

Hot Milk Study Guide

Hot Milk by Deborah Levy

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Plot Summary

This study guide refers to the following version of this book: *Hot Milk*, by Deborah Levy. Bloomsbury USA. 2016.

Sofia Papastergiadis and her mother Rose have traveled from England to Spain to seek a diagnosis and treatment for Rose at the Gómez Clinic. Sofia is feeling lost because she does not have a job or family of her own. She has abandoned her doctoral studies to help care for her mother.

Frustrated with her place in life, Sofia considers herself broken. She meets Juan, a student in the observation hut, after she is stung by jellyfish, which the locals refer to as medusas. At the clinic, Sofia listens to her mother talk to Dr. Gómez about her health. Dr. Gómez begins to offer advice to Sofia by telling her that she must be more bold.

After Sofia meets a German woman named Ingrid, Sofia decides to put her boldness to the test. Following Dr. Gómez' instructions, she steals a fish from a local market and sets a barking dog free. Sofia and Ingrid continue to flirt with one another, but after Ingrid leaves before eating dinner with Sofia, Sofia invites Juan to join her. Sofia and Juan begin a sexual relationship. Soon after, Sofia and Ingrid begin one as well.

Sofia continues to explore aspects of her sexuality and try to understand her life and what she wants. While Rose continues with her treatment, Sofia decides to go and visit her father, whom she has not seen since she was fourteen, in Greece. While in Greece, her father Christos introduces her to his new wife, who is only a few years older than Sofia, and their baby daughter Evangeline.

During her trip, Sofia spends more time with her father's new wife Alexandra than she does her father. Sofia understands that they will never be close, but she decides to stay in communication with Alexandra.

Back in Spain, Sofia continues her relationships with Ingrid and Juan. Dr. Gómez has taken Rose off of all of her medications, trying to ascertain whether Rose's illness is physical or mental. Rose apologizes to Sofia for Christos' aloofness during Sofia's visit to Greece, but she does not realize how much she controls Sofia.

Sofia decides to apply to an American university to continue her doctoral studies. As she becomes closer to Ingrid, Ingrid reveals a dark secret about something she did to her sister when they were young. Sofia realizes that Ingrid does not know her limits, when Ingrid holds Sofia under water, not letting her up for air until Ingrid is stung by jellyfish and is distracted by the pain.

Despite knowing that Ingrid may not be the best choice, she admits that she is in love with Ingrid and chooses to continue a relationship with her. Sofia confronts her mother and after thinking that she may have killed her mother, she goes to Dr. Gómez for advice.



Sofia returns to the house to find her mother alive and well. Rose explains to Sofia that she finally got a proper diagnosis from Dr. Gómez. Sofia struggles to believe the diagnosis.



Chapters 1-4

Summary

Chapter 1

Sofia reveals that she has dropped and her laptop, which has busted the screen. She reveals that the broken laptop is reflective of how she is also broken. From her current location in Spain, she is unable to get the screen repaired. While in the ocean, she suffers a jellyfish sting and is filling out paperwork in the observation hut. She is asked her name, age, country of origin, and occupation. The last item on the list is disconcerting for her. Prior to coming to Spain, she was working in a coffee shop, having abandoned her doctorate studies in anthropology. The student working in the hut speaks to her in Greek because of her last name: Papastergiadis, but Sofia does not speak Greek. She explains that she is in Spain with her mother. Rose, who is getting medical treatment for an undiagnosed ailment. The talk about their common dislike for Pablo, the director of a driving school, who has a dog that barks constantly. Sofia suspects that the student is prolonging their conversation to keep her in the observation hut. She lists her occupation as waitress before she leaves.

Chapter 2

Sofia reveals that Rose remortgaged her house in order to afford seeking treatment at Dr. Gómez ' clinic. She reflects on how she has long associated her mother with her health, recalling as a child asking about Rose's headaches. They take a car to the clinic as neither of the women are able to drive. At the clinic, Rose is greeted with a wheelchair and is taken to meet Dr. Gómez, whose two front teeth are gold. He takes Rose's history and she explains about how her illness contributed to her decision to retire from her job as a librarian. Dr. Gómez asks Sofia about herself and she explains that her father is Greek and she was born in Britain. Dr. Gómez talks about the illusiveness of identity. Dr. Gómez wants Rose to spend more time outside and encourages her to go to the sea, but Rose bristles at the idea. She cannot get to the sea because of her disability. Dr. Gómez notices an ulcer on her foot and she tells him it may be diabetes and he gets up and starts talking about the architecture of the clinic. He asks Rose to list her medications and identify the ones she feels she needs the most. He determines that she is dehydrated as well. Sofia does not know what to think about Dr. Gómez. He insists that he talk with Rose alone. Rose does not like it, but Sofia leaves. At the beach, Sofia reviews a text message from/Dan, one of her coworkers at the coffee shop. She thinks about how she has not seen her father since she was fourteen, but knows that he has remarried and recently had a child. Later, Rose tells Sofia that Dr. Gómez has taken her off of three of her medications and run some tests. Dr. Gómez introduces the women to his daughter Julieta, whom he calls Nurse Sunshine. During her conversation with Dr. Gómez, Rose tells him that she is an atheist. As they walk out to the car, Sofia asks Rose what exercises Dr. Gómez gave her to do. He told her to write a letter which lists her enemies.



Chapter 3

Sofia has decided that she is going to set Pablo's dog free, but does not know when the time will be right. While Sofia is in a ladies room, she is frightened when she sees a man in the restroom. Her fear of the situation is strange to her, but when she gets out of the bathroom, she explains to the restaurant owner about it, who thinks she must have gone into the men's room. She discovers that it was a German woman wearing men's shoes. Ingrid Bauer introduces herself and the women talk. They discuss Pablo's dog and Ingrid tells Sofia that the dog "will not know what to do with his freedom" (37). The women go for a walk on the beach and Ingrid apologizes for scaring Sofia in the bathroom. Ingrid gets a call from Matthew and takes off, stating she is late. Sofia thinks about how Ingrid squeezed her shoulder where she has the medusa sting.

Chapter 4

Sofia hears tapping at the window, but sees no one. She catches her reflection and thinks about how different she looks with a tan and wild curls. Rose is shouting at her about how Sofia tied her shoelaces. Rose wants water, but Sofia never seems to get the water just right for her. She hears tapping on the window again and it is Ingrid. Sofia tells her she does not lock the door when Ingrid tells her to open the door for her next time. Rose asks for a spoon and Sofia gets it. As she does so, she thinks about how she does not want to live like this. She also thinks about how she still has not let Pablo's dog go.

Analysis

The theme of identity is introduced at the outset of the novel. Sofia's identity is in question. She does not understand her place in the world and feels broken. She likens herself to the broken laptop screen in front of her. She defines herself as broken. Through her narration, many of the elements that contribute to this feeling are introduced to the reader. She is from England, but is currently in Spain. She has a Greek name, but does not speak Greek. And she is overwhelmed by her inability to answer a question about her occupation on a medical form after she is stung by a jelly fish. The form is insignificant. The student at the observation hut asks her to complete it, forcing her to identify herself by occupation, but she is conflicted about doing so. Any answer would do, but Sofia feels as though she should be further established in her life. She is in her mid-twenties and single and has ceased pursuing her doctorate. She identifies herself by accomplishments outside of herself. It is fitting then that she understands herself as broken by the screen of an inanimate object facing her.

The theme of health is also introduced in the first chapter. The reader learns that Sofia has traveled to Spain with her mother Rose, who is seeking treatment for an undiagnosed ailment. Part of the way Sofia is identified is as the child of the sick mother. They have traveled together, uprooting their lives in England. Rose offers an introduction to both the prospect of mental and physical health. There may be something genuinely wrong with Rose, but because her ailment remains a mystery, it



opens up the possibility that it may all be in her head. In contrast, Sofia is dealing with a readily diagnosed ailment: a jelly fish sting.

In Chapter 2, more is learned about Rose's treatment at Dr. Gómez' clinic, Rose's health has been of concern to Sofia for a long time. Sofia remembers her mother's headaches from when she was a child. While those headaches may have nothing to do with Rose's health now, it allows the reader to understand the lens through which Sofia has always seen her mother. In this way, Rose's health is tied inextricably to her health. This establishes the theme of family as well.

Dr. Gómez isolates Rose from Sofia to gather more information about Rose and how to best treat her. Because of Sofia's first-person narration, the reader does not know exactly what transpired during that session. Instead, more is learned about Sofia and her family and identity. The reader learns that Sofia does not have a relationship with her father, as he has been absent from her life for about a decade. This detail isolates Sofia from both of her parents. She knows that her father has remarried and has a baby daughter with his new wife. This is a family she does not know and is not a part of.

The interactions between Dr. Gómez and Rose reveal the unorthodox nature of Dr. Gómez' treatment plans. While he may be interested in Rose's personal and medical history, he makes an unusual request: for Rose to make a list of her enemies. He does not specify as to whether or not these enemies are real or abstract, but it opens the possibility that he may be trying to ascertain how much of Rose's ailment is in her mind.

If Dr. Gómez is in any way dismissing Rose's ailments, it helps to introduce the theme of gender politics. Rose is a woman in her sixties, traveling to another country in an effort to understand what is wrong with her. Yes, she has an ulcer on her foot and is dehydrated, but she maintains mobility, yet opts to use a wheelchair. When Dr. Gómez looks at the ulcer, he begins talking about the architecture. Sofia is not sure what to make of him. It is just as likely that Dr. Gómez is condescending to Rose as it is possible that he is a quack.

Gender is further explored in Chapter 3 when Sofia uses the bathroom and is frightened by a person she believes to be a man. It is revealed that the person in question was not a man and was in fact a woman wearing men's shoes. Sofia is introduced to Ingrid. As the women talk, Ingrid comments on what would happen if Pablo's dog is set free. The dog symbolizes Sofia and the situation that she is in. Just as the dog is confined by Pablo, it is as if Sofia is confined by her mother. It is unclear what would happen to either should they be set free.

Sofia continues to think about setting Pablo's dog free in Chapter 4. The reader is also given a clearer idea of Sofia's appearance. She is tan with wild curls. There is freedom to her look as though it is trying to convey to her what she really wants.

The theme of sexuality is also introduced in this section. There is an obvious connection between Sofia and Ingrid. Though they meet via a misunderstanding, the idea that Sofia



mistook Ingrid for a man foreshadows the relationship that will develop between the women.

Discussion Question 1

What does Sofia's difficulty at putting an occupation on a medical form reveal about her character?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Dr. Gómez want to speak with Rose alone?

Discussion Question 3

What does Sofia's inability to get the water just right for Rose reveal about the relationship between the women?

Vocabulary

tentacles, discretion, recession, petrol, camouflage, venom, deactivate, artisan, primitive, barren, infinite, recite, implied, preoccupation, portholes, aromatherapy, ethnographers, doctorate, juddering, canapes, decipher, thwarted, abundantly, stationary



Chapters 5-9

Summary

Chapter 5

Sofia is silent as Dr. Gómez takes Rose to lunch. She regards Dr. Gómez as her research assistant, choosing to see the outing as an anthropological study. At lunch Rose explains that she cannot be around fish because she is allergic. She tries to get Sofia to reinforce this information to Dr. Gómez, but she remains silent. He challenges Rose's allergy by reminding her that she takes a fish oil supplement, so she is not allergic to all fish. Rose then tries to order from the wine list, but he will not allow her to have alcohol. He orders octopus and welts begin to show on Rose's face and her eye begins to swell. Dr. Gómez asks Rose to tell him about her list of enemies. Rose begins to talk about her parents and how they disliked foreigners, prompting her to marry a Greek man as rebellion. She explains that she and her husband struggled to conceive and about five years after Sofia was born, he left her and remarried. Sofia gets an alert on her phone and tells Dr. Gómez that the car has arrived and she must leave; Dr. Gómez pays her no attention. Outside, she meets Ingrid. She notes that Ingrid is wearing silver, gladiator sandals and Ingrid introduces Sofia to her boyfriend Matthew. Ingrid invites Sofia to join them, but Sofia explains that she is waiting on her mother. When she returns to the lobby, she finds Rose and Dr. Gómez getting along and her mother being "flirtatious" (54).

Sofia thinks of how long her mother has been alone. Sofia continues her silence and later Dr. Gómez ask Sofia about Rose. Sofia admits that sometimes her mother will walk. Dr. Gómez is concerned by how much effort Rose puts into not walking, which makes him think he may not be able to treat her. He also tells Sofia that she has picked up her mother's limp and appears weak. He tells her that someone defaced his clinic, painting "QUACK" (59) on the building and how it upset him. Later, Sofia goes for a walk and picks sprigs of jasmine. She runs into Matthew and Ingrid touches a knot in Sofia's hair; Ingrid tells Sofia that she thinks she picked the flowers for her.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 opens with Sofia observing Rose's body as she takes a shower and how it differs from society's expectations of beauty. Julieta is going to take a case history of Rose. She asks about general information like height and weight, but also information about her mentality. Rose explains that her father had a temper. Sofia pick up on the fact that Rose coughs as she prepares to reveal something she considers uncomfortable and that her mother has "contempt for her body" (63) and even suggests that the doctors should amputate her feet. Dr. Gómez joins them and asks Rose why she has not started driving yet. She explains that she needs to practice before going out on the mountain roads. She also a uses Sofia of "wasting her life" (65). Sofia is quiet and hides behind her laptop screen.



Chapter 7

Sofia and Ingrid are together and Ingrid is trying to kill a lizard with a tiny bow and arrow. Sofia wants to order pizza and Ingrid tells her she should eat more salad. Ingrid tells Sofia to move, but she does not. Ingrid comes at her, puts her arms around her and calls her a "monster" (71). In the afternoon, Sofia goes for a swim and ventures out away from the shore. She gets stung multiple times by medusas. Onshore, the man in the observation hut scolds her as he treats her stings. He tells her he tried calling to her as she swam out. This time when Sofia fills out the form, she lists her occupation as monster. Later, Sofia thinks she is hallucinating when she sees Rose standing by her bed. Ingrid sneaks in and asks to see the stings and Sofia pulls up her shirt. The women talk and Sofia tells Ingrid that she has a three-month old sister in Greece. Ingrid briefly mentions that she has a sister as well. Ingrid tells Sofia that she would like for her to join her in Berlin for Christmas and take a carriage ride, and abide the mistletoe tradition. She asks Sofia if it is okay that she visited her at such a late hour and Sofia says yes.

Chapter 8

Sofia is at a fish market after Dr. Gómez suggested that she steal a fish to help her be more bold. She contemplates different fish and reasons why she should not take each of the fish. She finally steals a dorado and leaves the market. Later, after cleaning the fish and covered with blood from doing so, she confronts Pablo to free his dog. Her appearance frightens him and he threatens to call the police if she does not leave. He claims to be related to the cops in the town. Pablo ultimately takes a bone up to the roof where the dog is barking.

Chapter 9

Sofia invites Ingrid over to eat the dorado, but Ingrid only wants water. Sofia tells Ingrid that Pablo freed the dog after taking it for a walk and it attacked a woman. Ingrid gives Sofia a shirt that she embroidered with the word "beloved" (83). The women talk and Sofia asks about Ingrid's sister. Ingrid offers to tell Sofia about her sister, but changes her mind. Ingrid leaves and Sofia goes to the hut on the beach and talks to the student, who reveals his name is Juan. She invites him to join her for dinner and he does. After dinner they swim in the nude and have sex. She considers her actions ""very bold" (87).

Analysis

The issue of Rose's health continues to develop in Chapter 5. As Dr. Gómez and Rose go to lunch. He orders octopus and Rose objects because she is allergic to fish. His order demonstrates how he challenges her in a way to understand what elements of her illness are real or imagined. While Rose argues that she is allergic to all fish, he counters with how she takes a fish oil supplement. While this may be a logical argument, he puts her at risk. Over the course of the lunch, she begins to develop what appears to be hives and her face begins to swell. It is clear that Rose's allergy is not in her head. Instead of acknowledging the reaction, Dr. Gómez asks Rose about her



enemies. It is clear by this exchange that Dr. Gómez is trying to ascertain whether Rose's illness is physical or mental in nature. His actions also seem to reinforce the theme of gender roles in which he attempts to control Rose, leaving her in a subordinate role, and taking away her agency. This action appears to continue when he forbids her to order alcohol. However, his action foreshadows a personal reveal about Dr. Gómez.

With regard to Rose and her list of enemies, she lists her parents. This adds another layer to the theme of family. Rose's parents objected to foreigners and Rose admits that it made it natural for her to fall in love with a Greek man. Part of the appeal was as an act of rebellion. It is unclear as to whether or not Sofia knows about this, but she witnesses the discussion. She understands that her mother is force to be reckoned with, so if she does not know about it, then it likely does not come as a surprise to her.

Rose explains about the struggle to conceive. This would be an important event to bring up to Dr. Gómez because it reinforces her perception of how she has struggled with her health. The delay in conceiving is another way in which her body has betrayed her.

When Dr. Gómez and Sofia discuss Rose's ability to walk, he continues to wonder how much of her illness is in her mind. Sofia admits that her mother has the ability to walk, but she spends much of her time confined to a wheelchair. Just as Dr. Gómez expresses concern for Rose's mental health, he wonders about Sofia as well. He comments on the fact that has noticed that Sofia walks with a limp similar to her mother. Sofia has adopted the limp from assisting her mother when she does move around. Sofia is aware of this affectation, but likely does not realize how much she has the limp aside from when she walks with Rose.

Julieta takes a personal history of Rose to further assist in Dr. Gómez' diagnosis. Sofia sees her mother in the shower and reflects on Rose's body. She considers it in the context of attractiveness and who the body might actually be for. It is as though, Sofia cannot quite comprehend that the body is Rose. This provides insight into how Sofia sees her own body. As she struggles with her identity, she may struggle to understand how anyone accepts their body as their own. If Rose has contempt for her body, as is apparent in the discussions with Dr. Gómez and Julieta, it makes sense that Sofia may struggle with it as well, albeit in different ways. When Rose accuses Sofia of "wasting her life" (65), it indicates that Rose's awareness of the limitations Sofia puts on herself. Sofia's reaction is to hide to behind the laptop. She continues to hide behind something that is broken because that is how she views herself.

This is interesting in light of the theme of sexuality. In Sofia's interactions with Ingrid, Ingrid initiates some kind of touch. When they first meet, Ingrid squeezes Sofia's shoulder. In Chapter 5, Ingrid touches a knot in Sofia's hair. By Chapter 7, Sofia is spending time with Ingrid while she hunts a lizard with a small bow and arrow. Sofia may view this as an eccentricity, but she is undeniably drawn to Ingrid.

It seems as though Sofia is not sure quite what to do with her body when she is once again stung by jelly fish while swimming. The man on shore, who will later be revealed as Juan, tries to warn her and scolds her as he treats her stings. He has treated her



previously, so his scolding does not come quite as a shock. These stings may be painful, but they alert Sofia to her body. Just as Ingrid squeezed her shoulders earlier and made her aware of them, Juan treats them, continuing to make her aware of them. The intimacy that Ingrid and Juan share with Sofia foreshadows how Sofia will come to use and understand her body.

The possibility of a sexual relationship between Sofia and Ingrid is hinted at when Ingrid talks about the carriage ride in Germany. She indicates to Sofia that she would want to kiss her under the mistletoe. This does not make Sofia shy away and she indicates that she does not mind that Ingrid comes by in the middle of the night.

At Dr. Gómez' urging, Sofia is instructed to be more bold. While this will ultimately help to illustrate the theme of sexuality, it demonstrates how sexuality is tied to the theme of identity. Earlier in the section, Dr. Gómez' clinic is defaced with graffiti calling him a quack. In light of how he questions Rose's allergies and how he encourages Sofia to be bold, the reader may feel similarly about Dr. Gómez and his methods. If Dr. Gómez' identity is called into question through the lens of Sofia's observations in the first person narration. This seems natural given her own struggle to understand her identity as well.

After Sofia steals the fish, she is indeed emboldened. This gives her the courage to confront Pablo about his dog. In doing so, she emasculates Pablo and he threatens her in an effort to regain his power. This reinforces the theme of gender roles. It also prompts her to contact Ingrid.

Sofia is proud to tell Ingrid about confronting Pablo and she also wants to share the stolen fish with her. It is clear that she wants to continue with her bold behavior. Ingrid brings her an embroidered shirt with the word "beloved" (83) stitched on the front. Sofia is further empowered by the gift, but the evening does not go as planned and Ingrid leaves after she becomes self-conscious about revealing what happened with her sister when they were young. Just as Sofia's actions frightened Pablo, it may be that Sofia's newfound power intimidated Ingrid as well.

While Sofia is disappointed in Ingrid's departure, she does not waste her boldness. She invites Juan and they swim in the nude and have sex. In this way, Sofia is able to embrace her body for herself as well.

Discussion Question 1

How does Dr. Gómez' concern about Rose putting effort into not walking inform the theme of identity?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Sofia choose not to respond after Rose suggests that she is wasting her life?



Discussion Question 3

Why is it important for Sofia to free Pablo's dog?

Vocabulary

affliction, monotony, flamboyantly, vicinity, venue, metamorphosis, blatant, accurate, adversaries, churlish, extraterrestrial, sentimental, bestowed, rancid, putrefying, amiable, grievance, rota, apathy, charlatan, malevolent, complicit, chiffon



Chapters 10-16

Summary

Chapter 10

Sofia and Rose are headed to a market, with Rose driving. Rose complains that Sofia is distant, but Sofia thinks she is too close to her mother and her "grievances" (89). Sofia does not understand how her mother can drive without feeling in her legs. Rose drives fast and seems to be enjoying herself. Sofia is aware of the stings on her back and thinks about not finishing her doctorate and not being able to drive. She thinks about being able to smell alcohol on Julieta during her physiotherapy sessions with Rose. Rose comments to Sofia about Julieta being "clever" (93). They stop to eat churros and Rose wants to buy a watch. Sofia thinks about her night with Juan. Rose tosses Sofia the keys and tells her to drive. Sofia does and Rose reminds her about which side of the road to drive on. She tells Sofia about how Sofia's father forbid Rose from touching his hair and that he was very proud of his curls. After the drive, Rose walks away from the car and Sofia searches the trunk for something that was rattling. She finds a can of blue spray paint and suspects Matthew put it there before he hired the car for them.

Chapter 11

Sofia and Ingrid kiss while they make coconut ice cream. Ingrid cuts off one of Sofia's curls. The women talk with Matthew and Matthew tells Sofia that Dr. Gómez is "dangerous" (104). As they talk, Sofia begins to question whether or not Matthew is in love with Ingrid. Then she wonders about the masculine and feminine aspects of Juan and Ingrid.

Chapter 12

Rose meets with Dr. Gómez and he goes over an x-ray, which reveals how she is losing bone density. He tells her that she must give up all her mid cations to continue her treatment. He tells them that the cat is pregnant. Later Dr. Gómez tells Sofia that she is using her mother as an excuse to keep her from living her own life.

Chapter 13

Sofia goes to see Julieta. They talk about their surnames and Julieta tells her about a cocker spaniel she had a child. She reveals that her mother died when she was young. Julieta explains that she started taking patient case histories because of her English fluency. She starts asking Sofia questions and they begin a long conversation. At times Sofia feels like she is revealing too much. She explains about moving in to help her mother, but she feels like she is homeless. Matthew enters and Julieta tells him to never enter without ringing the bell first. He brings Julieta a bottle of wine.

Chapter 14



Ingrid and Sofia "have become lovers" (120). Sofia lists the things she likes about Ingrid, including her body confidence and how Ingrid appears to like Sofia's body. She considers her own sexuality an "enigma" (121) to herself. They shower together and when they get out of the shower, they see a snake. Ingrid kills the snake with a small axe. They dress and go the hire car. The driver looks at Sofia and she feels as though he is making her "weaker" (123). His name is Leonardo and Ingrid greets him with a kiss. He tells her she will need his boots to ride a horse. Ingrid tells him that Sofia is half-Greek and learning to drive and that Sofia will be driving her home.

Chapter 15

Sofia has not been sleeping and has started locking the doors at night. She thinks of Leonardo and Ingrid. Rose complains about waiting for the side effects from going off her medications. She asks Sofia to go to the pharmacy to get her painkillers. When Sofia refuses, she tells her she is "getting plump" (127). Sofia reflects on her life and feels bad about how much she feels she has not accomplished. She does not have a career or family. She goes to the kitchen and throws a vase with a replica Greek frieze of female slaves carrying water onto the floor, breaking it. She finds Rose standing behind her, asking her what is wrong. Sofia decides to go to Greece.

Chapter 16

Sofia meets her father at the airport. She calls him Christos, but he tells her to call him Papa. He introduces Alexandra, his wife, and Evangeline, his baby daughter. She considers the age difference and how Christos and Alexandra look like father and daughter. She talks to Alexandra, who tells her that she should visit the Parthenon. Christos talks about the shortage of medicine in Greece and reveals that Alexandra is Italian, and speaks multiple languages. When Sofia asks if Alexandra was born in Italy, she replies that she does not know. At the house, Christos shows Sofia around. Later, Sofia is stretching her legs and Christos walks in without knocking. She tells him not to do that again.

Analysis

At the start of Chapter 10, Sofia and Rose are going out for the day and Rose is driving. Thus far, the women have hired cars to get around. Rose does not drive because of her illness and Sofia has never gotten a driver's license. Rose drives fast and complains that Sofia seems distant. This develops the theme of family. While Rose was not close to her own parents, she expects to be close to her daughter. In contrast, Sofia feels like they are too close. She is beginning to understand her lack of autonomy in conjunction with her mother.

In an effort to share the driving experience with Sofia, Rose tosses Sofia the keys and encourages her to drive. During the drive, Sofia is thinking about everything that is happening around her and to her. She is aware of the stings on her back and thinks about spending the night with Juan. Rose's insistence on Sofia driving helps Sofia cope



with her self-consciousness about not being able to drive. Sofia continues to struggle with how she abandoned her doctorate. The act of driving symbolizes how she must take control of her life. It empowers her, foreshadowing her decision to renew her studies in later chapters.

Rose tells Sofia about how Christos, Sofia's father, was very proud of his hair and did not allow Rose to touch it. This demonstrates the distance between Rose and Christos from early on, reflecting a lack of intimacy. Sofia may not know a lot about her father, she did inherit her curls from him. Later, after Sofia and Ingrid kiss, she allows Ingrid to snip off one of her curls. This demonstrates Sofia's willingness to pursue an intimate relationship with Ingrid.

Sofia does not appear to struggle with the decision to enter into a sexual relationship with Ingrid. She refers to her own sexuality as an "enigma" (121) that she accepts, but may not understand. She does not seem to want to label her sexuality as part of her identity. She enjoyed her night with Juan and she enjoys the time she shares with Ingrid.

Building on her body confidence from swimming in the nude with Juan, Sofia notices how Ingrid appreciates Sofia's body and this further adds to Sofia's body confidence. If Sofia previously adopted the limp of her mother and questions the purpose of her mother's body, she is now ready to accept the purpose of her body. She is not limiting it in conjunction with it being just for Ingrid or for Juan. Rather, she is accepting it for herself and welcoming the pleasure she derives from it.

The theme of gender roles is further explored in the way that Sofia views her relationships with Ingrid and Juan. She sees them within the confines of both their assigned gender roles: Juan is masculine and Ingrid is feminine. While she does not mention it in her narration her, Sofia has previously assigned masculine elements to Ingrid. When she first encounters Ingrid, she mistakes her for a man because she is wearing men's shoes. The next time she sees her, Ingrid has a tiny bow and arrow and is wearing gladiator sandals as though she is a warrior.

Sofia does not see herself similarly. Even after she has taken actions to become bolder, she still sees herself as defeated by what she has not accomplished, or more specifically, what she has given up on: her doctorate. She struggles with sleep and is frustrated by her relationship with her mother. Sofia may not see herself as part of family because she is also thinking about how she does not have a family of her own. When she throws the vase, she understands the symbolism of breaking a frieze of female slaves carrying water. She sees herself in this frieze as the slave tasked with taking Rose water, which Sofia never seems to do to Rose's satisfaction. It seems absurd that Rose complains so much about Sofia's inability to bring her water in the way that she wants it. The water is symbolic of how Rose maintains control over Sofia. Clearly Rose should be able to get herself water, but she relies on Sofia for the most basic element key to survival.



Rose asks Sofia what is wrong after she breaks the vase. It is in this moment that Sofia reads the broken vase as a sign that she should travel to Greece. Sofia makes the decision without prompting from anyone. She is defeated and determined in this moment and it demonstrates how she is ready to pursue her exploration of her own identity.

When she arrives in Greece, she is greeted by her father, whom she refers to as Christos. He tells her to call him Papa, and she does so. Regardless of his insistence on being identified as her father, he is doing so in conjunction with introducing her to the people he regards as his family. Sofia is struck by the vast age difference between her father and his new wife. Sofia sees the baby Evangeline as a replacement for her. This demonstrates how Sofia may be able to make peace with how she views her father, but it also allows her to understand that her identity is not tied to him.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Rose encourage Sofia to drive?

Discussion Question 2

How does Sofia's comment about her sexuality being enigmatic connect the themes of identity and sexuality?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the broken vase prompt Sofia to go to Greece?

Vocabulary

resentment, grievance, antidote, polygamous, matrilineal, patrilineal, reconciled, astute, tarmac, espadrilles, acutely, diagnostic, indignant, empathy, curvaceous, brine, torment, undermined, ornate, compensated, conjuring, sommeliers, periphery, frailties, eccentricities, chastising, artisan, alcove, affinity



Chapters 17-22

Summary

Chapter 17

Sofia thinks about how she is in the birthplace of Medusa, while she still suffers from the medusa stings on her back. She thinks about how Alexandra and Evangeline replaced her and her mother. She spends time with Alexandra and learns that she was a research assistant in economics before meeting Christos. She is about four years older than Sofia and wears braces and works part time in Brussels. They talk about Christos and Alexandra asks her why she would think her father would do something that would not benefit him. Sofia does not have an answer and thinks about how her mother would not do something that disadvantages her as well. Alexandra discusses the disadvantages of the forty-year age difference in her marriage. Christos walks in and is pleased to see the women talking.

Chapter 18

Sofia is still in Reece. She spends the day with Christos and Sofia thinks about how her father likely felt obligated to introduce her as his daughter. She meets her father's friend George and she tells him that she has not seen her father since she was fourteen. Later that night, she thinks about how she is the only "obstacle" (147) from her father forgetting his former life.

Chapter 19

Sofia and Alexandra are talking and Alexandra asks Sofia what her beloved t-shirt means. Sofia is confused when Sofia explains the meaning of the word and thinks she is wrong. Sofia thinks about Ingrid a lot. Later, Sofia takes a closer look at the t-shirt and realizes that it reads: "beheaded" (151). She realizes that she wanted to be beloved and misread the shirt.

Chapter 20

Sofia asks to speak with Christos alone, but does not know where to start the conversation. She is worried about Rose, but she also wants to continue her doctorate, but does not feel she can leave her mother. He tells her that she should do what she needs and that Rose will manage, just as she always has. Later when they are eating, Sofia learns that her father likes dill and she notes that as a memory. Rose sends a package for addressed to Christos. He tells Sofia it is for her and she opens it to find Yorkshire tea; Christos does not like tea. On her last day in Greece, Christos takes her to a Greek coffee shop. She tells her father that she is happy that she met Evangeline. He gives her a paper flower that he made and she puts it in her hair. She considers why she did not change her last name after he left. She thinks that she did not give away what he gave her. Back at the house, Sofia realizes she has not seen Alexandra with



any friends and asks her if she has any siblings and she does not know. She asks Sofia to bring her a glass of water and she does so. She offers to teach Sofia Greek and they agree to the lessons via email exchange.

Chapter 21

Sofia has returned to Spain and Rose tells her that she is sorry that Christos was not more welcoming; she also accuses Sofia of being in a strange mood. Rose informs Sofia that Dr. Gómez has forbidden Rose from driving a car and given her new medications.

Chapter 22

Sofia is with Ingrid at the beach and while the word beheaded hurt her, she decides not to confront Ingrid about it. They talk about the rumor that Pablo's dog drowned and Ingrid tries to reassure Sofia she gave the dog a choice. Ingrid tells her about what happened with her sister when they were young. Ingrid was pushing her sister on the swing and kept pushing her higher, even though her sister asked her to stop. Her sister fell from the swing and cracked her skull, resulting in brain damage. She hears Julieta calling for her and the women talk. Julieta explains that her father hates drugs and continues to mourn her mother's death. Ingrid starts to leave and Sofia stops her. She tells Ingrid that she is beautiful, and Ingrid laughs in response. They play in the water. Then, Ingrid holds Sofia under water for longer than she should. She lets Sofia go after she is stung on her foot by the medusas. Back at Ingrid's summer house, Ingrid starts sewing. Ingrid is in a dark mood, and Sofia is uncomfortable. Sofia is relieved to see Leonardo when he arrives. Sofia wonders if she is being reckless or if she is in love with Ingrid. Ingrid tells Sofia that she and Leonardo need to arrange riding lessons, and Sofia leaves.

Analysis

This section continues to explore the themes of identity and family. Sofia's interaction with her father and his new family illustrate how identity and family are not necessarily dependent on each other. Yes, Sofia is half-Greek, and she relates to Greek identity by acknowledging the medusa stings on her back in conjunction with being in the birthplace of Medusa. Sofia may identify with Medusa in that she is a daughter and a sister who will eventually flee her family.

Sofia considers how Christos introduced her as his daughter out of obligation. She sees herself as an "obstacle" (147) in her father's pursuit to have his family without having to identify with his previous family. Sofia and Christos have difficulty relating to each other. Perhaps it is rooted in guilt or blame, depending on the individual's perspective, but enough of it is there to keep distance between them. Christos does invite Sofia into his home, but he does not relate to her. Instead, Sofia and Alexandra communicate. They are close in age, with only about four years between them. It is likely that Sofia continues to grapple with how she views herself through the lens of Alexandra.



Alexandra has what Sofia thinks she should have already achieved: a husband, family, and career.

Alexandra is inclusive of Sofia and makes an effort to offer clarity to Sofia. When the women speak about Christos, Sofia is taken back by Alexandra's comment about why Christos would ever do anything that did not benefit him. This clearly establishes Christos is a dominant male role, but Sofia has to be able to understand that her mother lives similarly. In this way, Rose and Christos are similar, but it likely led to their downfall as well.

What is curious about the statement is how Sofia considers it such an odd position. It is as though Sofia has not considered that she should do what best suits her. She has thus far felt as though she lacks choice. Learning this about Christos helps put things in perspective for her.

When Sofia goes to the coffee shop with Christos, she thinks about why she did not change her name. She chose to keep a name that is difficult to spell and pronounce. It is fitting that she did because Sofia is not one to take the easy way. She keeps it because it is complicated, which is how she sees herself. Although she is adapting to how being complicated is not bad.

When Sofia returns to Spain, Rose is apologetic for how Christos treated Sofia. But the visit has given Sofia perspective on her family and herself. Her interaction with Alexandra offered her insight into Sofia's relationship with Ingrid. It is not until Alexandra asks about the embroidered t-shirt that Sofia realizes that she has been misreading the t-shirt all along. Instead of reading "beloved", it reads: "beheaded" (151). Sofia understands that she was so desperate to be loved that her mind created the word. She did not see how the shirt was meant to remind her of the snake being killed.

When Sofia sees Ingrid, she does not make mention of the t-shirt. Sofia is the one who misrepresented it, and while the word hurts her now, there is no way to know how the word would have hurt initially if she had read the word properly. Sofia may have been offended or she may have laughed. But in this moment she is hurt by the misunderstanding, but not enough to bring it up to Ingrid. She decides it is worthwhile to pursue her relationship with Ingrid, even if she is not sure it is the best option, as will be evidenced in later chapters.

There is a rumor that Pablo's dog drowned, and Sofia feels bad about this. She gave the dog an opportunity to get away from Pablo, but sees that it led to the dog's death. Ingrid tries to redirect Sofia's thinking, however. She explains that she gave the dog a choice. In his freedom he assumed the risk of going into the water. This is a metaphor for what Sofia will do with her freedom, should she take it. Throughout the novel, Sofia continues to go into the sea when there is danger. She has suffered for these actions by the multiple medusa stings she has experienced. Ultimately, Sofia is the one who has made the choice to go into the water, and she should be able to see herself in the choice that Pablo's dog had as well.



While at Ingrid's house, Ingrid starts sewing. In this way, Ingrid is in a state of repair. She is not one to start over with something new, but rather she is interested in repairing or reinventing something. In this way, Ingrid's sewing reflects her relationship with Sofia. She wants to keep repairing it or giving Sofia the choice to be repaired. In this way, it is more fitting that Ingrid embroidered the word beheaded instead of beloved. It is as though Ingrid recognizes that Sofia needs to free herself from her mother or herself. Perhaps Sofia is too much in her head and in order for her to be free, the word beheaded is more to the point.

Discussion Question 1

How does Alexandra's comment about Christos not doing anything that did not benefit him inform the theme of gender roles?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sofia's misreading of the word "beheaded" (151) on the embroidered shirt reveal about her character?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ingrid go too far when she hurts her sister and holds Sofia under water?

Vocabulary

collateral, epidemic, inlaid, subsidized, canteens, affluent, sullen, congregation, furtively, potency, solidarity, oblivious, vagaries, ligament, abstract, forlorn, indolent, impartial, voyeur



Chapters 23-31

Summary

Chapter 23

Dr. Gómez asks Julieta to remove Rose's shoes. Rose tells him that she does not want her feet and asks him to amputate them. When Dr. Gómez is speaking with Sofia, he tells her about Senor James from LA, who creates diseases so that he can cure them with pharmaceuticals. Sofia tells him about her trip to Greece and how she feels that her father is forgetting about her. Dr. Gómez tells Sofia that her mother is asking for surgery to remove her feet. Sofia explains that her mother's request is dark, Yorkshire humor. He explains that her mother feels defeated and cautions Sofia to not feel similarly.

Chapter 24

Sofia is nude on the Beach of the Dead when she hears a dog howling and thinks it may be Pablo's dog. She has a sliver of glass stuck above her eyebrow. That evening, she meets up with Matthew and he asks her to reimburse him for a bottle of wine that she and Ingrid took from him earlier. Later, Sofia is in bed with Juan. She is reading an email from Alexandra and Juan asks her to read it aloud to him; she translates from Greek. Alexandra writes that Evangeline misses her sister and that she lost her job at the bank. Juan asks her to read it again, but in Greek. She tells him that she feels like she is lost in time and that the future has already happened.

Chapter 25

The broken, faux Greek vase remains on the floor and Sofia wonders if she should repair it. Rose asks her for water. She takes her the water, but is no longer speaking to her mother. That night she completes her university application to a school in the United States.

Chapter 26

Dr. Gómez introduces Senor James and a health official from Barcelona to Rose. They ask why Rose was admitted to the clinic for two nights and she explains it was to treat dehydration. She explains that she is going to continue her treatment in London when she returns. They discuss the medications she used to take and takes presently. She asks for a question to be recreated and Julieta tells her she does not have to answer. Rose talks about how she used to run and jump as a child and how she is now old and slow. They ask Sofia if she has concerns about her mother and she can hear Rose's watch ticking. Rose brags about her daughter's degree and then says something to Sofia in Greek. Sofia remembers it from when she was a child and how they quit speaking Greek to irritate Christos. Rose tells the men that the Gómez Clinic have her "hope" (197). Mr. James leaves and Dr. Gómez asks to speak with Rose in private.



Chapter 27

Sofia goes on a hike and sees Ingrid on a horse. Ingrid asks for her shirt back because Sofia never offered anything in exchange. Sofia realizes that she took from Ingrid, but did not give back and is not sure that she could repay her. She realizes that they are in love with each other, and while Ingrid may not be a safe choice, she is willing to take the risk.

Chapter 28

Sofia wades into the sea and begins crying. She sees her mother walking on the shore. She wants to go to her, but does not. She swims through medusas and is stung on her belly and breasts. She reaches the shore and finds her mother's footprints. She thinks about how she fears her mother as much as she is afraid for her. The tide comes in. She sees Juan and he tells her about how the jellyfish are in large numbers because of the decline in natural predators.

Chapter 29

Sofia goes to her mother, thinking Rose will tell her about walking, but she asks Sofia to get her water instead. Rose does not like the way Sofia looks with her sunburn and wild hair. Sofia offers to take Rose out and Rose tells her she has not been out all day. Sofia drives fast and stops the car on the shoulder, telling her mother they will watch the sunset. She gets the wheelchair out and with a truck coming in the distance, rolls Rose out into the road and leaves her.

Chapter 30

Sofia goes to Dr. Gómez' clinic. He tells her that he is with another appointment and Sofia cries because she believes she has killed her mother. They talk and he tells her that is it right to "mourn out dead, but we cannot let them take over our life" (214).

Chapter 31

Sofia finds Rose standing by the window in the beach house. Sofia asks for water and Rose brings her a glass. Rose tells Sofia that she the results from endoscopy. Dr. Gómez is refunding her money because she has cancer. Sofia does not want to believe it.

Analysis

In Chapter 23, Rose asks Dr. Gómez to amputate her feet. It is her way of taking control over her body. Her desire worries Dr. Gómez and he talks with Sofia about Rose. He is concerned that Sofia will share her mother's defeated mentality. If Rose is a double amputee, Sofia will likely feel obligated to stay and continue to care for her mother. Rose remains without a diagnosis, but she seems set on trying to take control over her body. Requesting amputation seems radical, but without her feet, she would at least be



able to justify the time she opts to spend in the wheelchair. She may also be noticing Sofia's new boldness. It may also be that having Sofia away from her put her life into perspective and she does not want to be left alone.

Whether there is something legitimately wrong with Rose or if the illness is in her mind remains to be seen. Dr. Gómez can see how Rose's attitude puts Sofia at risk and he seeks to help her.

The theme of identity is further developed by the investigation in Dr. Gómez' clinic. He must rely on Rose's testimony and he does not know how she will respond during questioning. Rose unexpectedly gives Dr. Gómez a favorable review. She also reveals that she and Sofia spoke Greek when Sofia was young. This demonstrates how Rose was once interested in exposing Sofia to her cultural heritage. They quit speaking Greek as an act of passive aggression toward Christos, providing the reader insight into the downfall of the Rose's marriage to Christos.

While Rose has taken many opportunities to belittle Sofia throughout the novel, such as negative comments about her weight, she takes a moment during her testimony to brag about Sofia's accomplishments. This is done publicly, but once they are back at the house, and after Sofia has spent time at the beach, Rose tells Sofia she does not like the way she looks. She does so in effort to control Sofia. Sofia has decided that she will leave her mother and finish her doctorate in the United States. The only way that Rose can control Sofia is by making her feel less about herself.

But Sofia continues with her pursuit of being bold. The theme of sexuality continues to develop in Chapter 24. She is alone on the beach and is nude. Her nudity indicates her boldness. It is during the day and she is on her own. She hears what she believes to be Pablo's dog and this gives her hope. She is exploring different aspects of her sexuality. Later she meets up with Juan.

While Sofia will ultimately choose to pursue a relationship with Ingrid, she continues to express her sexuality with Juan. When she is with Juan, she receives an email from Alexandra. She reads it in Greek and English, sharing the content with Juan at his request. Sofia continues to grapple with how she relates with time, often feeling lost. It may be that the email from Alexandra about losing her job may allow Sofia to feel more secure. Not everything is as perfect as perhaps she would like to think.

Sofia's comment about time indicates how she is likely in the wrong place. Her decision to continue her studies will likely help set her back on course. She understands herself as lost when she is in Juan's company. While Sofia struggles with different aspects of Ingrid's personality, particularly how Ingrid hurts her with comments she makes, she feels a stronger connection with Ingrid.

Ingrid reveals her vulnerability to Sofia when she explains what happened with her sister. Ingrid demonstrates that she continues to have difficulty with impulse control when she hold Sofia under water. It is not until she is stung by the medusas that Ingrid



allows Sofia to be free. While Sofia has been stung repeatedly throughout the novel, this time Ingrid must bear the sting as though the medusas came to Sofia's rescue.

As the novel draws to a close, Sofia is emboldened to take drastic measures. She puts Rose's life at risk by leaving Rose in the middle of the road with oncoming traffic. She does not stay to see what happens. Instead, she rushes to Dr. Gómez thinking she has killed her mother. It is later revealed, of course, that Rose did not die. Rose finally gets her diagnosis, and her prognosis looks bleak. Sofia is left in disbelief. She wonders if it is "easier to surrender to death than to life" (218). This is another opportunity for Sofia to reevaluate her identity.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it important for Sofia to believe that Pablo's dog is alive?

Discussion Question 2

How does Sofia's decision to leave Rose in the middle of the road develop the theme of mental and physical health?

Discussion Question 3

The ending of the novel is ambiguous. In your opinion, what will Sofia do now that she knows Rose's diagnosis? Explain your reasoning.

Vocabulary

spectral, remit, abeyance, refurbishment, abdicated, galvanized, intravenous, persecutory, jargon, reciprocated, mirage, martyr, unfathomable, stoic, visceral



Characters

Sofia Papastergiadis

Sofia Papastergiadis is a woman in her mid-20s who is caring for her mother Rose. She works as a waitress in England and has dropped out of her doctoral studies program in anthropology. She is single and feels like she is a failure.

Sofia travels to Spain so that Rose can finally get a diagnosis. Sofia puts up with her mother's comments about her weight and how she has not done anything with her life. She cannot seem to get things right for her mother, including a task as simple as getting her water.

Sofia begins sexual relationships with both Juan, a student who works at the observation hut on the beach, and Ingrid, a woman from Berlin. She is instructed by Dr. Gomez to take more chances. She steals a fish and sets Pablo's dog free.

Sophia wants to have a better relationship with her family, even traveling to visit her estranged father. She wants to be loved. Her desire leads her to misread a shirt that Ingrid gives her that has the word beheaded on it, but she thinks it reads beloved. Sofia also wants to complete her doctorate and applies to a program in the United States. When Rose finally gets diagnosed, Sofia cannot believe it.

Rose

Rose is a woman in her sixties. She spends much of her time confined to a wheelchair, though she is still able to walk. She is set in her ways and is often domineering to her daughter Sofia.

Rose has mortgaged her house in order to afford the treatment at Dr. Gomez' clinic. She knows there is something wrong with her and she feels betrayed by her body. While Dr. Gomez suggests that her illness may be in her mind, Rose knows that there is something wrong with her.

Rose is dependent on Sofia. Rose had been rebellious against her own parents, marrying a man from Greece to spite them for not approving of foreigners. She also stopped speaking Greek to Sofia when Sofia was a child as a way to spite Christos.

Rose wants a diagnosis and to be taken seriously. Rose wants more for her daughter, but she also does not want to be left alone.



Dr. Gómez

Dr. Gómez is a doctor at an experimental clinic in Spain. He has a daughter, Julieta, who is also his nurse. He has two gold teeth.

Dr. Gomez uses unorthodox methods in an effort to be able to best treat his patients. As he treats Rose, he offers advice to Sofia to see if he can help both of the women.

He is self-conscious about being regarded as a quack. When he is forced to testify about his methods, Rose defends his treatment and explains that Dr. Gómez has given her hope.

Ingrid

Ingrid is a woman from Berlin. She is a seamstress and embroiders a t-shirt for Sofa with the word "beheaded" on it. She caused her sister's accident when she was younger, which led to her sister having brain damage. Ingrid pursues a relationship with Sofia, and they fall in love.

Julieta

Julieta is Dr. Gómez' daughter. She works as his nurse and may have a drinking problem. She takes the medical histories of Dr. Gómez' patients because of her fluency in English.

Pablo

Pablo is the man who neglects his dog, leaving it chained up and barking all the time. When Sofia confronts him about the dog, he threatens to call the police.

Alexandra

Alexandra is Christos' current wife. She is a few years older than Sofia and wears braces. She has a baby daughter and tells Sofia about the difficulties of being in a marriage with a significant age difference. She works for a bank in Brussels and loses her job. She offers to teach Sofia to speak Greek.

Christos

Christos is Sofia's father. He divorced Rose and started a new family in Greece. When Sofia visits, it is the first time they have seen each other since Sofia was fourteen.



Juan

Juan is a student who works in the observation hut on the beach. He treats Sofia's jelly fish stings. They have a sexual relationship.

Evangeline

Evangeline is the baby daughter of Christos and Alexandra. Sofia views Evangeline as her (Sofia's) replacement.



Symbols and Symbolism

Pablo's Dog

Pablo's Dog is chained which is symbolic of Sofia feeling constrained by her life and her mother and her desire to break free.

Medusas

The medusas are symbolic of Sofia's desire to feel something. If she does not feel loved, then she can experience the pain of the stings on her skin.

Beloved/Beheaded

Sofia's misreading of the word beheaded for beloved symbolizes how she wants to be viewed by someone else. It is not merely that she wants Ingrid to love her. Sofia desires any kind of love.

Nudity

Nudity symbolizes Sofia's vulnerability in accepting herself and deciding what she wants.

Wheelchair

The wheelchair symbolizes Rose's reliance on Sofia and her fear in her daughter leaving her alone.

Driving

Driving symbolizes Rose wanting to help Sofia learn to drive so that Sofia may feel as though she must continue to care for Rose.

Anthropology

Anthropology symbolizes how Sofia views the world around her. She tries to understand it, but she does not really feel like an active participant. Instead, she feels like she is an observer of those around her.



Doctorate

The doctorate symbolizes the potential that Sofia feels she has not lived up to so far in her life.

Evangeline

Evangeline symbolizes the daughter Sofia could not be to Christos.

Water

Water symbolizes the fluid relationship between Sofia and Rose and how they are never quite on solid ground.



Settings

Gómez' Clinic

Gómez' Clinic is where Rose goes for experimental treatment to finally get a diagnosis. Someone sprays graffiti on the building accusing Gómez of being a quack.

Greece

Greece is where Sofia's father, Christos, is originally from and continues to live. Sofia visits Christos and meets his current wife and new child.

Spain

Spain is where Gómez' Clinic is located and where Sofia and Rose stay in a house near the sea.

The Beach

The beach is where Sofia meets Juan after she is stung by jelly fish, which the locals call medusas.

Julieta's House

Julieta's House is where Sofia visits Julieta to talk about her personal history so that Julieta can get a better understanding of Rose.



Themes and Motifs

Identity

The author uses the theme of identity as a way to keep Sofia as an ambiguous character. At the outset of the novel, Sofia is conflicted about her life and views herself as broken. She thinks she should have accomplished more by this point in her life, and she is overwhelmed by a simple form asking her to list her occupation. She does not want to identify as a waitress, but she cannot commit to any other title.

Sofia has dropped out of her doctoral studies and is dependent on her mother financially. Conversely, her mother appears to need Sofia to help care for her. Sofia does not see herself as an autonomous person, but as a subset of her mother.

Sofia feels abandoned by her father. She has not seen him since she was fourteen-years-old. She decides to visit him and his new family. After visiting him, she feels that Alexandra (his new wife) and Evangeline (his daughter with Alexandra) are replacements for her mother and her.

Sofia is close in age to Alexandra and feels like Alexandra has accomplished much more since she has a career and family. She even exhibits some jealousy of the baby Evangeline because she will grow up speaking three languages.

Sofia is detached from her Greek identity. She identifies more with her British identity since she grew up there. It is not until Rose is testifying for Dr. Gómez that she remembers that she and her mother once spoke Greek to each other.

Sexuality

The theme of sexuality is used to reinforce the theme of identity and to demonstrate Sofia's state of exploration.

Expanding on the theme of identity, Sofia's sexuality is in question. She is attracted to both Ingrid and Juan and pursues a sexual relationship with each of them. Throughout the novel, Sofia does not label herself as straight, lesbian, or bisexual. She only suggests that her sexuality is enigmatic.

Sofia's relationship with Ingrid allows her to feel more secure in her body and her enjoyment of it. She is hyper-aware of her body throughout the novel because of the pain from the jellyfish stings. She remembers the pain when Ingrid touches her shoulder. It makes her relish the touch.

Sofia continually goes into the sea when jelly fish are present. It is as though she is seeking that awareness of touch and it awakens her sense of self.



Mental and Physical Health

The theme of mental and physical health is developed through the mystery of Rose's ailment and previous attempts to diagnosis her.

Rose has traveled to Spain to seek a diagnosis. While Dr. Gómez is able to quickly identify that Rose suffers from dehydration and is experiencing bone loss, he is unable to determine what may be the underlying cause of her illness.

He suspects that her illness may be in her head. He challenges her allergy to fish and takes her off of her medications. Rose knows that she needs certain medications and goes so far as to ask Sofia to buy her painkillers that are available in Spain without a prescription.

Rose is frustrated with her inability to get a diagnosis, but she is also frustrated with her own body. She feels betrayed by it and goes so far as to request that her feet be amputated. While this may be to put her in a state of dependence on Sofia as it appears that Sofia is gaining her independence, it speaks to the desperation Rose feels in not knowing what is wrong with her.

Dr. Gómez continues to suspect that Rose is suffering from a mental illness. He encourages Sofia not to get caught up in her mother's issues. He wants her to be able live her own life, and likely believes that encouraging Sofia to do so will prompt Rose to become more independent.

Sofia even begins to suspect that Rose's illness is in her mind. When she leaves Rose in her wheelchair in the middle of traffic, she forces Rose's hand. Sofia clearly believes that her mother is physically ill because she is afraid that she has killed her mother. When she realizes that her mother is still alive, it is confusing for her.

Ultimately, an endoscopy reveals Rose's true illness, though it remains unidentified to the reader, and Sofia is left in disbelief.

Gender Roles

The theme of gender roles is used as a way to demonstrate the fluidity and exploration of identity.

Gender is explored in different ways throughout the novel. When Sofia first meets Ingrid, she mistakes her for a man because Ingrid is wearing men's shoes. Throughout the novel, Ingrid is seen in a more masculine role. From the men's shoes to her gladiator sandals and bow and arrow, she is subtly aggressive.

Ingrid's aggression becomes clearer as she reveals to Sofia about pushing her sister on a swing. Ingrid was unable to stop, which led to her sister's injury. She exhibits her power again when she holds Sofia under the water.



Pablo is seen as an aggressive male. He does not appear to care about the welfare of his dog. He leaves the dog chained up and barking, which become a nuisance. Sofia takes it upon herself to free the dog. When she finally goes through with it, her appearance frightens Pablo. She is covered in blood from cleaning the fish and threatening Pablo. In turn, Pablo challenges her by threatening to call the police.

Another aspect in which gender is explored is the way in which Dr. Gómez questions Rose's mental health. He does not take her ailment seriously and suggests that it may all be in her head. He marginalizes Rose's role in self-care as a result of his own ego.

Family

The theme of family is used to illustrate the power dynamics within a mother-daughter relationship.

Power dynamics are seen throughout the novel, as is illustrated in the previous themes. The relationship that suffers the most because of power dynamics is the one between Sofia and Rose. Rose clearly dominates the relationship. The women are bound to each other as mother and daughter. While the women do care for one another, they are simultaneously cruel to each other.

Rose is aware that Sofia is lost in life. Rose accuses Sofia of being dependent on her and of wasting her life. This is likely a defense mechanism because Rose makes demands of Sofia to help her and she does not want to be viewed as weak.

Rose is critical of Sofia's appearance as well. She does not like the wild curls that Sofia has from the sea water, which likely stems from how Christos would not allow Rose to touch his curls. In this way, Rose is rejecting the part of Sofia that is her father's.

Further, Rose comments on Sofia's weight. Sofia is self-conscious about her body and begins to feel more comfortable as she engages in her relationships with Ingrid and Juan. The most likely reason for Rose to be critical of Sofia's body is because she feels betrayed by her own.

In criticizing Sofia, she can make Sofia feel as though she has no other option than to be with her mother. In this way, Rose will not be abandoned by her daughter. Sofia does abandon her mother when she leaves her in the middle of the road. Sofia is fearful that she has killed her mother, but her mother's survival demonstrates a break between mother and daughter. In that moment, Sofia dominated Rose.



Styles

Point of View

Hot Milk is told through the first-person narration of Sofia Papastergiadis. She is a British woman in her mid-twenties who has traveled to Spain with her mother Rose. She has abandoned her doctoral studies in anthropology.

She sees herself as broken because she does not have a family of her own or a career. Sofia views her mother as controlling and has abandonment issues with her father Christos. When she meets Christos' baby daughter Evangeline, she sees the child as part of her father's replacement family.

At Dr. Gómez' suggestion, Sofia is tasked with taking more chances in her life. This leads to her relationships with both Juan and Ingrid. She is confused about the way Ingrid treats her, whether it be how Ingrid appreciates Sofia's body or says and does things that hurt her, such as when Ingrid holds her under water and gives her a t-shirt reading: beheaded.

Ultimately, Sofia views her world through the lens of deciding what she wants and what her obligation is to her mother. Their relationship is complex and Rose's diagnosis leads to an ambiguous ending in which the reader is left to determine what Sofia will do next.

Language and Meaning

The vocabulary is straight forward. There is minimal slang, such as "boot" (100) for trunk, "arsehole" (104) and "pram" (97). Some passages reflect how an anthropologist would talk about the modern world as though studying it.

There are a couple of phrases in Greek, which are defined in context, and the Greek alphabet is defined. Sofia calls her parents by their first names. Christos corrects her, asking her to call him papa; she complies.

Some of the spelling is in British English, such as "haemorrhage" (23) and "aeroplane" (54), "coloured" (86). Overall, the language is accessible and conversational.

The dialogue throughout is natural and conversational. The novel is not dialogue-heavy. Instead, there are bursts of conversation that come out of Sofia's narration.

Structure

The novel is short, coming in at 218 pages. There are 31 chapters, all of which are assigned a title instead of a number. Between some of the chapters there is a brief

paragraph in third-person that describes Sofia's character's arc over the course of the novel. The novel uses the British style of inverted commas for quotation marks.

The story is linear with no flashbacks. It takes place over an undefined, but short period of time in the summer months in Spain. Most of the novel takes place in Spain, although Sofia travels briefly to Greece to visit her father.

Sofia's interactions with Ingrid and Juan balance each other. After Ingrid leaves Sofia one night, she immediately reaches out to Juan. She spends more time getting to know Ingrid, although she remains a puzzle to her. Her relationship with Juan is largely physical.

Much of the narration is Sofia's internal monologue. It is as though she is puzzling through her own life to understand it as she would if she were studying a culture as an anthropologist.



Quotes

It is a sore point, more painful than my sting and more of a problem than my surname which no one can say or spell.”

-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 12)

Importance: The quote demonstrates Sofia’s struggle with her identity.

Memory is not always reliable. It is not the whole truth. Even I know that.”

-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 155)

Importance: The quote indicates how Sofia recognizes that what she knows may not be a complete picture of what happened in her past.

I suddenly felt jealous, as if I were missing some sort of attention that had never been bestowed on me in the first place.”

-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 63)

Importance: The quote shows how Sofia has felt neglected throughout her life and craves attention.

It is the vitality she puts into not walking that concerns. I’m not sure I can help her.”

-- Dr. Gómez (chapter 5 paragraph 128)

Importance: The quote illustrates how Dr. Gómez is questioning Rose’s mental health.

My mother’s words are my mirror.”

-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 49)

Importance: The quote demonstrates the control Rose has over Sofia.

Her body. Who is her body supposed to please? What is it and is it ugly or is it something else?”

-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 3)

Importance: The quote illustrates how Sofia is trying to understand her mother’s body as she begins to feel more comfortable in her own.

I am wounded with desire and I am ready for the ordeal of love.”

-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 11 paragraph 74)

Importance: The quote illustrates how Sofia is ready for a relationship, even if it will bring her pain.

You are using your mother like a shield to protect yourself from making a life.”

-- Dr. Gómez (chapter 12 paragraph 20)



Importance: The quote indicates how Dr. Gómez sees Sofia making choices in her life that do not benefit herself.

I am not okay. Not at all and haven't been for some time."
-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 15 paragraph 28)

Importance: The quote gives insight into Sofia's vulnerability and how she is facing her true feelings.

I have been traded off for Alexandra and Evangeline, but I am supposed to pretend not to notice."
-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 17 paragraph 7)

Importance: The quote demonstrates how she views herself in comparison to her father's new family.

I know nothing about him so was pleased to learn he liked dill. That will become a memory."
-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 20 paragraph 36)

Importance: The quote offers Sofia an opportunity to give her father a defined characteristic that previously she would not have known.

While he takes the tiny sliver of glass out of the skin above my eyebrow, I confess that I am often lost in all the dimensions of time, that the past sometimes feels nearer than the present and I often fear the future has already happened."
-- Sofia as narrator (chapter 24 paragraph 37)

Importance: The quote indicates how Sofia is lost to herself as she struggles to piece together what she wants and needs from her life.