

Here on Earth Study Guide

Here on Earth by Alice Hoffman

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Plot Summary

Here on Earth is an unforgettable novel by writer Alice Hoffman. In this novel, March Murray returns to her hometown after a nineteen year absence to bury the woman who was her surrogate mother. March intends to only remain for a few days, but those days turn into months when March is drawn back into an obsession she thought had ended more than twenty years before. Here on Earth is a novel about obsession, about pain, and about the devastation one person can bring upon on the people he loves.

March and her daughter, Gwen, return to March's hometown to bury Judith Dale, the housekeeper who was a surrogate mother to March after her own mother's death. March is haunted by the past from the moment she arrives. Inside her father's old house, March finds memories in every corner of the boy she once loved. Hollis was a street urchin, brought home by March's father when she was only eleven. From the first moment she saw him, March claimed the boy as her own.

Hollis' arrival in the Murray home was not accepted by everyone. Alan Murray, March's older and lazier brother, resented the attention paid to Hollis by his father. One day Alan and his friend ambush Hollis, beating him and leaving him tied to a tree. When March finds him, Hollis cuts himself in an attempt to make the attack seem worse than it was. This causes Henry Murray to threaten Alan's very existence in the household. It also opens Hollis to March, the only person he will ever trust.

Over time, Hollis and March become inseparable, often spying on the neighbors and envying their wealth and their belongings. After Henry's untimely death, March and Hollis become lovers, promising to one another there will never be another. However, at the same time Alan gives Hollis an invoice of all he owes the Murray family for their generosity. Hollis pays the bill quickly and then leaves, hoping to find his fortune in Florida.

March waits for Hollis for three years, watching for him from the window in her bedroom. At the same time, Richard Cooper begins courting March. Richard knows that March is in love with Hollis, but hopes she will see past this to realize how good Richard can be for her. Eventually March gives in and moves to California where she and Richard marry. While pregnant with her only child, March learns that Hollis has returned to Jenkintown. March begins calling him, whispering her love for him over the phone lines. However, when Hollis pressures her to leave Richard, she refuses for the sake of her child.

Now, more than fifteen years later, March finds herself unable to forget Hollis. Hollis still lives in Jenkintown, the owner of the farm they once admired and envied. Hollis has bought up most of Jenkintown, throwing around his great wealth to garner the respect he felt he never had as a child. However, Hollis still feels empty, as though he still does not own enough.



Gwen, March's daughter, begins stealing rides on Hollis' racehorse, Tarot. Hollis allows this to continue in hopes that it will draw March to him. March continuously puts off her departure, thinking more and more of Hollis. Finally they meet and March finds herself in his bed. They become obsessed with one another and March begins to neglect the simple things in her life. Susie, March's childhood friend, is concerned about March's behavior and begins investigating Hollis's past. Many people in town are convinced Hollis is responsible for his wife's death, though they cannot prove it. However, many can testify to injuries that make it clear Hollis was beating his first wife.

March allows Hollis to take over her life, to control everything in and out of bed. They move in together, making it easier for March to neglect her life. Gwen, however, is growing more and more frightened of Hollis. Gwen plans to leave as soon as Hollis gives her the ownership papers for Tarot. However, Hollis takes back the promise he made to her and refuses to give her Tarot. In fact, Hollis threatens to shoot Tarot when Gwen disobeys his orders to never bring strangers to Guardian Farm. The horse goes to Alan, who has become a drunk in the marsh. Gwen goes back to California, leaving her mother alone with Hollis.

On New Year's Eve, March attends a party at Susie's house, only to be dragged away by an unhappy Hollis. Hollis breaks a car window in his attempt to convince March that she never should have left the house without his permission. At home, March realizes that the boy she once loved is no longer a part of the man Hollis has become. March sneaks out of the house and returns to California. The following morning, Hollis rushes to stop her and crashes his car on a dangerous turn in the road in front of his house.



Part 1: Chapters 1-2

Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Summary

Here on Earth is a novel that has many of the same themes as Wuthering Heights, including a character not unlike Heathcliff. It is a novel that is almost literary at heart, filled with themes the reader is not likely to quickly forget.

In chapter 1, March Murray arrives in Jenkintown with her fifteen year old daughter, Gwen, late in the evening. They attempt to make it to March's childhood home down a back road, avoiding the main highway that not only has a homicidal curve that killed March's parents-in-law, but also runs in front of her husband's childhood home that is now owned by March's childhood lover. Unfortunately, the road is muddy and marked with potholes, causing March's rental car to become stuck. March and Gwen walk to Fox Hill where the Murray home sits. As March walks up to the house, she thinks about her childhood, her lawyer father and his partner, as well as the woman they have come to bury. Judith Dale was a mother to March when her own mother died and a woman who never had a bad word to say about anyone. It is sad to March that she died here alone.

In chapter 2, March recalls the day Hollis arrived at the Murray home. Alan told March about him over breakfast, talking about him like an unwanted stray their father brought home from his business trip to Boston. March looks out the window at Hollis and declares him to be hers from that moment on. It takes time, but Hollis and March begin to forge an unsteady friendship. Unfortunately, Alan does not feel the same way. Alan is deeply jealous when his father shows Hollis any attention, angry when his father treats Hollis the same as Alan. One day Alan and his friends ambush Hollis, tying him to a tree and leaving him to the elements. March finds him and frees him. Before returning home, Hollis cuts his arm deeply. At home, Hollis is rushed to the hospital. March refuses to admit that Alan is responsible, but Henry knows. Henry tells Alan if he ever hurts Hollis again, he will be banished from the home. That night, March crawls into bed with Hollis and listens as he cries in the dark.

A few years later, Henry Murray passes away. In his will, Henry has left everything to Alan. Alan banishes Hollis to the attic and gives him an invoice for everything the family has paid for him. Hollis works hard, and gambles harder, finally paying off his debt. Hollis then leaves, promising to return for March. However, March waits three years with no word.

Part 1: Chapters 1-2 Analysis

These first chapters introduce the reader to the main characters. First there is March Murray. March has come back to her childhood home in order to bury the woman who was a surrogate mother to her throughout her childhood. March has not returned home



in nineteen years in an attempt to avoid the past. However, the moment March walks into her childhood home she feels the past envelop her. This includes Hollis, a young man her father took in when March was just a little girl. March declares this boy to be hers from the moment she sees him and quickly develops a relationship with him that will leave her thinking of him more than twenty years later. It is almost an obsession the way she describes it, something the reader should note and recall as the plot continues to develop.

These chapters also introduce Gwen Cooper, March's daughter. Gwen is a rebellious young girl who has been involved in drugs and who smokes behind her mother's back. It seems the relationship between mother and daughter is strained, leaving them constantly at odds with one another. The reader sees this as something of a common theme in these books, but wonders how this relationship might change as March falls back into her obsession with Hollis. At the same time, the reader learns of Alan Murray, March's much older brother who had an adversarial relationship with Hollis. The reader assumes this relationship had an impact on the man Hollis was to become, and feels somewhat sorry for him at this point, but will not learn the true impact until later in the novel.



Part 1: Chapters 3-4

Part 1: Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, Hollis goes around and checks his property, making sure everyone has stayed off of it. Hollis owns Guardian Farm, a farm that was once one of the biggest horse farms in the area. Hollis has allowed the house and grounds to go to ruin, trying to kill all that reminds him of his unhappy childhood when he and his lover once envied this home and the people who lived in it. In the barn, Hollis goes to check on his few remaining horses: an old race horse that once killed two men, a nag used to work the farm, and a pony that once belonged to Hollis' son. The pony has colic and Hollis left his adoptive nephew to care for it, but the boy has fallen asleep. Hollis yells at Hank, making him feel inadequate for his mistake. Hank is angry with Hollis, however, because he learned in town that day that Judith Dale died. Judith Dale once lived with Hollis and Hank, carrying for Hollis' perpetually sick son Coop. Hank recalls now how Judith looked when she told him of twelve year old Coop's death. Hank also recalls the wonderful meals Judith once made them and the chocolate cake she sent to Hank on every birthday. Now Hollis gives permission to Hank to go to the funeral the following morning.

In chapter 4, Susanna Justice, the daughter of Henry Murray's law partner, arrives to drive March and Gwen to the funeral. Susie and March were never close as children, constantly fighting over Susie's habit of judging March, but manage to forge a strong bond as adults. March and Gwen sit beside Susie and her father at the funeral. Gwen becomes ill part way through and asks March to take her outside. Hank watches Gwen as she leaves the building. Outside, Gwen finds herself wishing she had not come to Massachusetts. Hank, however, finds himself hoping to meet Gwen alone sometime.

Part 1: Chapters 3-4 Analysis

In chapter 3, the reader meets the adult Hollis. Hollis is a man obsessed with having things, but not very concerned about taking care of them. Hollis has come to own the home he and March envied, a home filled with people Hollis somehow blames for him losing March. This implies to the reader that Hollis has bought this place to prove something and to hurt those who stole what he thought was his. This tells the reader that Hollis has not let go of his past and has in fact continued to nurse his hurt feelings. The reader also learns that Hollis has been married and lost both a wife and a twelve year old son. This makes the reader wonder if this grief has contributed to Hollis' pain. Finally, the reader meets Hollis' adoptive nephew, a young boy who is both timid and strong, a young man who would do anything for his adoptive uncle.

Susie Justice is introduced in the fourth chapter. Susie is an old friend of March's who appears to be lighthearted, but intelligent. Susie cares about March despite a difficult friendship when they were younger. The reader also meets Susie's father, who was



once Henry's law partner and friend. Bill Justice, or Judge, is overwrought with Judith's death, suggesting a close friendship. It seems everyone in this novel adored Judith Dale, a woman who seems more saint than housekeeper.



Part 1: Chapters 5-6

Part 1: Chapters 5-6 Summary

In chapter 5, Gwen and March return home from the funeral and reception. March calls home to her husband, recalling how he courted her after Hollis left town. Richard Cooper once lived at Guardian Farm with his sister Belinda and their parents. March was good friends with Belinda, drawing her to Guardian Farm often. After Hollis left, Richard would begin coming to see March. At first it was innocent, an attempt to draw her out of the house. Soon, however, March became aware that Richard continued to come home to Jenkintown on his breaks from Harvard, not to see his family, but to be with her. Eventually Richard gave up, moving to California. A short time later, March followed. Now March and Richard talk about the funeral. March mentions that Hollis was not there, causing some tension from Richard.

After hanging up, March recalls how, during her pregnancy with Gwen, Judith told her Hollis had returned to Jenkintown. March called him and soon they began speaking every day, sometimes in the middle of the night while March hid in a closet. Eventually Hollis began pressuring March to return to Jenkintown to be with him. When March refused because of the baby, Hollis disappeared and she never spoke to him again. It reminds March of the days after her father's death when she pushed Hollis away, then went to him with the intention of giving him anything he wanted as long as he would love her again. At fourteen, March becomes his lover. Only Susie knows the truth, and she never understands how March could fall in love with Hollis.

In chapter 6, Judge comes to Fox Hill to visit March. Judge tells March that her father's house, that went to Alan with Henry's death, is now owned by Hollis. Hollis purchased the house at a time when Alan needed money. They continue to talk and as they have a snack at the table, Judge becomes aware that Sister, Judith's dog, is missing. March and Judge drive through town together in search of the dog. They finally find Sister at Judith's grave. Sister is happy to see Judge, jumping into his arms. As he holds her, March notices that Judge is crying. It is then that March realizes Judge must have been in love with Judith all these years.

Part 1: Chapters 5-6 Analysis

The reader learns in these chapters that the man March is married to is the same young man who lived at Guardian Farm, the same young man Hollis and March envied as children. This explains to the reader why Hollis would have such deep anger not only against the idea of Guardian Farm, but toward the family who once owned it. The reader also learns how Richard began to court March in the years after Hollis disappeared and how March gave up on the hope that Hollis would come back to her. However, he did come back, but March made the choice not to return to him because of her unborn child. Again Hollis has a reason to dislike a member of the Cooper family.



Hollis and March had a close relationship from the moment they met, a relationship that became sexual when March was only fourteen. The reader should note how March describes their first sexual encounter in which Hollis not only refused to stop when March asked him to, but he made her feel as though it were her fault for coming to him in the first place. This is dark behavior, the type that allows a young man to control his lover until the day he walks away.

Finally, the reader meets Judge again and learns that he was a regular at Fox Hill. Clearly if Judge knows Judith's dog, he must have spent a great deal of time at her house. When he weeps at her grave, March realizes he is in love with Judith and is grieving her. Now the reader knows that Judith was not a saint, but in fact had an affair with a married man for more than thirty years.



Part 1: Chapters 7-9

Part 1: Chapters 7-9 Summary

In chapter 7, Gwen is walking on the road in front of Guardian Farm, smoking a cigarette and missing home. Gwen thinks of all her friends, of the fun they must be having at the mall and various parties. Gwen has tried to call her best friend multiple times, but cannot get a hold of her. Gwen is miserable and ready to go home. Gwen leans against the fence when Tarot comes up behind her. Gwen touches Tarot and is happy to have him reciprocate. Gwen has no way of knowing that Tarot is a crazy horse, that he once killed two men. Instead, Gwen feels a connection with the old race horse. Knowing he should warn her, Hank watches silently from the hill above.

In chapter 8, the Coward lives alone in the marshes in a rundown, abandoned house that some claim once belonged to the town's founder, Aaron Jenkins. The Coward knows that Judith Dale has died, but when he hears knocking on his door he hopes it is her. No one else ever bothered to come to his house, no one else cared enough to leave him clothes and food. The Coward has been alone out here for more than ten years, except for a dog he had for a while. However, even the dog is dead. The Coward can remember when he was Alan Murray, when he was lucky enough to have it all. The Coward can also remember the day his wife caught the kitchen on fire and he was not brave enough to go inside and save either his wife or their child. The Coward began drinking soon after that, selling his house and moving from place to place until he finally ended up in the marshes. The Coward had a son, but Hollis came one day and took him away. Now the Coward lives for the next drink, grateful that Hollis has arranged to pay his tab each Friday at the liquor store on Route 22.

In chapter 9, March is working to pack up the house on Fox Hill. March wants to be quick and efficient, but she finds herself continuously stopping to look through photos and books. March is touched by some of the things Judith chose to keep. March keeps putting off her departure date and has decided to remain until after Founder's Day. At the same time, Hollis has become aware that someone is riding Tarot. One day Hollis takes Hank and waits for Gwen to appear. Not only does Hollis not run Gwen off, but he tells her she can ride the horse if she comes to the barn to groom her everyday. Hollis then drives Gwen home and instructs her to tell March he is waiting.

Part 1: Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Gwen meets Tarot. This is an important moment in the development of the plot because up to this moment Gwen has wanted nothing more than to return to the urban environment of her hometown. Now, however, Gwen has found a reason to stay. At the same time, this friendship with Tarot brings Gwen into contact with Hank again. Hank finds Gwen fascinating and would like to get to know her better.



The reader gets to meet the Coward in the next chapter. The Coward was once Alan Murray, but he is now a broken man, obsessed with what he sees as his inability to save his wife and child. The Coward is now an alcoholic who relies on the kindness of both Judith Dale and Hollis to not only care for his basic needs, but to care for his only child, Hank. This shows the reader that Hank and Gwen are closely related, suggesting that any romance between them would be frowned upon by society.

Hollis learns of Gwen's interest in Tarot and decides to use it to get to March. March has already delayed her departure from Jenkintown because of her memories of Hollis. Now Hollis uses Gwen to give March the message that he is still waiting. When March does not immediately dismiss this announcement or make plans to return home, the reader suspects that March has the same intention as Hollis—to rekindle their romance.



Part 2: Chapters 10-11

Part 2: Chapters 10-11 Summary

In chapter 10, Gwen attends the Founder's Day dance with a couple of girls Susie has introduced her to. By this time Gwen and Hank have developed a fragile friendship. At the dance, the other girls are surprised to find Hank there since he rarely leaves Guardian Farm. Gwen becomes overwhelmed at the dance and Hank takes her outside. They share a kiss and Hank walks Gwen home. At the same time, March is having dinner with Susie. Susie is shocked when March agrees to man a booth during the Harvest Fair which is several weeks away. Again Susie pushes March to go home. March and Susie argue about this and March walks off, going into the Lyon where she knows Hollis is having a drink. Susie joins her and has her halfway out the door when Hollis comes over. March and Hollis begin to talk. Susie leaves in anger, so Hollis gives March a ride home. Hollis has been with many women over the years, but March is the only woman he wants. At her house, Hollis shows this to March and they kiss passionately until they become aware that Gwen is home. They continue to make out anyway and Hollis leaves March aching for more.

In chapter 11, Louise Justice is at the farmer's market in town, thinking of her husband and his long time affair with Judith Dale. Louise wonders if Susie knew about it, if it has affected her ability to commit to a relationship. Louise runs into a friend who tells her that March is having an affair with Hollis. Louise then speaks to March who informs her that she has decided to enroll Gwen in the local school for a time to keep her from the drugs that she was exposed to back in California. As they talk, Louise notices March is wearing Judith Dale's emerald ring. Louise knows this ring because she once found it in her husband's coat and thought it was a gift for her. When she never received it, Louise had confirmation of her husband's affair with Judith Dale.

March returns home where she is expecting Hollis and Hank to come over for tea. March and Hollis have been sleeping together for a few weeks. They once went to a hotel on Route 22, but now they sleep together in the small room off the Cooper's kitchen that March never knew existed. March sneaks home in the middle of the night, once locking the door in the pantry and forgetting about her. When Hollis and Hank arrive, Gwen is gone. Hollis tells Hank this is because she does not care for him as he thought she did. However, in reality it is simply Gwen's way of telling her mother she disapproves of her affair with Hollis. Instead of having tea with her mother and her lover, she goes to the library. There Gwen runs into the man who was once the head groom at Guardian Farm. They spend the afternoon discussing racehorses in general and Tarot in particular. At this point, Gwen also learns that she and Hank are first cousins. However, this does not cause her to end their burgeoning relationship.



Part 2: Chapters 10-11 Analysis

Despite being fairly closely related, Hank and Gwen develop a close relationship. Hank is deeply in love with Gwen and she seems to feel the same way. Gwen knows they are related, but does not know how closely until she runs into a local who once worked on the farm where her father grew up. Gwen learns a great deal about Hank and his father, as well as her own father, while spending time with this man. It brings Gwen close to her roots, but does not end the budding romance.

At the same time, March and Hollis have begun an affair. Their affair is similar to Gwen and Hank's in that it is socially unacceptable. March is married to someone else and she should respect that relationship. Instead, March spits in the face of her commitment to her husband and has an affair with Hollis that is all encompassing, causing her to forget her responsibilities to the family she already has.

Louise Justice is introduced in these chapters. Louise is a kind, gentle woman who is deeply in love both with her husband and her child. Louise has lived quietly with the knowledge of her husband's affair for more than thirty years. The opposite of March, Louise has remained quiet and loyal to her husband, aware that he is a flawed man who remains the love of her life. It hurts Louise, but she cannot imagine her life any other way. Louise is the saint that Judith Dale was made out to be and turned out not to be.



Part 2: Chapters 12-13

Part 2: Chapters 12-13 Summary

In chapter 12, March speaks to Richard and tells him she plans to stay in Jenkintown longer than planned. Richard is unhappy, especially when he learns Gwen has been riding Tarot. When he hears this news, Richard knows that March is sleeping with Hollis. The next day, March goes to the cemetery to leave a plant at Judith's grave. March thinks of all the people in her family who have died. Back in the car, March decides to go to Hollis. Hollis has just returned from a business trip to Boston. They make love in the kitchen despite the danger of being discovered by Hank, neither caring. At the same time, Hollis accuses March of not loving him enough because she stopped waiting for him.

In chapter 13, Gwen goes to a Halloween party with her new girlfriends. There is alcohol, but Hank refuses to drink. Gwen is determined that this night she will give herself to Hank. However, during the party some kids start talking about teasing the Coward by throwing firecrackers at his house. Hank storms away. When Gwen realizes he will not be with her that night, she storms off toward the Coward's house. Gwen wants to see where he lives. Hank follows. At the house, Gwen leaves a compass that she found in the house on Fox Hill and intended to give Hank.

Part 2: Chapters 12-13 Analysis

March has made the decision to remain in Jenkintown, as the reader can see by her decision to tell her husband. Now Richard knows about her affair with Hollis, but does not tell her to stop. Richard is heartbroken and asks her not to ruin their marriage, but makes no demands on her. Instead of returning to him, March goes to Hollis. Hollis accuses her of giving up on him and uses sex to abuse her over it. This should show the reader the darkness inside Hollis and how dangerous this relationship is for March, not only because of her marriage, but because of her personal safety in Hollis' care.

Gwen is also having a difficult affair of her own. Gwen wants to make love to Hank. Gwen has had sex before, which is slightly shocking to the reader since she is only fifteen, but has achieved a level of maturity in Jenkintown that shows her that sex is not love. Gwen loves Hank and wants to show him. However, the night is ruined when Hank reacts badly to his friends' jokes about his father. This shows the reader that Hank has feelings for his father despite what he sees as abandonment by him. When Gwen goes to the Coward's house, she makes a first step toward helping bring Hank and the Coward back together. The reader is unsure it will work.



Part 2: Chapters 14-15

Part 2: Chapters 14-15 Summary

In chapter 14, Susie learns from Ed Milton, the police chief and her lover, that Hollis and March are having an affair. Susie is upset that she did not know. At her mother's house, Susie talks of her disappointment and fear for March. Louise tells Susie that she believes Hollis killed his first wife. Louise tells how she saw bruises on Belinda's arm just a few months before she died. After dinner, Susie goes to Fox Hill to warn March. However, when she arrives she learns that March is supposedly with her in Boston. Susie waits for March to come home late in the night. Susie tells March that she is disappointed about her actions and warns her that Hollis is dangerous. However, March insists that she can control Hollis in a way no one else can.

In chapter 15, Richard Cooper comes to Jenkintown. Richard gets a ride to Fox Hill from the local handyman and surprises his daughter. Richard knows he is unwanted there, by March at least, but he hopes to convince both March and Gwen to return home with him. Gwen does not pretend that everything is okay and actually tells her father that March is with Hollis. Richard sits in a chair to sleep while he waits for March. When March returns, he asks her to go home with him, but she refuses. Richard quietly returns to California the following day.

Part 2: Chapters 14-15 Analysis

Susie Justice learns about Hollis and March and is shocked that she is the last to know. On top of this, Louise Justice makes the shocking accusation that Hollis beat his wife, Belinda Cooper, and had something to do with her death. Susie is so concerned that she goes to March to warn her. However, March is already so obsessed with Hollis that she will not entertain any bad news about him. This should warn the reader that March is already blinded herself to anything negative about the man she believes she loves.

March's husband, and Belinda's brother, comes to Jenkintown to reclaim his family. However, when March politely refuses to return with him, Richard does nothing to convince her to return. This tells the reader that Richard is not the type of person to force himself on someone, the complete opposite of Hollis. In fact, Richard is patient and determined to wait for his wife to come to her senses and return of her own free will. This, ironically, is similar to how Hollis waited impatiently for March to come to him.



Part 3: Chapters 16-17

Part 3: Chapters 16-17 Summary

In chapter 16, Susie goes to Ken Helm, the local handyman, to order wood for both herself and her parents. While there, Susie asks Ken Helm about Belinda Cooper. Ken tells her how Belinda used to come to his house, badly beaten, sometimes with broken bones. Ken cries when he tells her how guilty he feels for not doing anything to protect her. From there, Susie goes to the hospital and investigates the records for Belinda's hospitalizations. Susie can only find records for her last few years of life, but those include four hospitalizations. Susie then goes to speak to the doctor who cared for Belinda. He tells her that Belinda died of pneumonia because no one got her help until the illness was too far advanced. That night Belinda talks it over with Ed. Ed suggests that Belinda killed herself by not calling the doctor herself.

In chapter 17, Gwen and Hank have breakfast at the local diner. Hank tells Gwen that Hollis is fixing up the house in hopes that March will move in with him. At home, Gwen discovers that the heater is no longer working and suspects that Hollis has done something to it to encourage his mother to move in with him. The next morning when Gwen goes to groom Tarot, Hollis is waiting for her. Hollis tells her that he will kill Tarot if she stands between him and March living together. Gwen suggests that if he wants her help he should give her ownership of Tarot. Hollis reluctantly agrees. Gwen feels as though she has made a deal with the devil, but is happy to have Tarot as her own. Gwen and March move in with Hollis the following weekend. Gwen is miserable, however, and determined to leave as soon as Tarot is legally hers.

Part 3: Chapters 16-17 Analysis

Susie begins investigating the death of Belinda Cooper, Hollis's wife. Susie learns that Belinda died of pneumonia, but that her death was preventable if she had gotten medical care sooner. At the least, this implies that Hollis neglected her. At the worst, it suggests Hollis prevented her from getting care by not allowing her access to the phone. At the same time, the reader learns that Belinda was badly beaten on many occasions. This behavior on Hollis' part suggests trouble for March, not only in a physical way, but also in that Hollis might prevent her from having a social life, from contact with friends and medical personnel just as he did Belinda. Now the reader realizes that not only is March's marriage in trouble, but her life could be too.

Hollis uses Gwen to convince March to move in with him. Gwen feels sick entering this deal with Hollis, but it is the only way she can be sure Tarot will be cared for if she leaves. It seems that Hank is not enough to make Gwen want to stay now that she sees what Hollis has done to her mother. The reader can only hope she gets out fast enough to protect herself and her mother from harm.



Part 3: Chapters 18-19

Part 3: Chapters 18-19 Summary

In chapter 18, March mans a booth at the Harvest Fair, but Hollis becomes angry when a local man spends too much time picking out a jacket and insists that March leave with him. March convinces herself that Hollis' jealousy is not only normal, but flattering. March has been working on her jewelry again, but has run out of supplies. March must ask Hollis to get her more when he goes to Boston, but he has an excuse not to. March has no money, so she has been sending letters to shops in Boston where she hopes to sell her jewelry. However, she has not gotten a response. One day March is in bed when Ken calls to discuss a tree with blight at Fox Hill. March promises to meet him. When Hollis overhears, he becomes violent, pushing March up against the mirror and demanding to know who she was talking to. When Hollis gets his answer, he forces March to have sex with him as punishment.

March goes to Fox Hill with Hank to meet Ken. March walks through the house with Hank, forgetting that Hank's mother died here. March leaves, allowing Hank to stay behind to help Ken. Hank feels guilty because Hollis has asked him to watch March and to steal her mail. Hank feels that he should not be spying on someone who has been so kind to him. At the same time, Hank has become aware that his own father has been following him. Hank confronts him, demanding that he stop.

In chapter 19, Hollis dreams about screaming horses. Hollis made his money in Florida by killing and laming racehorses in an insurance scheme with their owners. One killing went badly, causing Hollis to give it up and return to Massachusetts. Hollis only did this to make his fortune, to show Alan Murray and all the others that he was as good as them. It is Thanksgiving and Hollis allows March, Gwen, and Hank to go to the Justices' for dinner. Hollis claims to not be interested in social situations. However, Hollis's true objective is to get them out of the house so he can search March's belongings. Hollis has also disabled the phones so that March cannot receive a phone call from Richard. Finally, Hollis has been stealing her mail, including many letters from Richard for Gwen.

At the Justice house, Louise is twice reminded of her husband's affair with Judith. First, Louise sees the ring Bill gave Judith on March's hand. Second, Louise sees how attached Judith's dog is to Bill. Louise hides her pain, however, and presents a lovely dinner. Afterward, March returns home to find Hollis out. When he arrives home, Hollis tells her he has been out checking some property at Olive Tree Lake. However, Hollis was there having sex with another woman, something he is now somewhat ashamed of.

Part 3: Chapters 18-19 Analysis

Hollis is becoming controlling over March. Hollis orders Hank to follow her and steal her outgoing mail. Hollis also cuts off his own phone line to keep her from talking to Richard,



making the reader wonder if he did this to Belinda at the end of her life as well. Hollis steals her mail and searches her belongings as well, afraid she is planning to leave him. Trust is something Hollis clearly has trouble with. At the same time, however, Hollis is the one being unfaithful to March. Not only this, but Hollis is becoming violent, leaving bruises on March's arm and forcing her to have sex when he is angry or trying to prove a point. It is a difficult situation that clearly cannot end well, especially when the reader is aware of what Hollis has done in the past.

Hank is being pulled into Hollis's craziness. Hank feels guilty and hates what Hollis is doing, but feels as though he owes him some loyalty. This leaves the reader wondering if Hank might not turn out to be a lot like his adoptive uncle. At the same time, Louise Justice continues to struggle in silence with the knowledge that her husband loved someone else. It is a difficult thing to live with, but Louise has a grace that allows her to forgive and to live with her pain in silence.



Part 3: Chapters 20-21

Part 3: Chapters 20-21 Summary

In chapter 20, December has come. Susie has a drink with her mother and expresses her growing concern for March. Susie went to see March, but Hollis tried to block her, stopping only when March came to the door. March is beginning to allow her hair to go white and walks around as though she is drugged. Susie has also spoken to Richard, who is devastated over the situation and distraught that he cannot get through to either Gwen or March over the phone or through the mail.

Gwen has been visiting the Coward, learning more about her family and the past. After her visit this day, Gwen returns home to find Hollis in the kitchen. When Hollis refuses to even acknowledge that he promised to give Gwen Tarot, she throws a cup at him. Hollis grabs Gwen with the intention of hitting her, but lets go when Sister attacks his leg. Gwen and Sister go into town and stop by the Justice house to use the phone. Gwen leaves a message asking her father to send a plane ticket to the Justice house for her to come home. Bill Justice then gives Gwen a ride home. Hollis is not thrilled to find the Judge at his front door. Hollis warns Gwen that if she ever brings the Judge there again he will hurt Tarot.

In chapter 21, Susie returns from a trip to Florida where she tried to investigate Hollis's time there. Everyone she spoke to was afraid to speak to Susie, simply calling Hollis Mr. Death. Ed tells Susie that Hollis was most likely involved in insurance fraud with horses and that is what people were implying. Ed tells Susie to back off because there is nothing that can be done about it now. At the Justice house, Louise gives the Judge a letter that came for Gwen. It is a plane ticket. Judge takes the letter out to Guardian Farm. Hollis becomes enraged after he leaves and tries to attack Gwen. When that proves too difficult, Hollis takes one of Mr. Cooper's guns and goes after Tarot. Gwen manages to get Tarot out of her stall. Tarot runs to the Coward's house, where he promises Gwen he will never let Hollis touch her. Gwen goes to Susie to get a ride to the airport. Hank arrives at the Coward's after stopping long enough to make sure Hollis calms down. The Coward and Hank build a shelter for Tarot. Afterward, the Coward gives Hank the compass that Gwen gave him, one that was once given to Alan Murray on his twelfth birthday.

Part 3: Chapters 20-21 Analysis

Susie is concerned about March, especially since Hollis will not let anyone come near her. No one thinks of Gwen, since perhaps Hollis is not known to harm children. However, Hollis goes after Gwen one afternoon when she becomes angry that he has reneged on his deal to give her Tarot. Later, Hollis goes to beat Gwen because she supposedly allowed Judge to come to the house. Hollis does not hit Gwen, perhaps because of fear that March will leave, but instead goes after Tarot. The reader knows



that Hollis has nightmares over killing horses, so this would be difficult for him. Therefore it is no surprise that Hollis allows Gwen to get the better of him and allow the horse to disappear. He does hit her, though, leaving Gwen with no choice but to leave when she finds Tarot is safe in the care of the Coward.

Gwen has been visiting the Coward, bringing him out of his self-imposed isolation and helping him to open up to people. This proves to be a great benefit when Hank comes looking for Gwen. The Coward and Hank work together all day to care for Tarot, forging something like a relationship. However, Hank still feels he owes his loyalty to Hollis and refuses to be kind to his drunkard father.



Part 3: Chapter 22

Part 3: Chapter 22 Summary

Hollis leaves March and Hank alone on New Year's Eve, so they decide to go out for a beer. As they drive through town, March and Hank discover that Susie is having a party. They stop for a few minutes and have a good meal, something they have not had in months. Hollis arrives and Hank tries to warn March. Before March can get out the back door, Hollis finds them. Hank leaves and Susie tries to convince March to stay with her. However, March is still convinced that she can handle Hollis. March and Hollis begin to leave. Hollis tells March that he does not like coming home to an empty house. Hollis is very angry, causing a party-goer to ask after March's welfare. This only makes Hollis more angry. March manages to get him to the truck where he puts both hands through the window, promising March he would never hurt her.

At home, March listens to Hollis sleep much like she did the night after Alan and his friends beat him. March realizes that the boy she loves, the boy Hollis once was, is no longer inside of him. March sneaks out of bed and disappears into the night. The following morning, Hank wakes to the sound of a car crash on devil's corner. Hollis has crashed his truck on the curve while chasing after March. Hank arranges the funeral, staying the night with Hollis. The Coward comes to visit Hollis' body during the night in an attempt to express his gratitude for all Hollis did for his child. After the funeral the following day, Hank moves in with the Justices. Hank has inherited everything Hollis had, but he donates it all to the town. Hank then buries Hollis on Fox Hill where he once stood to survey all he owned.

Part 3: Chapter 22 Analysis

Hollis becomes violent once more when March attends a party without consulting him. Hollis cuts his hands badly on the car window when he breaks it instead of hitting March. It is then that March finally sees what everyone else has always known. March realizes the boy she loved, the one she was obsessed with, is gone. Hollis is no longer that person. March leaves. Hollis cannot deal with the loss of the one and only thing he has ever wanted. Hollis dies in a car accident that might very well have been a suicide, not unlike his wife's death from pneumonia.

Hank is left alone, the sole heir. Hank is the only survivor of the clash of two families, two families that were torn apart by jealousy and envy. Hank will not continue the cycle, however. Hank has decided to move on, to make a life for himself somewhere else. At the same time, the Coward has come to pay his respects. The Coward knows that despite his poor behavior when Hollis was a child, that Hollis accepted his child and gave him the life that the Coward could not do himself. It is an ironic twist, one that leaves the reader wondering why Hollis did it and what his real intentions were. It also

leaves the reader feeling that somehow, despite his evil actions as a young man and his drunken behavior now, that Alan Murray is the bigger man.



Characters

March Murray

March Murray is a jewelry designer who has lived a good life in California with her husband and child for nineteen years. March grew up in a small town in Massachusetts, but left all that and her family behind her when she moved to California. However, March finds herself returning when the woman who raised her dies. March returns with the intention of burying this woman and packing up her house, a trip that should only take a week. However, instead of staying a week, March finds herself staying for three months.

March comes to Jenkintown in love with her husband and intent on returning to her life. However, being back in her father's house, March begins recalling the boy she once loved, the boy she left behind. This boy is now a man who lives on the farm next door, a farm he and March once admired and envied. March avoids the man for as long as she can, but eventually she finds herself drawn to him. March was once obsessed with this boy and now that he is a man, she finds herself falling under his spell again.

March becomes a different person, a person who is sleepwalking through life, allowing her lover to control her every movement, her every thought. However, March slowly comes to realize that the boy who once was her lover, the boy she has been obsessed with all her life, no longer exists. March draws up what little strength she has left and returns to the life she left behind in California.

Hollis

Hollis is a young boy who was living on the streets of Boston when Henry Murray brings him to Jenkintown. Despite the kindness Henry and Judith Dale show this boy, all he can recall of his childhood is the cruelty shown him by his surrogate brother. Alan is cruel to Hollis, beating him and leaving him tied to a tree and later forcing him to repay every cent ever spent on his care.

Hollis leaves town in the hopes of making his fortune to show the world that he is worth something. Hollis does some cruel, unspeakable things to make his money and carries with him the rest of his life the guilt of those actions. Back in Jenkintown, Hollis finds the love of his life gone. Hollis marries the daughter of the biggest landowner in town, taking over their farm and buying up most of the land the town sits on. Hollis wants to own everything, to get the respect he never had as a child. Instead, Hollis finds that he can never own enough to make that emptiness go away.

When March returns, Hollis waits for her to come to him. When she does, Hollis takes over everything that made March an independent person. Hollis controls her every move, her every thought, paranoid that she will one day leave him again. In the end,



Hollis forces her to leave. When Hollis goes to bring her back, he crashes his car, killing himself to avoid life without the woman he loves.

Richard Cooper

Richard Cooper is a quiet, highly intelligent man who also grew up in Jenkintown. Richard was disowned by his father and made his life in California, away from the gossip and darkness of his hometown. March Murray follows Richard and marries him, making a good life with him and their child for nineteen years. However, when Judith Dale dies, March returns to Jenkintown and the obsession she once had for the boy her father rescued.

Richard is a proud man, but he is not too proud to beg his wife to return to him. Richard goes to Jenkintown to ask his wife to come home, but she refuses. Instead of forcing his will on her, Richard quietly returns home and waits. Eventually Richard's actions are rewarded when both his wife and child return to him, damaged but still whole.

Gwen Cooper

Gwen Cooper is March's daughter. March brings Gwen to Jenkintown with her because the teenager has become wild, doing drugs and having sex even though she is only fifteen. Gwen is unhappy in Jenkintown until she meets Tarot, the racehorse Hollis still owns out of spite. Gwen goes to see Tarot daily, grooming him and riding him. At the same time, Gwen gets to know Hank Murray, her first cousin. Gwen and Hank fall in love, giving Gwen a reason to want to remain in Jenkintown. However, things begin going wrong for Gwen. Hollis promises to give her ownership of Tarot if she does not stand between him and her mother, but then Hollis reneges. Gwen returns home, a more mature girl who has learned the difference between want and need.

Alan Murray

Alan Murray is March's brother. Alan is already an adult when Hollis joins the family, a failure at his education and a man without purpose. When Hollis is brought into the house, Alan feels pushed out, as though his father is disappointed with his biological son, so he has brought another boy in to take his place. For this reason, Alan is cruel to Hollis, creating a rivalry that will propel Hollis to do cruel things and become an emotionless entity.

Alan has it all when his father dies. Alan has his father's money, his house, and a beautiful wife. However, Alan's wife dies in a house fire when she is still young. Alan is home during the fire, but he is so frightened by the flames that he is unable to go inside the house and save either his wife or his child. This haunts Alan for the rest of his life. Alan becomes a drunk who refers to himself as the Coward. However, when Alan meets Gwen he begins to come out of his self imposed isolation and reach out to his only child.



Hank Murray

Hank Murray is Alan Murray's son. Hank is just a toddler when his mother dies in a house fire. Hank moves with his father from place to place for the next few years, finally ending up neglected in the marsh house his father lives in. Hollis comes and rescues Hank from his father's neglect. However, Hollis gives very little to Hank, only allowing him the things he needs to live, nothing more. Hank is a hardworking young man, a strong boy who feels a deep loyalty to Hollis despite the fact that he knows Hollis beat his first wife and that he is capable of beating March and Gwen. Hollis also falls in love with Gwen, despite their close relationship, and is devastated when she disappears. In the end, Hank inherits everything Hollis leaves behind, but he gives it to the town, determined to begin his life fresh and alone.

Belinda Cooper

Belinda Cooper is Richard's sister. Belinda and Richard grew up at Guardian Farm. Belinda remained on the farm after her brother left, leading her father to leave the property to her. Belinda marries Hollis, allowing him to move into the house he envied all through his childhood. However, Hollis is not kind to Belinda. Hollis beats Belinda and refuses to get her help when she begins to suffer pneumonia. Belinda dies of the illness, leaving Hollis the farm he has so desperately wanted to own.

Susanna Justice

Susanna Justice is the daughter of Bill Justice, a lawyer in Jenkintown who was once partners with Henry Murray. Susie and March grew up together, often thrown together despite the fact that they often claimed to dislike one another. As an adult, Susie works as a reporter for the local newspaper. Susie and March renew their friendship, but clash over March's obsession with Hollis. Susie worries about March, so she begins investigating Hollis in hopes of finding proof he is a cruel man, proof that will convince March to leave him. Unfortunately, Susie never learns anything that changes March's mind about Hollis.

Judith Dale

Judith Dale is the Murray family housekeeper. Judith steps up and becomes mother to March and Hollis after March's own mother passes away. Judith is a kind woman who never has a bad word for anyone. When Hollis returns, Judith works for him, caring for his son and Hank. If not for Judith, Hank might never have had a decent meal or heard a kind word. Judith also takes it as her personal mission to be sure Alan always has decent clothing and food despite his desire to live in isolation on the marsh. Judith is presented as something of a saint to the reader until March has the realization that Judith and Bill Justice had an affair for more than thirty years.

Bill Justice

Bill Justice is a lawyer in Jenkintown who had a partnership with Henry Murray. Bill was always the good looking partner, the one the women were all drawn to despite the fact that he was a lesser lawyer compared to Henry. After Henry's death, Bill becomes a judge and continues to build a respectful reputation in Jenkintown. Bill is married to Louise, a woman he deeply respects and thinks of as his best friend. However, Bill is in love with Judith Dale and they carry on a clandestine romance for more than thirty years. Bill does not realize until after Judith's death that Louise knew all along.



Objects/Places

Emerald Ring

Judith always wore an emerald ring and March begins to wear it after her death. It turns out that Judith got this ring from her long time lover, Bill Justice.

Compass

Gwen finds a compass in the house on Fox Hill and gives it to the Coward. The Coward remembers receiving the same compass as a gift when he was twelve. The Coward gives the compass to his son, Hank.

Lemon Tree

March has a lemon tree in her yard in California that becomes a symbol of everything she gave up in her life.

Jewelry

March makes jewelry for a living, but she loses interest when she becomes involved with Hollis.

Founder Statue

There is a statue of the Founder in downtown Jenkintown. Everyone always rubs its knee as they pass for luck.

Attic Room

After the death of Henry Murray, Hollis is banished to the attic at Alan's command. This is where Hollis and March will live out their romantic attachment until Hollis leaves Jenkintown several years later.

Tarot

Tarot is a race horse that once belonged to the Cooper family, Belinda in particular. Gwen becomes attached to the horse and cares for it, making a deal with Hollis that the horse will become hers if she encourages her mother to move in with Hollis. However, Hollis reneges and then tries to kill the horse to punish Gwen.



Guardian Farm

Guardian Farm is a large farm that was once owned by the Cooper family. Hollis and March spent a large section of their childhood admiring this property, so Hollis bought it as an adult. However, Hollis does not care for the farm and allows it to run down.

Fox Hill

Fox Hill overlooks the small town of Jenkintown. The Murray home sits on this hill and it is here that both March grew up and Judith Dale died.

Devil's Corner

Devil's Corner is a sharp turn on Route 22 near Guardian Farm that has been known to claim more than a few lives. Mr. and Mrs. Cooper die here and Hollis will also crash their truck here, taking his own life.

Olive Tree Lake

Olive Tree Lake is a lake outside Jenkintown where many of the local teenagers go to make out in the dark. Hollis and March go here frequently both as children and as adults.

Jenkintown

Jenkintown is the small town in Massachusetts where the novel takes place.

California

March fled to California three years after Hollis left Jenkintown in order to make a new life with Richard Cooper. At the end of the novel, March repeats this flight, this time escaping Hollis' abusive behavior.

Florida

Hollis made his fortune in Florida both by committing insurance fraud by injuring race horses for their owners and by making smart investments.

Themes

Physical Abuse

As a child, Hollis is abandoned and neglected by his own family. When Hollis comes to live with the Murrays, he is undernourished and unable to trust that there will always be enough food to fill the emptiness in his soul. Hollis' presence is resented by Alan Murray, his adoptive brother. This causes a great deal of tension between the two men, leading to a beating that leaves Hollis once again feeling isolated and alone. As Hollis grows older, he fails to let go of the hurts that have brought him to this place in his life. Then, when Henry Murray dies, Hollis finds himself at the mercy of Alan Murray. Alan banishes Hollis to the attic and orders him to pay back every penny ever shelled out for his care. Hollis does and then quickly disappears to make his fortune.

When Hollis returns to Jenkintown, he finds his beloved March gone and married to someone else. Hollis marries Belinda Cooper, March's sister-in-law and the sole owner of Guardian Farm. Hollis neglects his new home, allowing it to fall apart despite his envy of the home as a child and his need to have more, to have everything. Hollis also neglects his wife, treating her with indifference on a good day. Belinda begins appearing at a neighbor's house with broken bones and bruises, marks that cannot be explained away. Eventually Belinda dies of pneumonia, an illness that could have been treated had Belinda been allowed to seek help sooner.

March returns for the funeral of Judith Dale, the woman who raised her. When she returns, March finds herself drawn back to the man she once loved. At first, it is a love affair that is more physical than emotional. However, this begins to shift. Soon March finds herself allowing Hollis to control her every move, in and out of bed. The day Hollis forces March up against a mirror, threatening to hurt her for accepting a phone call from a neighbor, she is too far gone to realize just how abusive Hollis can be. Bruises do not phase her, nor do warnings from her friends and neighbors. Not until Hollis breaks a car window in anger does March finally see that the boy she once loved no longer exists.

Inability to let go of Past Hurts

Hollis is a wild, dangerous child. Hollis lives on the streets of Boston before coming to live with Henry Murray and his family. Hollis should be grateful for this change in residence, but he cannot make himself trust. Hollis cannot accept that there will always be enough, that he will always be included. It does not help Hollis to have his new, adoptive brother treat him with jealous disdain. Alan is deeply jealous of this new boy in his life, jealous of the attention his father pays to the boy, jealous of the expenses and effort made to make this boy a part of the family. Alan is so unhappy with Hollis that he beats him with a group of friends and leaves him tied to a tree. However, this only leads to more resentment when Henry learns the truth and punishes Alan.



When Henry dies, no one is there to stand between Alan and Hollis. Alan banishes Hollis to the attic and orders him to repay everything the Murray family has paid to care for him. Hollis does, then leaves town to make his fortune. Hollis intends to return to Jenkintown a rich man, to marry Alan's sister March, and buy the Guardian Farm, a home March has always admired. However, when Hollis returns, March has left town to marry Richard Cooper. Hollis gets Guardian Farm anyway by marrying Belinda Cooper, but he cannot stop there. Hollis buys up everything he could see as a child from Fox Hill, always anxious to buy more.

Hollis raises Alan's child after Alan becomes an alcoholic. This is not an act of kindness, but a way of getting back at Alan, by showing Alan's own son mercy that Alan could not show Hollis. When March returns, Hollis takes her, too. However, Hollis cannot trust that March has returned to him for good and he begins controlling her every movement, keeping her without money of her own, without friends, and without a life beyond him. Hollis needs to own everything, to control everything because he cannot accept that there will be enough. Hollis cannot let go of the things and the people who hurt him in the past.

Obsession

March has a good life in California. March has a husband who is kind and caring, even if he is quiet. March has a good career, making jewelry that sells well in California consignment shops. March has a daughter who is a little wild, but smart and kind like her father. March seldom thinks about the past, feeling as though what is past is past. However, when Judith Dale dies, March finds herself forced to return to her hometown. March promises herself and her husband that she will only remain in town long enough to bury the woman who was like a mother to her and to pack up the house.

March begins thinking of Hollis almost as soon as she returns to the house where she grew up. Hollis was a boy who was raised by her father after he was found living on the streets of Boston. March and Hollis were closer than brother and sister, becoming lovers when they were only teenagers. However, Hollis ran off when March was seventeen. March waited for him for three years, but finally had to get on with her life. March never forgot Hollis, but chose a life with another man over him.

Hollis comes back into March's life one evening and March cannot help herself. March is obsessed with his touch, with the feel of his skin against hers, and she cannot force herself to behave like an adult, an adult married to another man. Quickly March and Hollis become inseparable and March finds herself moving into Hollis' house, thinking of nothing but that moment when they can be alone together. March is obsessed with the boy she once knew, the boy only she could control. Unfortunately, March will finally come to realize this boy is no longer in existence.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person omniscient with a touch of the authorial voice. The author tells her story from the point of view of multiple characters, ranging from the main characters March Murray and Hollis. However, the author also dips into the minds of many other characters including March's daughter Gwen and nephew Hank. The author moves from mind to mind without warning, shifting as the story takes her rather than remaining with one particular character until the scene is complete. The author also opens many of her chapters in an authorial voice, making comments on the setting or the situation, that eventually lead to the scene that will begin the chapter.

The point of view of this novel can cause some confusion for the reader. The point of view itself is simple, a common use of third person omniscient. This point of view allows the reader to see events through the eyes of a character as well as the thoughts and emotions of that same character. However, this author chooses to use all of her characters without utilizing white space to warn the reader of a change in narrating character. The author also keeps the reader at something of a distance by injecting the authorial voice, making comments on the setting and characters in an indifferent voice.

Setting

The novel is set in Jenkintown, Massachusetts. This town is very small, one of those places where everyone knows everyone else. The town, like most small towns, is filled with interesting characters. There is the town drunk, the town know-it-all, and the rich guy on the hill. In this novel, all these people are known to or related to the main character, March Murray. March has come home, a place she thought she had left behind her, but finds it welcomes her back and draws her into a darkness hindsight never warned her existed.

The setting of the novel is the typical small town, the hometown everyone has or dreams of having. This town should be a place of hot apple pies and harmless gossip. However, when March returns to this town, she finds a place filled with darkness. March is sucked into a relationship that ended more than nineteen years ago and finds that it has become warped, that it is not the romantic, light dream she recalls. The setting of this novel is a backdrop to this story that seems to contradict the idea of the American small town, a setting that reflects the dreams of childhood that can sometimes turn dark when one tries to recapture them as an adult.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. The characters in this novel are typical Americans, some young and not as well educated as others, but all representative of



the American dialect. The language in this novel tends toward the formal, but the dialogue does remain true to the most part of the characters and their backgrounds. There is little slang in the novel, no foreign phrases, and therefore no language that needs to be explained in order for the reader to comprehend the meaning of the plot.

The language of this novel is simple and somewhat precise. The reader does not have to have a dictionary nearby to understand the language of this novel, but the language does tend to be a little more formal than the language of the common bestselling novel. The tendency toward formality in this novel gives it more of a literary feel than a character driven bestseller might have. However, the language is not difficult and the characters still manage to shine, giving the reader a novel filled with language that is both entertaining and intelligent.

Structure

The novel is divided into twenty-one chapters. Each chapter is fairly long, many beginning with the author's description of the setting, the situation, or a character. The chapters are written in both dialogue and exposition, with some whole chapters dependent on flashbacks that contain little dialogue. The author does not leave a lot of white space in her chapters. In fact, the author rarely creates a break in the chapters that might denote a change in narrating character or scene. The author simply tells her story in one flowing narration, moving from character to character and scene to scene with simple segues rather than paragraph breaks.

The novel has several plots that flow from and through one another. The main plot begins with March Murray coming home to Jenkintown to bury her surrogate mother, Judith Dale. March brings her daughter Gwen with her to get her away from the bad influences back home in California. However, shortly after arriving, March loses interest in everything, including her daughter, except for her childhood lover, Hollis. This leads Gwen into a situation where she has to play sides against her mother and father as well as make decisions based on her desire to remain close to the boy she adores and the horse she loves.



Quotes

"The town founder himself, Aaron Jenkins, a seventeen-year-old boy from Warwick, England, was the first to realize that some localities are accompanied by bad luck."

Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 4.

"He arrived like a bundle of mail, on a gray and windy day." Part 1: Chapter 2, pg. 15.

"Once you get a taste of getting back at someone, it sticks with you." Part 1: Chapter 3, pg. 37.

"That is how you know you've left childhood behind—when you wish for time to go backward." Part 1: Chapter 4, pg. 51.

"Gwen has been sanding by the window, fogging up the glass with her breath and feeling as trapped as a fly in pudding." Part 1: Chapter 6, pg. 67.

"His wife and his child were trapped in that house, but he could no more go inside and search for them than he could jump up and land on the moon." Part 1: Chapter 8, pg. 88.

"It happens quickly—seeing all that hurt and disappointment—it's as fast as a breath drawn and released." Part 2: Chapter 10, pg. 117.

"When all is said and done, the weather and love are the two elements about which one can never be sure. That's what you learn at sixty, and, as it turns out, no one is ever surprised by this bit of news." Part 2: Chapter 11, pg. 133.

"It has come to this: They don't give a damn about anyone but themselves."
Part 2: Chapter 14, pg. 174.

"If he's having a stroke, then it's a suitable penance for all the ruin he's brought upon his tired body." Part 2: Chapter 15, pg. 193.

"She hopes that after all this time, he won't suddenly take it upon himself to apologize. She simply wants him to understand that she knows. That's all." Part 3: Chapter 21, pg. 265.

"Looking at him now, March sees that the boy she loved, the one who kissed her in the attic and promised to love her forever, is no longer inside him." Part 3: Chapter 22, pg. 287.



Topics for Discussion

Why has March Murray come home to Jenkintown? Why is this the first time March has returned to her hometown since she was twenty-one? Who is March afraid of running into when she returns home? Why does March hesitate to return home while packing up the house? What does March begin to recall during this time? Is that why March elects to put off her return to California?

Who is Judith Dale? What kind of a person was Judith? Why has March returned for her funeral? Who does March believe Judith is? Is Judith really that person? Who gave Judith the emerald ring? Why does March begin to wear it? What does this ring mean to Judith? What does it mean to March? What does March come to understand when she questions why Judith was not wearing the ring upon her death?

Who is Gwen? Why has Gwen come to Jenkintown? What is Gwen leaving behind in California? Does Gwen miss this world in California? What kind of behavior did Gwen indulge in California? Does she continue this behavior in Massachusetts? Explain. Who does Gwen fall in love with that keeps her in Jenkintown? Why does Gwen continually hesitate to return to her father in California? What finally forces Gwen to return?

Who is Richard Cooper? How did March meet him? Why did March marry Richard? Is this a good marriage? Why does Richard not attempt to force March to return to California? Why does Richard allow March to carry on an affair? What does this say about Richard's personality? What might have happened had Richard forced his will on March? What eventually does happen? Is this of benefit to Richard?

Who is Hollis? How did Hollis come to live with the Murray family? Why did Alan resent him? What did Alan do to show his resentment? How did Hollis react to this treatment? What does this say about Hollis? Where did Hollis go when March was seventeen? For what reason? What happened while Hollis was gone? Did it change him? Would Hollis have become the man he does if not for that event?

Who is Belinda Cooper? Why did Belinda marry Hollis? Why did Hollis marry Belinda? Did Hollis love Belinda? What was wrong with their child? Did this have an impact on their marriage? Was Hollis abusive toward Belinda? Why do people believe Hollis is responsible for Belinda's death? Was he? Explain.

Who is the Coward? Why is he called the Coward? Was he a coward? What was he like in his childhood? What did he become in his adulthood? Why? Why did Hollis take custody of the Coward's child? Was this an act of generosity or an act of hatred? Explain. How does the Coward begin caring for Gwen and her horse? Why? How does this help the Coward forge a relationship with his child? Is this a relationship that will endure?

Who is Suzanne Justice? How is she connected to March Murray? Why does Susie begin investigating Hollis? What does Susie learn about Hollis? What does Susie do

with this information? What could she do with this information? Is Hollis the bad person Susie wants to prove he is? What good would it do to prove Hollis's past crimes?