

The Guineveres Study Guide

The Guineveres by Sarah Domet

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Plot Summary

The following version version of the book was used to create this guide: Domet, Sarah. *The Guineveres*. Flatiron Books, 2016.

The Guineveres, by Sarah Domet, tells the story of four girls, all named Guinevere, who grow up in a convent as the result of being left there by their families for various reasons. As they live lives ordered by the rhythms and routines of the nuns, The Guineveres discover family in one another and learn lessons faith and what it means to be happy.

As the book begins, Vere, who is the narrator, explains that the four girls all named Guinevere came to live at the convent over a period of two years. Vere, Ginny, Win, and Gwen, as they are individually called, form a bond over their shared name and decide they want to escape the convent to live normal lives.

They build a float for the Assumption of Mary parade and hide inside of it, but they are caught before they can run away. They are sentenced to serve out their punishment by helping the nurses in the Sick Ward. While they are working there, five soldiers who were injured in the war are brought in. They are all unconscious and their identities are unknown.

Ginny tells the story of her arrival at the convent. She is there as a result of her father killing her mother after discovering her with another man. Ginny's father was sent to jail. Ginny's brother was able to live with their aunt, but Ginny was sent to the convent. She still loves her father and chooses not to judge him because of one mistake.

When one of the soldiers wakes up and is able to tell the nuns that his name is Jack Murr and he goes by Junior, his family comes to get him. Another girl, Ebbie, who has also been working in the Sick Ward goes home with his family to help with his recovery. The Guineveres are upset that she is able to leave the convent before turning 18.

After attending mass during which Father James preaches about miracles, Ginny comes up with the idea that each of The Guineveres might go home with the one of the remaining soldiers when they wake the same way that Ebbie went home with Junior's family. The girls start spending a great deal of time taking care of the soldiers and trying to wake them up.

Gwen decides that each of The Guineveres should choose one soldier as her own so that they can concentrate their efforts and prayers on one man, sort of like patron saints. She reasons that it will also make it easier to know which Guinevere will get to go home with which boy as they wake. The Guineveres each choose a soldier and talk to one another what their lives will be like with their soldiers when they leave the convent.



The Guineveres talk about what they will confess in the monthly penance service and Gwen decides they should all kiss their boys and confess that. Vere is unable to go through with kissing her boy after she discovers he has an erection and it makes her uncomfortable.

At Thanksgiving, Father James preaches while drunk. Afterward, while The Guineveres work on paintings while waiting for Thanksgiving dinner to be ready, Ginny says she is in love with her boy. Reggie, another girl who lives at the convent, tries to join them while they paint and they turn her away. The other girls say The Guineveres are just unhappy because their parents did not want them.

Sister Fran calls The Guineveres to her office and tells them their punishment time is over. She informs them that they have been chosen as altar servers, which is exciting because only boys have been allowed to do this in the past. They will serve at regular church services and at the Wednesday service in the Sick Ward.

Father James trains The Guineveres in their duties as altar servers. During their first mass as altar servers a man reads the petitions and mentions a missing soldier named Peter Drexel whose parents are part of the congregation. After the service Ginny asks Father James about Peter Drexel and he tells them that his fate is unknown and that not all soldiers were involved in the war willingly.

On Mail Distribution Day The Guineveres do not receive any letters, but watch as the other girls get letters and Christmas cards.

On Wednesday, The Guineveres serve at the mass in the Sick Ward. Father James serves the elderly patients communion, but does not serve the soldiers because they do not know what faith they follow or if they have confessed recently.

The Guineveres find duffels belonging to their boys in the storage room of the Sick Ward. They each take a memento from their respective boy's bag, except for Vere who is interrupted before she can look in her boy's bag.

Win tells the story of how she came to the convent. Win's mother brought her to the convent after she kissed a girl and then punched her. Win's mother was not angry about Win punching the girl, but when she found out that Win kissed her first, she decided to take Win to the convent even though her grandparents did not want her to go.

The Guineveres go to the library and try to find information that might lead them to the identities of their boys. They discover that a symbol on a box in Ginny's boy's bag is a pagan symbol, so they think they should baptize their boys.

Two weeks before Christmas The Guineveres get ready for mass and can see that Father James has been drinking again. In the service Father James asks the congregation to write letters to the Veterans Administration on behalf of Peter Drexel's parents asking that they look into his whereabouts.



After the service The Guineveres go into Father James' office and find that he is hiding a bottle of wine under his robes. Gwen grabs the bottle and drinks from it, then passes it around to the other Guineveres. They are drunk when they walk back toward the convent. They decide to visit their boys and are told that they cannot go in because some parents have come to see if any of the boys is their son. None of them belongs to the couple.

The Guineveres baptize their boys as the nuns walk the couple out. Vere notices that her boy gets an erection when she lays her head on his chest. Gwen sees and teases Vere.

On the night of the Christmas Eve Midnight Vigil The Guineveres find Father James passed out drunk in his office. They wake him and he preaches by candlelight so the congregation does not see that he is drunk.

After the service The Guineveres sit on a hill and drink a bottle of whiskey they took from Father James. When they are very drunk they go into the Sick Ward and lay down with their boys. In the morning Ginny is discovered passed out by a radiator. She does not tell Sister Fran that the other Guineveres were also drinking or that she got the whiskey from Father James. Ginny is not at dinner and is gone for several days.

Ginny returns and tells The Guineveres she was serving her punishment in the Penance Room on the third floor. While there she found a staircase that leads from the third floor to the Sick Ward. The girls decide to use it to sneak in and see their boys during the night. Ginny also says that Father James owes them and that they should blackmail him into taking them to the Veterans Administration to try to find out more about their boys.

When the girls use the stairwell to sneak into the Sick Ward during the night they find that the door automatically locks behind them so they are forced to sneak past Sister Fran's office to get back to the Bunk Room. They stop in her office to call Junior's house to see if he knows anything about their boys. They find out that Junior committed suicide and Ebbie left.

Father James sends a note to Sister Fran asking for The Guineveres to come for further training. The girls believe he is going to take them to the Veterans Administration, but he is passed out drunk when they get there. Ginny is desperate to leave and frantically searches his office for his car keys.

Ginny's boy dies while Father James is on hiatus. The Guineveres continue to sneak into the Sick Ward. One night Vere's boy briefly wakes up but she is too startled to remember to ask his name. He slips back into a coma.

On the morning before Easter The Guineveres wake up to find Ginny gone. Father James tells them she has been sent to the Penance Room because she was found naked in her boys empty bed. The nuns are worried about her mental state. As the girls walk back from Father James' office Ginny steps out of the bushes looking disheveled and acting erratically. She begs The Guineveres to run away with her, but they refuse.



Ginny leaves on her own and is found. Sister Fran sends her away and The Guineveres do not see her again.

Gwen tells her story. As a child her father paid a great deal of attention to her and told her that she was the prettiest girl. He bought her secret gifts and took her for drives where they would hold hands and talk. When Gwen starts at a new school the other girls do not like her because she is pretty. Three boys start to pay a lot of attention to her. One day they convince her to come with them after school and they rape her. When she tells her father, he kisses her on the lips. A few days later he takes her to the convent and tells her that sometimes men cannot help what they want.

The Guineveres write letters to the Veterans Administration and Sister Fran mails them. Guinevere's boy's facial bandages are removed and she discovers that his face is a ruin. She begins to lose interest in him.

After mass one day The Guineveres can again tell that Father James has been drinking. Gwen sits very close to Father James and tells the other girls to leave them alone. They reluctantly leave.

Vere wakes up one night and discovers that Gwen is not in her bed. When she asks Gwen about it the next day Gwen claims she was in the bathroom, but is very defensive.

Win is called to Sister Fran's office. Vere and Gwen see her standing with a woman who looks like an older version of Win. Win is gone that night.

Vere and Gwen receive form letters from the Veterans Administration. Gwen says that they do not care about the soldiers, but Vere remains hopeful.

Sister Fran discovers that Gwen is pregnant and calls Vere to her office where she is questioning Gwen. Gwen admits that she had sex with Vere's soldier and the baby is his. Vere forgives the baby, but tells Gwen she has to forgive herself.

Vere tells her story. She grew up mostly homeless and her mother was mentally ill. Her mother was convinced their family was cursed and that she would die before she turned 33. When that did not happen she claimed to have a vision that Vere needed to get an education. She took Vere to the convent and left her there.

Vere continues to be friends with Gwen and helps her to alter her clothing for her pregnancy. However, they no longer talk very much. Gwen is moved to the Penance Room in her eighth month and gives birth to the baby in the Sick Ward. After that, she is sent away and leaves the baby behind.

Vere is given the chance to go and live with a family that has agreed to take her in, but she refuses saying that she wants to stay at the convent and care for the baby. Sister Fran allows her to do so.



Vere and the baby, who she names Guinevere, move into the Penance Room. Vere has written The Guineveres as the child's revival story so that she will have answers about her life. Vere still loves her boy and works in the kitchen at the convent.



The Assumption - Sacrifice

Summary

In *The Assumption*, Vere explains that The Guineveres arrived at the convent over a period of two years and now wish to escape. They hide in a parade float they have built to be pulled by one of the nuns in the Assumption of Mary parade. The girls hold no illusions about being anything like Mary since they are constantly reminded of their sins.

Vere arrived at the convent at the age of 13, left there by her mother. She shares her name with Saint Guinevere, who was beheaded and rose from the dead. Vere is a sensitive girl who still has faith in God. Ginny arrived eight months later. She considers herself an artist. Winnie arrived eight months after Ginny. She is an intimidating figure and the other girls at the convent are sometimes afraid of her. Gwen, a beautiful blonde girl, arrived last. She knows she is pretty and teaches the other girls beauty tricks.

The float is shaped like a hand offering the victory sign, but Sister Fran decides to call it a Hand of Benediction instead. The Guineveres sit on the lawn watching the people at the carnival that takes place before the parade, including Lottie who is devout about following rules. They notice that even the elderly people from the Sick Ward seem livelier. They feel sorry for the Sick Ward patients because they have been left at the convent and forgotten just like The Guineveres.

They plan to exit the float when it is left unattended and go to the city. Each of the girls has an idea of what they would like to do when they are free. All Vere wants is a family and somewhere to belong.

When it is time for the parade, the girls walk through the carnival and down the chilly hallway toward the courtyard where the float waits. They climb in the float and hide as Sister Monica pulls it along the parade route.

When the parade is over, the girls measure time by saying the Our Father, waiting for it to be safe to leave. They hear a faucet turn on and the tissue on the float begins to dissolve. Sister Fran is spraying the float with a hose. She orders them to get out.

The next chapter, *Saint Rose of Lima*, tells the story of Saint Rose who was very beautiful. Her parents wanted her to marry, but she did not wish to. She tried to make herself unattractive and devised ways to make her body suffer, all the while working to help her family and the sick and poor. One morning Christ appeared to her and she felt her body bloom. She died at the age of 31, a virgin known for being the first saint of the New World who always had faith that Christ would come again.

In *Penance*, The Guineveres resolve to endure their punishment with grace like the saints. Ginny cries and says she will never see her father again. Win tries to make the others laugh and braids their hair while they wait. Gwen sleeps. Vere prays for her mother to come back for her.



The next day The Guineveres are taken to Father James to confess. Each girl offers her individual confession and part in the plan. Vere confesses only that she “wanted to go” (35). However, she feels relieved that they were caught. She remembers sitting on a bus with her mother while they circled the city for hours. Afterward, Father James tells them their sins are absolved but that they be working in the Sick Ward for three months.

When the girls go to the cafeteria they are allowed to sit anywhere they want. They divide themselves by their stories of how they came to be at the convent, which The Guineveres call theirs “Revival Stories” (39). These stories are the moments in the girls’ lives when they realized the truth. The groups in the cafeteria are The Specials who still have contact with their parents, The Sads who have depressing stories about parents who died, The Poor Girls whose families are too poor to care for them, and The Delinquents who are there for getting into trouble. Reggie and Noreen sit by themselves. They are new to the convent. Reggie swears her father is a general in the war and is coming back for her.

The Guineveres do their duty in the Sick Ward where they work with nuns who are trained nurses. Another girl, Ebbie, is also working in the ward. She is almost 18 and will be leaving the convent soon. The Guineveres try to stay away from Ebbie because they find her intimidating due to her confidence. They spend their time reading to patients from the Bible. When the girls later discuss the stories they read with each other, they disagree on the meanings of some of them. Vere tells them “not everything can be easily explained” (45).

Working in the Sick Ward makes the girls feel guilty about the way they feel uncomfortable around the patients. They confess these feelings at their monthly confession.

On mail day, The Guineveres watch as the other girls receive mail. They never get anything. Win and Gwen claim not to care, but Vere and Ginny always hope for letters. Once Vere had received a disturbing postcard from her mother with passages from the Bible on it, but has not gotten anything since then.

That night during Rec Time, Vere and Ginny work on letters to their parents. Gwen tells them they will not hear back. She starts a group fake letter home in which each girl writes a portion. The letter is meant to be funny, but Vere writes about loneliness, but The Guineveres do not want to hear about that because it is the truth.

The conversation turns to the idea of speaking in tongues. Gwen flops on the floor in an imitation of someone she once saw in a Pentecostal church. Lottie asks what is going on and an argument starts. Before bedtime, Win puts wet tissue in Lottie’s bed. Polly accuses The Guineveres of being mean. They feel guilty and cry themselves to sleep.

The next chapter, Ginny’s Revival, is told from Ginny’s perspective. She says she chooses to love her father regardless of everything that happened. She says her father is an artist and very sensitive like her. He was a painter and spent a lot of time in the



garage painting portraits that were metaphors about life. He painted Ginny as Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz in a field of poppies.

Ginny's mother thought his paintings were a waste of time. She told Ginny not to be like her father and to choose a "dignified career" (63). Ginny's father began working longer hours and stopped painting. He started drinking. Ginny's mother left for hours at a time and said she was at a crafting group.

One day Ginny came home to find her mother sitting on her bed with a man. A few weeks later, Ginny came home from school to police cars parked in front of her house. She watched as a stretcher holding the man that Ginny saw her mother with was wheeled out of the house. Another stretcher came out and it was carrying Ginny's dead mother. Ginny's father was cuffed and put into a squad car.

Ginny and her brother stayed with relatives afterward. A few days later Ginny was taken to live at the convent, but her brother continued to live with their aunt. When Ginny entered the convent with Sister Fran, Sister Fran turned to her and says, "The joy of God is the innocent" (68). Then, Sister Fran handed Ginny a mop to clean up the tracks she made on the floor of the convent.

Sacrifice begins in the first week of October. Sister Fran announces that some injured soldiers will be staying in the Sick Ward. Five soldiers arrive the next day and are in comas. Their duffels are delivered with them. Nobody knows the identities of the soldiers and they have no dog tags. The Guineveres do not want to care for the young men, but Ebbie is unfazed.

A few weeks later one soldier wakes up. His name is Jack Murr and he goes by the name Junior. Ebbie continues to help care for him. Junior's family arrives to take him home. The Guineveres watch and think of their own homes. Vere reminds them that the soldier sacrificed, but they all feel as though they have, too. When Junior goes home, Ebbie goes with the family to help care for him. Before she leaves she tells The Guineveres not to worry so much about not getting letters. The Guineveres are angry that Ebbie gets to leave because she is not yet 18.

The girls attend service in the chapel. Father James delivers a homily about the soldier going home and says there are no coincidences, only miracles. In the few days following the service there are several incidences that the girls consider miracles, such as Sister Fran losing her whistle.

Ginny points out that there are four of them and four soldiers left in the Sick Ward. She suggests they might wake up if The Guineveres pray for a miracle. If they wake up, perhaps The Guineveres can go home with them. They begin to spend a great deal of time with the soldiers, praying for them, reading the Bible to them, and trying to wake them. As an adult, Vere knows that they just wanted to feel needed and says they would later come to need the soldiers, too.



Analysis

The author begins the book with an exciting scene of The Guineveres trying to escape the convent in a parade float. This immediately draws the reader in, leaving them to wonder what the girls are doing at a convent against their will and what is so bad about it that they want to leave. The scene sets up the main plot of the novel, which is The Guineveres looking for a way to get out of the convent.

The action begins at the carnival and parade for the celebration of the Assumption of Mary. Domet structures the book around the calendar of the church. The story takes place over the course of a year, so there are actually two chapters titled “The Assumption.” The book is structured in this manner because the lives of The Guineveres are structured by the church. They mark time by the goings on in the church. In fact, Sister Fran tells the girls that they do not need watches because they are on God’s time at the convent. The Guineveres learn to estimate time based on how many times they can say a particular prayer in a time period. In fact, this is the method they plan to use to determine when it will be safe to get out of the float.

The author introduces each of the girls who are part of The Guineveres. Each of the girls has a distinct personality that brings something to The Guineveres as a whole. Vere provides the faith, not only in a religious sense, but also in a sense of being hopeful for the future—at least on the surface and as far as the other Guineveres can see. However, on a deeper level, the author will reveal that Vere doubts her future just as much as the rest of The Guineveres, if not more. Win is the tough girl. She is physically larger than the other girls and has big, strong hands. Her physical appearance and her attitude make her intimidating to the rest of the girls at the convent. Ginny is frail and sensitive. She seems to need protecting and the author writes that the years in the convent are harder on Ginny than on the rest of the girls. Gwen is the beautiful one, with an attitude to match. She is pretty and she knows it. She is a girl who is focuses on the physical, both her looks and her sexuality.

The story is told mainly from Vere’s perspective, so the descriptions of the girls, including herself, are as Vere sees them. Vere sees The Guineveres as a unit and speaks about them as though they are one person. The individual personalities of the girls meld to create an entity that is strong and impenetrable by any of the other girls in the convent. The only way to break into the unit is by being named Guinevere, which automatically makes the group exclusive. Vere frequently includes a piece of dialogue and attributes it to “one of us” rather than naming just which girl was actually speaking. This indicates that their lives were so interwoven during the year in which this book takes place that she cannot differentiate one girl’s actions from another’s.

The individuality of the girls who comprise The Guineveres is most evident when they go to confession. While each of their confessions might concern the same topic, what they confess individually reveals something about the way each of the girls sees the world. For example, when The Guineveres confess to trying to escape the convent, they are all confessing to the escape attempt, but each says something different about the



event that reveals a part of her personality or her story. Ginny confesses she wanted to leave so she could visit her father because he cannot visit her. Her confession indicates that she loves and misses her father, and that she is confident he loves her, too. There is also a note of mystery in her confession since the reader does not yet know why a father who loves his daughter would abandon her in a convent and why he cannot come to visit her. Win confesses that she designed the float and that it was supposed to be a victory sign. Her confession shows her defiant nature. While Vere sees her folding her arms across her chest as a sign that she is self-conscious about her body, the reader will later see that this may be Vere's own self-conscious nature projected onto Win. Instead, the reader might see Win's crossing her arms as a gesture of confidence that says something like, "I did it, and there's nothing you can do to change me." Gwen's confesses that the whole thing was her idea. She is smug in her confession and even attempts to flirt a bit with the priest as she looks over the grille that separates them and smiles at him. Vere simply confesses that she wanted to leave, but immediately feels guilty about saying it. Her confession reveals her sadness at being left at the convent, but also her relief that they were caught and she did not have to go. Vere's confession reveals that a part of her feels safe at the convent, and it leaves the reader wondering what her experiences in the outside world were like to make her feel that way.

In addition to the confessions, the author leaves clues about Vere's life in the snippets that Vere reveals about her life before she came to the convent. For example, Vere mentions remembering sitting on a bus riding around the city with her mother for hours. While Vere talks about this by saying her mother was teaching her about people, the reader likely realizes there is something strange about a mother and her child just sitting on a bus for hours at a time for no reason but to watch people.

Domet also introduces the character of Sister Fran, the head nun at the convent. The Guineveres speak of Sister Fran as though she is a very severe woman who does not feel any affection for the girls in her charge. However, the reader might infer that, while it is true that she is not a particularly warm person, Sister Fran does care about the girls in her care a great deal. The convent puts on a carnival every year, including a parade, to celebrate the Assumption of Mary. This indicates that Sister Fran does want the girls to have enjoyable, fun experiences. She is adverse to them stepping foot outside the convent because she is fiercely protective of them and does not want them to encounter sin. To The Guineveres, she seems like a warden who is keeping them prisoner. However, the reader will come to understand that many of the girls at the convent have had terrible experiences in the outside world, so perhaps Sister Fran is simply trying to spare them from more sadness.

One of the peculiarities of Sister Fran's character is that she is fond of saying "the joy of God is the innocent." This is one of the first things she says to Ginny when Ginny arrives at the convent. She follows the statement up by handing Ginny a mop to clean up the footprints she has left on the floor. When taken in combination, it is difficult to understand what Sister Fran means. Is she saying that Ginny is an innocent and, therefore, one of God's joys? Or, is she admonishing Ginny for not being innocent and for leaving tracks on the floor, so she is asking her to clean away her sins as well as her



tracks? Sister Fran will repeat this phrase several times throughout the book. The reader will see that the phrase means different things depending on the situation.

The author introduces the convent in a manner that makes it a character of sorts. It is a huge building that has a real presence in the lives of The Guineveres. Their feelings about the convent are reflected in the words the author uses to describe the building. She writes about the “weight” of the convent and the way it “towered behind the festival tents.” (23) She goes on to describe a hallway in the convent in a way that invokes thoughts of a grave. She writes, “Regardless of the time of year, the hallway felt chilled, the way dirt does if you dig down far enough” (23).

Domet uses saints as a motif for the book. The saints are an important part of the Catholic church, and, therefore, are an important part of the lives of The Guineveres. Vere is particularly interested in the saints and their lives. One of the first things she tells readers about herself is that she is named after Saint Guinevere. Domet mentions the saints often throughout the telling of the story of The Guineveres as the saints seem to be the touchstone against which Vere and the other girls measure their actions. Domet also intersperses the story with chapters about the lives of female saints. In this section, she includes a chapter about Saint Rose, a beautiful girl who denied both her body and her beauty. The chapters about the saints all talk about sacrifice of some sort, and generally the sacrifice being made is the saint’s feminine nature in that she must deny her beauty, her sexuality, or her desire to be a mother or a wife. These chapters reveal something about the saints and give the reader something to reflect on as they read the subsequent chapters. For example, in the story of Saint Rose, Rose exposes herself to great suffering. The chapter that follows this is titled “Penance” and is about the punishment meted out to The Guineveres for having attempted to run away. The chapter begins with the line “The Guineveres resolved to face adversity with grace, as the greatest of the saints had done” (34), which reminds the reader of the way that Rose faced the adversity in her life.

Another interesting aspect of the book is the revival stories of each of The Guineveres that are interspersed as the main plot takes place. In this section, Domet shares Ginny’s revival story. The revival stories are all told from the perspective of the girl they are about. In Ginny’s story, readers learn that Ginny is frail, sensitive, and a bit nervous perhaps as a result of the horribly traumatic experience of coming home from school to find that her father has murdered her mother. Such an event leaves a mark on a person, and Ginny certainly carries that mark. In fact, she imagines she has a literal mark on her hands in the form of stigmata wounds. She frequently studies or rubs her palms as though she carries the wounds of Christ’s sacrifice. This is perhaps because Ginny, like all of The Guineveres, feels like she has been sacrificed because of the actions of her parents.

The main plot of the book, which surrounds The Guineveres devising a way to leave the convent, is moved forward when Ebbie is allowed to leave the convent to act as Junior’s nurse. This leads The Guineveres speculating about whether they might be able to leave the convent with the other soldiers if they should wake up. Their relationship with



the soldiers and plan to leave the convent is the impetus for all of the action that will take place in the book following the arrival of the soldiers.

Discussion Question 1

Vere refers to The Guineveres as though they are one entity. Why do you suppose she does this?

Discussion Question 2

Why are The Guineveres so desperate to leave the convent? What makes it an unpleasant place for them to live?

Discussion Question 3

What do the confessions the girls make to the priests say about their differing personalities?

Vocabulary

foyer, wincing, vengeful, purgatory, abstaining, adversity, opaque, menacing, repented, microcosm, resentment, atrocities, essence, dawdling, impassive, woozy, ferrous



All Saints' - Communion

Summary

In the chapter titled "All Saints," Gwen is the first to choose one of the soldiers as her own on All Saints' Day. All Saints' Day is Sister Fran's favorite holiday and she reminds the girls that there are saints for "every possible area of the human experience, even impolite ones" (85).

Gwen is inspired by the idea of there being a saint for every individual thing to have each of The Guineveres choose one soldier to be responsible for. She says it will make it easier when they wake up to know which Guinevere should go home with each soldier.

Gwen chooses the soldier whose face is bandaged hoping that he will be the richest and most handsome in the end. The Guineveres call the soldiers "Our Boys." Ginny is the next to choose and picks the soldier with small scabs on his face that she imagines will fade to appear as freckles, like the ones her dad has. Win selects the soldier that looks like he would be the roughest. Vere is left with the soldier who has no visible injuries. Immediately she feels as though she can finally claim someone as her own.

After choosing soldiers, The Guineveres feel more comfortable around them and are no longer bothered by their wounds. They start to wonder about the experiences the boys had in the war and how they got their injuries. They talk about where they will live when the soldiers wake up and how they will make themselves like daughters to the soldiers' parents. This prompts a discussion about their real parents in which Win says she does not think her mother ever even liked her. Ginny says she does not miss her mother, only her dad. When Win asks Vere what she likes to remember, she says everything because her mother never meant to hurt her.

The Guineveres try different ways to wake the soldiers up and brag to one another about even the slightest change. Gwen tells them that her soldier's lips pucker when she gets near him. When Gwen brings up wet dreams, Vere does not know what she is talking about. When the girls break out in laughter Sister Fran admonishes them.

A few days before the monthly penance service The Guineveres discuss what they will confess to the priests. Sometimes they treat the other girls badly just so they have something to confess. Other times they tell the priests that they disrespected Sister Fran or made fun of her parrot named Pretty, whom they call Ugly.

Gwen suggests they all confess the same thing. Win jokingly says they should confess that they all covet their neighbors' wives. They want to confess something true because they believe God will know if they are lying. They decide they will all kiss their boys and confess that.



At confession, Ginny confesses that she kissed a boy, Gwen confesses that she made out with a boy, Win confesses that she tried to kiss a boy, and Vere confesses that she thought about kissing a boy. Vere had tried to kiss her boy, but discovered that he had an erection and she could not go through with it. They discuss their individual experiences with their boys. Gwen says Vere has to kiss him and then kisses Vere for practice. Win tells Gwen to leave Vere alone. Then she asks Win why she did not like kissing her boy. Win kisses Gwen to prove she is not afraid of her and then makes a joke of it. A few days later, Vere kisses her boy and feels guilty afterward.

In the chapter titled Thanksgiving, Father James is drunk during the church service. He preaches a sermon about there being a time for everything. The Guineveres wonder what the plan is for their lives, the lives of their soldiers, and whether they or the soldiers are missed by their families.

The sisters prepare Thanksgiving dinner while the girls spend time in the Rec Room. Sister Margaret brings in art supplies for the girls to create paintings that will be sent overseas as part of the War Effort. The Guineveres paint a picture together that reflects their dark moods. Then they work on a puzzle of the Sistine Chapel from which the nuns have removed the pieces that depict Adam's penis and nipples. They talk about how Sister Fran takes everything away, including a watch that Vere's mom had given her. Then the conversation turns to menstruation. Win says it is embarrassing and Gwen says it means they are women no matter that the nuns try to make them think they are still just girls. Ginny says she wants to have a baby with her boy one day because she loves him.

Reggie comes up and tries to join them, but they rebuff her. The other girls in the room are laughing and dancing and The Guineveres shoot them dirty looks. The other girls say The Guineveres are just unhappy. Gwen says that happiness is boring and means they have stopped trying. Shirley makes a comment about The Guineveres being given up by their parents, which incites Win to jump on her. The other Guineveres stop her.

The chapter titled Saint Cecilia tells the story of Saint Cecelia who wore rough sackcloth under her silken gowns so that it would scratch her skin when she moved. She fasted and prayed to be saved from her flesh. Cecelia's parents gave her to be married to a pagan named Valerian. On their wedding night, Cecelia told Valerian that their vows were invalid because she was already married to an angel who guarded her virginity. Valerian insisted that she show him her angel and she said that he had to be baptized to see the angel. Valerian got baptized and could see the angel. The two spent a year preaching together, but never consummated their marriage. The ruler of the land killed Valerian because of his faith, but Cecelia still refused to recant her faith. She was barricaded into her bathroom while the building was burned around her, but she did not die. Her captors tried to behead her, but were unsuccessful and she was only maimed. After three days her angel lifted her into heaven and she was reunited with Valerian.

In Advent, The Guineveres are called into Sister Fran's office and are told their Justice Under God punishment has come to an end. She tells them that she and Father James are happy with the progress the girls have made. Sister Fran reminds them that Advent



is coming and that Advent is a season of waiting for “an arrival” (118). She then tells them they have been chosen to be altar servers. Sister Fran is excited about the opportunity and the girls are pleased to have her praise them. Sister Fran tells them part of their duty will be to serve at the mass in the Sick Ward on Wednesdays. The girls are happy to hear they will still be able to go to the Sick Ward and see their boys.

The next morning The Guineveres go to Father James’ office for training. He gives them pastries and he shows them the robes they will wear, emphasizing that they are to be worn over their clothes.

The next morning the girls serve on the first Sunday of Advent. Father James is absorbed in his work and does not greet the girls. When it is time for the service to begin, Father James looks sad and guilty.

The church looks different to the girls from the altar, where previously only boys had stood. They feel a bit self-conscious and are fully aware of their awkward bodies. A man approaches the altar to read the petitions and mentions a missing soldier named Peter Drexel whose parents are in the congregation.

After the service The Guineveres take their robes off while Father James talks to the Drexels. They wait for him to finish and then go to his office where they find him with a bottle of wine on his desk and an empty, but used, wine glass. He tells them they should knock before entering and seems embarrassed about the wine. Gwen asks if they can try the wine and he refuses and excuses them to return to the convent.

Before they leave, Ginny asks Father James where Peter Drexel is. He tells them that Peter is missing and no one knows his fate yet. He tells them that not all soldiers volunteered to go to war, some were forced. He then tells the girls they did an excellent job and they walk back to the convent. When they get there, Sister Fran also praises them.

At lunch, The Guineveres talk about Peter Drexel. They wonder if their boys volunteered to go to war. Gwen decides they have to make an effort to find the identities of their boys and locate their parents. Gwen says that the boys’ parents are sure to take them home if they are the ones to reunite them.

The chapter titled Communion starts on a Monday morning. They talk about being two days away from the Wednesday mass in the Sick Ward. During Morning Instruction, Sister Fran teaches them about Saint Bibiana who suffered joyously. Sister Fran thinks the way the saint cried out in ecstasy as she was beaten to death is wonderful. She asks how they might try to be like Saint Bibiana.

When Sister Fran passes out the mail, there is still nothing for The Guineveres. Sister Fran suggests that Vere write a letter. Some of the other girls get Christmas decorations and cards.

Later, The Guineveres talk about their boys and wonder if their parents would write letters. Vere wonders if their parents think they are dead and Gwen asks if she thinks



The Guineveres' parents assume they are dead. Win says they would not care. Ginny says the Drexels care and Gwen says there is "a danger in caring too much" (137).

On Wednesday, The Guineveres help set up for the mass in the Sick Ward. They help Father James feed the elderly patients communion. They do not serve communion to the soldiers because, as Father James explains, they do not know the soldiers' faith or whether or not they have confessed since their last mortal sin.

When they return to the storage room to change, Gwen pulls out her boys' duffel and tells the others to get theirs. Win says they should go through them one at a time.

Gwen finds a box with a gold ring in her boy's bag and takes the ring as a memento. In her boy's bag, Ginny finds a box with a painting of a snake eating its own tail on the outside and inside what looks like a dried fig or piece of leather. She keeps it thinking it is a lucky talisman. Win finds a wooden toy shaped like a horse with a cowboy on its back. She keeps it. They are interrupted before Vere can go through her boy's bag.

The girls return to the convent and go in to Morning Instruction where Sister Fran is trying to get her bird to say "God doesn't make junk." Instead, the bird says, "Dear me, where's my whistle," which makes the girls laugh (144). While she teaches about Advent, The Guineveres pretend to take notes, but are really writing letters to their boys. Vere, though, cannot think of anything to write and instead writes, "I just want to go home" (146).

Analysis

The author moves the plot forward in this section of the novel when The Guineveres make the decision to each choose a soldier to attach themselves to. The author uses the Saint motif as part of this plot since Gwen comes up with the idea after hearing Sister Fran's lecture about there being a saint for every aspect of life. Gwen decides that The Guineveres can be saints of a kind for the unconscious soldiers. She convinces the other girls that if they each pick a boy, they can concentrate their prayers and care on one soldier apiece, which may be more effective. She also suggests that choosing one soldier each will make it easier to decide who gets to go home with the soldiers as they wake up. Prior to Gwen's suggestion it would seem that The Guineveres assumed all of the soldiers would simultaneously awaken as one, which is in keeping with the way they see themselves as one entity; it does not cross their minds that they may have to travel down separate paths in the future.

The soldier each Guinevere chooses reveals something about the girls themselves. Gwen is a romantic and picks the soldier whose face is bandaged. She decides that when his face is revealed, he will be the most handsome of all, and will also go on to be the richest. Gwen seems to think her life will play out like something out of the movies. Ginny picks a soldier who reminds her of her father because his scabs might heal to look like freckles. This shows how much Ginny loves and misses her father. She has clearly forgiven him for killing her mother and just wants to be reunited with him. Win



picks a soldier who looks rough. Win has a reputation for being a tough girl and her choice of soldier reflects that she is looking for someone with whom she might have something in common, perhaps more of a friend than a romantic interest. Vere, of course, is assigned to the soldier that is left after the other girls make their choices. This is in keeping with Vere's total devotion to The Guineveres since she allows her friends to choose and takes what is left. There is no indication that she argues the order of the choosing, so it seems that she is fine with allowing her friends to have what they want first.

The author continues with the saint motif by including another chapter describing the life of a saint. This time, the saint is Saint Cecilia. The story of Cecelia and her husband is a romantic story, thus speaking to the romantic idea The Guineveres have about their soldiers waking up and taking them away from their lives in the convent. In the case of Cecilia, she was able to live a virginal life while also being married to Valerian, whom she clearly loved as she was happy to reunite with him upon her death. This story perhaps reflects on Vere's idea of how her life with her soldier will play out. Vere is very naïve about sex and is uncomfortable with sexuality as is evidenced by the way she reacts when the other girls talk about wet dreams and when Gwen suggests they all kiss their soldiers. Vere is unable to go through with kissing her boy, and when she finally does, she feels guilty about it.

Another aspect of The Guineveres kissing their soldiers that warrants a closer look is in Win's reaction to Gwen when she teases Vere about not kissing her soldier and then kisses Vere herself. Win quickly jumps in and defends Vere, telling Gwen to leave her alone. When Gwen accuses Win of not liking kissing her boy, Win becomes even more defensive and kisses Gwen, allegedly to prove she is not afraid of a kiss. The way that Win turns the whole incident into a joke afterward suggests she is uncomfortable with having kissed Gwen and that she is using humor as a defense mechanism. The reasons for this will be made clear when the author shares Win's revival story.

While the author briefly introduced Father James in the previous section, in this section the reader learns more about him as The Guineveres begin serving as altar servers. The first indication that there may be something amiss with Father James is seen when he fails to speak to the girls as they prepare for the worship service. Father James had been friendly with them when they came to learn their duties, even offering them pastries. However, as he prepares to preach, he looks guilty and sad. This leads the reader to wonder why a priest might feel guilty, particularly when faced with addressing his congregation. The author later reveals that Father James drinks wine in his office, and while he does react as though he is embarrassed when The Guineveres see the wine, having a glass of wine hardly seems like enough reason for a priest to feel sad and guilty. Therefore, it seems there may be more to Father James' story than the occasional glass of wine.

More about Father James is revealed when he talks to The Guineveres about Peter Drexler and the war. When Ginny suggests that Peter may have willingly given his life in the service, Father James replies by saying, "Not all men volunteer. Some are forced to go, you know" (129). His mention of the draft suggests that he may be opposed to the



war or at least to the draft. This conversation foreshadows a conversation that occurs later in which the reader will learn why Father James feels guilty about addressing the congregation.

While the soldiers become characters in the novel at this point, the author reveals very little about them. This is in keeping with the limited perspective that Vere has since she does not know anything about the soldiers and their identities are a mystery. However, the author gives just enough information about each of them through the items The Guineveres find in their duffels to keep the reader wondering about them just as The Guineveres do. The most mysterious of the boys is Ginny's soldier whose box has a painting of a snake eating its own tail on it. Readers might be familiar with the symbol as being an ouroboros, a symbol that typically means eternity, though it does have other meanings for different cultures. Inside the box is a brown, shriveled bit of what appears to be leather. The Guineveres have no idea what the symbol means or what the leather bit is. The mysterious nature of these objects draws readers into the conundrum surrounding the identity of the soldiers.

The plot surrounding The Guineveres hoping to go home with the soldiers allows the author to show some growth in the girls. In the beginning of the book, The Guineveres did not enjoy working in the Sick Ward and were bothered by the ailments of the people there. They were reluctant to perform their duties and uncomfortable around the elderly. However, as the girls spend more time in the Sick Ward and become attached to the soldiers who have various injuries, they begin to look at the people there in a different light. As the girls grow to love the soldiers they are caring for, they become more accustomed to illness and injury, so they are more able to perform their duties as assistants to the nurses.

Throughout the book the author deals with several themes. One of those themes is the idea that a person can create a family. This is the case with The Guineveres, who have been abandoned by their biological families. Their desire to attach themselves to the soldiers, and hopefully their families when they awake, represents the girls trying to build families to replace the ones they lost. Of course, they have actually already created a family of sorts with one another. They often act as a family unit in that they care for one another and look out for the needs of their fellow Guineveres. In addition to treating each other as sisters, The Guineveres, and all the girls in the convent, look to Sister Fran as a mother figure. Though she is not necessarily a woman The Guineveres love like a mother, they do seek her approval in the same way a child seeks approval from their parent.

Another theme the author explores is the idea that a person finds happiness where they place their attentions. This idea was briefly introduced in the previous section of the book when The Guineveres are sentenced to serve in the Sick Ward as punishment for trying to run away. Father James tells them, "Happiness, girls, is a matter of where you place your attention" (37). Domet expands on this idea in this section when The Guineveres talk about their families and what they remember about them. When Win asks Vere what she likes to remember, Vere tells her that she likes to remember everything about her mother. Though the reader already knows that there is something



traumatic in Vere's past that brought her to the convent, Vere chooses to find happiness in her past because she knows her mother did not mean to hurt her. Because Vere places her attention on the good parts of her past and the time she spent with her mother, she is able to find happiness there. The same can be said for Ginny who still finds happiness in thoughts of her father regardless of his horrific actions; she places her attention on the positive things she knows about her father, so he still makes her happy.

Another theme discussed in this part of the novel is the theme of faith involving waiting. Advent occurs in this section of the book and Sister Fran explains to the girls that Advent is a season of waiting. This is true for the girls not only in a religious sense, but also in the sense that they are waiting for their boys to wake up so they can begin to lead normal lives outside of the convent. The Guineveres have faith that their boys will wake up, so they wait for just such a thing to happen. In addition to waiting for their boys to wake up, the girls also wait each week for Wednesday to come around so that they can see their boys during the Wednesday mass at the Sick Ward. The Drexels, too, experience the waiting involved in faith as they wait for their boy to be found.

Discussion Question 1

Gwen seems to be the ringleader in the plot to leave with the soldiers in the Sick Ward. Why do you think this is? What makes Gwen the most likely of The Guineveres to formulate such a plan?

Discussion Question 2

How do the girls feel toward Sister Fran and Father James? In what ways do they treat these authority figures like parental figures?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author sometimes have Vere talk about events that occur in the adult lives of the girls at the convent when the story focuses on their lives as girls?

Vocabulary

obligation, intervening, aquiline, abounding, emote, abundance, literally, intertwined, sackcloth, candelabras, appease, pyre, superstitions, trinity, reformed, jubilation, satchel



Win's Revival - Saint Ita

Summary

Win's Revival is told from Win's perspective. It begins with Win and her mother lifting her Grandfather's trunk into the car and her mother saying they are going for a ride. Win says her mother has been avoiding her since "the incident" (147).

Win reflects back on life leading up to the incident. She and her mother moved in with her grandparents after Win's father left.

Win was a mediocre student and a good athlete. Win thought her classmate Linda Carol was beautiful and she sometimes wondered what it would be like to have Linda's body pressed against hers.

Win's mother started taking pills and Win came home to find her passed out in the bathroom one day. Win knows her mother's problems stem from her father leaving. Win's mother got better for a short time after that. When she took Win to get new shoes she commented on how a man would one day kneel at Win's feet and she hoped Win would say yes.

One day at school, Linda and Win were in the locker room and they kissed. After a moment, Linda pushed Win away and said she was not like Win. Win punched Linda in the face. When Win's mother picked her up from school, she did not yell at Win, but said she was embarrassed about Win fighting. Later, Win heard her mother talking to Linda's mother on the phone and saying that Win would never do that.

Win spent the next couple of days sitting on her Grandfather's trunk and hiding from her mother. One day she heard her mother crashing drunkenly around the house while her grandfather yelled. Then, her mother left and did not return for dinner.

Now, a couple of days later, Win's mother packed her into the car while her grandparents stood at the door and ask where they were going. Win's grandmother tried to convince Win's mother to stay, but it did not work.

They drove to the convent and Sister Fran greeted them. Sister Fran told Win "the joy of God is the innocent," and that she would be "washed of [her] sins" (156). Win did not cry.

In Baptism, the girls sit in Morning Instruction while Sister Fran talks about Advent. Sister Fran explains that they are rejoicing the hope of redemption.

The Guineveres hope to find redemption in answers about their boys from the library. They look through old books and maps in hopes of finding anything that might link the things they found in the duffels to a place or any other information. Win finds a picture of an ouroboros that matches the painting of the snake on Ginny's boy's box. They wonder



if the symbol means that Ginny's boy is a pagan or some other religion. Ginny wonders if serpents always represent evil. This leads them to decide that their boys need to be baptized.

Two weeks before Christmas The Guineveres are getting ready to serve as altar girls. Father James has been drinking and tells them jokes. His demeanor changes as soon as they walk into the church and he becomes stern. During the service, Father James asks the congregation to join Mr. and Mrs. Drexel in a letter writing campaign to the Veterans Administration to urge them to find Peter.

After the service, Father James stumbles and when the girls catch him they find a bottle of wine under his robes. He asks them if they think God is a "good guy" (163). When they say yes, he tells them that they should know, then, that there are some things God wants them to keep to themselves. He tells them that drinking wine is not a sin. Gwen asks if they can try some and then grabs the bottle and takes a drink. She then passes the bottle to the other girls and prompts them to drink.

As the group continues to drink, The Guineveres ask Father James if he ever had a girlfriend. He says he did, but then he decided to join the priesthood and the relationship was his sacrifice. One of the girls asks if all sacrifices are a blessing. Father James says the girls have not sacrificed anything yet and one of them says they are the sacrifices.

The girls are drunk and hold hands on the way back to the convent. They go to the Sick Ward to see their boys before going to the convent. Mr. Macker sees them and calls them over. When Sister Magda enters and asks what the girls are doing there, Gwen lies and says Mr. Macker wanted to show them his magic trick. Mr. Macker does a trick in which his coin disappears and reappears in Vere's hands. She is surprised because she has never been chosen for anything.

The Guineveres ask if they can visit with the patients for a while and Sister Magda says they cannot because a couple is coming to see if one of the soldiers is their son. The parents arrive while the girls are still there. They watch as the mother goes to each boy, but none of them is her son.

While the sisters walk the couple out, The Guineveres quickly baptize each of their boys. Afterward, Vere lies with her head on her boy's chest and feels slightly aroused. When Gwen tells her to get up, they both notice that the soldier again has an erection. Vere begs Gwen not to tell anyone. Gwen says she will not tell if Vere touches it. Vere tries to, but she starts to cry and Gwen tells her she will not tell anyone.

Years later Win admits to Vere that Gwen told her everything. She tells Vere that they could never trust Gwen, but they were The Guineveres so there was no other choice.

The chapter titled Saint Irmina and Saint Adela tells the story of sister saints. Irmina and Adela were princesses whose mother died and whose father travelled in his duties as king. When Irmina was 15 she was promised to Count Herman. A young officer of the court wanted Irmina to marry him instead, but Irmina wanted to please her father. Three



days before the wedding Adela informed Irmina that Count Herman had been pushed off of a cliff by the officer. The officer had gone over the cliff with him.

Irmina was distraught and a few days later she went to her father for comfort. The king was leaving and told one of his officers to give Irmina anything she wanted. Irmina screamed that she wanted a convent larger than the castle. She did not mean it, but her father had the convent built and Irmina became a nun.

Adela married a man her father had promised her to, though she did not love him. Her husband died shortly after the wedding and Adela was left alone. Adela had many suitors, but she was used to the idea that love was waiting and emptiness.

Both sisters died alone behind the walls of their respective homes. As they died they imagined a tree that they had played under together as children. The tree was withered but they knew it would bloom again. The story concludes that "from hopelessness springs hope. From longing, desire" (178).

In *The Vigil*, The Guineveres serve at the Christmas Eve Midnight Vigil. They go to the church and find Father James in his office. He is passed out drunk, so they try to wake him. They know that if he is found drunk he will be replaced by another priest.

Before waking him, Gwen searches his desk drawers and takes a telephone directory. Then she pours water over Father James' head. He wakes and says he cannot perform the mass. He asks them if they know what it is like to have to be strong when he is not and to know that he will never have the answers. One of the girls answers that they know exactly what that is like. They tell him the only unpardonable sin is to lose faith.

The mass takes place by candlelight so the congregation cannot see that Father James is drunk. Gwen hides the bottle of whiskey in the waistband of her shirt during the service.

The Guineveres do not see Father James after the service. They sit on a hill facing the convent and drink the whiskey. When they are quite drunk they decide to go see their boys. Vere decides to look in her boy's duffel and finds a Book of Psalms. Then they crawl into bed with their boys. Vere wakes up and finds that the other Guineveres are gone. She runs back to the Bunk Room and hides the Book of Psalms under her pillow.

The girls wake up to the Sisters singing Christmas carols rather than to the usual whistle blowing from Sister Fran. Later, The Guineveres learn that Sister Fran was not there because she was in her office with Ginny who had been found passed out.

Vere asks why Win and Gwen left her in the Sick Ward. Win says everyone was awake when she left and Gwen says she does not even remember getting back to the Bunk Room.

Ginny later tells them that she had woken up in bed with her soldier and could not find her way back so she found a warm place by the radiator and fell asleep. She woke up later on the bench in Sister Fran's office. She did not incriminate the other Guineveres



or Father James. Sister Fran had found the talisman that Ginny took from her boy's bag. Sister Fran told her it was a human ear.

Ginny does not come to the Rec Room to open Christmas presents or to lunch or dinner. Later, Sister Fran calls an assembly about depravity. At the assembly, Father James talks about how drinking is a sin and reminds the girls that "the joy of God is the innocent" (190). He then announces that there will be a penance service after lunch. During the talk, he looks at The Guineveres pleadingly.

During confession, The Guineveres confess to Father James things like taking whiskey from a priest and accepting liquor from someone who should not have offered it.

The chapter titled Saint Ita is about a saint who was known for her beauty and her pure heart. Her father promised her to a noble gentleman, but she did not want to get married. She fasted for three days. An angel appeared to her father in a dream and he allowed Ita to become a nun. Ita performed many miracles and was a nearly perfect person. Sometimes she remembered her mother bathing her in the lake and it made her long to have a baby of her own. One night as she got ready for bed the baby Jesus appeared in her arms. As she held him she realized how difficult it must be to be a mother, knowing that there is suffering and unable to do anything about it. The baby fell asleep and she lay back on the bed with Him. When she awoke He was gone and her longing was even greater for the rest of her life.

Analysis

This section begins with Win's revival story, which reveals a great deal about the character of Win. The author reveals that Win is a lesbian and that is the reason her mother left her at the convent. Win's sexual preference was hinted at previously in her reaction to Gwen kissing Vere when she was teasing her about being afraid to kiss her boy. Win's defense of Vere may stem from the fact that she is afraid that Vere will get into trouble for kissing another girl and be forced to leave the convent. Or, perhaps, the incident simply hits too close to home for Win and reminds her of her past and the consequences of her own experience with kissing a girl.

Win's mother seems to know that Win prefers girls even before Win and Linda kiss. Win's mother makes comments about Win never finding a man and that she hopes if a man ever asks Win to marry her, she will say yes. She makes these comments despite the fact that she is miserable due to her own failed marriage, so it stands to reason that she is trying to deny that her daughter may not be interested in men.

Win's revival story shows that Win did have a loving relationship with her grandparents prior to being left at the convent. She loved her grandfather's old trunk and sat there to get away from her mother's mood swings, drinking, and drug abuse. The trunk made her feel safe, suggesting that her grandfather is a person she trusts and loves. Her grandmother frequently said that Win is a good girl and tried to defend her from her mother. The fact that Gwen's grandparents loved her makes her mother leaving Win at



the convent when she no longer wanted her all the more tragic. Win's grandparents beg her mother not to take Win away, so surely they would have taken Win in rather than see her sent away.

Win's revival story is part of a theme that the author revisits throughout the novel, the theme of innocence being lost because of the actions of others. Win is a regular girl whose grandparents love her, but when her mother judges her sexual preference as wrong, Win loses her innocence in the sense that she begins to believe there is something wrong with her and she feels a need to defend herself from the world. Prior to Win being left at the convent, there is no mention of her being a tough girl. However, when she is left at the convent, the author makes a point of writing that Win does not cry. Her loss of innocence has caused Win to create that tough outer shell.

When Win is left at the convent, Sister Fran again uses her signature phrase of "the joy of God is the innocent." The reader has to assume that Sister Fran knows the reason each girl is brought to the convent since she is always ready to receive the girls as they are dropped off. Therefore, Sister Fran knows that Win is being left because she kissed a girl. In this instance, Sister Fran is likely using the phrase as an admonishment since she also tells Win that her sins will be washed away. Or, she may be reassuring Win that she can become "innocent" again.

Domet continues to explore the theme of faith requiring waiting through The Guineveres' wait for their soldiers to take them away from the convent. The girls have faith in their love for the soldiers and that their love will eventually help the soldiers to wake up, so they continue to visit the soldiers and lavish attention on them. When Sister Fran talks about Advent and celebrating the hope of redemption, The Guineveres start hoping for redemption by looking for answers about their soldiers' identities. This hope of redemption, an element of faith, will again require The Guineveres to wait as they are unable to find the answers they seek.

Father James touches on the idea that part of faith is waiting for answers when he drunkenly asks the girls if they know what it is like to search for answers and never find them. Of course, the girls do understand this in the sense that they have been looking for answers about their boys, but also in the sense that they have questions about their own lives and having been left for which they will probably never know the answers. Domet will return to the way in which faith allows people to continue answers in the conclusion of the book.

Father James' drunken lament about never knowing the answers reveals more about his character. He has clearly developed a drinking problem since he is now drinking to the point of passing out right before he is supposed to preach. Father James is aware that his drinking has gotten out of hand since he asks The Guineveres to keep it secret and even allows them to drink in his office. His drinking may be one of the reasons he feels guilty about being a priest. In addition, Father James tells The Guineveres that he had a girlfriend once, but sacrificed the relationship when he entered seminary to join the priesthood. His lost love is likely one of the reasons he is unhappy and perhaps is another reason he feels guilty about becoming a priest.



Another theme that the author touches on in this section is the theme of finding happiness where attention is focused. The Guineveres find happiness in the time they spend with their boys. They have convinced themselves that the soldiers are their key to finding happy lives, so the attention they spend there allows them to be happy in the moment as well. The author also writes that The Guineveres find happiness just in being together. As the girls walk back to the convent after drinking in Father James' office, they hold hands and feel warm and happy. The author writes, "Much of happiness, we'd been taught, was really about where we chose to place our attention, and that's where we chose to put our attention, in each other's hands" (168).

Domet continues to explore the theme of creating family through the relationship The Guineveres have with each other. When Ginny is found passed out, she protects her makeshift family by not telling Sister Fran that the rest of The Guineveres were also drinking. Instead, she makes up a lie about taking the wine herself and drinking it alone. She even protects Father James, which suggests that he has been welcomed into The Guineveres' family, even if only on the fringes.

Gwen shows that there is some weakness in the relationship between The Guineveres when Gwen leaves Vere behind in the Sick Ward after they drink and fall asleep in the beds of their boys. When Vere questions her about it, Gwen makes the excuse that she was not thinking about saving anyone else, only herself. And, later when Gwen witnesses Vere's boy getting an erection when Vere is close, she promises Vere she will not tell anyone, but she tells Win anyway. While Gwen's actions may make readers question whether or not The Guineveres are really a family-like unit, the reaction of the other girls to her actions confirm their closeness. Rather than being angry at Gwen, they accept her inability to keep a secret and her "look out for number one" attitude as just part of who she is. In fact, Win and Vere admit they know they cannot trust Gwen, but she is one of The Guinevere's so they decide to trust her anyway.

Domet continues the saint motif with the inclusion of two more chapters about saints in this section. The chapter regarding Irmina and Adela serves to strengthen the theme of faith requiring waiting. Irmina and Adela both wait out their lives behind the walls of their respective castles, just as The Guineveres are biding their time in the convent, which is often described as looking like a castle. Irmina and Adela have faith that they will be together again one day as is evidenced by the two of them imagining the tree they played under as children. The author writes that the tree had withered, but that it would bloom again, suggesting that the tree will bloom when the sisters are reunited.

Irmina and Adela's story also talks about the way that Adela had come to equate love with waiting, which is significant in that The Guineveres seem to believe that their waiting for their soldiers to wake up and take them away equates to love. This idea will be revisited in the final chapter when the author reveals Vere's fate with her soldier.

The chapter regarding Saint Ita focuses on Ita's deep desire to have a child despite the fact that she has no interest in physical intimacy with a man and has devoted her life to God. This chapter foreshadows Vere's fate, which will be revealed in the final chapters of the book.



The author answers some of the questions surrounding the box that belongs to Ginny's boy and the leather bit found inside of it. The Guineveres discover that the snake symbol is an ouroboros, which is a pagan symbol. The snake often represents evil, particularly in Christianity since Satan is sometimes portrayed as a snake. This leads the girls to wonder if perhaps Ginny's boy is not a Christian. Because of the questions the ouroboros raises about him, The Guineveres decide they must baptize their soldiers. The baptism of the soldiers is what leads to Gwen seeing that Vere's boy is capable of an erection, an important factor in moving the plot of the book forward.

The other question the author answers about Ginny's boy is what the leather piece is. Sister Fran informs Ginny that it is a human ear. This leaves The Guineveres and readers wondering why he would carry a human ear around with him. It also brings into question the character of the soldier and what kind of person would have such a gruesome thing. By leaving Ginny's reaction to the ear and, therefore, her soldier unanswered at the close of the chapter, the author creates some suspense that keeps the reader engaged in the story in hopes of finding out more about the ear and whether or not Ginny will go on loving her boy.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Win's mother leave her at the convent? Who does Win's mother blame for Win's behavior? How does Win react to being left at the convent? Why do you think she refuses to cry?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sister Fran mean when she repeatedly says "the joy of God is the innocent"? How do you think this makes the girls feel? Is it meant as an admonishment?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author include chapters that tell the stories of saints? Do these stories say anything about the girls? Or are they about life in the convent? Or both?

Vocabulary

incident, luxury, preposterous, commotion, ignite, pagan, eternal, processional, piety, exiled, replicate, notion, murkiness, cassocks, parishioners, psalm, vanity



Ordinary Time - Easter

Summary

In Ordinary Time, Ginny returns looking very pale and thinner. She has been serving out her punishment in the Penance Room on the third floor. She was given tasks to do while serving penance, like washing the windows on the third floor. While doing that she found a door to a stairwell that led to the Sick Ward. They dub the stairwell “The Catacombs” and decide they will use it to visit their boys in secret.

Win asks Ginny if finding out the talisman is a human ear makes her feel differently about her boy. She says she does not know how he came to have it and that she would not want to be judged based on one mistake like her dad was.

Ginny says that she thought about Father James and he owes them. The girls decide to blackmail Father James into taking them to the VA to find out about their soldiers.

After mass they tell Father James their plan. He does not think it will work, but Gwen reminds him that it would be bad for him if Sister Fran found out that he gave them alcohol. He reluctantly agrees to try.

On Mail Distribution Day, The Guineveres receive a postcard from Ebbie. The note looks as though it has been written while on a moving train. The girls speculate about what Ebbie’s life is like and if she has fallen in love with Junior and will get married. The Guineveres are no longer sure they want their parents to return for them because it would mean choosing between them and a future with their soldiers.

Time passes and The Guineveres continue with their usual routine. In Morning Instruction Sister Fran teaches about Ordinary Time and says it is a “season of miracles, of mystery” (207).

After church one Sunday The Guineveres wait for Father James. When he arrives he looks as though he has been crying and he tells The Guineveres that his brother has died in the war. Gwen snuggles up to him and tries to comfort him. Father James says he tried to get his brother to go to seminary with him so they would both be protected from the draft, but his brother refused. They decide they cannot press him about going to the VA when he is grieving.

In Involuntary Doubt Sister Fran explains the difference between obstinate doubt and involuntary doubt. She says that involuntary doubt is part of being human and is not a sin. The Guineveres doubt they will ever leave the convent, but their doubt is involuntary.

The Guineveres use the catacombs to get to the Sick Ward and when they get there, they discover the door automatically locks when it closes behind them. Win is practical and says there is only one way back. Gwen goes to the storage room and gets the



telephone book they took from Father James' office. As they leave, one of the patients calls out to them for a glass of water. Vere goes to her and the patient asks what she is doing there. Vere responds that she is waiting to go home just like the patient is.

Gwen makes them stop in Sister Fran's office on the way back to the Bunk Room. Gwen calls Junior's house and they find out he has committed suicide and that Ebbie is gone. Win suggests that he may have killed himself because he did not think anyone would ever understand what he had been through and he would spend his life trying to explain it. They decide their boys will be different because The Guineveres will understand.

At the next confession, The Guineveres refuse to confess. Instead, they pepper Father James with questions about when they will go to the VA. He says they will go soon.

The chapter titled Saint Agatha tells the story of Agatha, a beautiful girl who refused to get married. Agatha prayed to God to be protected from the touch of a man. An egotistical man named Quintian decided he wanted Agatha just to have what other men could not.

Quintian learned that Agatha was a Christian, which was illegal at the time, and blackmailed her. He told her she could either be with him or go to prison. Agatha chose prison, so Quintian sent her to a brothel. However, she prayed to God for protection and each time a man tried to have sex with her, her body would glow and they would be thrown off of her.

Quintian called for Agatha again and gave her the same option. She again chose prison, so he sent her there. She prayed and, as she did, she felt her soul pulled away from her body. When the torturers came and told her to renounce her faith, she did not. They cut off her breasts, but she did not even feel it. The torturer made her carry her breasts on a platter through the town. She felt free.

In Lent, Sister Fran has the girls prepare for Lenten Season by removing all decorations and other excesses from the Bunk Room. The Guineveres spend their Rec Time talking about their boys and what their futures with them will be like. Ginny wants to live in the country and raise chickens. Gwen imagines she and her soldier will elope and he will work as an executive while she works as his secretary. Then she will be discovered by a famous director. Win wants to be a carpenter. Vere just wants to be her boy's wife and cook for him. The Guineveres believe she should want more from life.

Father James sends Sister Fran a note requesting that The Guineveres come to the church for training for Lenten masses. When they get to Father James' office he is not there. They sit waiting and watching the candles flicker. Finally, they hear a crash from a confessional booth and find Father James passed out drunk. The Guineveres are extremely angry and Ginny suggests they take his car and go themselves. Win reminds her that they do not know where the VA is. Ginny says they can visit her dad and ask for directions. She begins frantically looking for his keys. The Guineveres later say she looked "unhinged" in that moment (234).



Father James goes on a hiatus and several other priests step in to perform his work, including the Wednesday mass in the Sick Ward. Ginny's boy dies and The Guineveres try to console Ginny. The Guineveres ask Sister Fran if there is something they can do as a memorial to Ginny's boy. They take his boots, plant flower in them, and place them next to the Sister's shoes that also hold plants.

That night The Guineveres go to the Sick Ward. Ginny sits by her boy's empty bed and cries. Gwen tells them that she put her boy's hand up her shirt. Gwen asks Vere if she would let her boy touch her. Vere says she does not know and that modesty can be attractive, too. Gwen calls her a "freezer" and says she does not know how to show love. As she lays in bed that night, Vere thinks about what Gwen said and touches herself, which makes her feel ashamed.

The next time they attend confession each of the girls confesses to varying degrees of physical contact with their boys and how it made them feel, but Vere confesses that she is a freezer and needs to learn to love better. A few days later, Sister Fran calls a meeting to talk about sins of the Flesh. She reminds them that their bodies are temples.

The Guineveres visit their boys and when Vere places her hand on her boy's cheek he wakes up and asks if she is an angel. He asks her name and she tells him, then he goes back to sleep. Vere is elated thinking that he has finally come for her, but by Good Friday he has slipped back into a coma. Vere is bothered that she did not ask his name. Gwen tells her to keep waiting and then complains that their whole lives have been about waiting. Vere says it takes faith to wait.

In the chapter titled Easter, the girls wake up to find Ginny's bed empty on the morning before Easter. Gwen says she could not have run away because she would not have gone without The Guineveres. Vere worries that Ginny might be sick. Gwen says she could be in the Penance Room again and that they do not want to associate themselves with any trouble she is in.

The next day Ginny is still not back, but Father James has returned. After mass Father James gives The Guineveres chocolate eggs, but they do not speak to him. When he apologizes to them, Gwen interrupts him to ask where Ginny is. He tells them she is in the Penance Room. She had been found sleeping naked in her soldier's empty bed.

Gwen sits very close to Father James and convinces him to pass his flask around. Father James tells them that the nuns are worried about Ginny's mental state. He wonders why Ginny would be so attached to a soldier in a coma and The Guineveres become angry at him for doubting that Ginny could love her boy. He apologizes and tells them he cannot take them to the VA without Sister Fran's permission. The Guineveres lock arms and walk out.

As they walk back to the convent Ginny steps out of the shadows. She tells them they are running away right now. The other Guineveres tell her they have already tried to run away. Ginny says she is not going back and she grits her teeth and shakes her head. Then she drops to her knees and tries to pull the shrubs up by the roots.



Years later when Vere and Ginny remember this scene they laugh. Ginny eventually married and had three daughters. She became a good mother, but never went to art school.

In the moment, the Guineveres know they have no one to run to, so they tell Ginny they are not going. Ginny says the soldiers are all nearly dead and that The Guineveres are only pretending they are not. The Guineveres fix Ginny up a bit with a sweater, socks, and a hair tie and then they say goodbye to her.

Ginny is found by that evening and brought back to the convent before Sister Fran sends her away. The Guineveres do not see her again.

Years later, Ginny wrote to Vere and Vere learned that Ginny was sent to live with and care for her elderly grandmother. After her grandmother died Ginny got an apartment. Vere was never sure if she had been better off with her grandmother or at the convent, but in either case, Ginny was fine.

At the time that Ginny leaves the convent, The Guineveres experience their first real loss and it is as though they are missing a part of themselves. They do not know where she is and they pray to their boys for help. They feel as though The Guineveres are falling apart.

Analysis

The author moves the plot forward in this section through building on The Guineveres' plan to go home with their boys. Domet uses Ginny's time in the Penance Room to produce two elements that allow the plot to advance: the Catacombs and Ginny's idea to blackmail Father James. The Catacombs move the plot forward because they give The Guineveres a way of going to see their boys more often and at times when there will not be anyone around to see them. This will be important later in the book as the plot reaches its climax. Ginny's plan to blackmail Father James helps to move the plot forward because it leads to the resolution of Ginny's storyline since her mental stability begins to slip when Father James fails to take them to the VA.

The author provides additional insight into the character before her storyline ends. When Ginny discovers that the leather piece found in her boy's box is a human ear, her reaction to the ear shows great wisdom. Instead of being disgusted by it and deciding her boy is unworthy of love, she determines to forgive him the mistake and not to judge him for it. Ginny's reaction is fueled by the way she feels about her father. She does not want to judge him based on his one violent act. Instead, as she says in her revival story, she chooses not to think of her father as evil, but to love him anyway. She extends this grace to her soldier and hopes that people will extend the same grace to herself and the other Guineveres.

Ginny also proves to be even more frail than The Guineveres previously suspected. Earlier in the book, Vere had said that the years in the convent were hardest on Ginny, and the reason for that becomes clear in this section. Ginny first shows signs of



instability when Father James gets drunk and does not take them to the VA. She is frantic to leave the convent and seems to want to go and see her father more than she wants to go to the VA. The Guineveres notice that there is something wrong with the way she is acting. Ginny is further affected by the death of her soldier. Sleeping naked in his empty bed suggests that Ginny is trying to find a way to get as close to her dead love as possible, but of course it ultimately leads to her being sent away from the convent.

Her story is resolved by Vere finding out later in life that Ginny went to live with her grandmother. While the author ends Ginny's storyline somewhat abruptly with Ginny simply being gone from the convent, her removal from the story reflects the way that she was abruptly ripped from the lives of the rest of The Guineveres. She was not given a chance to say goodbye and, at the time, The Guineveres had no idea what happened to her.

The resolution of Ginny's storyline plays into the theme of creating a family. The Guineveres are deeply affected by Ginny's disappearance from their lives. Her loss is like the loss of a family member and they find themselves arguing and feeling like their unit is no longer as strong as it used to be. The author concludes Ginny's story by saying, "The Guineveres were falling apart" (259).

The theme of creating a family is also evident in the way The Guineveres are no longer certain they even want their parents to return for them. Vere admits that if their parents were to come for them, they would have to make a choice between their new family (The Guineveres and the soldiers) and their old family.

Ginny's storyline is also an example of the theme of innocence being lost through the actions of others. The death of Ginny's soldier had nothing to do with any of Ginny's actions, yet his death takes away some of Ginny's innocence in the sense that she has lost her hope for the future. Ginny undoubtedly believes that with her soldier gone there is no way she will ever leave the convent. His death causes Ginny to have to face the loss of her romantic interest in a traumatic fashion and the thought that she may never lead a normal life with a real family.

Following the death of Ginny's boy, The Guineveres plant flowers in his boots and place them next to the nuns' old shoes, which are also used as planters. Previously the author had mentioned the nuns' shoes being a constant reminder of the nuns' presence in their lives. By planting flowers in the soldier's boots, The Guineveres are attempting to keep him a part of their lives.

The theme of faith requiring waiting is somewhat reversed in this section as Vere reminds Gwen that waiting requires faith after she complains about how much waiting they do in their lives. However, the author does maintain the theme in that The Guineveres continue to have faith that their waiting will produce the desired results. Sister Fran talks about Ordinary Time being a time of miracles and, with their plan to go to the VA for help, The Guineveres seem to have renewed faith that their waiting will indeed produce miracles. In Vere's case, she does witness a small miracle when her



soldier briefly opens his eyes and speaks. Unfortunately, Vere is forced to go back to waiting when he slips back into his coma.

The author also touches on the theme of happiness being a matter of where one places their attention in a conversation The Guineveres have about their plans for the future. Each of The Guineveres share what they hope to do when they get out of the convent. Win, Ginny, and Gwen all have plans for a career, but all Vere wants is to have a husband and children. The other Guineveres feel that Vere should have bigger plans for her future, but she knows that a family is all she really needs to be happy.

The saint motif continues with the story of Saint Agatha. Agatha's story emphasizes the importance of keeping faith since Agatha refused to renounce her faith even when faced with terrible consequences. The Guineveres, too, face adversity in their lives that sometimes makes them want to give up on having faith. Vere has just such a moment when she wonders if the VA will even have records about their boys. The other girls remind her that she has to have faith

Domet often alludes to the Bible and the conversation in which The Guineveres try to encourage Vere to have faith is an example of that. First, Ginny tells Vere not to be a "doubting Thomas." This refers to the apostle Thomas who doubted that Christ had risen from the dead until he actually touched the wounds. Then, Win tells her that Vere has to be the faithful one and that she is like Bathsheba. As Vere points out, Bathsheba was a woman who had an affair with King David. Finally, they compare Vere to Esther, who was a Jewish Queen that saved her people from being executed.

In this section the author further develops the character of Father James. While the reader may have already suspected that Father James became a priest in order to avoid the draft, the author confirms this when Father James' brother dies in the war. Father James' drinking gets worse and he takes hiatus, presumably to work on his alcohol addiction. However, when he returns from his hiatus, he still carries around a flask and still allows The Guineveres to drink with him.

Gwen's interactions with Father James begin to change as The Guineveres get to know him better and become more comfortable with him. In keeping with her personality, Gwen is focused on the physical. She sits close to Father James on his couch and snuggles up to him when he grieves for his brother. Gwen seems oversexualized for a girl her age, which makes the reader wonder what her life was like prior to coming to the convent.

Vere's aversion to sexual contact is in direct contrast to Gwen's behavior. When Gwen tells the others she put her boy's hand up her shirt, Vere is a bit shocked. Her discomfort with sex seems to egg Gwen on to prey on her since Gwen asks Vere directly if she would let her boy touch her, but she does not directly ask the others. She then accuses Gwen of being a "freezer," meaning that she cannot show physical love. While Vere is uncomfortable about sex, she does feel love and wants to be able to express it. She feels so guilty about being a freezer that she even confesses it.



The author includes some foreshadowing in this section when Ebbie sends The Guineveres a postcard. The postcard leads The Guineveres to speculate that Ebbie is living a romantic life with Junior as her husband. However, the author includes the detail that Ebbie's note looks as though it has been written on a moving train. This note foreshadows a change in Ebbie's life, which the Guinevere's discover upon calling Junior's house. Ebbie has, in fact, left Junior's family because Junior has committed suicide, so she may actually have written the postcard as she traveled away from his house.

Domet uses a beautiful metaphor when The Guineveres sit watching the candles as they wait for Father James to take them to the VA. She writes of the candle flames, "They shrank and grew and shrank again, and it struck us that the flames were contained by their wick, but reliant on it all the same. Bound to a candle, fire was a thing of beauty; unrestrained, a destructive force" (233). Domet uses the candle flames as a metaphor for Vere and her life in the convent. She feels imprisoned by the convent, yet relies on it as well and feels safe inside its walls. Inside the convent, Vere can lead a life of faith and avoid sin, but outside she might self-destruct just as her mother did.

Discussion Question 1

What does Ginny decide about her boy having a human ear in his box? Why does she come to this conclusion? How does it relate to her own life?

Discussion Question 2

What changes do The Guineveres experience in their faith? What is different about Vere? Who do The Guineveres place their faith in now? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What causes Ginny's breakdown? Why do the other Guineveres refuse to run away with her? Do you think Ginny was better off living with her grandmother than in the convent?

Vocabulary

scrawnier, arduous, catacombs, inclined, scrutinizing, obstinate, privileges, fibbed, dismay, renounce, gloating, excesses, mired, winnowed, uneasy, idle, avert



Gwen's Revival - The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

Summary

Gwen's Revival is told from Gwen's perspective. Gwen's father paid attention to his pretty daughter in ways that seemed inappropriate for a father, such as giving her a ring that he told her to keep hidden until she turned 18. Gwen's mother did not like the attention he paid her, but Gwen thought she was just jealous.

Gwen's family moved after her father had an affair and Gwen went to a new school. The girls there were mean to her because she was pretty, but three boys began to pay a great deal of attention to her. Gwen's father tells her not to trust boys because they are snakes and sometimes cannot help what they want.

One day Gwen went with the boys after school to celebrate one of their birthdays. When they got to their destination, the boys pushed Gwen into the dirt and raped her. Afterward, she realized she lost the ring her father gave her and was distraught. Gwen told her father what happened and he kissed her on the mouth.

A few days later he drove her to the convent and told her that sometimes a man cannot help himself and that a person can love something so much they destroy it. Sister Fran greeted Gwen and told her that she would be washed of her sins. When Gwen met Father James she shook his hand and held it a little longer than was proper so that he blushed.

In The Ascension, it rains for a week after Ginny leaves and the girls sit in the Bunk Room watching the rain fall. The girls speak crossly to each other. With just three of them left they feel less like a solid group.

The Guineveres write to the VA and Sister Fran mails the letters. They beg to work in the Sick Ward again and Sister Fran gives them permission. They wonder what color Win's and Gwen's boys' eyes are. One day Gwen pulls back the eyelid of her boy and discovers that there is a pool of blood at the corner of his eye. Gwen is disgusted by it, but Win and Vere remind her that they have to love despite imperfections.

At the next confession Gwen confesses that she does not know how to love. Win confesses that she hates herself. Vere confesses that she doubts her faith. Vere prays for her boy's eyes to open again.

The next day when The Guineveres arrive at the Sick Ward they are not allowed to go in. Sister Connie tells them that Mr. Macker is dying. This makes Vere sad, but Gwen says it would be worse if it was one of their boys. Gwen is very nonchalant about Mr. Macker's death, which angers Win.



A few days later Gwen's boy's bandages have been removed from his face and it is a ruin. Again Win and Vere remind her that they have to love regardless of flaws. Vere and Win go to sit with their boys. Vere closes her eyes and prays. Vere's boy opens his eyes again and she remembers to ask his name, but he does not respond. Gwen tells her he is not going to wake and Vere says she just wants to go home.

The Guineveres go to the church to serve during mass. After mass the girls can tell Father James has been drinking. Gwen sits next to Father James on the couch and tells the other girls to go without her. Win and Vere leave even though they know they should not leave Gwen alone with Father James.

The chapter titled Saint Alice starts when Alice was a small child susceptible to illness. At the age of seven she was sent to a convent to receive an education. When she left home she told her mother not to cry because she would be surrounded by love among the nuns.

Shortly after arriving at the nunnery, Alice decided she wanted to become a nun. She began performing miracles when she was very young. However, she became ill with leprosy and had to live in isolation. At first Alice did not mind being alone, but eventually she got bored and was frustrated that the priest who came to give her communion would only shove the host through the door and would not allow her to drink from the chalice.

One day the bridegroom appeared to her and said, "Where there is part, there is whole" (285). Alice was lonely and sad and did not feel like she was part of the whole.

Despite her illness, Alice was still able to perform miracles. People stopped by her hut to be healed of all manner of ailments. She grew more and more sick, but still the bridegroom appeared to her. She eventually went blind. As she laid on her cot, she thought she could feel hands still wanting more miracles from her, but she had nothing left to give. She laid on her cot waiting for her final reward and died at sunrise.

In Eternity Gwen swears nothing happened with Father James and that they just talked. However, she says she is sure that he wanted something to happen. Win and Vere remind her that she is devoted to her boy.

More soldiers arrive at the Sick Ward. Vere hopes they might recognize their boys. Gwen wonders if there are any cute soldiers. The new soldiers are all older than their boys and are missing limbs or other parts of themselves. They are all in comas.

At confession Win tells the priest that she closes her eyes when she walks past the soldiers in the Sick Ward. Vere confesses that she does not know why God would let soldiers be so badly injured. Gwen cries as she confesses to Father James. When Win and Vere ask what she confessed she says she confessed that she wishes the soldiers had never come.



One night as Vere lies in bed trying to recall each girl's revival story, she notices that Gwen is gone. The next morning she asks Gwen where she was and she says she just went to use the bathroom.

Win is called to Sister Fran's office during dinner. When Gwen and Vere walk past Sister Fran's office after dinner they see Win standing with a woman who looks like her. The woman is hugging Win and crying, but Win just stands there. Win is gone later that night.

That night during Rec Time, Vere and Gwen sit on Win's stripped bed. The nuns have not taken down the few pictures Win had hung by her bed as decorations. One picture is of an island in the middle of the ocean. In the corner of the photo there is just a tip of land in the distance. This makes Vere think about the way they are stuck on an island, but the rest of the world is out there. She knows that there is no such thing as eternity and everything eventually comes to an end.

Years later Win told Vere that she was not allowed to say goodbye when she left the convent. She had gone to live with her mother in an apartment above a bakery. After a few months her mother started drinking again and then just left. Win was almost 18 by then, so the bakery owner hired her and let her stay in the apartment. She told Win that she was engaged once but could not go through with it. Instead, she got on a train and went west. She said she never loved her boy, but still had the toy on her mantle. When Vere asked her why she pretended to love her boy, Win told her that she did it because she loved The Guineveres and that they were all pretending. Vere says she was not. Win lived with a woman named Lorraine and the two of them opened a bakery. She still had her grandfather's trunk and sat on it to think sometimes.

In The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, Vere and Gwen continue to care for their boys and also care for Win's. Even though Win has gone, life at the convent is the same. At confession, Gwen tells Vere she does not feel well. She seems distant after that.

On Mail Distribution Day, Sister Fran gives Vere and Gwen each a letter. Vere's letter is from the VA and says they are doing everything they can to identify her soldier. Vere is ecstatic and can see a future with her boy at that moment. She and Gwen compare letters and discover they are identical form letters. Vere tries to remain hopeful, but she knows that Gwen is right when she says the VA does not care about their boys. However, Vere feels like the letter is all she has connecting her to the outside world.

Vere and Gwen sneak to the Sick Ward one more time after receiving the letters, but they do not know at the time that it will be the last time. When they get to the door of the Sick Ward, Gwen tells Vere to go in alone and that she does not want to see her boy. Vere tries to convince her to see her boy saying that when he wakes up, Gwen will be able to tell him she was there all along. Gwen says she is not a saint, but that Vere makes being good look easy. Vere goes in to see her boy and hears Gwen crying.

After mass the next day Gwen asks Father James if she can talk to him and he brushes her off. After he leaves Gwen abruptly bolts toward his office, but Father James is not



there. Vere follows and Gwen tells her to leave because no one wants her. She tells Vere they are not The Guineveres anymore. Vere feels completely alone.

Analysis

The theme of innocence being lost through the actions of others is most apparent through Gwen's revival story. Gwen's innocence is literally taken from her by the boys who rape her, but prior to that, her father had been chipping away at her innocence through the inappropriate attention he was paying her. Gwen's father had a perverse attraction to Gwen that her mother could see. His perversion is evident in the way that he touches Gwen's neck when he braids her hair, gives her gifts that he asks her to hide, tells her she is the prettiest, and takes her for drives where they sit and hold hands while talking. Perhaps taken separately these actions might seem innocent enough, but when they are looked at in whole, these are not the normal actions of a father toward his child. Instead, they seem more like the actions of a man toward his love interest. Even he seems to know that his actions are inappropriate since he warns Gwen not to trust men because sometimes they cannot help themselves. He eventually decides to place Gwen in the convent to prevent himself from taking his affections for Gwen too far.

Gwen's loss of innocence is emphasized when Sister Fran greets her with her usual line that "the joy of God is the innocent" and then tells her that she will be washed of her sins (271). The familiar line again takes on a new meaning as it seems to suggest that Gwen has somehow done something to bring on the actions of the boys and her father. Of course, the reader has no idea what Gwen's father may have told Sister Fran about Gwen and his reasons for leaving her at the convent. It is doubtful that he told the nun about his own perverse feelings for his daughter. Hearing Sister Fran say such a thing probably makes Gwen believe she has, in fact, done something wrong and is no longer an innocent person that God loves.

The ring that Gwen's father gives her is an especially inappropriate gift given the fact that he asks her to hide it until she turns 18. Even though she is just a child, Gwen seems to understand that the ring is special and is more than just a pretty trinket. She is so upset that it is lost during the rape that she actually wants to go back to the scene to find it before going home. Knowledge of the ring Gwen once received from her father makes the ring she finds in her soldier's box more significant. Gwen places an added significance on the ring as an item that symbolizes love. Unfortunately, Gwen's experiences with her father and the boys have given her a warped view of what love is.

Gwen's revival story gives the reader some insight into why Gwen behaves the way she does. Gwen knows that the special attention that her father paid her was because of her looks, so she believes that she must be beautiful for people to like her. This also helps to explain why Gwen reacts the way she does to discovering that her soldier is not handsome due to his injuries. Once his face has been revealed, Gwen becomes disinterested in him. She seems to have deemed him as unworthy of love because he is not attractive.



Gwen also equates love with sex because of her father's inappropriate behavior. The rape also traumatized Gwen, who apparently never received any help in dealing with her feelings afterward. It is not uncommon for victims of rape to become promiscuous as a means of regaining control over their bodies, and that seems to be the case with Gwen.

Even Gwen's attentions toward Father James become inappropriate as she seems to be trying to seduce him. She sits as close to him as possible when they are in his office. When he is drunk, she seems to see her opportunity and tells the other Guineveres to leave her alone with him. They seem to know their friend has an ulterior motive in mind for being alone with the priest, but she is one of them, so they do as she asks. Later, when Gwen cries as she confesses to Father James and bolts into his office when he refuses to talk to her, the reader is left wondering if something happened between the two when they were alone in the office.

Gwen's actions become even more suspicious when Vere discovers her missing from her bed one night. When she questions Gwen about where she has been, Gwen responds that she was in the bathroom. However, her annoyance at being asked where she was suggests she is lying about where she has been.

Gwen also seems to be getting more cynical and self-centered as the book goes on. When Mr. Macker dies the other Guineveres are saddened by the loss of the lively old man who liked to flirt with them and perform magic tricks. However, Gwen acts as though she does not care that he is dead. Instead, she says things could be worse and it could be one of their boys who is dead. Gwen's reaction to Mr. Macker's death angers even Win who is generally not an emotional person.

As Gwen's storyline is becoming more central to the book, Win's storyline comes to an end. Just as abruptly as Ginny was pulled from the convent, so too is Win when her mother comes to get her. Again, she is not allowed to say goodbye to her friends and her loss is like the loss of a family member. The author resolves the storyline by informing the reader through Vere's adult interactions with Win that Win eventually opened a bakery with Lorraine, her significant other.

Perhaps one of the most interesting things about the resolution of Win's story is that Win tells Vere she was only pretending to love her soldier and thought that all of the other Guineveres were pretending, too. The reader is likely not surprised to learn that Win was only pretending, but may be surprised that even as an adult Vere maintains that she loved her boy. This also speaks to the strength of the unity of The Guineveres since Win pretended just to be a part of the group and to do what her chosen family was doing.

Win's departure allows the author to continue exploring the theme of family being something one can create by looking at what happens to the family when some of its members are torn away. With Win's departure, the family unit of The Guineveres is further compromised to the point where they are not The Guineveres anymore.



The theme of faith requiring waiting is examined in this section through Vere's and Gwen's interactions with the VA. They write letters even though letters they have written in the past have never gotten them any responses. However, The Guineveres still have faith that they will eventually learn something about their boys. Even after they receive form letter responses and Vere's rational mind knows that the VA probably is not working on discovering the identity of the soldiers, she cannot help but continue having faith that if they wait long enough, something will happen.

The saint motif continues with the chapter regarding Saint Alice. The story of Saint Alice probably speaks to Vere's character since she was brought to the convent to get an education just as Alice was, as will be revealed when Vere's revival story is told. Alice feels surrounded by love when she first arrives at the convent. While Vere may not have felt loved by the nuns, she certainly found a family to love her among The Guineveres. After Alice contracts leprosy and is separated from her family of nuns, she starts to feel lonely and rejected. This is also the case for Vere after Ginny and Win leave. Then, when Gwen pushes her away and tells her that no one wants her and later that they are no longer The Guineveres, At that moment, Vere realizes for the first time since her mother left her, that she is completely alone. Alice also felt like people seeking miracles from her wanted too much in the end when she had no more to give. Vere likely feels this way as well when The Guineveres lean on her to always be the one who has faith that everything will turn out the way they hope it will. Gwen even tells Vere that Vere makes being good look so easy, and Gwen is clearly frustrated by that fact and the fact that she herself does not believe she is a good girl.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Gwen's father leave her at the convent? How does Gwen's revival story explain her personality and behavior?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Win's mother comes for her? Why does she leave Win again? Why does Win keep the wooden toy and her grandfather's chest?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think makes Gwen tell Vere that they are not The Guineveres anymore? Why might her behavior toward Vere changed?

Vocabulary

ruddy, sensation, smirked, poise, crucial, proximity, flaws, duration, frail, communal, contemplate, inebriated, pallbearers, tinged, tepid, aerial, despair



Saint Christina the Astonishing - Absolution

Summary

In Saint Christina the Astonishing, Christina suffered from a terrible seizure at 22 and was presumed dead. Her body was taken to a church for her funeral during which she sat up in the coffin and floated up to the rafters. Christina told the priest she had been to hell, purgatory, and heaven. In heaven she was told that she had to go back to earth “to do penance for the sinful” (308).

After that, Christina became fearless and performed many dangerous acts that left her unharmed. No matter what she did, she could still smell the sin of others. Sometimes her sisters would get tired of hearing about the strange things she did and would chain her to her bed, but she always broke free and ran to the forest where she felt calm. She would stay until she knew her sisters would be worried. Then, she would levitate and float in the sky unsure of what to do with her powers.

In the Assumption, the Sisters are again having a carnival. Gwen and Vere work at the concession stand. Some girls that they recognize from church come to the booth and cannot decide what to get. Vere wonders what it is like to live in a world with so many choices. Later, Gwen and Vere overhear the same girls talking about them. One of the girls says that their parents gave them away. The other wonders what they did to deserve such a thing.

Vere asks Gwen if she would like to go see their boys, but Gwen says no. They watch the parade and talk about their failed attempt to run away. Vere says they were lucky to be caught because if they had not been, they would never have met their boys.

Lottie notices that Gwen’s belly has become round and tells Sister Fran. Sister Tabitha brings Vere to Sister Fran’s office where Gwen tells Sister Fran that the Holy Spirit gave her the baby. Sister Fran slaps her for being blasphemous. Sister Fran asks if the father is Father James or one of the other priests. Gwen says no, but Sister Fran sends for Father James anyway. Sister Fran asks Vere if Gwen has spent time alone with Father James. Vere reluctantly says she has.

When Father James arrives, Sister Fran demands to know if the baby is his. Gwen finally speaks up and says that baby is not Father James’. When Sister Fran asks what other men they have been seeing, Vere tells her about their boys. Gwen admits that the baby belongs to Vere’s boy. She says she is confessing and her sin should be absolved now. Vere says maybe the father really is the Holy Spirit because she does not want to believe her boy betrayed her.



Vere reaches out and touches Gwen's stomach as she says "forgive this child" (321). Vere suffers as she does so, but does not regret not getting angry at Gwen.

Years later Gwen called Vere looking for her forgiveness. She told Vere the details and said she hated herself. Vere stopped her and said she forgave her, but did not want to hear the story. She refused to absolve Gwen and told her she needed to forgive herself. Vere continued to believe her boy loved her.

My Revival is Vere's revival story. Vere's mother told her their family was cursed and that all the women die young. Vere's mother believed she would die before the age of 33. Vere's mother sometimes preached to strangers about the visions she had while Vere stood nearby holding a hat to collect change.

Vere remembers seeing her father only once. She and her mother moved from place to place staying in shabby apartments and hotels. Vere had to remind her mother to take her medication or she would forget. When she forgot, she would have conversations with people who were not there.

When Vere's mother turned 32, they started living in the basements of churches because it comforted Vere's mother. On the day before her mother's 33rd birthday, they packed their things and go to wait at the bridge where Vere's aunt and grandmother died. Vere's mother gave her a watch to remember her by. Midnight came and nothing happened. They believed she had been saved.

The next day Vere's mother said she had a vision and that Vere needed to get an education. They took a taxi to the convent. Vere's mother kissed her and prepared to leave her with Sister Fran. She told Vere that when a person loves someone they can either hold on or let them go. Neither option means the person is loved more or less. Then she left.

Sister Fran told Vere "the joy of God is the innocent," and then told her that she must take all of her personal items for safekeeping, including her watch (333). She said that God sent Vere to the convent for a purpose, but Vere could not imagine what that purpose could be.

In Absolution, Vere helps Gwen alter her clothes for her pregnancy and continues to sit with her in the cafeteria. The other girls at the convent avoid them. Gwen and Vere do not talk to one another much either.

Vere serves as an altar server one more time. Father James preaches about miracles and having faith. After the congregation has approached to be blessed with oil, Vere asks to be blessed, too. She goes back to the dorm and uses some of the oil from her forehead to bless Gwen. Gwen wipes it off and tells Vere that she cannot heal pregnancy.

When Gwen is eight months pregnant, Sister Fran moves her to the Penance Room so that she does not lead the other girls astray. She gives birth to a baby girl in the Sick Ward. She stays to recover for a few days and then leaves the convent for good.



Years later, Sister Fran told Vere that she was never able to find Gwen's family. Gwen had been sent to a school for troubled girls. Sister Fran felt bad that Gwen's family never knew where she was. She said she always hoped for all of her girls to return home.

The day after Gwen leaves Vere visits the Sick Ward. The baby is still there. The baby cries and the Sisters seem too busy to care for her, so Vere asks to hold her. She takes the baby over to meet her boy.

A few days later Sister Fran calls Vere to her office. She takes Vere's hand and says, "The joy of God is the innocent" (341). Sister Fran tells Vere that a family from the parish has agreed to take her in. Vere is silent as she thinks about her boy and the baby and realizes they are her family. She tells Sister Fran she will not leave. She says that Sister Fran had told her on the day she arrived that she had a purpose and she believes her purpose is to serve by caring for the baby. Sister Fran nods at Vere giving her approval to care for the baby.

Vere names the baby Guinevere and they move into the Penance Room. Vere thinks the baby has Win's hair and Ginny's freckles and that she looks a bit like all of The Guineveres.

She cares for the child for years and doing so changes her. Guinevere finds Vere's box of the belongings she arrived with and asks for permission to look through it. She finds a bundle of letters that Vere wrote to her mother as a girl. The letters are all unopened and marked "return to sender." She wonders why Sister Fran never told her the letters were returned, but thinks Sister Fran may have been trying to allow her to keep hoping. Vere pulls out the watch her mother had given her and gives it to Guinevere. Vere never saw her mother again.

The book, she says, is Guinevere's Revival Story and she has written it down so that Guinevere will have the story when she turns 18 and leaves the convent. She hopes that it will give Guinevere the answer to all her questions. She says that all people seek the answer to their lives whys, but it is a question people may never have the answer to, so they turn to faith.

Vere stays on at the convent as a layperson and works mostly in the kitchen. She cooks for Father James once a week and says he has become a friend.

Father James asks her one day why Gwen did it. Vere had not thought about this since Gwen's boy died years ago. When Vere had written to Gwen to tell her, she had received a note back thanking her, but Gwen never asked about her daughter. Vere tells Father James that she does not think Gwen's reasons matter. Father James says that Gwen had confessed her actions to him. Vere thinks the power of confession and absolution is that it allows people to share their stories with someone else who can carry the weight for a while.



Vere plans to send Guinevere to college when she is 18 and to tell her to never look back. She will tell her to find someone to love and that love requires surrender. She says love is the most rewarding kind of religion.

Vere's boy never woke up. She cares for him and kisses his face when no one is looking. She still believes he will wake up one day and then she will tell him that she is the only Guinevere left and that she loved him the most.

Analysis

In keeping with the saint motif, this section begins with the story of Saint Christina. This story really reflects Vere's feelings as the book draws to a close. Christina spends her life atoning for the sins of others, and, in a way, Vere does the same. Vere is frightened of the world because her life before coming to the convent was so chaotic. She and her mother were mostly homeless, so the convent is really the only safe home she has ever known. While it seems her mother was mentally ill and, therefore, not at fault for the way she and Vere were living, Vere's fears of the outside world and being sequestered in a convent are still the result of her mother's actions. So, in that way, she is paying for something that is not her fault. When Vere makes the decision not to leave the convent, she essentially makes the decision to spend the rest of her life atoning for Gwen's sins by caring for Gwen's daughter.

Another aspect of Christina's story that resonates with Vere's life is the idea that Christina had become something she never meant to and did not know what to do with what she had been given. The final lines of Christina's story read, "She didn't know what to do with the powers she had been given. She hadn't meant to be so astonishing" (309). Vere likely felt the same way when Gwen admonished her for being too good and making it look so easy. While Vere is a person of faith and she does try to always do what is right, it is not something that she ever meant to use as a means of making anyone else feel bad about themselves the way that Christina's sisters must have felt like they would never be as astonishing as Christina. Vere is left not knowing what to do with the faith she has and how to move forward in her life as the book moves into the final chapters.

The climax of the book takes place in the chapter titled The Assumption. The author gives this chapter the same title as the opening chapter of the book to show that a year has passed. The climax takes place when the author reveals that Gwen is pregnant. Of course, the first person suspected as the father is Father James since he seems to be the only viable male Gwen could have had contact with. Indeed, the author has set his character up as a red herring through his interactions with Gwen. First, Gwen starts making physical contact with Father James by sitting too close to him and snuggling up to him when he grieves. Then she contrives to spend time alone with him in his office. After that, Father James is visibly uncomfortable with Gwen and tries to avoid her, which makes her go storming into his office looking for him like a spurned lover. Finally, she is seen crying while in confession with Father James. However, Gwen reluctantly reveals that the father of her baby is Vere's soldier. From the time the soldiers arrived at the



Sick Ward, the author laid the groundwork for this plot twist by periodically mentioning that Vere's soldier was capable of getting an erection and by having Gwen take notice.

Gwen's having intercourse with the comatose soldier is perhaps in part due to the curiosity and hormones of a teenager, but it also represents Gwen taking control. The soldier is comatose so he cannot do anything more than lie there. Gwen essentially rapes him just as she was once raped. Whether or not she thought about the consequences of her actions or even realized that such a thing was possible given the soldier's medical condition is unclear.

Vere's reaction to Gwen admitting what she had done with Vere's boy emphasizes Vere's goodness and dedication to The Guineveres. She is undoubtedly upset and feels betrayed by what has happened, but she does not react in anger. Instead, she reaches out and offers the baby forgiveness. She does not, however, forgive Gwen but tells her she must forgive herself. Vere's offering forgiveness to the baby plays into the idea that innocence can be lost through someone else's actions. Vere seems to understand that the baby will be seen as sinful because it will be illegitimate. Given that this story takes place during a time when men were drafted into the military, it takes place sometime before 1973 (which was the last year in which the draft was in effect), so a baby born outside of marriage was still seen as scandalous. Vere does not want the baby to have to live with the sins of its mother the way The Guineveres have lived with the sins of their own parents, so she offers it forgiveness.

Vere's refusal to forgive Gwen does not seem to be out of anger or meanness. Instead, she seems to understand that in order to move on, Gwen will need to find a way to forgive herself. In fact, Vere continues to be friends with Gwen after learning about the pregnancy and even helps Gwen to alter her clothing to fit her growing belly.

The author wraps up the theme of being able to create a family through Vere's decision to stay at the convent and raise Gwen's baby. Vere is given a chance to go and live with a family, but she chooses to stay with the baby and her soldier because she realizes they are her family now. Her decision is predicated by a statement Sister Fran made on the day Vere arrived at the convent. Sister Fran said to Vere, "You'll learn, girl. God sent you here for a purpose" (333). Vere seems to have known her purpose all along since it has always been her wish to have a family of her own.

Through Vere's revival story and her decision to stay at the convent, the author adds another dimension to Sister Fran's character. In Vere's revival story, Sister Fran comes across as more compassionate than she did in the stories of the other Guineveres. She wraps her arm around Vere and brings her in from the rain. This time her use of the phrase "the joy of God is the innocent" seems to suggest that Vere is one of God's joys since it is delivered with more warmth. When Vere objects to her watch being put into storage, Sister Fran pulls back her own sleeves to show that she does not wear a watch either, which seems to be an attempt to assuage the child's sadness. Later, when Sister Fran is elderly and Vere is an adult, she expresses regret at never having been able to find Gwen's family. She tells Vere that she always hoped for all of her girls to return to their homes. While The Guineveres assumed that Sister Fran never even tried to find



their parents, just the opposite seems to be true. Sometimes, though, as seems to be the case with Vere's own mother since all of Vere's letters were returned, reuniting girls with their families was just not possible. When Vere learns that her letters were all returned, she realizes that Sister Fran never told her because she did not want Vere to be sad or lose hope.

The final chapter, titled Absolution, explains that the entire book has been Vere's recording of baby Guinevere's own revival story. She says that she wants Guinevere to have the answer to some of the questions she will have about her life. Vere talks about the way that faith allows people to continue looking for answers without seeming redundant. This thought plays into the theme of faith requiring waiting in that Vere understands that having all of the answers is not possible and so waiting to find those answers, or simply accepting that there are no answers, makes faith a necessity. In fact, even as the book ends, Vere is still waiting and has faith that her boy will wake up one day.

The fact that Vere is still waiting for her boy gives her story a bittersweet ending. Vere is undoubtedly happy in her life at the convent with the family she has created. She has had a daughter to raise and cares for all of the girls in the convent by cooking for them. She has even forged a friendship with Father James. However, she is still in love with a man who will never be able to return her love. She has restricted her life to the confines of the convent and the reader cannot help but feel a bit sorry that Vere never really did get to experience a normal life.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Vere react to Gwen's revelation that the father of her baby is Vere's boy the way that she does? Do you think she really forgives Gwen in that moment? Why does she refuse Gwen absolution?

Discussion Question 2

What was Vere's life like before she came to the convent? Why does her mother leave her there? How does her revival story explain her actions throughout the book?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Vere decide to stay at the convent and care for the baby? Is her ending a happy one?

Vocabulary

astonishing, ephemeral, levitate, unconditional, attributes, conveyed, dignity, superstition, accommodate, gawk, improperly, amplified, sassing, synchronized, contagious, shriveled, instinctively



Characters

Vere

Vere is one of The Guineveres. She was the first of The Guineveres to arrive at the convent and the story is told primarily from her perspective. She is the most faithful of The Guineveres, though as time wears on at the convent, she does come to doubt somewhat as she wonders if she will ever go home.

Vere was left at the convent by her mother after the two had lived an itinerant lifestyle during which they were mostly homeless. Vere's mother suffered from mental illness and sometimes talked to people who were not there. She also preached about her visions to passersby while Vere held a hat to collect change.

When Gwen becomes pregnant by Vere's soldier, Vere does not react in anger. After Gwen leaves the convent, Vere decides to stay and raise Gwen's baby there even though she is given an opportunity to go and live with a family.

Vere writes the story of The Guineveres as the baby's revival story so that she will have the answers to questions she may have about her life.

Win

Win is one of The Guineveres. She has a tough attitude that sometimes intimidates the other girls at the convent. Win's father left her and her mother. The two of them went to live with Win's grandparents who were loving people. However, Win's mother never recovered from her husband leaving her. She nearly overdosed on drugs one day. Win found her and went to the neighbors for help, which made Win's mother angry. When Win kisses another girl at her school, Win's mother takes her to the convent and leaves her there. Win's mother comes to pick Win up during the year in which the book takes place. She takes Win to live in an apartment above a bakery, but eventually goes back to drinking and leaves Win. Win works in the bakery and eventually opens a bakery of her own with her partner, Lorraine.

Ginny

Ginny is the most frail of The Guineveres. She considers herself an artist like her father. Ginny came to live at the convent after her father killed her mother when he discovered her having an affair. Ginny has a breakdown after her soldier dies. Afterward she is sent to live with and care for her grandmother. Ginny eventually marries and has children, but never goes to art school.



Gwen

Gwen is the prettiest of The Guineveres. As a child, Gwen's father paid her a lot of attention and bought her special gifts. Gwen's mother was bothered by the attention. After Gwen's father has an affair and the family moves, Gwen goes to a new school where the other girls do not like her because she is very pretty. Three boys pay a great deal of attention to her, and one day they take her to a park and rape her. When Gwen tells her father about the rape, he holds her and then kisses her on the mouth. Shortly afterward, he takes her to live at the convent.

Gwen sneaks into the Sick Ward and has sex with Vere's unconscious soldier, which results in a pregnancy. After having the baby, Gwen is sent to a school for wayward girls. She does not take her daughter with her.

Sister Fran

Sister Fran is the nun who runs the convent. She is in charge of teaching the girls and taking care of them. Sister Fran often says "the joy of God is the innocent," which seems to mean different things at different times. She frequently preaches to the girls about the sins of The Flesh and will not allow them to leave the convent for fear they will be exposed to sin. Though she comes across as gruff, she cares deeply for the girls in her charge. Years after she sends Gwen to live in a home for wayward girls, she tells Vere that it always bothered her that she could not find Gwen's family and that they never knew where she went.

Father James

Father James is the priest for the church that is associated with the convent. He joined the priesthood to avoid being drafted. When The Guineveres begin serving as alter girls, he spends quite a bit of time with them. He drinks often and when The Guineveres catch him drinking, Gwen convinces him to share the wine with The Guineveres. Later, they blackmail him in an attempt to get him to take them to the Veterans Administration so they can try to find out who their boys are. When Gwen gets pregnant, he is Sister Fran's first suspect, but he is not to blame.

Our Boys

Our Boys are the four unconscious soldiers that are brought to the Sick Ward. Their identities are unknown. The Guineveres decide the boys are their tickets to getting away from the convent. They become convinced that if they care for the boys and the boys wake up, they will be able to go home with the boys' families. Though Vere's boy briefly opens his eyes, none of the boys ever regains consciousness.



Ebbie

Ebbie is one of the girls at the convent who works in the Sick Ward. She takes care of a young soldier named Jack Murr who comes into the Sick Ward unconscious and with no known identity. When he wakes up and his parents are contacted, Ebbie is invited to go home with them to care for Jack. Her departure is what inspires The Guineveres' plan to go home with their soldiers.

Jack Murr (Junior)

Jack Murr is a soldier that comes into the ward unconscious and with no known identity. When he wakes up he tells the nuns his name and that he goes by Junior. His parents come to pick him up and they take his nurse, Ebbie, home with them. Jack later kills himself.

Mr. Macker

Mr. Macker is an elderly man who is a patient in the Sick Ward. He is a lively man who flirts with The Guineveres and likes to perform magic tricks for them. Mr. Macker dies, which saddens all of The Guineveres except Gwen who says they are lucky it was not one of their soldiers.



Symbols and Symbolism

Lucky Talisman/Human Ear

This item symbolizes Ginny's love for her boy and her wish to keep him close to her. Ginny finds a brown leathery item in her boy's box. She does not know what it is, but decides it is his lucky talisman and keeps it. Later, when Sister Fran reveals that the item is a human ear, Ginny decides the ear represents a mistake her boy made.

Wooden Toy

Win finds a wooden toy in her boy's box and keeps it as a symbol of her love for him. Later, the author reveals that Win never loved her boy, but pretended she did because she loved The Guineveres. She keeps the toy on her mantle as a symbol of her time as part of The Guineveres.

Gwen's Boy's Ring

Gwen finds a ring in her boy's box, which she keeps as a symbol of her love for him. However, when the author reveals Gwen's revival story and that Gwen had received a special ring from her father, the ring also comes to symbolize Gwen's relationship for her father and her desire to recapture that love, however dysfunctional it may have been.

Book of Psalms

Vere finds a Book of Psalms in her boy's duffel and keeps it as a symbol of her love for him. For Vere, the book also indicates that her boy is a faithful person, just as she is.

Win's Grandfather's Chest

Win's grandfather's chest symbolizes calm for Win. The chest was the place where Win went to sit when her world was in chaos around her. She hid from her mother's drinking and mood swings by sitting on the chest where she would not be noticed. She keeps the chest even as an adult and still sits on it when she needs time to think.

Sister Fran's Bird "Pretty"

Sister Fran's bird symbolizes Sister Fran giving her affection to someone other than The Guineveres. Because Sister Fran is the only mother figure they have available, they want her approval and affection even though they see her as a stern woman. The



attention she pays to the bird and the fact that she calls the bird “Pretty” makes the girls jealous so they call the bird “Ugly” and make fun of it.

Our Boys

Our Boys, the soldiers The Guineveres choose as their own, symbolize their desire to leave the convent and lead normal lives. The Guineveres see Our Boys as their ticket to getting out of the convent before they turn 18. As such, they become inordinately important to the girls despite the fact that they never know the boys’ names and the boys never wake up.

Advent

Advent symbolizes a period of waiting. During the Advent season, the Guineveres are in a period of waiting for their boys to wake up so that they can leave with them and lead regular lives.

The Guineveres

For Vere, Win, Ginny, and Gwen, The Guineveres symbolizes a makeshift family structure. The girls feel as though they have nothing, so their relationship with one another becomes the most important thing in their lives. They are like sisters to each other.

Sister Fran’s Whistle

Sister Fran’s whistle represents her position of power at the convent. Sister Fran uses the whistle to signal the girls to move from one activity to the next or to call them together. She is seldom seen without it.



Settings

The Sisters of the Supreme Adoration

The Sisters of the Supreme Adoration is the convent where The Guineveres live. It is a huge, imposing building that is sometimes described as a castle. The castle almost takes on a persona for The Guineveres when they sit in its shadow and feel as though it looms over them, confining them away from the outside world.

The convent consists of the living space for the nuns, the Bunk Room where the girls sleep, the Rec Room, classrooms, the cafeteria, the third floor Penance Room, and the Sick Ward, which houses elderly patients and unconscious soldiers. Ginny also discovers that there is a back staircase that leads from the third floor to the Sick Ward. The Guineveres use this staircase to sneak in to see their boys at night while the other girls sleep.

While the girls all want to escape the convent, it eventually becomes home to Vere who decides to stay there and raise Gwen's daughter.

Sick Ward

The Sick Ward is part of the convent where The Guineveres live. The Sick Ward is home to several elderly patients that the nuns care for. It also becomes home to several soldiers who are brought in unconscious during the course of the war. In particular, it is where the four soldiers The Guineveres attach themselves to live.

The Guineveres start out hating the time they have to spend working in the Sick Ward as part of their punishment. They are uncomfortable with the patients and do not enjoy the work. However, after the soldiers come and they decide the boys are their ticket out of the convent, The Guineveres look forward to their time in the Sick Ward. In fact, they begin sneaking into the Sick Ward at night while everyone else is asleep just so they can sit by the beds of the soldiers.

Bunk Room

The Bunk Room is where the girls who live at the convent sleep. It is sparsely decorated, but some of the girls have stuck pictures on the walls above their beds. Though the Bunk Room is used mainly for sleeping, The Guineveres do spend some time there talking about their plans for the future along with other things. It is in the Bunk Room that Vere first discovers that Gwen has been going somewhere alone at night.



Church

The church is a separate building from the convent, but sits close to it since The Guineveres walk there to do their duties as altar servers. Father James is the priest there and all of the girls from the convent attend worship services at the church. They also go there for confession. The Guineveres get to know Father James because of the time they spend in the church with him. It is at the church that The Guineveres discover that Father James is a heavy drinker. While in his office, they convince him to share his wine with them. The Guineveres also go to Father James' office to blackmail him into taking them to the Veterans Administration to find out more about their soldiers.

Penance Room

The Penance Room is located on the third floor of the convent. The Guineveres are unaware of the room until Ginny returns to the Bunk Room after being sent there for some time because she had been found passed out drunk. While in the Penance Room, Ginny discovers that there is a stairwell that leads from the third floor into the Sick Ward. The Guineveres use this stairwell to sneak in to see their boys when everyone else is sleeping.

Later, when Vere decides to stay at the convent to raise Gwen's daughter, she and the baby move into the Penance Room and live there.



Themes and Motifs

Faith Involves Waiting

The theme of faith involving waiting is seen throughout the book as The Guineveres wait for so many things to happen in their lives, yet continue to have faith that what they hope for will happen. In essence, the story of The Guineveres is very much about waiting. When they first come to the convent, The Guineveres all believe their parents will return for them some day. This is especially true of Ginny and Vere who write letters to their parents and are certain that they will one day be reunited despite the fact that Gwen and Win sometimes tell them to give up.

The Guineveres also have faith that they will one day be able to live normal lives outside of the convent. They imagine having husbands, careers, and families. While living in the convent, they often feel like their lives are on hold as they wait out the routines of their days that never seem to change.

When the soldiers come to live at the convent, The Guineveres place their faith in the boys waking up and taking them away. They believe the boys hold the key to their salvation and even begin to pray to them as well as for them. But, the boys do not wake up and The Guineveres have no information about their identities. As a result, they go on waiting and hoping for the day to come when even one of them wakes up.

In the end, Vere proves to be more faithful than the other Guineveres since she remains at the convent and continues to wait for her soldier to wake up even when she is an adult. She never gives up hope that he will awaken and they will be a family.

Family Can Be Created

The idea that family can be created is the central theme of the book and it is explored through the lives of The Guineveres inside the walls of the convent after being abandoned there by their biological families. Vere, the first of The Guineveres to arrive, feels alone until the day when Ginny arrives and their family starts to take shape. The Guineveres form a family between the four of them that is strong despite the personal flaws and identities of each girl. Even when Win and Vere realize they cannot trust Gwen, they make the decision to trust her anyway because she is one of them and, therefore, a part of their family. Their makeshift family unit is so tight that they speak of themselves as one entity, referring to themselves as The Guineveres in much the same way a family might refer to themselves using their surname. They even refuse to allow any girl who is not named Guinevere to join their group.

In addition to the family unit The Guineveres build with one another, they also find a mother figure in Sister Fran. While they do not see her as particularly affectionate and sometimes do not even like her, they do look up to her and seek her approval in the same way that a child seeks approval from a parent. At the end of the book, Sister Fran



is shown to be a warmer person than The Guineveres make her out to be and it becomes clear that she feels as though the girls in the convent are her family as well since she says to Vere before she dies, “My hope for all my girls is that they return home” (339). Her referral to the girls as “my girls” indicates that she sees them as something like daughters.

In the end, Vere chooses to form for herself a family comprised of Gwen’s daughter and the comatose soldier that she loves. She chooses this even though she is given the opportunity to go live with a family that has agreed to take her in. Vere believes that her purpose is to serve at the convent by being baby Guinevere’s family.

Innocence Can Be Lost Through the Sins of Others

The theme of innocence being lost through the sins of others is seen primarily through the revival stories of The Guineveres, which the girls describe as the moment they saw the truth. Their definition of a revival story is in keeping with the idea of the loss of innocence in the sense that, as with Adam and Eve eating the fruit in the Garden of Eden, a loss of innocence can mean knowing an unpleasant truth about life, such as Adam and Eve recognizing their nakedness.

Ginny’s revival story shows that her loss of innocence occurred when her father killed her mother in a moment of rage after discovering her with another man. As a result of the murder, Ginny now knows that even the person she loves most can be capable of horrible things. Win’s loss of innocence occurs when she learns that her mother despises her simply because Win is attracted to girls. Win learns that her mother’s own narrow-mindedness can result in Win being discarded. Gwen’s revival story is the best example of innocence being lost through the sins of others in that it is a more literal example. Gwen is raped by three boys and her own father has an improper attraction to her. Gwen not only loses her physical innocence, but her view of love is skewed because of the way her father treated her.

Happiness Is Found Where You Place Your Attention

The idea that happiness is found where you place your attention is explored through what makes The Guineveres happy. Father James says to The Guineveres, “Happiness, girls, is a matter of where you place your attention” (37). The Guineveres find happiness in one another because their relationship is the one thing they place most of their attention in. They spend a great deal of time together and become like a family. Vere confirms this fact later when the girls are walking from the church back to the convent. They hold hands as they go and Vere says, “Much of happiness, we’d been taught, was really about where we chose to place our attention, and that’s where we chose to put our attention, in each other’s hands” (168). While Vere may literally mean they placed their attention in that moment in the physical contact of their hands, this statement might also be taken in a figurative sense as well.



For a time, The Guineveres choose to place their attentions and energies in the care of their soldiers. As a result, they are happy when they are with their boys or talking about their boys. They become certain that the boys are, in fact, the key to their ultimate happiness away from the convent. The book concludes with Vere able to find happiness without ever leaving the convent because she chooses to place her attention on Guinevere and on her boy, making them her family.

Saint Motif

Domet uses a saint motif as part of the structure of *The Guineveres*. Saints are mentioned often as the story is told. Since the story is set in a Catholic convent where saints play a big role in the religious practices of the nuns, it is not surprising that *The Guineveres* know a great deal about saints and use them as role models and inspiration in their lives.

However, the saint motif goes beyond saints being mentioned frequently. Domet intersperses the book with chapters devoted to telling the stories of several female saints. The chapters serve to emphasize ideas presented in the story or to demonstrate how traits in some of the characters relate to what they have learned about the saints.

At the conclusion of the book, when the reader learns that the entire book has been Vere's recording of baby Guinevere's revival story, the saint stories take on new meanings. Vere has included them in Guinevere's revival story as a means of teaching her about where she has come from, which is a place of faith where the saints are very important.

Moreover, the reader sees that each of the stories has more to do with Vere than with any of the other Guineveres. Many of the saints strive to lead chaste lives and to be free from their bodies. This reflects Vere's aversion to sex and her extreme discomfort with her own body. The story of Saint Ita becomes particularly relevant to Vere's life since it is about a saint who does not want a physical relationship with a man, yet she wants a baby more than anything. This is certainly the case for Vere since she makes the decision to remain at the convent to raise Guinevere. All Vere has ever desired is to have a family of her own, and with Guinevere she achieves her goal.

Styles

Point of View

The *Guineveres* is told mostly in first person from the perspective of Vere. Her perspective is limited as she can only speculate on how the other girls are feeling and what they are thinking. The book is written primarily from Vere's perspective because it is meant to be Gwen's daughter's revival story and written to provide her with answers to questions she might have about her life. Therefore, Vere is the logical person to tell the story since she was not only the first *Guinevere* to arrive at the convent, but also stays at the convent to raise the child.

The revival stories of each of *The Guineveres* is told from that girl's perspective, i.e., Gwen tells her revival story, Win tells hers, and so on. The author writes the stories from the perspective of each girl because it allows her to delve into the way each girl is feeling during the events leading up to being left at the convent. Telling the stories from the perspective of each girl also allows the reader to connect with each character and understand the traumas they have experienced in their lives that have shaped their personalities.

The chapters about the saints are told in the third person omniscient perspective. The narrator, who may or may not be Vere since she is fascinated by the saints, includes the feelings and thoughts of multiple characters involved in the stories. These stories are meant to provide information about some of the saints the girls at the convent learn about, but they also give insights into the story of *The Guineveres*.

Language and Meaning

The language of *The Guineveres* reflects Vere's emotions and her faith. There are many references to saints and to the Bible. The author's word choices invoke the tone for each scene. For example, the first chapter of the book takes place at a parade during which *The Guineveres* are trying to run away from the convent. The author uses language that reflects the way the girls feel about being stuffed inside their float, but also represent the way they feel being confined to the convent. She describes the air as being "suffocating," which reflects the girls' feelings about being forced to live the rigid, and often dull, lifestyle prescribed by the nuns at the convent. Yet, as they sit inside the float, they also hear the "squealing and hooting" of the people watching the parade, which reflects their excitement at the possibility of leaving the convent.

The author capitalizes a number of terms that would not normally be capitalized. For example, *The Guineveres* refer to the soldiers in the Sick Ward as "Our Boys," and the phrase is always capitalized. This use of capitalization represents parts of *The Guineveres* lives that hold importance. The names of the various rooms in the convent are always capitalized because those rooms are really all the girls see of the world, so



they are very important parts of their lives. And, *The Guineveres* is always capitalized because the friendship of the four girls is the most important thing to them while they live together in the convent. The *Guineveres* become family to one another in a time when their real families have left them.

Structure

The Guineveres is comprised of 29 chapters. The chapters are titled rather than numbered. The book follows a year in the church with many of the titles being parts of the church year, such as Lent and Advent. Titles that do not refer to a time period refer to other concepts related to life in the convent, such as Involuntary Doubt and Absolution. The chapters that describe how each of the girls came to be at the convent are called Revival stories, such as Gwen's Revival. Sister Fran explains that a revival is a "moment of spiritual reawakening" (39). However, *The Guineveres* use the term revival to mean the moment when they understood the truth. The chapters that are about saints are titled using the saint's name(s).



Quotes

Back then, I hadn't yet realized that time had a way of providing the answers. Back then, I believed The Guineveres were all I had.

-- Vere (The Assumption)

Importance: This quote shows how important being one of The Guineveres was to Vere, and to the rest of the girls as well. The Guineveres all feel abandoned by their families, so they form a new family with their fellow Guineveres. The girls become like sisters to one another and their friendship is so important to them that they exclude other girls simply on the grounds of not being named Guinevere.

To The Guineveres the outside meant leaving behind our histories as throwaways."

-- Vere (Penance)

Importance: The Guineveres are desperate to get away from the convent and this quote explains the reason. The Guineveres have all been left at the convent by family members for one reason or another. They do not receive letters from anyone, so they feel as though they have been discarded. They believe that if they get away from the convent they can start new, normal lives.

These stories found ways to tell themselves, even against our wishes. Stories are like that; they seek to unravel.

-- Vere (Penance)

Importance: Vere says this of the revival stories of the girls who live in the convent. These stories tell how they came to be at the convent. Many of the stories are sad and some are even tragic. Whether the girls want others to know their histories or not, the stories seem to get around. This quote explains Vere's reason for wanting to write down the story of The Guineveres as the revival story for Gwen's baby. She wants this Guinevere to understand why she has grown up in a convent and to have the answers to some of the questions she will have about her life.

I choose to love my dad, then, despite everything.

-- Ginny (Ginny's Revival)

Importance: Ginny says this at the beginning of her revival story before it has been revealed that her father is in jail for killing her mother. Ginny believes people should not be judged on the basis of one mistake because she believes her father is a good man who loves her regardless of his one act of rage. This attitude leads Ginny to continue loving her soldier even when she discovers that the lucky talisman she found in his box is a human ear. She makes the decision not to judge him based on one mistake and continues to care for him so much that when he dies she has a mental breakdown.

In the Sick Ward later that day it was Ginny who first pointed out that maybe miracles really do happen, and maybe Father James was right, and maybe The Guineveres had



overlooked the obvious in our most pitiful of states.

-- Vere (Sacrifice)

Importance: This quote represents the beginning of The Guineveres' plan to act as nurses for the unknown soldiers in the Sick Ward in hopes of one day going home with their families just as Ebbie when home with Junior's family. The plan is inspired both by Ebbie's leaving and by a sermon on miracles that Father James delivers in which he says that there are no coincidence, only miracles.

We had to admit that, although Sister Fran more often terrified us than not, we still craved her praise. She was, after all, our de facto parent, and what girl doesn't seek such approval?

-- Vere (Advent)

Importance: This quote describes the way The Guineveres feel about Sister Fran. They do not exactly like her, yet she is the only parent figure they have, so they want to please her just as a child wants to please their parent.

Much of happiness, we'd been taught, was really about where we chose to place our attention, and that's where we chose to put our attention, in each other's hands.

-- Vere (Baptism)

Importance: This quote states one of the themes of the book, happiness is found where you place your attentions. The girls are told this on a number of occasions. This particular quote occurs as The Guineveres walk back to the convent after drinking wine with Father James. They are happy because, for the moment, they are outside, free from the convent, and together. Their connection with one another is one of the places in which they find happiness.

The heart is funny in that way: When it keeps on loving, and loving, and loving what isn't there, it becomes attached to the notion that love is the wait itself, the emptiness of it.

-- Narrator (Saint Irmina and Saint Adela)

Importance: This quote is an example of how the chapters that tell the stories of the saints also tell something about The Guineveres. This quote describes the love The Guineveres have for their soldiers. They are really more in love with the idea of love and with the waiting for their boys to wake up than they are in love with the soldiers themselves, whom they do not even know.

They resented the convent itself, as though it were a living, breathing thing capable of such blame.

-- Vere (The Vigil)

Importance: This quote is an example of how The Guineveres feel about the convent itself. The author indicates several times that the building has an effect on the girls, stating that they sometimes feel like it swallows them whole or that it looms above them. When The Guineveres grow up they seem to understand that the nuns and priests were



doing their jobs and raising the girls to the best of their abilities, but still they resent the convent itself.

Everything happens for a reason.' One of us was always saying that. One of us was always believing it, too.

-- Vere (Ordinary Time)

Importance: This quote is an example of the way that the author writes about The Guineveres as though they are a single entity. Although Vere remembers that one of The Guineveres said this, she does not specify which Guinevere said it. Vere frequently recalls that something was said, but seldom which girl said it because their individual identities become wrapped into one as The Guineveres.

Truth be told, The Guineveres weren't sure if we wanted our parents to come back, because we knew that if they did, we'd have a difficult choice to make: Our Parents or Our Boys. Our past or our future. Our old families or our new ones.

-- Vere (Ordinary Time)

Importance: This quote states one of the themes of the book, families can be created. The Guineveres have been abandoned by their real families, so they create a family with one another and with their soldiers. This family becomes so important to Vere that she makes the decision to stay at the convent even when she is faced with the opportunity to leave and live with a family that wants to take her in.

Look, look! I'm the only Guinevere here. I loved you most of all.

-- Vere (Absolution)

Importance: These are the final lines of the book. They give the book a bittersweet ending because Vere has never left the convent. It seems her life was a happy one since she had achieved her goal of having a family in that she was able to raise Guinevere like her own daughter and she continued to love her soldier. Yet, there is a sadness in the fact that the soldier never woke up and Vere goes on waiting.