out for Alice and encourage her, but that family dynamic radically shifts once their parents force her to abort her baby. Though Natalie never gets a chance to explain why she included Alice in her anger against her parents, it can be surmised that Natalie resents her parents' favoritism toward Alice, which ignites her sisterly jealousy toward her. This is made worse when Alice gets pregnant with Thomas's child. Not only is Thomas Natalie's former lover, but Natalie's inability to have children causes her to deeply resent Alice for being able to do the same.

Natalie's subsequent actions-- taking Agnete and causing Alice to believe she's dead -- may make it seem as though she hates her sister, but the relationship is far more complicated than that. Natalie resents having to care for Alice, but she still cares for her and financially supports her for several years. At the times when Alice is at her lowest points, Natalie sometimes shows compassion toward her, which suggests a part of her still loves her sister. The opposite is true as well; Alice knows that Natalie mistreats her and abuses her in many ways, but she still can't erase the memory of the sister who used to support her. She is angry at Natalie, but she also can't stop loving her. The bond of family keeps them together; even when they hate each other, they still love each other.

Biology doesn't necessarily determine this closeness, however. Stephen's biological father is Thomas, but the man is a virtual stranger to him. He spends most of the novel mourning the loss of the man who has raised him as his father, who continues to be the



conscience inside his head. Finch has no biological ties to Stephen, but becomes like family to him over the course of the book. This indicates that these

family bonds can be forged as well as born into.

Sometimes it is necessary for even biological relatives to forge new bonds with each other. For example, Agnete is Alice's biological daughter, yet although the two care for each other, their relationship will have to be built from the ground up since they have missed a significant portion of each other's lives. The same is true for Stephen and Agnete, who only discover at the end of the novel that they are siblings. Yet this discovery also connects them to a broader "family"--as Finch points out, Stephen will now have Alice and Agnete to look after him, as well as Phinneas and Frankie (who are a surrogate family for Alice), and they in turn will be connected to Finch and Lydia through Stephen. Thus, many characters who began the novel feeling lost and alone will now be surrounded with a family of their own making.

Styles

Point of View

There are three different point of view characters in the novel: Alice, Stephen, and Finch. All are told from the third person perspective, and jump back and forth in time. What is perhaps most significant in this narrative are the characters who don't have point of view chapters, specifically Thomas and Natalie. While arguably most of the mystery of the novel would be given away if these two got to tell the story from their perspectives since they are the two characters who have the most secrets, not allowing them to speak for themselves can also be read as a conscious choice to keep the characters as an enigma. Natalie and Thomas never have to answer for their "crimes," and the reader can only guess at their intentions and motivations, particularly since they are both dead before the end of the novel.

Though the novel has a strong plotline that carries through, surrounding the search for the missing portrait panels, much of the writing is introspective, focused on how things which have happened in the past inform the present. This is also, perhaps, why Stephen, Alice, and Finch have been chosen as the point of view characters. They are not privy to many of the secrets within the novel, and so the reader must go on the journey with them to discover things as they unfold. They also all begin as fairly isolated characters, for different reasons; Stephen is socially ostracized, Alice is physically unable to connect to the world around her as much as she'd like, and Finch is emotionally damaged from his wife's death. This isolation causes them to be more introspective and more observant of the world around them, which is reflected in the slow unfolding of the storytelling.

Language and Meaning

The vocabulary used within the novel is elegant and advanced, particularly for young readers. Since many of the characters work in an art-related field, many terms are used within the novel that might require the reader to look them up to understand them (such as "triptograph"). The same could be said for birdwatching ("ornithology"), which Alice is passionately involved in at one point in her life. The definitions of these words are generally not provided, though they can be inferred from their contextual usage.

Structure

The novel moves back and forth between time and through different locations. The novel begins in 1963, upon the first meeting of the Kessler family with Thomas Bayber, then moves to 2007, then to 1971, then back to 2007, then to 1972, and finally again to 2007, where it ends. The 2007 portions rotate between Finch, Stephen, and Alice, though all of the previous time periods are told exclusively from Alice's point of view.

The novel is broken into sixteen chapters and one epilogue, though there is no prologue.

Switching back and forth between these points and view, characters, and time periods suggests that all of these stories are meant to weave and intersect and finally come together in the end, as they eventually do. They are also staged to fill in the missing gaps between other characters' narratives so that the reader is often more informed than the characters experiencing the novel. The epilogue is the culminating sequence in which all plotlines have been resolved, secrets have been revealed, and characters have come together.



Quotes

Nonetheless there he was, staring at them quite deliberately and making no attempt to hide it, as if he could see past their fleshy outlines and deep inside them, into the places where they hid their weaknesses and embarrassments.

-- Narrator (One paragraph Page 7)

Importance: In this quote, Alice is reflecting on Thomas Bayber, whom she believes to be a man of uncommon honesty. Thomas does, indeed, have the ability to look at people and see what makes them work, but usually not for the noble reasons that Alice seems to have assigned him. More often than not--such as the case with Alice, Natalie, and Finch--Thomas uses these insights to manipulate people into doing what he wants them to do. Thomas's own weakness is his ability to see people but his inability to truly connect with them, which leaves him ultimately alone in the end.

Birds are perfect. Yet most people completely overlook them.

-- Alice (One paragraph Page 13)

Importance: Alice bears a strong connection with birds. Not only is she a budding ornithologist with a deep interest in bird watching, but her disease has often left her feeling like a bird trapped in a cage, unable to escape. Alice believes birds to be perfect and mourns that they are overlooked, much like she has often been overlooked in favor of her prettier, more striking sister. Yet, much like birds, the closer one looks and the more one observes, the more one realizes how truly remarkable Alice is.

I suppose I considered it a seminal piece of work at one time. But seminal is too close to sentimental, and that never serves an artist well.

-- Thomas (Chapter 4 paragraph Page 57)

Importance: Thomas underplays the importance of the painting and the people in it to his life, pretending to remember little about the Kessler sisters, though in fact they played a pivotal role in shaping his fate. Stephen can tell by examining the portrait that it was hung at some point, suggesting that Thomas has not always kept it hidden away, and that it means more to him than just a long-lost painting he's forgotten about. Though decades have passed, Thomas is still keeping secrets, still unable to be entirely honest, though his work is often credited for being raw and sincere. Thomas is only brave enough to tell the truth in his paintings.

The work always gave the artist away, no different than the tell of the gambler.

-- Narrator (Three paragraph Page 45)

Importance: Many times throughout the novel, paintings, sketches, sculptures, and photographs reveal some secret that the artist has been keeping. Thomas's painting reveals the truth about his relationship with the Kessler sisters and his missing daughter. The photographs sent by Natalie reveal that Alice had a child and that Natalie took that child to raise as her own. Agnete's signature on her artwork leads Finch and



Stephen to find her, which in turn leads Finch to piece together the relationship between Agnete and Stephen and why Thomas has brought them all together.

That is the small space where I hide, Denny... That thin line between the painting and the public persona, that's where I exist. That's what no one will ever see.

-- Thomas (Five paragraph Page 63)

Importance: Thomas's work contains many of his secrets, but even at the end of the novel, he remains a mystery. Of the three people in the painting, only Alice gets a chance to tell her side of the story; the reader is made aware of what Thomas and Natalie have done, but both die before they get a chance to explain their own motives. All that remains of Thomas and Natalie is in their letters and the portrait itself, which must do all the explaining for their actions, for good and for bad.

Evidently, there's quite a bit I don't know when it comes to Thomas.

-- Finch (Seven paragraph Page 117)

Importance: A person's secrets impact not only himself, but all of those around him. This quote shows how Finch has been impacted by Thomas's secrets. He is probably the person closest to Thomas and has devoted his life to cataloguing and critiquing his work; in some ways, Thomas withholding his work is more painful than Thomas withholding his friendship, since that is where the real basis of his connection with Finch lied. It also belittles all of Finch's efforts, making the work he has devoted his life to thus far incomplete and in many ways pointless. Arguably, the reason Thomas enlists him for this quest to find the Kessler sisters is to offer him not only a complete access to his life's work, but also to give him insight into Thomas's life in a way he felt he couldn't offer when he was still alive.

The baby had cast a spell over her body, fending off her familiar symptoms with a protective charm. What arrived in the aftermath surpassed the worst her arthritis had previously offered up: the physical jabs and volleys it threw, her intimate relationship with exhaustion, the detours her illness took when new drugs set up roadblocks. This pain was different, even from the grief that still hugged her in its arms after her parents' death. This pain was fresh and searing and made a home for itself in her very core.

-- Narrator/Alice (Eight paragraph Paragraph 3)

Importance: Alice describes her physical symptoms caused by her daughter and her daughter's death, but she could also very well be describing the emotional aftermath. When she was pregnant with her daughter, she was happier than she had ever been before, which allowed her to temporarily forget about her physical condition and her strained relationship with Natalie; losing her daughter took a physical toll on her body, but was also an emotional hardship even worse than losing her parents, one from which she may never fully recover.

I'm an only child. Us only children, we haven't mastered the knack of sibling rivalry for some reason.

-- Phinneas (Eight paragraph Page 124)



Importance: Here, Phinneas references the sibling rivalry between Natalie and Alice, which plays a major role in their relationship and in the plot as a whole. They are the only siblings portrayed in the actual pages of novel--though, interestingly, it turns out that Phinneas is lying here, as he later reveals that he has a sister with whom he has a strained relationship, though their interactions are only discussed, never seen. All of the other main characters are only children, with the exception of Stephen and Agnete, who believe themselves to be only children, but discover throughout the course of the novel that they are actually half-siblings.

Only in the panel of the triptych was the door to the cage slightly ajar, as if something precious had flown away.

-- Narrator (Nine paragraph Page 146)

Importance: This quote ties to the symbolism of Alice and Agnete as birds. Thomas originally took the figurine of the bird from his mother because he wanted her to experience real grief at something being taken from her; when Alice takes the bird, she wants him to feel the same. In truth, Alice's loss is felt by Thomas more than the loss of the bird, particularly after he learns that he has a daughter he will never get a chance to meet, Agnete. Much of Thomas's life, things have come very easily to him: he is handsome, talented, and was raised in a privileged family. The loss of Alice and Agnete is the greatest hardship he's had to bear and has haunted him over the years. This feeling is captured by the empty cage, which likewise haunts his painting.

Let them gawk at the deformities of her hands, the swan neck of her fingers, the dinner fork of her wrists, such whimsical descriptions of her state of disrepair. All that was tolerable when she could pretend a pristine interior, unblemished by the dark spot of a nasty thought, a malignant wish.

-- Narrator (Twelve paragraph Page 192)

Importance: Alice has often thought of her arthritis as a kind of cage; she knows she is stared at because of it, judged for it, but so long as she can put up the surface of pretending she is irreproachable on the inside, then she does not feel quite so trapped. Part of why she wants to seem above having such feelings is because she associates them with Natalie. Natalie has been twisted by her anger and grief into someone poisonous to everyone around her. Alice feels many of the same things, but is afraid of letting them cripple her life as they have done her sister's. Though Alice has been physically caged, Natalie has been emotionally caged, and Alice does not want to suffer the same fate.

What is it about birds? People envy them the ability of flight, of course, but it must be more. Maybe not just their ability to fly, but to fly away from, is that it? To leave trouble behind, be free from boundaries, from expectations.

-- Gallery Owner (Thirteen paragraph Page 222)

Importance: This chapter is the first time that Alice has been able to travel in three decades, and the first time she's been able to be on her own. This causes Alice to think



about many of her old dreams that have long been unfulfilled, such as birdwatching in remote areas and discovering rare species. This quote also qualifies that it's not just the ability to fly that makes Alice wish she were a bird, but their ability to fly away from difficult situations: her awkward relationship with her sister, her loneliness, her physical condition. At the same time, this journey represents the first time that Alice is getting to actively "fly" toward something on her own--to make her own decisions instead of letting someone else decide her fate for her.

Her talent was obvious. She had her father's imagination, his gift for seeing not only what was there but the space taken up by what was not, and melding them into what could be. Her work had a fresh, playful quality that excited him. The fact he'd never heard of her, never seen any of her pieces, reminded him how isolated he'd become, so many of his years focused on only one subject--Bayber--to the exclusion off anything else. He was saddened to think of the talent he'd missed. All the up-and-coming artists he hadn't seen.

-- Narrator (Fifteen paragraph Page 265)

Importance: Here, Finch reflects on seeing Agnete's work. The quote expresses Finch's regret at spending so much of his time focused solely on Thomas's work and being at his beck and call; yet there is also a sense of hope embedded in the words. Finch may have lost many years devoted to only Thomas's paintings, but he discovers here that he is still able to become excited about art, and artists besides just Thomas. This parallels some of the regret present in the rest of the novel; Alice may have missed a good portion of Agnete's life, but they have found each other now and will be able to make up for lost time together. The same can be said for Alice's fear of starting a relationship with Phinneas, and the early stalling of Stephen's career because of a bad decision. All are things which can be redressed, or "re-painted," as they go on to lead the rest of their lives.