

# **Housekeeping Study Guide**

**Housekeeping by Marilynne Robinson**

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## Plot Summary

Housekeeping is the story of two sisters coming of age in an isolated mountain town. The narrator, Ruth, and her younger sister, Lucille, rely on each other to survive. Their father deserts the family too early for them to remember him. When Ruth is about six, their mother commits suicide. Their grandmother takes them in for five years until her death. Then two, unmarried, elderly great-aunts take custody. These anxious ladies cannot cope with children, so they turn the girls over to their mentally unbalanced aunt, Sylvie. The household gradually dissolves into total disorder. Ruth bonds with the free-spirited Sylvie, but the more conventional Lucille yearns for stability. The school ignores the girls' truancy and increasingly uncared-for appearance until Lucille begs for help from her home economics teacher, who gives her refuge. The chaos of the household situation is exposed. A judge tries to take custody of Ruth, but she refuses to be parted from her aunt. Sylvie leads Ruth in a dangerous midnight walk out of town across a high railway bridge. They elude the authorities and go on to live a transient life, drifting from place to place. Ruth is haunted by thoughts of her sister and always contemplates getting in touch with Lucille, but never does so. This is the first novel by the Pulitzer Prize winning author.

Narrator Ruth Stone's grandfather loves the mountains and settles in the remote town of Fingerbone, Idaho. He works on the railway, prospers, marries, and builds a house with his own hands and no knowledge of carpentry. He dies in a spectacular midnight train derailment off the high railway bridge into the fathomless lake just outside of town. This disaster is the one notable thing that has ever happened in Fingerbone. His widow continues to live in the house and raise their three daughters: Molly, Helen, and Sylvie. Molly goes off to China as a missionary. Helen marries Reginald Stone and moves to Seattle. Sylvie marries a man named Fisher and leaves Fingerbone, though she seems to have no fixed address after leaving.

Helen and Reginald Stone have two daughters, Ruth and Lucille, but their father deserts the family so early in their lives that the girls have no memory of him. They grow up in Seattle in an apartment with their mother. A gossipy neighbor, Bernice, babysits while Helen goes out to work. Bernice offers the loan of her car so Helen can take Ruth and Lucille to Fingerbone to meet their grandmother. Helen drives the girls to her mother's house, arriving Sunday morning. She leaves them on the screened porch, telling them she will be right back. After leaving, she drives the car over a cliff into the lake to her death. Ruth and Lucille are raised by their kindly grandmother for the next five years. The grandmother provides a comfortable home, but due to old age and the loss of so many loved ones, she often seems too distracted to really see them. She never asks them about their lives or discusses their mother.

After the grandmother's death, her sisters-in-law, Lily and Nona, agree to move to Fingerbone to take care of the girls. But the dithering, elderly maiden ladies are nervous around children. They hate the remote town of Fingerbone and long to go back to their cozy residential hotel in Spokane. They don't know how to reach Helen's sister, Sylvie, but she happens to write with her most recent address. Sylvie is persuaded to travel to



Fingerbone to consider looking after the girls. She arrives on a bitterly cold winter day, wearing a huge, shapeless overcoat and loafers with no socks. She also has no gloves, scarf, or hat. Even the girls can see she is barely able to take care of herself, let alone anyone else, but she talks calmly to the girls and answers their questions about what their mother was like. Sylvie tells the girls frankly that the aunts are too old to take care of them and she will stay, for the moment. The aunts are gone by that evening.

Within a week of Sylvie's arrival, the town of Fingerbone suffers the worst flood in living memory, prompting many to evacuate or travel around town by boat. Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille, whose house is on high ground, have only four inches of water flooding the ground floor, but they must spend the next few days in the second floor bedrooms. With no electricity and mainly card playing to distract them, Lucille complains of boredom and Sylvie tells them a story about a woman whose children were taken away by the court. The girls realize that they might lose their home with Sylvie, and are even more frightened when she goes to the flooded downstairs and doesn't come back up again, or even reply when called. Terrified that they have been deserted, Ruth goes to fetch her. She finds Sylvie, who doesn't recognize her and won't speak to her. Ruth hits her and pulls her back up to the second story, where Sylvie picks up the playing cards to resume the game as if nothing had happened.

As the floodwaters recede, the town begins to set things to order, but Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille's home has begun a downward spiral that will only intensify. Lucille fakes an illness to avoid an embarrassing situation with a teacher who falsely accuses her of cheating. The excuse note Sylvie writes to the school says that she didn't take Lucille to the doctor because she didn't seem really sick. The girls know that note won't be acceptable, and they both play truant from school. For a week they go down by the lake, until the day when they see Sylvie talking to some hobos camping there, and walking out onto the high railway bridge over the lake. Up on the bridge she finally notices them and waves. When they tell her they didn't go to school she accepts the fact with no particular interest. Ruth and Lucille go back to school with no note or excuse, but no one asks them any questions. They begin to get the idea that others have noticed Sylvie's odd behavior.

Lucille and Ruth have different views of Sylvie's eccentric housekeeping. Sylvie insists on eating dinner in the dark and accumulates collections of autumn leaves, newspapers, and tin cans on every flat surface. She also furnishes the girls with sequined blue velveteen ballet slippers as school shoes to trudge through the inches of spring mud. Ruth accepts Sylvie's bizarre behavior, but Lucille begins to rebel. Both girls stop going to school once the weather turns warm, but when they return to school in the fall, Lucille tells Ruth they need to make new friends and she begins to spend all her spare time with a group of girls at school. Ruth is isolated and alone. Sylvie takes Lucille's absence as a rebuff and is more and more silent.

Finally, Lucille walks out and goes to take refuge with her Home Economics teacher, Miss Royce, who is so moved by her plight that she essentially adopts her. From that moment Ruth no longer has a sister. Sylvie responds by taking Ruth on an expedition by stolen rowboat to see an abandoned house that has fallen into its cellar on the other



side of the lake. She abandons Ruth there for most of the day and they end up spending the night in the boat and riding a freight car into town the next morning. As Ruth is sitting in the kitchen by the warm stove, totally exhausted, Lucille comes in to tell her that she doesn't need to stay with Sylvie, but Ruth is too sleepy to be able to talk to or even hear her sister.

The sheriff starts visiting soon after Sylvie is observed bringing Ruth into town on the freight train. It is assumed that Sylvie is turning Ruth into a transient as well. Neighbor women and church women come to the house bringing casseroles and questions, and cast shocked looks Sylvie's collections of bottles and cans and stacks of newspapers, magazines, and paper bags. Sylvie realizes that she is about to lose Ruth, and she makes a heroic effort to create a more normal household, burning all the stacks of paper late into the night, forgetting supper. Ruth mischievously hides from Sylvie in the dark, and Sylvie is calling for her when the sheriff arrives, drawn by the fire and the noise. He tries to get Ruth to come home to stay with himself and his wife. When she refuses, he promises to return the next day. As soon as he is gone, Sylvie and Ruth set the house on fire and escape by walking across the railroad bridge, the one route no one will dare to follow.

At dawn, Sylvie and Ruth reach the other end of the bridge and climb down just as the first train of the day roars past. They hop on a boxcar, and begin a life of drifting. Ruth occasionally takes a waitress or clerical job, but leaves before anyone can get close to her. People soon realize she is an outsider. Ruth speculates that she was always different from other people, and that every event of her life increased that distance until the harrowing midnight walk across the railways bridge sealed her destiny. She and Sylvie talk about contacting Lucille, but she knows they never will.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Housekeeping is the story of two sisters coming of age in an isolated mountain town. The narrator, Ruth, and her younger sister, Lucille, rely on each other to survive. Their father deserts the family too early for them to remember him. When Ruth is about six, their mother commits suicide. Their grandmother takes them in for five years until her death. Then two, unmarried, elderly great-aunts take custody. These anxious ladies cannot cope with children, so they turn the girls over to their mentally unbalanced aunt, Sylvie. The household gradually dissolves into total disorder. Ruth bonds with the free-spirited Sylvie, but the more conventional Lucille yearns for stability. The school ignores the girls' truancy and increasingly uncared-for appearance, until Lucille begs for help from her home economics teacher, who gives her refuge. The chaos of the household situation is exposed. A judge tries to take custody of Ruth, but she refuses to be parted from her aunt. Sylvie leads Ruth in a dangerous midnight walk out of town across a high railway bridge. They elude the authorities and go on to live a transient life, drifting from place to place. Ruth is haunted by thoughts of her sister and always contemplates getting in touch with Lucille, but never does so. This is the first novel by the Pulitzer Prize winning author.

The first person narrator, Ruth, describes how her grandfather grew up in the flat Middle West, living in a house dug out of the ground with windows at ground level. He yearns to travel and paints pictures of imaginary mountains. At last he buys a ticket west, asking the ticket agent only to go "to the mountains". He ends up in the mountain town of Fingerbone, on the shores of a nameless lake. He gets a job working on the railroad, marries, and builds a house. The railroad and the lake eventually lead to his death in a catastrophic derailment where an entire train and all its passengers go off the high railway bridge into the lake.

Ruth's grandmother continues to live as a widow with her three daughters, Molly, Helen, and Sylvie, in the house her husband built. The eldest daughter, Molly, goes off to China as a missionary. Helen, the middle daughter, marries, and they move to Seattle, where Ruth and Lucille are born. Their father leaves, and Ruth has no memory of him. The youngest daughter, Sylvie, also marries and leaves home.

Seven and a half years after Helen leaves Fingerbone, her gossipy Seattle neighbor, Bernice, takes a week off work to lend Helen her car to take the girls to visit their grandmother. Helen arrives on a Sunday morning and sits the girls down in the screened porch at their grandmother's house, telling them to wait. Then she drives the car off a cliff and into the lake to her death. Ruth and Lucille spend the next five years with their grandmother.



## Chapter 1 Analysis

Ruth's grandfather died long before she was born, but she has the fanciful paintings he left, many of them fantasies of mountains which he had never seen until he came to Fingerbone. Ruth is creating a portrait of a grandfather she never met through family legend and the documents of fantasy that he left. She describes his early life in the Middle West, living in a half-buried house with windows at ground level in the flat landscape of the Middle West. His destiny to be buried at the bottom of the lake in a spectacular midnight train is ironic. Foreshadowing the characters' isolation from each other, Ruth describes her grandmother as serenely taking on the role of widow to raise her three daughters alone. Ruth tells the reader that having her husband die is not that different for her grandmother than all the times he was away on railroad business. She never considers moving away from the house her husband built in the town next to the lake that claimed his life.

The catastrophe of the train going off the tracks foreshadows other ways that the family slides off the main tracks and into disaster. Ruth describes the fragile foothold that the town of Fingerbone has between the lake and the mountainous wilderness all around. She mentions the yearly floods, frequent fires, and murder and mayhem from madness brought on by isolation.

Helen's abandoning of life and her daughters sets up questions in the first chapter that Ruth will return to again and again throughout the course of the book. Later she will imagine her mother's state of mind on the day of the suicide. The grandmother cares for them very well, giving Ruth and Lucille the physical consolation of warm, comfortable shelter, food and attention, but she never asks them about their life in Seattle, and seems abstracted as if she cannot see them even as she is tending to their needs. Ruth explains that her grandmother was too old, and this foreshadows her later insight that their mother was also too absorbed in her own sorrow to see Ruth and Lucille.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Ruth and Lucille's grandmother plans that when she dies, her sisters-in-law, Lily and Nona, will move into the house in Fingerbone to look after the girls. Lily and Nona move in, but almost immediately find themselves unable to cope. They are uncomfortable around children and hate the small town. They place ads trying to reach Helen's younger sister. Sylvie has no known address and may not be sane, but if she could be found, she might accept taking care of the girls and relieve Lily and Nona of the responsibility.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Lily and Nona demonstrate the kind of sisterly bond that can close two women together and that excludes the world. The two maiden ladies resent leaving their cozy routine at a residence hotel in Spokane. Change of any sort frightens them, children make them anxious, and making new friends and building a new life in Fingerbone is impossible for them. They want to go home. Ruth and Lucille can hear every word when the hard-of-hearing aunts discuss how they must try to find Sylvie, how reports of her instability must be exaggerated, and how much better it would be for her to take over care of the girls. The girls realize that their aunts won't be staying long.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Sylvie, still unaware of her mother's passing, writes a brief note giving an address in Wyoming. The aunts prevail upon her to come back to Fingerbone. She and arrives traveling in the winter cold in salvaged clothing, with no hat, gloves, or socks. She talks to Ruth and Lucille, and listens to them. They like her and she speaks to them kindly. When she goes out the next morning, Ruth and Lucille fear that she is leaving and run after her. They follow her to the train station, and she agrees to stay. The girls understand that Sylvie is unstable, but they lie to Lily and Nona that they went outside to see the snow, and Sylvie got worried and went after them to bring them in rather than the other way around. Lily and Nona ignore any warning signs that Sylvie may not be capable of taking care of the girls. They leave that very evening.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

From the moment Sylvie walks in out of the winter cold in an ill-fitting greatcoat and wearing loafers with no socks, it's clear that she's not even able to keep herself warm and will not be a responsible caretaker for children. Ruth and Lucille can see this, but Sylvie at least likes them and talks to them, unlike the great-aunts, who are desperate to leave. Lily and Nona choose to overlook any evidence of instability in Sylvie in their eagerness to escape the burden of childcare and the town of Fingerbone. Sylvie bonds with Ruth and Lucille because she listens to them with interest. She is the first person who understands their need to know about their mother, and she responds to their questions. She seems calm and even-tempered compared to the anxious and ineffectual great-aunts. The girls want her to stay. Sylvie agrees that the aunts are too old and it would be best for her to stay, for now at least.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The first week after Sylvie arrives brings three days of snow-melting sun followed by four days of rain, and the town floods to the point where people are traveling by boat in the lower-lying parts of town. Even with a house on the high ground, Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie are marooned for days without electricity in the upstairs rooms. Four inches of water cover the first floor of the house and they must go downstairs wearing rain boots to bring up food and necessities. Lucille complains of boredom and Sylvie tells a story about a woman she met traveling on a bus who said she has four children. Sylvie suggests that the woman was alone on the bus because the court might have taken custody of the children. This is the first time Ruth and Lucille have heard of the state taking children away, and they are alarmed. When Lucille asks Sylvie about whether she wanted children of her own, she refuses to answer. Then she goes downstairs and does not come back up again. Ruth goes through the darkened downstairs looking for Sylvie, fearing that she has abandoned them. She finds Sylvie, who mistakes her for Lucille, and refuses to come back upstairs. When Ruth pleads with Sylvie, she simply stops talking. Finally, Ruth hits Sylvie across the front of the huge raincoat she always wears and pulls her upstairs. After that Lucille is eager to run errands to the flooded downstairs to forestall Sylvie from going and perhaps not coming back. When the floodwaters recede, the whole town is in a state of disorganization for weeks. Those who visit to see how Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille are faring see the same sort of disorder that is all over town.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The flood that covers Fingerbone within a week of Sylvie's arrival demonstrates how dangerous Sylvie's instability can be for the girls. This chapter also sets the friction between Lucille and Sylvie that will eventually lead to the split. The idea that a court could take custody of children is a threat that will hang over Ruth and Lucille for the rest of the book, and theme that will be played out at the end. When Sylvie goes into a distant, unreachable state, Ruth can only hit her to get her to speak, and drag her upstairs for fear that she will wander off and leave them. The crisis of the flood shows how the normal citizens of Fingerbone can suffer damage to their property and slowly mend it. No one yet sees that the chaos brought by the flood will be compounded rather than put to order under Sylvie's care.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Ruth and Lucille have always gone to school because there was simply no avoiding it. When school resumes after the flood, however, Lucille has a traumatic encounter with a teacher who falsely accuses her of cheating. She fakes illness to stay home. Her absence requires a note, but on the way to school the girls read Sylvie's note and find that she's written that she didn't take Lucille to a doctor because she really didn't seem to be very sick at all. The two girls agree that the note won't work, and decide to skip school together and go to the lake. After they do that for a few days they see Sylvie at the lake, but she has not come to look for them. She doesn't even see them. She chats briefly with the local hobos, watches a train crossing the railway bridge, and then goes out fifty feet onto the bridge high above the lake. Even the hobos are alarmed and leave, fearing trouble. From the high bridge, Sylvie sees Ruth and Lucille and waves to them. On coming down, Sylvie tells them that she only wanted to know what it felt like to walk on the bridge. They tell her that they have skipped school. She only says gently that she didn't realize that, but she seems uninterested in the subject.

Ruth and Lucille realize that their aunt is not a stable person. Awakened in the night they sometimes hear odd sounds that may be Sylvie singing or weeping, or leaving the house to wander around town. The next week they return to school. No one questions them about their truancy, perhaps because the town is also beginning to notice Sylvie's oddness. Ruth and Lucille become accustomed to Sylvie's eccentric housekeeping that brings the outdoors inside through the perpetually open windows in the form of leaves, crickets, wasps, bats, and barn swallows. They eat late dinners in the dark, consisting of cold, mostly canned food. Sylvie tells tales of people she met traveling in boxcars, and she pays little attention to most of the girls' actions. The girls are free to go explore their grandmother's belongings and learn more about her life and their Aunt Molly, who went off to become a missionary. Ruth is content with Sylvie's ways, but Lucille becomes increasingly dissatisfied and begins to look for a way to escape to a more normal way of life.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Ruth and Lucille find that Sylvie is unconcerned about their school attendance. Worse yet, she has only the faintest concern for even her own physical safety. The girls are deeply troubled, but the initial crisis passes. Ruth and Lucille adjust to Sylvie's unusual ways, but the sisters' different attitudes foreshadow their inevitable split. Ruth finds comfort in the freedom, Sylvie's colorful stories, and her drastically unsuitable purchases such as sequined velveteen ballet slippers for school shoes. Lucille dreads the results when Sylvie sets off shopping and grows more and more frustrated by her impractical ways.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Ruth and Lucille stop going to school in March when the weather turns warm enough to go to the lake. They also explore the woods and an old quarry. The school sends letters to Sylvie about the girls' truancy and she composes notes blaming adolescent female troubles. Sometimes she remembers to mail the notes, and sometimes she does not. One evening, while in the darkened kitchen waiting for Sylvie to cook eggs for their supper, Lucille turns on the lights, turning a shocking spotlight on the total disorder of heaps of unwashed pots and dishes, cupboard doors unhinged and propped on the floor, thick coats of dust, soot, and a curtain left hanging half-burned. Spitefully, Lucille asks Sylvie about her husband, accusing her of inventing him. Sylvie says she is out of touch with her husband, who was a sailor. For awhile Lucille accepts this, imagining that their uncle was lost at sea, until Sylvie produces a picture of a sailor clipped from a magazine. From that point, Lucille demands normal dinners with the lights on, and Sylvie gives Lucille money to buy meat and vegetables. Sylvie begins going out in the evenings, walking and eating crackers while the girls eat in the lighted kitchen.

Lucille begins to actively court normal friends and to complain about Sylvie's transient ways. When the girls find Sylvie sleeping on a park bench with a newspaper over her face, Lucille demands that Ruth wake her up. Lucille then runs home and begins furiously cleaning. When Ruth and Sylvie arrive home, Lucille is still angry. She yells at Sylvie, who goes back out again. Ruth and Lucille end up turning off the lights and waiting until Sylvie comes back with a newspaper full of huckleberries she has picked. She makes pancakes out of them for the girls, and for the moment, all is peaceful.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The conflicts that will break up the fragile household are growing in this chapter. Ruth and Lucille skip school and draw more and more attention from the authorities. Sylvie's excuse notes are inconsistent at best, and off-key even when she does remember to mail them. The chaos of the filthy kitchen and the discomfort of eating fried eggs and cold canned food in the dark stretch Lucille's patience to the breaking point. She begins pressuring Sylvie to explain more about her life, notably what happened to her husband, if there ever was one. Sylvie cannot give her an acceptable answer. Lucille begins to act like the adult authority figure that Sylvie can never be. She demands regular meals with meat and vegetables, served on plates with the lights on. Sylvie responds by giving Lucille the money to buy these things herself and vacating the kitchen to walk around alone outside eating soda crackers.

Lucille is beginning to find allies in friends outside of the household, while Ruth is growing closer to and more like Sylvie every day. When the girls find Sylvie lying on a bench in the park with a newspaper over her face, Lucille is crushed by the public



humiliation of Sylvie's freewheeling lifestyle so openly exposed. She demands that Ruth wake Sylvie immediately and runs home. Ruth and Sylvie walk back home talking, and when Sylvie comments how quiet she is and asks what she thinks, Ruth can only say she doesn't know. She doesn't say that she feels invisible, but she half expects Sylvie to tell her they are alike, or that Ruth is like her mother. Sylvie only tells her that this feeling may change or it may not, but Ruth should go to school more often. The conflict between Lucille and Sylvie escalates, just as the bond between Ruth and Sylvie becomes more solid. Ruth has to choose between her sister and her aunt, and she is too passive and too estranged from people in the community to be able to follow Lucille's escape route.

The berries that Sylvie picked around the train station to bring home as a gift wrapped in a newspaper are huckleberries. The allusion is to Huckleberry Finn, the ultimate untamable American transient, a free spirit who would run off to wander and live off the land whenever anyone threatened to civilize him. She wraps them in a newspaper without a clue that this will be disturbing to Lucille, who was so upset to see Sylvie with a newspaper over her face, sleeping like a transient on a bench in a park.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

As the summer passes, Ruth sees similarities between their early years with their distant, distracted mother and the Sylvie's hands-off care. One Saturday, Ruth and Lucille bring fishing poles and gear and walk up the shore to an inlet where they catch and roast many small fish to eat with the huckleberries growing wild there. They end up spending the night there and coming back cold and wet and exhausted the next morning. Sylvie is waiting for them with quilts she has warmed behind the stove. She wraps them up in the quilts and feeds them cups of Brimstone tea made from condensed milk, hot water, and sugar. Lucille asks if Sylvie knows where they were all night and Sylvie laughs. Ruth falls asleep sitting in the kitchen.

When Ruth wakes up, Lucille is getting ready to go downtown to the drugstore to talk to girls from school. Ruth feels uncomfortable listening to these girls discuss sewing patterns and hairstyles, and she slinks out the door. Lucille follows her for a few blocks, begging her not to go back to what is now Sylvie's house, pleading with her to come back and to make an effort to improve. Then Lucille goes back to the drugstore and Ruth goes home. Lucille comes home with a dress pattern and fabric. She enlists Ruth to help her clear off Sylvie's can collection from the kitchen table and lay out the pattern. They need a dictionary to look up words like pinking shears, but when Ruth gets their grandfather's dictionary, it is filled with pressed flowers arranged alphabetically. Lucille suggests throwing the pressed flowers in the stove, while Ruth wants to move them to another book. They get into a violent argument, with Lucille crushing the flowers and Ruth throwing down the dictionary.

The girls don't speak for several days. Lucille works on the dress alone. Finally Lucille comes downstairs with the dress and pattern and stuffs them in the wood-burning stove. The sisters' fight is over. Lucille tells Ruth that while she knows Ruth can't help being like Sylvie, she is not. She tells her they need to make other friends. Ruth has never made a friend in her life aside from her sister, and until recently neither has Lucille. From that point on, Lucille devotes herself to her self-improvement program and Ruth cannot tempt her away from it even to go to the lake.

When they return to school in the fall, the principal summons them for a talk about missing half of the last school year. Lucille says she has a new attitude. Ruth shrugs. Lucille begins to spend all her spare time with a group of girls at school. Ruth, isolated and alone, throws herself into her schoolwork to escape. Sylvie takes Lucille's absence as a rebuff and is more and more silent. One night, Lucille goes to a dance at school, Sylvie lies on their bed in one of her disconnected trances while Ruth tries to study. When Lucille comes home, she sees this and finally can bear it no longer. She leaves the house and walks through the night to knock on Miss Royce's door and beg for help from the Home Economics teacher. Miss Royce is so moved by her plight that she takes Lucille in, and essentially adopts her. From that moment on Ruth no longer has a sister.



Sylvie offers to take Ruth on an expedition to see a ruined farmhouse instead of going to school on Monday, and she agrees.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter traces the final arc of Lucille's rebellion against Sylvie. Any responsible caretaker would be concerned when two early adolescent girls stay out all night, but Sylvie is incapable of setting boundaries. It is significant that when the girls stay out all night, they pick wild huckleberries to go with the fish they catch and roast. This alludes to both Huckleberry Fin and to Sylvie's picking of huckleberries as a peace offering to Lucille when the girls found her sleeping on the park bench looking like a transient. After this episode Lucille gives up on seeking parent-like behavior from Sylvie and redoubles her efforts to build relationships with girls and teachers at school. Lucille tries to persuade her sister to join her, but Ruth doesn't want to leave. She is too close to Sylvie, and Ruth is beginning to imagine that she is very much like Sylvie. Lucille tries to defend Sylvie and Ruth to her new friends and even to the school principal, but her resentment simmers so near the surface that it's a half-hearted defense. Lucille has been holding the household together in many ways by her insistence on a semblance of normalcy. When she can stand no more and goes to Miss Royce for help and refuge, the collapse of the household is inevitable.

Sylvie's maintaining custody of Ruth can only continue as long as no one closely examines their bizarre household. Sylvie knows this and yet her hold on reality is so tenuous that she reacts to Lucille's leaving by suggesting that Ruth take Monday off from school. Ruth explains she has a test that day, but she's easily persuaded. Sylvie wants to show Ruth an abandoned farmhouse on the far side of the lake. Sylvie's description of the boat they will borrow foreshadows the revelation in the next chapter that she has been stealing the boat for day trips for some time now, enraging its owner.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Sylvie wakes Ruth up before dawn and drags her down to the shore of the lake where she hunts for some time before finding the boat she intends to take, which has been hidden. They cast off, and are followed by an irate man who wades partly into the water after them, yelling and throwing rocks. Sylvie laughs and says to ignore the man as he always does that. Ruth suggests he might be the boat's owner, and Sylvie says he might just be a lunatic. On a remote wilderness area on the other side of the lake Sylvie shows Ruth the abandoned farmhouse, fallen in on its cellar. While Ruth is looking at the frost sparkling in the sun, she misses the moment when Sylvie leaves her. Ruth is stranded alone, cold and hungry for the entire day, until early evening when Sylvie comes back and they start the perilous boat ride home. They end up spending the night in the rowboat, some of it under the railroad bridge while the train roars overhead. In the morning, back on dry land, Sylvie and Ruth hop on a boxcar and ride into the train yard. As they walk home, the local dogs that always used to follow and bark at only at Sylvie now follow and bark at both of them. Lucille visits and tries to get Ruth to leave with her but Ruth is so exhausted that she can neither talk to her nor hear her.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Sylvie brings up the subject of insanity twice in this chapter, but dismisses any possibility that it might really be applied to herself. When they steal a boat and the owner yells at them, Sylvie's suggestion that the man might be a lunatic is an ironic example of her holding fast to her own version of reality and refusing to accept other possibilities. Her own behavior is insane, and in fact, puts Ruth in peril several times. As she rows them through the water, Sylvie talks about the people who live on the islands and up in the hills, imagining a cabin with ten children. This sort of Peter Pan, Lost Boys fantasy intrigues Ruth. When Sylvie says she tried to catch one of these elusive, never-seen children, she starts out by saying Ruth will probably think she's crazy. Then she goes on to talk about the imaginary children as if Ruth will be able to catch them.

Ruth is abandoned by Sylvie at the frost-coated site of the abandoned homestead. She realizes that there are no ghostly children hiding in the woods to be coaxed out with marshmallows and caught. She recognizes that Sylvie's guardianship of her is as lacking as the black banana and salami lump lunch she has brought along. Ruth cannot imagine choosing to leave Sylvie. She takes whatever nurturing she can get in whatever form Sylvie is able to give it. Lucille has moved out of Ruth's life to such a degree that even when she visits, trying to help her sister escape, Ruth cannot neither hear her nor respond to her. Ruth, in her exhaustion, mirrors Sylvie's disconnected state during the flood when an argument with Lucille sent her off into her own mind in a state where she did not seem to recognize and could not seem to hear Ruth or even speak to her.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

The sheriff visits, dispatched by complaints that Sylvie has been spotted with Ruth riding into town on a boxcar at dawn. Neighbor ladies begin to visit with casseroles and knitted scarves, gloves, and hats. They are shocked by the chaos inside the house, with fallen leaves all over the floor and bottles, cans, and newspapers piled high on every flat surface. When they begin to voice their objections to Sylvie's care of Ruth, she can offer no effective defense. Sylvie begins to realize that the town means to take Ruth away from her custody. She begins a manic campaign of clearing out the house, urging Ruth to go to back to school even in clothing that no longer fits, with a mind that is no longer capable of concentration. Ruth expects Sylvie to give up and she is touched at how hard she trying so hard to keep her. But her frantic attempts to create an orderly environment are doomed. The sheriff tells them that a hearing has been scheduled and Ruth faces the likelihood that she will be taken out of Sylvie's custody.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

The town of Fingerbone and its residents are particularly nervous about transients. The railroad brings transients through town in great numbers. The citizens are always charitable and uneasy because any one of them could imagine being forced into homelessness. Fingerbone residents live on a tenuous footing next to the flooding lake and surrounded by merciless wilderness. They have a deep need to rescue Ruth from being turned into a transient by Sylvie. The depth of Ruth's pessimism and passivity is revealed. She expects to be handed off again, and is only surprised at how strenuously Sylvie is fighting the inevitable.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Ruth meditates on Cain and Abel and on loss. She reflects that losing her mother has turned every small memory of her into an icon. If their mother had not killed herself but come back to the girls on the porch, Ruth and Lucille would have had the opportunity to grow up with her ignoring them, and to become frustrated and angry at her long silences, and her remoteness. As it is, her pain and sorrow has been forced on them by her suicide and her physical as well as emotional absence.

Sylvie's first efforts to appear like a normal household have failed. A letter arrives scheduling the custody hearing for a week later. Sylvie embarks on an even more frantic round of attempts to gain acceptance. Her cleaning efforts culminate in a long session of burning all the boxes, newspapers, and magazines that have stacked up over the months. Ruth and Sylvie's fire lasts past dark, dinner forgotten. When they are done, instead of going inside, Ruth hides in the orchard behind the house, enjoying watching Sylvie go around calling for her. The sheriff arrives, drawn by the fire and the lights on in the house. He asks to talk to Ruth. Sylvie tells him that Ruth is upstairs in bed. When he says he wants to check on her anyway, Sylvie is forced to admit that Ruth is somewhere hiding in the orchard. She lamely explains that Ruth is playing a game. Ruth comes over and stands near Sylvie, but the sheriff asks if she would like to come spend the night with his wife and their family. She says she would not. He says he will be back the next day and expects to see Ruth in school.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Ruth has had so many losses in her life that, despite her natural passivity, she will do what she can to keep her relationship with Sylvie. She has no ties to anyone else in the world except for her sister, and Lucille has abandoned her for the conventional life. Sylvie makes only occasional demands, and now when she is trying so hard to keep Ruth, this is the time Ruth picks to be mischievous and hide in the orchard while Sylvie calls for her and makes excuses to the sheriff. Even after she embarrasses Sylvie in front of the sheriff, Sylvie doesn't get angry at Ruth. She simply takes her fight to keep Ruth to the next and most primal level. Her ultimate strategy is and has always been to run away.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Operating with one thought between them, not to be separated, Sylvie and Ruth set the house on fire. They cannot bear to leave it and Ruth cannot bear to stay and be taken away from Sylvie. They escape into the night. Sylvie suggests walking across the high railway bridge. No one has ever done it and it is the one route where tracking dogs will not be able to follow. They make it across the bridge just as a train comes. They hop on a boxcar, and begin a life of drifting. The dogs track them to the shore, but no further. Sylvie later finds and pins into her coat a newspaper clipping with a headline that says that Ruth and Sylvie are assumed drowned in the lake. They hold off on contacting Lucille for seven years, fearing the law. Even after seven years, Ruth speculates that even if they could be prosecuted for the arson, they could always be arrested for increasingly erratic behavior. Ruth takes occasional menial jobs, always leaving before anyone can get close to her. People soon realize she is different, an outsider. Ruth speculates that from the earliest days she has been different from other people, but every experience she has had pushed her in that direction, starting with her mother's abandonment and culminating in the terrifying walk across the railway bridge. She admits that she has trouble distinguishing reality from dreams. She and Sylvie talk about contacting Lucille, but Ruth knows they never will.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

The newspaper clipping states that Ruth and Sylvie are assumed drowned. In a sense, Ruth has left the world of the living. Burning the house and crossing the railway bridge are the boundaries that Ruth crosses when she leaves the conventional world behind forever. By casting her lot with Sylvie she keeps the connection with the one person who matters for her, but she loses all hope of connecting with mainstream society. Ruth's view is that she was always on this path. The swaying of the wooden superstructure of the bridge as she and Sylvie cross it brings back the memory of her mother pushing her and the creak of the scaffolding of a swing set. They reach the other end of the bridge at dawn and climb down to the rocks just as a freight train roars onto the bridge. This echoes the earlier episode of Sylvie walking onto the bridge with the girls watching and realizing that Sylvie is incapable of protecting even her own life, let alone taking care of others. Ruth describes her life with Sylvie as one of perfect understanding between them. Even as their drifting lifestyle puts them through hardships, they stay firmly outside of most of human society. Although she deeply misses Lucille, Ruth is content to keep traveling with Sylvie and observe life from a distance as they ride past on a freight train.



# Characters

## Ruth Stone, the narrator

Ruth is the first person narrator, dark-haired, thin, tall, awkward, and shy. She is haunted by her mother's suicide and her grandmother's sorrow and her grandfather dreams and his paintings of fantastical landscapes. Ruth imagines the interior life of her relatives because she must. They never share with her their inner thoughts. Ruth is a close and cautious observer. For most of her life she and her younger sister, Lucille, existed in a state of watchful anxiety, knowing they were unwanted burdens in the care of a depressed mother, elderly grandmother, and hysterical aunts. Ruth lives mainly in her imagination with her sister as her only friend. She goes through the motions of daily life doing whatever the adults around her require because she cannot imagine doing otherwise. She and Lucille are always living on sufferance, and Ruth constantly fears that the current bad situation will get worse because it so often has. When Sylvie arrives, Ruth is captivated because Sylvie talks to them and listens to them. She also answers questions about the girls' mother, who killed herself when Ruth was six, and who no one else ever mentions. Ruth wonders how much she might be like her mother, or like Sylvie.

## Lucille Stone, Ruth's younger sister

Lucille, Ruth's younger sister, is red-haired and more outgoing. During their early years, Ruth and Lucille were inseparable allies. The sisters were unwanted by anyone and isolated from any support system beyond whatever adult could be persuaded to look after them. Lucille is, from an early age, more assertive than her older sister, but until Sylvie takes over care of them, the two have been united in the effort to survive. Lucille approaches adolescence at the same time that Sylvie turns their daily life into a downward spiral of disorganization. Lucille asserts herself and begins to grow up when she looks outside the chaos of her immediate family situation and longs to escape to a more normal life. Tentatively, but with great persistence, Lucille ingratiates herself with girls at school and with her teachers. She tries to bring Ruth along as she gradually expands out of Sylvie's realm, but Ruth cannot fit in and does not want to try. Lucille is grimly determined to escape, but in order to go to a new, more orderly life, Lucille has to leave Ruth behind.

## Sylvie

Sylvie, the youngest sister of Helen, is about thirty-five, brown-haired, tall, narrowly built, and always walking looking down and to one side as if listening to a soft-spoken conversation no one else can hear. Sylvie marries a man named Fisher and leaves home. There are no pictures of the man she married. She is next heard from living a solitary, transient life, traveling by hopping railroad boxcars, telling discordant anecdotes



of stories told by passing strangers in boxcars, train stations, and truck stops. Sylvie is mild-mannered and without malice, but she lacks a sense of what is appropriate in society. She lives in her own mental world, without much contact with reality. Sometimes she simply sits and stares and will not respond to questions. She copes with disagreements by vanishing for a longer or shorter period of time. Her fearless exploration of things like walking up on the railroad bridge frighten even the hobos, who leave the area so as not to get in trouble if she should suffer a deadly fall into the lake. Sylvie sets up a household compatible with the transient life she is used to, but the effort is doomed. She cannot bring herself to conform to Lucille's desire for a normal life, but when Ruth follows her and accepts her own form of hands-off nurturing, Sylvie doesn't want to give custody of Ruth to the authorities.

## **Sylvia Foster, Ruth's grandmother**

Ruth and Lucille's grandmother is the mother of Molly, Helen, and Sylvie, and wife of the grandfather who built the house that is at the center of the action of the book. She is in her seventies when the girls first meet her and come to stay with her. She is still brisk and able to take care of her household, but she is shrinking in her clothing into a kind of monkey-like old age with white hairs in large numbers on her face and smaller numbers on her head. She is an excellent housekeeper and nurturer in every way except emotionally. Although she provides for all the girls' physical and daily needs, she has been so struck down by family tragedy that she cannot connect with the girls or even sometimes seem to see them. She seems to be always distracted as if she were not present, listening to someone who wasn't there, and not being able to focus on Ruth and Lucille, who are there. She gives them advice about what to do with the property after her death and plans for her sisters-in-law to come and take care of the girls.

## **Helen Stone, Ruth's mother**

Ruth and Lucille's mother, Helen, left home when she married Reginald Stone. Her husband abandoned the family early enough that the girls have no memory of him. Helen is a single parent. She goes out to work selling cosmetics in a drugstore and finds a neighbor to babysit her daughters, but in many ways she is also an absent parent. Ruth remembers her mother ignoring them for long periods of time and suddenly looking at them as if surprised to remember their existence. She drives off the cliff to her death when Ruth is about six years old. The girls are beginning to forget what their mother looked like and whether her hair was brown like Ruth's or red like Lucille's. The sorrow in Helen's life that caused her to choose suicide haunts her daughters even as it remains an impenetrable mystery, because it is made up of things that were never spoken of.



## Edmund Foster, Ruth's grandfather

The girls' grandfather is both a dreamer and a practical man. He has a love of mountains and paints fanciful pictures as he grows up in the Middle West in a house dug into the ground. He takes a train west, looking for mountains, and ends up in the remote town of Fingerbone, working for the railroad. With his own hands and no knowledge of carpentry, he builds a house, marries, and has three children. Aside from building the house, the grandfather has a knack for fanciful paintings such as seahorses painted on the dial of a broken pocket watch he finds and gives to his wife early in their marriage. He is locally famous, as are all the victims of the catastrophic midnight train derailing off the railroad bridge into the lake. This is the most interesting thing that has ever happened in Fingerbone, and everyone connected with it has a permanently association to the event.

## Lily and Nona Foster, Ruth's great-aunts

Lily and Nona, the two nervous elderly aunts, are interchangeable for the reader. They always appear together and speak primarily to each other. They both have "light blue hair and black coats with shiny black beads in intricate patterns on the lapels". They look maternal with stout, matronly figures, but are awkward around children. They always appear together and agree with each other so completely that they seem like two halves of a whole. They are shy, fluttery ladies who hate having their routine disrupted. Ruth and Lucille make them nervous, and they hate life in Fingerbone. They fear that Sylvie might be unbalanced, but they are so anxious to get back to their residence hotel life in Spokane that they eagerly hand the responsibility for the girls over to her.

## Miss Royce

Lucille's Home Economics teacher and mentor, a solitary, high-strung woman who yearns to make friends with her students. Miss Royce's devotion to her students has only brought her ridicule and cartoon drawings of her rabbit face. On one occasion she is locked in a supply closet by mischievous boys. When Lucille runs through the night to take refuge from the increasing chaos of Sylvie's life, Miss Royce is so moved that Lucille is seeking her help that she offers her the spare room and, in effect, adopts her.

## Bernice

Helen's neighbor in Seattle, a woman with lavender lips and orange hair, who loves Helen, Ruth, and Lucille. She works nights as a waitress in a truck stop and more or less babysits the girls, waking up to check them from time to time during the day while Helen works. Bernice conveys scandalous gossip, including some about Helen's husband and a cocktail waitress. When she hears that Helen's mother is still living, she takes the week off work and urges Helen to borrow her car and go back to Fingerbone



so the girls can meet their grandmother. Helen drops the girls off and then drives Bernice's car off a cliff into the lake, killing herself.

## **Mr. French**

The school principal, a man with a small, smooth skull and very white hands the size of a boy's. He calls Ruth and Lucille into his office on the first day of school after they have missed half of the last year. He sits on the edge of his desk, toys with a piece of chalk, and interrogates them with "an inquisitor's delight" that prompts Lucille to say she will do better this year and work hard. Lucille even tries to defend Ruth, who retreats into embarrassed silence. When Ruth escapes into her schoolwork because Lucille now avoids her, Mr. French calls her into his office to congratulate her on her changed attitude.

## **Neighbor women of Fingerbone**

The neighbor women and church women show up when there is a disaster or death. Ruth doesn't give them names, but they show up in groups to bring casseroles, coffee cakes, knitted hats, gloves, and scarves. They roll their eyes at the newspapers and cans stacked to the ceiling, the fourteen cats, and their dismembered prey. They persist in discussing Ruth's situation and in trying to bring her back to an orderly life. One of them is the wife of the probate judge who will later schedule a hearing to determine whether Ruth can continue in Sylvie's custody.

## **Sheriff of Fingerbone**

A tall, fat man, embarrassed by his duty to intervene in family business, the sheriff is determined to rescue Ruth from slipping into a transient life style. He tries to protect Ruth even from having to listen when he tells her he has to discuss grown-up matters with her aunt and informs Ruth that there will be a hearing. A grandfather, when he goes to check on Ruth the night when Sylvie and Ruth are burning newspapers late into the night, he offers to take Ruth home to be taken care of by his own wife.

## **Dogs of Fingerbone**

Whether tied up or running free, all the dogs in Fingerbone sense Sylvie as an outsider and follow and bark at her when she goes through their neighborhoods. They are not so aggressive if Ruth is with her until she spends the night on the lake with Sylvie and rides home on the boxcar. After that, the dogs treat Ruth with the same aggression that they treat Sylvie.



# Objects/Places

## Fingerbone

The tiny town of Fingerbone is shallowly rooted in its mountain setting. It sits on a lake that floods yearly, blizzards and fires happen often, as do murders and fatal accidents. The railroad bridge is the only link to the outside world and the site of a disastrous wreck that took the lives of an entire trainload of passengers, including Ruth and Lucille's grandfather, who worked for the railroad. The fragile existence of the town at the whim of the overpowering landscape gives its residents fears of homelessness and a religious zeal that results in grimly determined works of charity. The residents feed and help the transients who often flood the town as well, and they are so secretly afraid of losing their fragile grip on their homes that they are very determined not to lose Ruth to a life of transient drifting with her Aunt Sylvie.

## The lake

The nameless lake is a strong, dangerous presence throughout the book. It always threatens to take back the town. The spectacular derailment off the railroad bridge into the lake claims the most victims. Early in the book it floods the whole town and sends four inches of water into the house, and strands Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie in the upstairs bedrooms for a week. In winter when it freezes, the townspeople go out on the banks to celebrate, but the lake is never free from danger. Sylvie says, "the lake is full of dead people", and it has killed at least two of Ruth's immediate relatives, her grandfather who dies in the train derailment and her mother, who drives off a cliff into the lake, killing herself.

## The railway bridge

This is the bridge the train went off of during a midnight crossing, killing all the passengers except two railway employees who were on the open back of the caboose. When Ruth and Lucille see Sylvie walking across the bridge, looking down at the water, they begin to realize how seriously disturbed she is and they fear that she will take her own life as their mother did. At the very end of the book, Ruth leaves Fingerbone late at night by following Sylvie across the bridge above the terrifying depths of lake.

## Grandfather's house

Ruth and Lucille's grandfather builds the house over several years with his own hands and no knowledge of carpentry. It is built on high ground so it floods less than many houses in Fingerbone. It has many eccentric details, such as a trap door he creates to get into the upstairs bedroom because he fears the wall might collapse if he cut a door





into it. The timid maiden aunts are afraid the house might collapse entirely, but their fears have some ground in reality.

## Trains

The railroad trains bring Ruth and Lucille's grandfather to Fingerbone and give him the job that allowed him to prosper and build a house there. The train also causes his death in the catastrophic derailment off the railroad bridge. Sylvie literally lives on the trains, jumping on boxcars and riding the rails as a transient. When the court threatens to take custody of Ruth, Sylvie escapes with her by crossing the railroad bridge, hopping a freight train, and bringing her into the transient lifestyle.

## School

Ruth and Lucille are outsiders at the school in Fingerbone. They discover that under Sylvie's care they can play truant for months at a time and no one will reprimand them, possibly because Sylvie's odd behavior is becoming public knowledge. When Lucille begins to look for a way out of Sylvie's realm, she turns to the school. She cultivates friendships with girls from school and eventually is rescued by her home economics teacher, Miss Royce. Ruth does better at school after Lucille turns away from her because she needs to find something to distract her from the sorrow of losing Lucille's companionship.

## Rowboat

Sylvie is in the habit of stealing a local man's rowboat to explore the far reaches of the lake. She finds it each time he hides it. When he chases after her throwing rocks, she is unmoved and considers him crazy for yelling. By the time Sylvie returns the rowboat on the last occasion that she takes it, she is in so much trouble for taking Ruth home via a boxcar that the sheriff never mentions it.

## Middle West

Ruth and Lucille's grandfather is raised in the Middle West in a house built into the ground with windows at eye level. Living so low to the ground, the grandfather dreams about mountains and paints imagined picture of them, until he leaves to go to the mountains and ends up in Fingerbone.

## Seattle

Helen and her husband go to Seattle when they marry. Although her husband leaves her, Helen remains living there for seven and a half years with her two daughters. The



car that she uses to drive back to Fingerbone and to her death is borrowed from her Seattle neighbor, Bernice.

## **Spokane**

The maiden aunts, Lily and Nona, are deeply attached to the inexpensive basement room they had in a residence hotel in Spokane. They are anxious to return to their established routines there.



# Themes

## Isolation

Ruth and Lucille are isolated from everyone around them. First their father's abandonment then their mother's depression and suicide set them adrift. Their grandmother takes care of them, but she is elderly and she also loses all of her loved ones. Her husband dies in the train derailment, her daughters all leave home, and Helen comes home, not to see her mother, but to drop off her children and commit suicide. Their grandmother seems distracted, as if not able to really see Ruth and Lucille.

The two aunts slated to take care of Ruth and Lucille after their grandmother's death are incapable of connecting with them on any level except pure anxiety about the girls' safety. They are also not able to make new friends in Fingerbone. They connect only with each other, and run from deeper involvement with anyone or anything else.

Sylvie takes an interest in Ruth and Lucille as no other adult ever has. For a time, this bridges the isolation the girls have always felt. Soon, however, Sylvie's unbalanced mental state and her bizarre methods of running a household keep the girls at a distance. Worse yet, Sylvie's eccentric caretaking draws Ruth and Lucille further into her own chaotic world and away from the world of school and other children.

At last Lucille begins to pull away from Sylvie, while Ruth remains loyal. When Lucille runs away to be adopted by her home economics teacher, Ruth states, "I had no sister after that night". Lucille also betrays Sylvie's unbalanced ways to the community officials, who see Sylvie and Ruth returning via a freight train from an overnight trip up the lake in a stolen boat. They determine to take Ruth from Sylvie and the two escape by walking the railroad bridge in the middle of the night. Ruth's isolation from everything she grew up with is complete. Ruth and Sylvie drift from place to place. Ruth takes an occasional job, but she leaves whenever people begin to realize her oddness, the same strangeness they see in Sylvie. She contemplates contacting Lucille on a day when she looks presentable, but that such days are "rare" now. She does not try to find Lucille.

## Fragility of Life

The town of Fingerbone sitting on a nameless lake "full of dead people" is a metaphor for the fragility of human existence. The sudden catastrophic train derailment early in the book sets the tone as a constant reminder that death can even come from the small isolated town's lifeline to the outside world. The entire town of Fingerbone fears being wiped off the map by flood or fire, fears that are intensified by the isolation of the town and the wilderness around it. The wilderness inside Fingerbone residents is also a threat. Madness, mayhem, and murder are regular occurrences.



Deaths that have repeatedly uprooted Ruth and Lucille demonstrate how they, as children, are even more vulnerable. Their mother's suicide leaves them in the care of their grandmother, who is old and shaken by the deaths of her husband and daughter.

Different characters have different views of death and of the dangers of life. Sylvie seems indifferent to personal safety—her own or that of anyone else. Having had their mother kill herself, Ruth and Lucille are upset when they see Sylvie walking along the railroad bridge simply to see what it felt like. Ruth speculates that she might jump into the lake to her death just to see what that felt like. The elderly aunts who take care of the girls for awhile after their grandmother's death are afraid of everything, including the potential collapse of the house their brother built. Later, when Ruth visits an abandoned, caved-in farmhouse, she points out how many houses in the area are poorly built and do indeed literally fall apart.

The impermanent nature of house, home, and livelihood also looms over Fingerbone and makes its residents particularly threatened by the presence of the homeless transients who come through town on the railroad. The townspeople are ready with charity, fearing that they might be the next to be dispossessed. This fear also galvanizes them when they see Ruth is slipping into a transient lifestyle under Sylvie's influence.

## The community versus outsiders

Sylvie is most comfortable outside the normal realm of society. When she takes on the care of Ruth and Lucille, she is unable to keep up the kind of routines and caretaking that most responsible parents in the community respect. She creates a zone of the disorder in the house so that she feels comfortable. She leaves doors and windows open, collects cans, bottles, newspapers, and cats. She prefers to eat cold food in the dark late in the evening rather than cooking hot meals. When Lucille demands light, place settings, and meat and vegetables for supper, Sylvie can only give her the money to buy those things while she goes outside to eat crackers in the dark.

Ruth and Lucille at one time banded together against an uncaring world, but Sylvie's outsider status polarizes them. Lucille begins to identify more and more with the community at large as she judges the chaos that Sylvie has created. Neighbors and school officials keep their distance even after Lucille reveals the depths of disintegration in the household. It is not until Sylvie and Ruth are seen together riding a freight train into town that the sheriff and the neighbor women get involved. Eventually a hearing is scheduled before a local judge to enforce community standards of childcare for Ruth.

In the end, Lucille chooses to embrace the community and Ruth chooses to escape with Sylvie into the transient life of an eternal outsider.



# Style

## Point of View

The first person narrator is Ruth, who stands outside a great deal of the action just as she stands outside of the community and her family. When she describes her grandmother's feelings on looking back on her marriage, she discusses things her taciturn grandmother probably would not have told her. She imagines herself experiencing her grandmother's feelings based on small clues and close observation. This is the same method Ruth uses to cope with a world where she feels unsafe and uncertain. So when Ruth describes her grandmother mourning for a man who was dead long before Ruth was born, she is also describing her own mourning for a father she never knew and a stability she only briefly experienced during the years when she and Lucille were cared for by their grandmother.

Ruth speculates on what might have happened if this or that path had not been taken. Once she focuses on the path that actually was taken, she begins to imagine what that decision meant and why that choice was made.

A few long interludes of short dialogue show the characters discussing what to do, as when the elderly, hard-of-hearing aunts discuss how they can find Sylvie and persuade her to take over care of the girls loudly enough for Ruth and Lucille to hear every word .

## Setting

The novel is set in the imaginary mountain town of Fingerbone, Idaho, in the remote northwestern United States, on the shore of a nameless lake. The most remarkable thing that ever happened in this small town was the spectacular midnight train derailment that killed the narrator's grandfather and everyone on board with the exception of two employees who were standing on the caboose at the back of the train.

Fingerbone is a town with shallow roots, sitting on the banks of a lake that floods yearly, and plagued with fires that burned it down on one occasion and still break out frequently. The house that the narrator's grandfather built was improvised without any knowledge of carpentry, so it also stands on a shaky foundation. Characters who leave Fingerbone, whether for Seattle or Spokane or as missionaries to China like Helen and Sylvie's sister Molly, do so to escape, and few have much communication with anyone in the town after leaving.

## Language and Meaning

This book uses language with richness and precision. The paragraphs are long, often filling more than a page with lyrical description. The tension of the action keeps the extended paragraphing from seeming tedious except on a few occasions when the



narrator is contemplating abstract concepts at length. The descriptions of the natural world and the characters' actions in it engage all the senses in unexpected ways that capture the attention, such as the rank smell of melting snow or the rickety click of the boxcar riding the rails.

The narrator's flights of fancy re-imagining what the other characters might think are so sharply imagined that they pass for reality. Only at the very end of the book does Ruth say she has "never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming". In the last paragraph Ruth tries to imagine connecting with Lucille, and every sentence is a negative. She and Sylvie do not go into a restaurant in Boston to meet her sister. Lucille is not there, nor is their mother or grandmother. There is a lyrical affirmation in the several negative statements that close the book as Ruth concludes that Lucille "does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie".

## Structure

This novel is comprised of eleven unnamed chapters, each approximately thirteen to fifteen pages long, with two longer chapters that are twenty-eight and thirty-three pages, and a shorter eleven-page final chapter.

The plot novel has no subplots. The narrator tells the story in chronological order as a remembrance, but she uses flashbacks to revisit and re-examine events in her life as the narrative builds detail. The narrator admits to telling a story, and she frequently digresses to say that her sister would tell it differently, or that another character might have another explanation for some event.

When the events leading up to her present life are all unfolded, the narrator examines them one last time and imagines a reunion with her sister that she longs for but must remind herself will never happen.



## Quotes

"Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step." Chap. 1, p. 5

"The disaster took place midway through a moonless night. The train, which was black and sleek and elegant, and was called the Fireball, had pulled more than halfway across the bridge when the engine nosed over toward the lake and then the rest of the train slid after it into the water like a weasel sliding off a rock." Chap. 1, p. 6

"Her bread was tender and her jelly was tart, and on rainy days she made cookies and applesauce. In summer she kept roses in a vase on the piano, huge, pungent roses, and when the blooms ripened and the petals fell, she put them a tall Chinese jar, with cloves and thyme and sticks of cinnamon. Her children slept on starched sheets under layers of quilts, and in the morning her curtains filled with light the way sails fill with wind." Chap. 1, pp. 11-12

"Lily and Nona, I think, enjoyed nothing except habit and familiarity, the precise replication of one day in the next." Chap. 2, p. 32

"Sylvie talked a great deal about housekeeping. She soaked all the tea towels for a number of weeks in a tub of water and bleach. She emptied several cupboards and left them open to air, and once she washed half the kitchen ceiling and a door." Chap. 5, p. 85

"I was content with Sylvie, so it was a surprise to me when I realized that Lucille had begun to regard other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore. She pulled all the sequins off the toes of the blue velveteen ballet slippers Sylvia bought us for school shoes the second spring after her arrival." Chap. 5, pp. 92-93

"I was increasingly struck with Lucille's ability to look the way one was supposed to look. She could roll her anklets and puff her bangs to excellent effect, but try as she might, she could never do as well for me." Chap. 7, p. 121

"Sylvie had taken lately to keeping tin cans. She washed the labels off with soap and hot water. There were now many of these cans on the counters, and the windowsill, and they would have covered the table long since if Lucille and I had not removed them now and then." Chap. 7, p. 125

"I watched them from the parlor window—little old Miss Royce in her brown box suit with the salmon pink bow at the throat, talking tensely and earnestly to Sylvie, who shrugged or nodded and looked to the side. Finally, Sylvie came in and went upstairs and came down again carrying Lucille's schoolbooks and her diary." Chap. 7, p. 141



"Sylvie had no awareness of time. For her, hours and minutes were the names of trains —we were waiting for the 9:52." Chap. 8, pp. 165-166

"So we sailed above the water rickety click into Fingerbone, and Sylvie and I climbed down in the freight yard." Chap. 8, p. 173

"Sylvie set fire to the straw of the broom, and held it blazing to the hem of the pantry curtain, and to the fringe of the rug, so there were two good fires, but then we heard a train whistle, and Sylvie said, 'We have to run! Get your coat!'" Chap. 11, p. 209





## Topics for Discussion

Discuss Housekeeping and homelessness. Is Sylvie's housekeeping very different from her life as a transient? Why are transients such a threat to the citizens of Fingerbone?

Housekeeping was published in 1980. Compare and contrast modern day homelessness with the transient lifestyle described in the book. Are things different now for the homeless and transient? Is urban homelessness different from the traveling lifestyle described in the book?

The lure of the road is strong in American fiction. How do the transient characters in Housekeeping differ from literary transients floating down the Mississippi in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn or driving down the highway in Jack Kerouac's On the Road?

Discuss women's role in Housekeeping. How does Ruth and Lucille's grandmother regard cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children? What do the maiden aunts, Lily and Nona, think of it? How does Sylvie approach the same challenge? What does Lucille think of Sylvie's methods? What does Ruth think of them? How do the women in the community react?

Discuss relationships between sisters in terms of Ruth and Lucille. Early in the book they are united against an uncaring world, however, at the end of the book where they have no contact whatsoever. How do they work together at first to keep Sylvie from leaving? When and how do Ruth and Lucille start to feel differently about Sylvie, and what effect does it have on their relationship with each other?

At the end of the book Ruth describes a life of drifting with Sylvie and she considers going back to see if the house in Fingerbone burned to the ground, and possibly seeking out Lucille. Do you think she will do that? Why or why not?

The terms "mental illness" and "child abuse" are never used during the book. Do you think either of those terms fit any of the characters or situations in the story? Would using those terms have helped any of the characters? If there had been a Child Protective Services agency in the book what might they say about the household? Explain.

Discuss the point of view of the book. Would the novel have had as much impact if it had not been written Ruth's viewpoint? Could the novel have been written from Lucille's viewpoint? Could it have been written from Sylvie's viewpoint? How would writing it in the third person have changed the story?