

Human Croquet Study Guide

Human Croquet by Kate Atkinson

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Plot Summary

The novel *Human Croquet* presents the story of Isobel Fairfax, her family, and friends in 1960 England. Isobel as principle narrator tells a story that moves forward and backward through history. The story begins on April 1, 1960, Isobel's sixteenth birthday.

In a short introductory chapter Isobel tells the history of her region of England, the town of Lythe. She goes far back into English history and chronicles the sixteenth century figure Sir Francis Fairfax, who built his manor in the area of Lythe and married Lady Fairfax. After the decline of Fairfax manor, the descendants of Sir Francis remained in the area, and their fortunes waxed and waned. Isobel's family's current house, Arden, stands on the location of what was once Fairfax Manor.

Isobel has a brother named Charles, who is fascinated by topics generally regarded as science fiction. His particular interests center on alien abductions. This may be due in part to the disappearance of Charles and Isobel's mother, Eliza, when they were young. They also lost their father, Gordon, for a seven-year period immediately following the disappearance of their mother.

Isobel's presentation of history is not linear. The narrative often moves back in time. These presentations of past events are most often told by an unnamed third person narrator, while Isobel's presentation in the present is delivered in first person. Sometimes Isobel herself experiences what her and Charles refer to as time warps. Suddenly for brief moments Isobel will find herself in various periods of the past before returning to the present. These time warps come without warning, and often the scenes she witnesses are without explanation.

In one of the sections that covers the past, the cause for Isobel and Charles's mother's disappearance is revealed. The children witness her murder, but they are so young that they do not understand what they have seen, and they seem to have repressed the memory as they grow up. They believe the various stories that their father, grandmother, and aunt tell them regarding their mother's departure. They also believe their grandmother and aunt's story that their father died in a fog in London until one day, without warning, seven years later, Gordon returns home with a new wife.

As the novel progresses, the plot becomes increasingly surreal. The narrative continues to move back and forth in time, and Isobel experiences the same events over and over, and one of the events involves the death of a friend. Explanations for certain events are provided, but just as often revisions in the plot reveal that some events never happened. The surreal element of the plot intensifies until at last the revelation of one particular event in Isobel's life provides an explanation for most inconsistencies.

The latter chapters provide additional historical accounts of the Fairfax family, and in a final chapter, Isobel reveals what happened to all of the principle characters. Through all of the delightful twists and turns, Isobel delivers a deeper message about the nature of imagination.



I. Beginning: Streets of Trees

I. Beginning: Streets of Trees Summary

The novel is set in 1960 England, and the main setting is a brief period in the life of the narrator Isobel Fairfax. The novel also covers portions of English history relevant to the Fairfax family. The story begins with the introduction of the narrator. The narrator introduces herself as Isobel. She discusses the beginning of the universe and mixes in some mythology. Isobel states that the setting of the story will be England, and in loosely chronicling the history of the land she talks about changes in the land over time, including how advances in tool making hastened the decline of the forests. She discusses the origin of the village Lythe.

Around the year 1580, Francis Fairfax arrived in the village of Lythe and began construction of Fairfax Manor. Francis was an adventurer, and he enjoyed the favor of the Queen. Fairfax Manor even hosted the Queen in 1582, and some people believe that Shakespeare also stayed there. Fairfax married and presented his wife with the famous Fairfax jewel. Historians have searched for the jewel for over four hundred years. Lady Fairfax gave birth to a son. Lady Fairfax was also fond of taking walks in the woods, and during one such walk, she disappeared and never returned.

Francis Fairfax died in 1605, and Fairfax Manor was abandoned. Over the next two centuries, the forest continued to decline. The Fairfax family fortune increased and decreased over time in regard to the prevailing economic climate. In the twentieth century, houses are built where Fairfax Manor once stood, and the Fairfax family buys one of the houses.

Isobel gives a short history of the recent Fairfax family, and she closes the chapter by reintroducing herself.

I. Beginning: Streets of Trees Analysis

The novel opens with humor. The author's choice to open with, "Call me Isobel", is similar to a famous American novel that opens with the line, "Call me Ishmael".

The narrator, Isobel, is extremely knowledgeable of English history, and she presents it in a playful tone. She seems to be playful in every aspect of her narration, and her frequent reminders that she is the narrator are reminiscent of the classic intrusive narrators of famous eighteenth century English novelists.

Isobel closes the chapter by hinting at future discord with her mother, Eliza.



II. Present: Something Weird

II. Present: Something Weird Summary

Isobel claims that she is a large person and that she is not beautiful. The day is the first of April, and it is Isobel's sixteenth birthday.

Isobel states that she is five feet ten inches tall. She contemplates her height, and she thinks about her missing mother who walked off into the woods and disappeared years ago. The family has a lodger, Mr. Rice, who Isobel holds in low regard. Charles laments his lack of height, and Isobel thinks about how girls do not find her brother attractive.

Audrey's father, Mr. Baxter, is overly protective. Her father is the headmaster of the local elementary school, and he forbids Audrey to spend time with boys. The Baxter's are the closest neighbors of Isobel and her family, and they call their house Sithean because it is a Scottish name, and Mrs. Baxter is Scottish. Mr. Baxter is domineering to both Audrey and Mrs. Baxter.

Isobel and Charles's lives have been deeply affected by their missing mother. Their Aunt Vinny has always told them that their mother ran away with a man. Their father, Gordon, also disappeared for a seven-year period during this time. Neither Isobel nor Charles have any photographs of their mother, and their father never speaks of her.

Gordon remarried a much younger woman named Debbie. Debbie does her best to get along with the children.

Charles' hobbies include reading about extraterrestrial beings and human disappearances. He believes that aliens abducted his mother. Isobel tries to remind Charles that the day is her birthday, but Charles shows no interest in his sister's birthday. Instead, he shows her a compact mirror engraved with his mother's name. He collects artifacts pertaining to his mother in hopes of finding clues to her disappearance.

Gordon wishes Isobel a happy birthday. Gordon was a fighter pilot in World War II, and he was dynamic and good-looking in his youth, but he appeared broken after he returned from his seven-year absence. Charles speculates that aliens have substituted the man that appears to be Gordon for the real Gordon.

Isobel has a crush on Malcolm Lovat. Malcolm is a medical school student, and Malcolm's father is a doctor. Malcolm and Isobel are close friends, though secretly Isobel desires more from the relationship. Isobel and Malcolm would seem to be an odd match, even as just friends, because of Malcolm's family's seemingly higher social status.

Isobel discusses some of her other friends. Eunice is someone who seems to have attached herself to Isobel. Isobel finds Eunice annoying but also thinks she might make a good companion for her brother, Charles. Carmen is another friend of Isobel's.



Carmen, who Isobel considers physically unattractive, quit school and got a job. She plans to marry her boyfriend. Audrey, Isobel's next door neighbor and friend, is frail with ill health, and her father constantly oppresses her. Isobel thinks that their physical oddities and other eccentricities tie her group of friends together.

In stark contrast to Isobel's group of friends are characters like Hilary Walsh. She is beautiful and from a wealthy family.

Debbie gives Isobel a birthday gift. Debbie wants to have a baby, but she cannot get pregnant. Isobel says that instead Debbie just gains weight. After Debbie says that she intends to make Isobel a cake, Isobel leaves her house and goes to visit Audrey and Mrs. Baxter.

When Isobel is returning home, she finds herself suddenly in a place she does not recognize. A man appears to be planning the building of houses, and the year seems to be 1918. Just as suddenly as it happened, the experience is over, and Isobel finds herself back in her own time of 1960.

When Isobel tells Charles about her strange experience, he tells her that she probably experienced a time warp.

Isobel celebrates her birthday with Audrey and Eunice over fish and chips. On the way home, the three young women see a large moon. Eunice, in her typically pedantic and irritating manner, explains that what appears to be a larger than normal moon is merely an optical illusion.

II. Present: Something Weird Analysis

This chapter contains straightforward first person narration from Isobel. The chapter manages to adequately describe the principle setting and introduce all of the main characters.

Though she does not explicitly state that much of their lives have been sad and miserable, it is clear that Isobel and Charles have been deeply affected by their mother's departure. Charles' fascination with disappearances is obviously a result of having lost his mother at a young age in a way that can be considered a disappearance, whether she really walked away in the woods one day or ran off with a man, as Vinny says.

Isobel manages to provide clear and vivid character descriptions. All of the characters presented have distinct and memorable traits. Aside from the disappearance of her mother, Isobel's concerns appear to be typical for a young woman her age. She worries about her physical appearance and constantly refers to her awkward height. She has a crush on a young man she thinks is unobtainable. All of the adults she knows are deeply flawed in some way. She believes that she and her group of friends are drawn together by sharing a sense of somehow being misfits, whether by physical appearance, familial circumstances, or personality traits.

At this point it is difficult to know what to think of Isobel's vision of being in a different time. The reader does not know whether to dismiss Charles's theories on the event as preposterous, and it is difficult to tell what Isobel truly thinks about the event.



II. Present: What's Wrong

II. Present: What's Wrong Summary

One morning Isobel goes downstairs the kitchen table is covered in a variety of raw meat. Debbie says they are giving a party and having a barbecue. Debbie has a history of failed parties.

Vinny is about to leave for an appointment, and she asks Isobel to get her a better pair of shoes. Upon arriving in Vinny's room, Isobel cannot find the particular shoes that Vinny wants. Isobel searches Vinny's wardrobe, and she finds a single unusual shoe. On her way out of the room, Isobel finds the shoes that Vinny wanted. When Isobel shows the shoe to Vinny, Vinny says she has never seen it, and she angrily criticizes Isobel for searching her private possessions. Charles asks Gordon about the shoe, and Gordon appears troubled.

Neighbors begin to arrive for the barbecue party. Gordon has not yet been successful in getting the fire in the barbecue grill started. When he begins to attempt to cook the meat, he has additional trouble, and some of the meat served to the guests is partially raw.

Eunice says that she saw Isobel earlier in the day but that Isobel did not acknowledge her greeting. Isobel has no memory of being in the place where Eunice claims to have seen her. The Baxters make excuses to avoid having to eat any of the undercooked food, and they leave. The grill explodes, and it begins to rain. Isobel goes to the Baxter's house to visit with Audrey.

When Isobel returns home, Charles is sitting in a chair near the exploded grill. He is angry because Vinny buried the shoe that Isobel found. Vinny hears something at the back door and asks Isobel to answer. Isobel finds a stray dog at the door and asks Gordon to keep the dog. He agrees. With the arrival of summer and a new dog, the house is infested with fleas. Vinny's many cats compound the problem.

One day on her way home from school, Isobel is caught in another time warp. Isobel suspects that she has been transported back to the sixteenth century. The people outside on the street do not seem to notice Isobel. Isobel goes inside what in her time is the Ye Olde Sunne Inne. Isobel sees a young man, and he smiles at her. As Isobel tries to walk toward the young man, she is instantly transported back to 1960, and she finds herself in the Ye Olde Sunne Inne.

When Isobel sees Debbie in a Tudor style dress, Isobel at first thinks she has encountered another time warp, but then she remembers that Debbie has recently joined the local amateur theater group, and the dress is probably a costume.

Isobel has tea on the lawn with Mrs. Baxter. Mr. Baxter is characteristically gruff and rude.



The play Isobel attends is bad even by amateur standards. When Debbie confides to Isobel that she believes that she was truly lost in the woods and not just playing the part of a character, Isobel suggest seeing a psychiatrist.

II. Present: What's Wrong Analysis

This chapter comes from the same first person narrative as in the previous chapter. Isobel continues to describe her environment and the other characters that inhabit it. She manages to further develop the characters, and she reveals more about herself.

Though the reader cannot at this time know why, the incident with the odd shoe seems significant. Vinny's reaction to seeing the shoe betrays her claim that she has never seen it. Gordon's reaction further supports the possibility that the discovery of the shoe may somehow be significant, as does Vinny's seemingly drastic action of burying it.

Though she does not say so in her account of the time warp at the Ye Olde Sunne Inne, it seems that Isobel believes that the man she sees briefly is William Shakespeare.

More of Isobel's character is revealed in her interaction with Mr. Baxter. Unlike so many other characters, she is not intimidated by the aggressive schoolmaster. In fact, she intentionally chooses to answer a question in a manner she knows will further annoy him. Isobel seems like a person who does not tolerate bullies.



III. Past: Half-Day Closing

III. Past: Half-Day Closing Summary

Charlotte Fairfax runs the family grocery business, and she intends that the business will be Gordon's once he finishes school. Gordon has other ideas. When World War II begins, Gordon joins the military, is commissioned as a Royal Air Force officer, and becomes a fighter pilot.

Eliza is a mysterious character. The first time she met Gordon's family was at the wedding. Gordon met Eliza when he rescued her from a bombed building in London. Vinny makes no effort to conceal her dislike for Eliza. Gordon and Eliza's first child, Charles, is born on a train. While Gordon is home on leave, their second child is conceived. This time, Eliza goes into labor at home, but she locks the door to a bedroom and gives birth alone. She has a daughter and chooses the name Isobel.

Gordon returns home after the war. Charlotte and Vinny are constantly mean to Eliza, and Eliza longs for the family to have their own house independent of Charlotte and Vinny. Though she adores her two children, Eliza grows increasingly frustrated with Charlotte, Vinny, and Gordon. Once, while Eliza draws with the children, Gordon comments that they should have more children. Eliza acts coldly toward Gordon. The brief conversation between Gordon and Eliza cause Charles to wonder about the origin of babies.

Charles does not like school, and he is happy to enjoy his two-week break for Christmas. The family celebrates Christmas together, and Gordon gives Eliza a gold ring containing emeralds and diamonds.

In the summer, the Baxters move in next door to the Fairfaxes. Charlotte is not receptive to Mrs. Baxter's friendliness. Gordon, Eliza, Charles, and Isobel go on a vacation to the seaside. Charles and Isobel delight in building sand castles, and sometimes Eliza participates. Eliza sometimes goes for walks alone and acts generally distant from Gordon.

Back at home, breakfasttime is usually volatile. Charlotte is openly critical of Eliza, and sometimes she is overtly hostile. One morning Eliza gives Gordon an ultimatum: if he does not find them a house of their own soon, she will leave him. Charlotte is, of course, against the idea of Gordon moving out.

On a day, when Gordon will work at the store only a half day, Eliza, Charles, and Isobel take the bus to the store in order to surprise Gordon with a picnic. While at the store, Eliza invites Vinny to join them at the picnic. The weather is cold, but Eliza insists on a picnic anyway. Gordon and Eliza are more hostile to each other than usual even before the picnic begins. Once in the car, Gordon asks where they should go, and after Eliza offers no suggestions, Gordon suggests Boscombe Woods.



The five try to enjoy themselves eating in the woods, but the food is not good, and the weather is uncomfortably cold. Vinny excuses herself to go into the trees, and shortly thereafter Eliza says she is going for a walk. Gordon and the children think that is a peculiar thing to do, and Gordon sets off after Eliza.

The children wait for a couple of hours, getting colder and colder. Eventually they lose patience and go looking for their parents. Along the way, Charles finds one of Eliza's shoes. Soon they find Eliza leaning against a tree. She has been beaten and is possibly dead, but the children think she is sleeping. They wait with Eliza until after dark and then cover her in leaves for warmth before going looking for Gordon.

The children soon get lost and encounter a bog. They manage to find dry ground and bury themselves in leaves. They wake at dawn, still lost in the woods.

III. Past: Half-Day Closing Analysis

The point of view in this chapter comes from an unknown third person narrator. The tone is more distant and neutral than the previous chapters presented by Isobel.

Charlotte and Vinny are exceptionally mean to Eliza. Vinny never misses an opportunity to suggest that Eliza is a tramp and that Charles is not Gordon's son. Although outwardly she seems to always be in a good mood, Eliza makes subtle comments to indicate that she is not happy with her treatment from Charlotte and Vinny. Indeed, living with the widow and spinster aunt is torture for Eliza. She even states that if it were not for Charles and Isobel, she would not remain. Even while on vacation, the marital tensions remain. Gordon and Eliza seem to be headed for a crisis.

The portrayal of Eliza as a nurturing, doting mother is surprising in comparison to the few references to her in previous chapters. Eliza as presented early in the chapter does not seem to be the type to abandon her children. The explanation comes later in the chapter.

In the woods, the shoes Eliza wears seem similar to the shoe Isobel found in a previous chapter. Some events, particularly Eliza walking off into the woods alone, seem similar to the account of Lady Fairfax disappearing into the woods, but the more vivid picture of Eliza dead and reclining against a tree is horrifying.



IV. Present: Leaves of Light

IV. Present: Leaves of Light Summary

Isobel is in class and bored by the lecture on photosynthesis. Audrey is sleeping during the lecture.

At Arden, one of Vinny's cats dies, and she suspects Mr. Rice of doing something to harm the cat. Mr. Rice is in even more trouble once Debbie catches him in a compromising position with a woman who works at a local pub.

Charles finds a monogrammed handkerchief, and he incorporates the find into his developing theories concerning Eliza being abducted by aliens.

While riding a bus with Eunice, Isobel sees Malcolm Lovat talking to Hilary Walsh. Eunice informs Isobel that she has heard that Malcolm and Hilary are dating. Isobel is upset at Malcolm's relationship with Hilary, and she tells Eunice that she intends to kill Hilary.

One evening, Isobel is at the kitchen sink washing dishes, and she is started to see Mr. Rice outside the window with a flashlight exposing himself. Isobel does not scream or tell anyone, but when she looks again, Mr. Rice is gone. The following morning, Isobel dreads seeing Mr. Rice at breakfast, but she discovers that he has left the house for good while owning three months rent. Vinny burns all of the belongings that Mr. Rice leaves behind.

In autumn, Isobel finds that she misses her mother more than usual. She visits the Baxters and notices that Audrey appears to be gaining weight. Mrs. Baxter has a bruise on her face that she claims to have gotten from her own clumsiness. Mr. Baxter has been forced into early retirement for injuring a young boy.

At Arden, Debbie shows signs of mental illness. She believes the dog has been replaced by a robot, and she believes that Gordon has been replaced by another man. Isobel talks to Gordon, and he says that he has already taken Debbie to a doctor.

One evening, Gordon and Debbie go out for dinner, and Charles takes the dog for a walk. Isobel is home alone with Vinny when Vinny hears something at the back door. Isobel checks and finds a baby in a box. Also inside the box is a note with the words "PLEASE LOOK AFTER ME". Isobel shows the baby to Vinny, but she wants nothing to do with it. When Charles returns home, Isobel shows him the baby, and he suggests that perhaps the dog could look after it. When Gordon and Debbie return home, Debbie, of course, wants to keep the baby. She says she will simply claim the baby as her own.

While waiting for the bus, Isobel experiences another time warp. She finds herself briefly in a dense woods, but then she is back at the bus stop suddenly.



IV. Present: Leaves of Light Analysis

At first it seems confusing that Isobel and Charles continue to wonder about the disappearance of Eliza. However, even if the events as presented in the previous chapter are true, it is entirely possible that both Charles and Eliza have suppressed the memory. They were young at the time and without a concrete sense of reality. Charles' preoccupation with finding clues to her disappearance may be some sort of psychological defense mechanism.

Debbie's symptoms of mental illness seem more like the sorts of things that Charles would wonder about, and the arrival of the baby seems to occur in exactly the same way that the dog arrived to live at Arden. Though she does not explicitly state her suspicions, it seems that Isobel has some idea about the parentage of the baby.

The most recent incidence of a time warp is impossible to interpret. Isobel sees only a dense wooded area. Perhaps it has something to do with her mother's disappearance, or perhaps it has something to do with the lecture Isobel heard at school.



V. Untitled: Backward People

V. Untitled: Backward People Summary

The chapter resumes the incident where Isobel and Charles were young children lost in the woods.

Isobel hears a voice, and she wakes Charles. The voice is Gordon's, and after he greets and calms the children, Charles says they must help Eliza. Gordon says that Eliza is all right. Once in the car, Charles again asks about Eliza, and Gordon says that she is in the hospital. Charles gives Gordon Eliza's shoe, and Gordon is so shocked that he almost loses control of the car. Vinny snatches the shoe away.

Once at home, Charlotte feeds the children and then puts them to bed. She serves them lunch in bed, and then the children return to sleep. Isobel and Charles wake in time for tea, and Charles asks if he can see Eliza. Charlotte says he can see her soon.

During the night, Charles wakes Isobel and they watch their father drive away. The following morning, at breakfast, Isobel produces one of Eliza's handkerchiefs, and first Vinny then Charlotte violently take it away.

Time passes, and Isobel starts school. Mrs. Baxter looks after the children between the time they return from school and Charlotte and Vinny return home. Every time the children ask when they can see their mother, Charlotte answers soon. One evening, Charlotte informs Charles and Isobel that Eliza has gone away and is never returning home. Charles reacts badly to the news.

One day Charlotte receives a letter with foreign postmarks. She cries after reading the letter. That evening she tells the children that their father is not returning home because he is in heaven. The following morning, at breakfast, Vinny tells the children that Gordon is dead. Charles reacts with shock and horror. Charlotte says that Gordon died in a London fog, and he is buried in London.

Charlotte will not let the children look at photographs of Eliza. She claims not to have any. The children often look at Eliza's clothes, so Charlotte gets rid of all them. Charlotte circulates the story that Eliza ran away with a man.

During the winter, Charlotte becomes ill, and she has to stay home in bed while Vinny goes to work and runs the store. Vinny does such a poor job that the employees quit. The children are home alone unsupervised because Charlotte is mostly bedridden. Once Charlotte gets out of bed while the children are playing with toys near the top of the stairs. She steps on one of the children's toys and falls down the stairs and dies. The children hurriedly pick up their toys and go play outside.

Vinny has to take over, but she is as terrible a caregiver to the children as she is at running the store. Charles has to have a surgical operation to restore his hearing, and



no one knows how long he had the ailment before it was detected. Vinny is a terrible cook, and the children are constantly hungry.

Mrs. Baxter tries to offer maternal support, but Mr. Baxter will not let her. One day he becomes angry at Mrs. Baxter reading to the children, and the following day Mrs. Baxter has a severe bruise on her face.

When Charles is eight years old, Vinny decides to give him away to a couple that want a son. Charles is led to believe that Isobel will be coming along, and once in the departing car, Charles realizes he has been tricked. He tries to get out of the car, and Isobel chases the car as far as she can. A week later the couple returns Charles and says that he bites.

Vinny decides to sell the grocery business and take in lodgers at Arden. Mr. Rice soon rents a room. Years pass and Charles and Isobel continue to wonder why Eliza does not return.

Mrs. Baxter's sister, Rhona, visits, and they reminisce and look at a book called *The Home Entertainer*. They have particularly fond memories of a game called Human Croquet. Mr. Baxter does not like the time Mrs. Baxter spends with her sister, and the day after Rhona leaves, Mrs. Baxter is covered in bruises.

After seven years, Gordon returns. Gordon is surprised and annoyed that the children had been told that he was dead. Gordon claims to have been living in New Zealand with amnesia. A woman accompanies Gordon, and she introduces herself to the children as their new mother.

Charles tells Isobel that they should accept the fact that Eliza is not coming home.

V. Untitled: Backward People Analysis

This chapter covers a considerable amount of time in the lives of the children.

Probably because they are young and trusting, the children forget what they saw in the woods and accept their father's story that Eliza is well and recovering in the hospital. Though the children cannot understand what they see in the behavior of Vinny and Charlotte, the two women act as accessories to a serious crime. They behave exactly as one would expect of people trying to conceal a murder.

Charlotte's actions toward the children are often harsh, but there is little doubt that she cares about them. She certainly loves her son, Gordon, and however misguided her thinking is, she honestly believes she is doing what is best for Gordon and the children. Vinny, on the other hand, is an outright cruel person. It is understandable that she could get frustrated when providing care for the children, but behavior such as telling the children that Eliza left because they were naughty seems to show that she enjoys being mean. That particular comment was perhaps the harshest thing she could have said to the children.



The cruelty the children must endure does not end there. In perhaps the most horrifying part of the chapter, Vinny lies to Charles and gives him to another couple. Both Charles and Isobel are traumatized, though there is some dark humor in the reason for Charles's return. This dark humor is also present in another scene that should not be funny. When Charlotte falls down the stairs, the children immediately remove their toys, the evidence, and go play outside as if nothing has happened.

Mr. Baxter seems to be a sinister character. Though the narrator does not explicitly state that Baxter beats his wife, the evidence certainly points to that conclusion.

The appearance of the book *The Home Entertainer* is significant. The scene where Mrs. Baxter and her sister discuss the book mentions a particular game that has the same name as the title of the novel. Perhaps later in the text the reader will learn why a game named Human Croquet inspired the title of a novel.



VI. Present: Experiments with Aliens

VI. Present: Experiments with Aliens Summary

Debbie cannot think of a name for the baby. None of the neighbors are the least bit suspicious about the sudden appearance of the baby, and they accept the story that Debbie is the mother. At home, Debbie's symptoms of mental illness increase. Eunice names a medical condition with the same symptoms as those Debbie displays, and this makes Isobel wonder about the existence of doppelgangers.

Malcolm offers Isobel a ride in his new car, and they go to visit his mother in the hospital. She thinks that Isobel is Hilary, Malcolm's girlfriend, and she expresses disappointment. After leaving the hospital, Malcolm admits that he does not feel worthy of so much praise from so many people. While Malcolm drives Isobel home, she sees Mr. Primrose in a dress, and she wonders if the clothing is something Mr. Primrose enjoys wearing or if it is in preparation for another amateur dramatic production.

Isobel returns home to find Vinny caring for the baby because Debbie is obsessed with the china cabinet. Debbie believes that when she turns her back on the cabinet the pieces inside move around. Isobel goes to the Baxter's house. Isobel wants to ask Audrey if she left the baby but instead asks if Audrey is okay and if there is anything Audrey wants to tell. Audrey does not reveal any information concerning the baby.

Back at Arden, Isobel experiences another time warp. She sees a young Vinny. Vinny is more attractive and cuts her hair in the flapper bob fashion, popular in the 1920s. Isobel also sees a little boy and knows it must be Gordon.

Charles finds a lock of hair and believes it came from Eliza.

Isobel tries to write an essay on Shakespeare's Twelfth Night. She wonders what it would be like to go back in time to meet Shakespeare, and if doing so would help with writing the essay. Richard Primrose comes into Isobel's room and attacks her. Isobel manages to fight him off, and he angrily says that he came to invite her to a party. Isobel has already been invited to a party by Hilary Walsh.

During the night, Isobel is awakened by an unfamiliar noise. She goes downstairs and sees a strange green light in the conservatory. The light vanishes, and all returns to normal.

Mrs. Baxter works on a party dress for Isobel. Audrey is still acting in a peculiar manner, and Isobel learns that Audrey was supposed to have mailed the shawl that the baby arrived wrapped in to a relative of Mrs. Baxter's in South Africa.

Charles shows Gordon the lock of hair he believes to belong to Eliza. Gordon panics, grabs the lock of hair, and runs from the room. Later in the evening, Gordon goes to



Isobel's room. He sits on her bed holding the lock of hair, and he tells her, "I killed your mother".

VI. Present: Experiments with Aliens Analysis

This chapter is presented in the humorous first person narrative of Isobel. In this chapter, Isobel is again a mildly intrusive narrator, and she uses this for humor, such as when she says that only one time warp should occur per chapter.

The first time warp seems to have the effect of humanizing both Vinny and Gordon. When Isobel sees Vinny as a younger woman at odds with her parents, she sees a side to Vinny she had not previously imagined. Isobel feels slightly different toward Vinny after seeing her younger version. When she sees Gordon as a young boy, this serves to remind her that no matter how distant her father may often seem, he was once an innocent child just like everyone else.

Circumstantial evidence seems to be mounting to indicate that Audrey is the mother of the abandoned baby. Thus far Isobel has not acted on the knowledge, but she seems to want answers.

The chapter ends in a shocking cliffhanger.



VII. Past: The Fruit of This Countrie

VII. Past: The Fruit of This Countrie Summary

Gordon has been out drinking, and he is trying to return to his lodgings. On the way, he encounters a building that has recently been bombed. Gordon enters the building and carries out a woman. He invites the woman to tea.

Gordon finds Eliza mysterious and exotic, but Charlotte and Vinny have decided they do not like Eliza even before they have met her. Gordon is smitten, obsessed with Eliza. Once while she sleeps, he cuts a lock of her hair.

Gordon remembers the day he killed Eliza. When he tells Charlotte that he intends to inform the police, she dissuades him and says that he leave the country for a while.

VII. Past: The Fruit of This Countrie Analysis

It seems that from the beginning Gordon always had a fatalistic view of the possibility of a relationship with Eliza. Though he is immediately smitten, he seems to think that Eliza's free spirit precludes the possibility of a long-term commitment.

It comes as no surprise that Charlotte and Vinny had decided that they did not like Eliza even before meeting her.



VIII. Present: Experiments With Aliens (Cont'd.), The Art of Successful Entertaining, and Killing Time

VIII. Present: Experiments With Aliens (Cont'd.), The Art of Successful Entertaining, and Killing Time Summary

Experiments With Aliens (Cont'd.)

This brief chapter returns to the conversation between Gordon and Isobel.

Isobel asks for clarification regarding Gordon's shocking statement. Gordon says that what he meant to say is that he "killed her spirit" by wanting her to change.

The Art of Successful Entertaining

On Christmas Eve, Isobel sleeps into the afternoon. Gordon prepares the Christmas turkey, and Debbie obsessively makes hundreds of mince pies. Vinny has given the baby a name: Jodi. Isobel rushes out of the house on her way to Hilary's party. Gordon warns her about limited bus service, but Isobel says that she intends to get a ride home from Malcolm Lovat.

Isobel arrives to find the party already in progress. When Isobel goes into the kitchen to greet Hilary, she sees a boy pouring vodka into the punch bowl, and Isobel takes some punch before going to search for Malcolm. Isobel notices that she knows almost no one at the party. The party guests are unfriendly to Isobel, and some even openly make fun of her dress.

Isobel encounters Richard Primrose and discovers that he has told other boys false stories about her. The boys crowd Isobel. She kicks one and flees out the back door. One of her pursuers tackles her, but Isobel manages to escape again. The boys seem to lose sight of Isobel, and she thinks she may have transformed into a tree. Isobel loses consciousness, and when she wakes, Hilary is asking her if she has seen Malcolm.

Isobel follows Hilary inside and goes into the bathroom. Isobel notices that her dress is ripped and dirty. She takes off her petticoat and shoves it in the space behind the water heater. When Isobel leaves the bathroom, she sees Hilary locked in an embrace with the captain of the football team. Isobel notices the time is 11:30, and many of the party guests are drunk.



Isobel finds Malcolm drunk and alone in Hilary's room. Isobel joins Malcolm in drinking gin. When she is drunk, Isobel tells Malcolm to kiss her, and then she passes out. When Isobel wakes, Hilary is asking her why she is on the bed. Isobel vomits all over Hilary's dolls. Hilary's parents return home and kick Isobel out of the house and even call her vile names.

Isobel walks out of the house and passes out under a bush. She wakes to Malcolm trying to put her in his car. Malcolm drives to Lover's Leap, and both pass out again. When they wake, Malcolm drives past Hilary's house, and they see that it has burned. Isobel hears that Hilary and Richard have died.

Malcolm drives to Boscrambe Woods and tells Isobel to get out of the car and follow him, even though a blizzard is occurring. After seeing a deer, Isobel thinks that Malcolm is about to kiss her. Instead, he begins walking back to the car. On the drive out of the woods, Malcolm swerves to avoid hitting a deer, and he loses control of the car and crashes into a tree. Dazed, Isobel looks at Malcolm and sees him with a bloodied face. Malcolm struggles to say "help me", but Isobel thinks that he is already dead.

Killing Time

Isobel wakes in her bed at home, and it seems as if the previous days events never happened. Her party dress is hung and intact. Charles enters her room, and she asks the date. Charles tells her it is Christmas Eve. Isobel is confused. She does not know if the previous days events really happened. She gets out of bed in an effort to find out.

Isobel telephones the Lovats and the Walshes. No one seems to be dead or injured. Isobel notices that no one but her and the baby seem to be in the house. She takes the baby to the Baxters. No one seems to be home until Mr. Baxter arrives. Audrey and Mrs. Baxter arrive soon after.

While Mrs. Baxter goes to heat water for tea, Audrey tells Isobel that Mr. Baxter is angry with the belief that Audrey has been with a boy. Isobel still suspects that Audrey is the mother of the baby, and she asks Audrey. Audrey does not answer, but she takes off her hat to reveal that Mr. Baxter has cut off all of her hair.

Mr. Baxter enters the room and accuses Isobel of being a bad influence on Audrey. He is verbally abusive to all present. Mr. Baxter waves a gun. He then puts the gun on the mantel before grabbing Audrey and demanding to know who impregnated her. Audrey answers that it was Mr. Baxter. Isobel tries to help Audrey, but Mr. Baxter punches Isobel in the face. Mrs. Baxter is shocked and asks if Audrey's statement is true. She leaves the room and then reenters carrying a knife. She stabs Mr. Baxter. He falls to the floor, dead.

Eunice and Carmen arrive and debate about how to best handle the situation. Carmen suggests burying Mr. Baxter, and Eunice agrees. Isobel, Eunice, and Carmen work to dig a shallow grave in the garden. The three drag Mr. Baxter to the hole. After they bury him, they go back inside for tea. Eunice begins cleaning the room. Mrs. Baxter talks cheerfully about when Mr. Baxter will return home. Isobel feels sick and goes home.



Isobel sleeps, and when she awakes she goes downstairs and sees Gordon with the baby. She asks how the baby got back to Arden, and then Isobel sees a half-eaten turkey. She asks what day it is, and she learns that it is Christmas day. Isobel runs out of the house in her nightdress, causing a car to swerve and hit a tree. Malcolm Lovat drives the car. Again, Isobel watches Malcolm die. Neighbors run out of their houses, and Isobel sees Mr. Baxter among them.

VIII. Present: Experiments With Aliens (Cont'd.), The Art of Successful Entertaining, and Killing Time Analysis

Experiments With Aliens (Cont'd.)

Gordon gives Isobel an answer she can believe and one that retracts his previous confession.

The Art of Successful Entertaining

Early on, the reader can see that the chapter is titled in a sarcastic manner. The terms "successful entertaining" makes one think of a sophisticated party, but the actual event that Isobel attends includes the basest of human behavior.

Isobel does not seem to react as one would expect to the many unpleasant events of the chapter. She does not seem to be embarrassed when other partygoers are making fun of her, and her account of being pursued by the young men does not convey the emotion of fear that one would expect Isobel to feel. She seems numb even before she joins Malcolm in drinking.

Some element of satisfaction or revenge occurs. First, Isobel vomits in Hilary's bed, and that seems to be something Hilary deserves. Then the Walsh's house burns to the ground and perhaps kills two of the partygoers, and this comes after Hilary's parents were so rude to Isobel. It is likely Isobel's discarded petticoat that starts the blaze.

The chapter ends in horror as Malcolm dies.

Killing Time

Usually the phrase "killing time" means to do something to occupy an excess amount of time, but in the case of this chapter it seems to mean a time in which to commit murder or somehow be a witness to the death of a person.

Just like Isobel displayed little emotion in the previous chapter, Eunice and Carmen act as if burying a murder victim in a shallow grave is an everyday occurrence. Murder is out of character for Mrs. Baxter, and this is further illustrated when she fails to comprehend what she has done and believes that Mr. Baxter is still alive.

Isobel again seems to behave as if she is numb, as if she is in a dream. When she finally does snap out of her lethargy and panics at the thought of losing a day and runs out of the house, she once again witnesses the death of Malcolm, and this time she causes the accident.



IX. Present and X. Maybe: There Is Another World But It Is This One

IX. Present and X. Maybe: There Is Another World But It Is This One Summary

IX. Present

This part contains no text.

X. Maybe: There Is Another World But It Is This One

Isobel wakes to the smell of cooking bacon. She notices that much is different about her bedroom. She looks in the mirror and sees that she looks healthier and happier. Isobel goes downstairs and first sees Charles enjoying a good breakfast. Then she sees Gordon, Charlotte, Vinny, and some unidentified person. Everyone seems to be happy and getting along. Isobel continues into the kitchen and sees that the unidentified person sitting next to Gordon is Eliza.

The family enjoys a wonderful dinner and a happy Christmas celebration. They hear a car horn outside the house. Eliza looks outside and says to Isobel, "It's your boyfriend". Malcolm enters and greets everyone. He tells Isobel that he is taking her to visit his parents, and Isobel is surprised to learn that Malcolm's mother is well. Isobel wonders if she is dead or if perhaps they are all dead.

Once in the car, Malcolm says that he thinks they should go for a drive. Isobel hopes that Malcolm intends something intimate. She believes she is dreaming. Malcolm asks if Isobel would like to get engaged after the New Year. Isobel is confused and asks Malcolm if he is driving to Boscrame Woods. After he answers yes, Isobel says to stop the car and warns of an accident. Isobel sees an out of control car approaching, and it strikes Malcolm's car. As in previous versions, Malcolm dies.

Isobel sees a variety of images and feels a range of sensations. Many do not make sense, such as the feeling that she is being kissed. Isobel has the impression that she is in a hospital room surrounded by family and friends. Isobel begins to make sense of the images. She believes she is in the hospital and the kiss was a paramedic trying to resuscitate her. Isobel sees another bed in the room with another patient. She believes the other patient is telling her a story that begins with the arrival of a baby.

IX. Present and X. Maybe: There Is Another World But It Is This One Analysis

IX. Present



Of all of the narrative tricks used thus far, this one is perhaps the most unusual. Possible reasons for this section containing no text include the distortion of time. Perhaps to Isobel the present has ceased to exist.

X. Maybe: There Is Another World But It Is This One

By titling this part "Maybe", Isobel seems to further acknowledge that time has been distorted so much that she can no longer distinguish present from past.

Unlike the previous times that Isobel woke to repeated Christmas Eves or Christmases, this time Isobel is not at first aware that time may be repeating. The scene at Arden is so idyllic that even Isobel thinks she is in heaven or dreaming. The thought of Boscrambe Woods jolts her memory, and she remembers that the combination of Malcolm and his car ends in death. This connection between Boscrambe Woods and memory may be somehow connected to Isobel's suppressed memories of her mother in the woods.



XI. Past: The Bonny Bonny Road

XI. Past: The Bonny Bonny Road Summary

Servants prepare for the arrival of Sir Edward and Lady de Breville and their new baby. The baby is named Esme. One day, while a servant takes baby Esme for a walk in a pram, Maude Potter steals baby Esme from the carriage.

Maude has lost five babies of her own, and after she brings home baby Esme, Maude's husband, Herbert, sees newspaper articles about the stolen baby. Maude says she will name the baby Violet Angela. As Violet Angela grows up, she displays an aggressive, sometimes mean, nature. When Violet Angela is twelve, Maude and Herbert agree that she is out of control. Herbert molests Violet Angela, and when Violet Angela is fourteen, a neighbor catches Violet Angela with her husband. Maude questions Violet Angela about the incident with the neighbor, and Violet Angela says that she does the same thing with Herbert. Maude does not believe Violet Angela, and she confines her to her room.

Maude and Herbert discuss options. Herbert says that he has found a job for Violet Angela as a servant in a rich household. Before Maude and Herbert can act on any plan, Violet Angela escapes. She returns during the night intending to kill Maude and Herbert, but instead she steals money and runs away.

Violet Angela works in a teashop, and the same man comes in every Friday at 2 pm. The man asks Violet Angela's name and age. She replies that she is eighteen. The man rents an apartment for Violet Angela, and after she gets into legal trouble, he helps her get a new identity. Her new name is Eliza Jane Dennis.

When Eliza has a baby, her benefactor sells it to Dr. Lovat.

Eliza occasionally works as a high-priced prostitute. One of her clients is Sir Edward de Breville.

One night Eliza meets a shy, disfigured red-haired soldier in a bomb shelter. Soon after, she decides she has had enough of life as she has known it, and she begins to leave. Just as she is leaving, an air raid siren sounds, and the house is hit by a bomb. A Royal Air Force officer carries her from the building and introduces himself as Gordon Fairfax. Gordon invites Eliza to tea.

Eliza thinks how she never meant to be unfaithful to Gordon. She thinks about how the only person she ever loved besides Charles and Isobel was the red-haired soldier in the bomb shelter. Eliza also thinks about how that soldier is the biological father of Charles. Eliza decides to take Charles and Isobel to the store and invite Gordon to join them on a picnic. In the woods, Gordon chases after Eliza and demands to know whom she is having an affair with. Eliza admits her past, and Gordon smashes her head into a tree.



Eliza is not dead. She hears someone approaching, and she thinks it is Gordon returning to apologize and help her. It is not Gordon. It is a man she had an affair with, a man named Peter. Peter beats Eliza with one of her shoes, and Eliza dies.

The narrator reveals that Sir Edward had purchased Esme as a baby while he was visiting Paris.

XI. Past: The Bonny Bonny Road Analysis

This chapter contains all the details necessary for a full history of Eliza.

The marital situation between Sir Edward and lady Irene is somewhat similar to the situation between Gordon and Eliza in that both husbands are at first attracted to the wife's lack of convention and later wish their wives were more complacent.

Some of the revelations are surprising and disturbing. If Eliza's child was sold to Dr. Lovat, that could mean that Eliza is the mother of Malcolm Lovat, and Malcolm and Isobel are half siblings. Sir Edward de Breville being a client of the adult Eliza is disturbing until at the end of the chapter the narrator reveals that Eliza is not Sir Edward's biological daughter.

In addition to the first name Peter, the dialogue containing the statement "I am older than you" points to Mr. Baxter as being Eliza's murderer. That statement is also something Mr. Baxter frequently says to Mrs. Baxter when he is being abusive.



XII. Present: This Green and Laughing World

XII. Present: This Green and Laughing World Summary

Isobel wakes and asks a nurse about the woman in the other bed. The nurse says there has not been anyone in the other bed. Isobel learns that the current date is April, 23 1960, and she has been in the hospital since April 1. Eunice and Carmen visit, and Eunice says that a tree in the backyard of Arden fell on Isobel while Gordon was trying to chop it down.

Audrey visits and Isobel learns more about events of recent weeks. Mr. Baxter killed himself over depression from being forced to leave his job as headmaster. Mr. Rice still lodges with the Fairfaxes at Arden. There never was a baby left on the doorstep, but the dog that arrived at the backdoor still lives with the family. Hilary and Richard are alive and well. Malcolm is also alive, but he is missing. It seems that one day he took his car and left medical school, and no one has heard from him.

Isobel wonders if reality can be relative, and she imagines an alternate reality for Mr. Baxter. She imagines that Mrs. Baxter discovered that Mr. Baxter did molest Audrey. Mrs. Baxter first feeds Mr. Baxter poison mushrooms, and then Mrs. Baxter shoots Mr. Baxter to make it appear that he shot himself.

Isobel learns from Charles that the shoe, lock of hair, and handkerchief that she attributed to Eliza never existed but the powder compact does. Isobel is released in May and feels almost normal by June.

One day Debbie is in the kitchen and appears to be in discomfort. Isobel asks if anything is wrong, and Debbie grabs her own midsection. Isobel helps Debbie to the sofa, and Debbie's pain intensifies. As Isobel yells for Vinny, Debbie goes into labor. Charles and Gordon arrive home and are amazed that Debbie has had a baby. The baby has the same hair color as Charles. Debbie names the baby Renee.

On Midsummer's Eve, Isobel takes the dog and a book to the park. Later that evening she watches the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from her bedroom window. Isobel imagines that a man is in the room with her, and she embraces him.

XII. Present: This Green and Laughing World Analysis

If Isobel entered the hospital on April 1, then the entire story to this point has been a product of her imagination, an imagination inspired as much by trauma and medication



as much as memories, both surface and suppressed. Much of the chapter presents a distinction between events "real" and events imagined.

In the segment where Isobel presents an alternative version of Mr. Baxter's death, she seems to be also saying that the imagination is no less significant than what we classify as "reality".

Isobel's imaginary man in her room is almost certainly William Shakespeare.



XIII. Past: The Original Sin

XIII. Past: The Original Sin Summary

A first person narrator that is not Isobel describes Robert Kavanagh, the forester. The narrator is Lady Fairfax, the wife of Sir Francis Fairfax. Sir Francis and Lady Fairfax host their wedding feast. The wedding guests admire the jewel that Sir Francis has given to his wife, and Lady Fairfax wonders about the true nature of the relationship between Sir Francis and Lady Margaret.

Once Lady Fairfax catches Sir Francis and Lady Margaret in a compromising situation. Lady Margaret is a minor who is supposed to be in the care of Sir Francis. Lady Margaret's tutor is Master Shakespeare. Once Lady Fairfax notices bruises on Lady Margaret, and Lady Margaret admits that they are from Sir Francis. Lady Fairfax tries to question Sir Francis, but he throws her across the room. Lady Margaret is pregnant, and Master Shakespeare is worried about his pupil.

Lady Fairfax spends a great deal of time in the woods, and there she first speaks to Robert Kavanagh. Once while in the forest, Lady Fairfax sees Kavanagh naked and bathing. On another occasion, Lady Fairfax ventures far into the woods to the little house where Kavanagh lives. She enters the house, and it is empty. When Kavanagh returns, the two have an intimate encounter.

Sir Francis orders Lady Margaret to a convent, and Lady Margaret kills herself. Master Shakespeare is disturbed, and he decides to leave Fairfax Manor. Confidentially, he advises Lady Fairfax to do the same.

Lady Fairfax runs away with Robert Kavanagh. She takes nothing with her but her dog. She casts away deep into the woods the jewel Sir Francis gave her.

XIII. Past: The Original Sin Analysis

In covering the lives of those surrounding Sir Francis Fairfax, Isobel returns to her narrative of the opening chapter. And by titling the chapter "The Original Sin", she both refers to the biblical story and implies that these events set in motion the circumstances that affected the rest of the Fairfaxes all the way until Isobel's time.

Lady Fairfax presents a clear parallel to Isobel's mother, Eliza. Sir Francis bears little similarity to Gordon besides being a stifling influence on Lady Fairfax's free spirit. It is unclear what Robert Kavanagh symbolizes. Perhaps he is the ideal man, or perhaps he provides the way to freedom, the road to a life free of oppression.



XIV. Future: Streets of Trees

XIV. Future: Streets of Trees Summary

From a point far in the future from 1960, past the turn of the century, Isobel tells what happened to the remaining principle characters of the story.

Audrey became one of the first women ordained into the Church of England. She administered a parish in Liverpool, married, and had three children. Despite her childhood, Audrey developed a view of the universe that was incredibly positive.

While six months pregnant, Carmen died with her husband in an auto accident in 1962.

Eunice became a geologist and worked for oil companies before being elected to Parliament. She died of lung cancer at age fifty-two. Isobel attended the funeral and discovered that she missed Eunice.

Hilary became a lawyer. She had a couple of marriages and three children. Eventually, Hilary and Isobel became close friends.

Charles went to America and found work in the film industry. For many years he directed low budget science fiction movies. The movies were often poorly received by critics, and they rarely did well at the box office. But over time, Charles's work attracted a cult following. In his later years, Charles was always in demand at film festivals and television talk shows. He had several beautiful wives. Isobel says that Charles enjoyed his life to the fullest.

Debbie and Gordon had a happy life. Their youngest child, Renee, worked as a legal secretary in Hilary's law office.

Malcolm got involved in the music industry and developed a drug problem. Isobel last saw him in 1967. He died six months later.

Vinny outlived both Gordon and Debbie. In Vinny's final days, Isobel returned to Arden, and after Vinny passed, Isobel took over the house. By that time Isobel was a successful author of historical romances, and she found that Arden provided a good place to write.

Boscrambe Woods was cleared for a highway project. During the clearing, a skeleton and a ring were found. The ring had the engraving "To EF with all my love, G". But Isobel chose not to see that as evidence that her mother died in the woods, because Isobel has always felt like her mother was alive.

XIV. Future: Streets of Trees Analysis

The function of this chapter is to wrap up all, or almost all, loose ends. Isobel answers some remaining questions and provides a conclusion to the lives of many of the characters. When she mentions her profession, this explains the flavor of much of the preceding narrative, and it also explains some of the strange gaps in perspective. Isobel, an experienced and talented writer of historical romance, has presented the entire book *Human Croquet* as a historical romance from her vantage point in the twenty-first century.



Poem and A Good Game for a Party

Poem and A Good Game for a Party Summary

Poem

The excerpt from a poem tells of three roads. One road is the way of wickedness. The second road is the way of righteousness. The third road is the way to "fair Elfland".

A Good Game for a Party

The instructions for the game called Human Croquet involve two groups of people, those wearing blindfolds and those not. The people wearing blindfolds function as the croquet balls, and they are directed by those not wearing blindfolds.

Poem and A Good Game for a Party Analysis

Poem

The excerpt comes from the ballad Thomas the Rhymer.

The purpose of the excerpt seems to be that there are three basic choices: the right way, the wrong way, and the richer and more beautiful route of imagination. Isobel is an example of one who embraced the path of imagination. Each of the characters mentioned in Part XIV can be classified according to one of the three paths. Charles and Isobel take the path of imagination.

A Good Game for a Party

The publication data page mentions that the excerpt and illustration comes from *The Home Entertainer*, the same book that Mrs. Baxter and her sister had fond memories of.

The purpose of this excerpt seems to be to illustrate that people are both affected and exert influence over others' lives. The blindfolded people are at the mercy of others, much like a young Charles and Isobel were once at the mercy of the adults in their lives. The non-blindfolded players symbolize how people, intentionally or not, affect everyone around them.



Characters

Isobel Fairfax

Isobel is an English teenager with an impressive intellect and a hilarious sense of humor. Both of these qualities make her a wonderful narrator. Her vast array of learning enables her to cover historical periods with accuracy, and her sense of humor can make the most ordinary circumstance interesting or the most horrifying incident bearable.

Isobel tells the reader early on in grand colorful terms that she is a large person. Later she gives more details, and the reader learns that she is about five feet ten inches tall and weighs about 145 pounds. While this is certainly not gigantic or obese, it is more than enough to make a sixteen-year-old young woman self-conscious.

Isobel has a fondness for the writings of Shakespeare. She delights in reading his works and imagining him as a real person and not just a literary figure. But it is as a literary model that Isobel may derive the most from her love of Shakespeare. Just like William Shakespeare often followed moments of tragedy with moments of comedy to keep his audiences engaged in his plays, Isobel often follows moments of extreme tragedy or violence in her tale with moments of humor. At times, she even makes jokes during these moments of horror in her characteristic dry manner.

Toward the end of the story, the reader can see a different sort of Isobel. Instead of a teenage narrator, one is presented with narrative from an Isobel that is beyond middle age. At this time, one can imagine that the early portions were also told by this older Isobel looking back, but that realization does nothing to detract from the enjoyment of hearing the story from a bored and often frustrated sixteen-year-old young woman.

Eliza Fairfax; a.k.a. Esme de Breville, Violet Angela Potter

For the majority of the novel, Eliza is a mystery. She is first constructed as a mysterious person with no family roots, a person from an uncertain region of England, and a person who abandons her children. As the plot progresses, Charles and Isobel long for their missing mother, and the reader craves more details about the shadowy figure, Eliza.

Details about Eliza do come slowly, but they do not come in the direct first person narrative of Isobel. Details of Eliza's life come in the sections set in the past and told by an unnamed third person narrator. Readers learn about Eliza's life in a sort of backward fashion. First, one learns about her life as a wife and mother and her untimely demise, and then near the end of the novel, one learns about her childhood and adulthood before she met Gordon.



Not much can be pinned down as true where Eliza is concerned because of the multiple narrators with questionable reliability. What might be true consists of the following. Eliza was purchased as an infant in France and first had the name Esme de Breville. After she was abducted by Maude Potter while still an infant, her name became Violet Angela. Due to her disobedient nature and early adventures in what could be called prostitution, Violet Angela ran away from the Potters and made her way to London where she worked first as a waitress and later as a much sought after prostitute. As a result of some legal trouble, she changed her name to Eliza and met Gordon Fairfax when he saved her from a fire. She may have been murdered, though multiple suspects are presented in differing versions of the event.

Charles Fairfax

Isobel's brother seems a bit of a pitiable character throughout much of the book. He laments his short stature, especially as compared to his sister's unusual height for a female. Isobel worries about him ever finding a girlfriend because he is so unattractive. Charles has red hair, something unusual and perhaps unknown in the Fairfax family, and this causes his crass grandmother and aunt to suggest that perhaps he has a father other than Gordon.

Charles does not excel at academics. In fact, he opted to go to work in a department store rather than attend university. Charles lacks the sort of social skills that one needs to have a large and dynamic network of friends. Charles prefers instead to dedicate his time to his hobbies of reading and speculating about alien abductions.

Charles's life is not always sad. Isobel tells us late in the story that the qualities that made Charles odd in 1960 England served him well later in America. Charles became a well-known director of low budget science fiction films, and over time he gained a devoted group of fans.

Gordon Fairfax

Gordon's best personality trait is closely related to the one that irritates those around him. Gordon is by nature a kind person, but he is also at times too passive. This passivity may be the result of being too many years under the domination of his mother, Charlotte. In the times that Gordon is away from the control of his mother, he seems to do well. During World War II, he served as an RAF officer and fighter pilot. After the questionable death of his first wife, Gordon travels abroad and manages to heal and to find a successful wife that he has for the rest of his life. But it is in the times that Gordon is under the direct control of his mother that he allows his mother's aggressive, and at times cruel, actions to harm his marriage and family life.



Debbie Fairfax

This character is Gordon's second wife who he met while in New Zealand. She tries to be a good stepmother to Isobel and Charles, and for the most part, she enjoys a civil relationship with them. Debbie has an intense desire to have a child of her own, and she works hard to be a good homemaker. However, one of her most notable traits is her utter lack of skill at cooking.

Vinny Fairfax

This character is Isobel's aunt. Because of her personality she has long had the nickname "Vinegary Vinny". Vinny was married once briefly, but she spends most of her long life living as a spinster in Arden and often making others' lives miserable.

Charlotte Fairfax

This character is Isobel's grandmother. While she dotes in her son, Gordon, and is mostly kind to her two grandchildren, she has a deep hatred for Gordon's wife, Eliza. This hatred and constant criticism of Eliza causes marital troubles and eventually ends the marriage.

Sir Francis Fairfax

This character was the first of the Fairfax line that extends all the way to Isobel. He gained the favor of Queen Elizabeth and built a mansion on a sizable estate on what later became the town of Lythe and what Isobel calls "Streets of Trees".

Lady Fairfax

This bride of Sir Francis soon falls in love with a man in Sir Francis's employ. Legends circulate about her disappearing in the woods.

Audrey Baxter

This character is Isobel's next door neighbor. She is shy and quiet, though this is likely in reaction to the oppression from her father.

Peter Baxter

This headmaster of the local grammar school is gruff and possibly abusive to his wife and daughter.



Mrs. Baxter

This jolly next door neighbor of Isobel is a homemaker and is always making some kind of tasty treat. She is Scottish, and Isobel enjoys listening to her accent.

Eunice Primrose

This character attached herself to Isobel and Isobel's friends. She is intelligent but often annoys others by constantly explaining things.

Richard Primrose

This brother of Eunice has a long-lasting crush on Isobel, but Isobel finds him revolting.

Carmen McDade

This is one of Isobel's close friends. She quits school and takes a job in a cheese store.

Hilary Walsh

This beautiful and wealthy young woman often inspires jealousy in Isobel and her friends.

Malcolm Lovat

This good-looking medical student is a friend of Isobel.

Jodi

This is the name that Vinny gives to the infant that Isobel found at the back door or Arden.

Sir Edward de Breville

This heir to a vast British fortune marries a character from a wealthy Argentinean family.

Lady Irene de Breville

This character, from a wealthy Argentinean family, marries an heir to a vast British fortune.



Maude Potter

This character steals a wealthy couple's baby.

Herbert Potter

This character tries to act as a father to the baby his wife steals.

Robert Kavanagh

This character is employed as a forester by Sir Francis.

Imogen

This character is Isobel's daughter.

Mr. Rice

This man rents a room in the Fairfax's home.



Objects/Places

Lythe

This is the name of the town where Isobel lives.

Arden

This is the name of the Fairfax's house.

Sithean

This is the name of the Baxter's house.

The Home Entertainer

This is the name of a book of party games. One of the games described in the book is called Human Croquet.

Boscrambe Woods

Many important events take place in these woods, including Eliza's disappearance and Malcolm and Isobel's auto accidents.

Lover's Leap

Malcolm and Isobel sometimes go to this place in his car.

Knightsbridge

This is the name for an area of London where Gordon rescues Eliza from a bombed house.

Ye Olde Sunne Inne

At this location, Isobel encounters a time warp and possibly meets a young William Shakespeare.



Streets of Trees

This is what Isobel calls her neighborhood.

Fairfax Manor

This is the name of the estate built by Sir Francis Fairfax. In the twentieth century, it is the location of the houses on what Isobel calls Streets of Trees.



Themes

Alternate Realities

Throughout *Human Croquet*, different narrators present alternate versions of reality. The first dramatic example concerns the death of Isobel's mother, Eliza. Isobel begins the novel by stating that her mother disappeared, and no one knows her whereabouts. Later, a third person narrator tells the story in the chapter "Half-Day Closing", where the children find their mother bloodied and crumpled against a tree. The reader recognizes that Eliza is most likely dead, but the young children believe their mother is merely sleeping. Over the years, the children are told various stories by relatives that include versions where Eliza is well but in a hospital and Eliza ran off with another man. Throughout the book, the fate of Eliza is revised, and it is ultimately up to the reader to decide which version of reality to choose.

Yet another example of alternate realities concerns Isobel's triple repeat of Christmas Eve and Christmas day. Each time she relives these periods the setting is completely different, and different extraordinary, sometimes violent, events occur, but the versions always end the same. Usually sometime before the end of the alternate version Isobel remembers the ending of the previous version, but she is unable to fully change the ending.

After the reason for some of the more surreal events of the plot are revealed, that is not the end of alternate versions of reality. Even when Isobel is fully aware that she has been in the hospital and after she has been fully informed of events of recent weeks, she presents to the reader an alternate version of the death of Mr. Baxter. It seems that Isobel as playful narrator is saying that often our version of reality involves a choice.

Loneliness

Loneliness or isolation is one of the most prevalent though subtle themes in the novel *Human Croquet*. Every one of the principle characters suffers from feelings of isolation. Isobel, though surrounded by family and friends, has intense feelings of loneliness through her childhood and teen years. She has friends, but she rarely shares everything with her friends. She has a crush on a young man, but she cannot reveal that crush because the young man thinks of her only as a friend. Isobel feels a deep longing for her mother, and she knows that some things she cannot discuss with anyone are exactly the types of things she would have discussed with her mother.

The secondary characters also experience isolation. Charles is regarded as odd and does not seem to have any friends at all. Isobel attributes this to his lack of physical attractiveness and short height. Audrey, possibly Isobel's closest friend during her childhood, is extremely introverted due to the abuse from her father. And Mrs. Baxter, Audrey's mother, though outwardly friendly hides the abuse she suffers from her



husband and cannot forge any real friendships while under the oppression of Mr. Baxter. Even Malcolm, the object of Isobel's affection, feels completely alone and misunderstood, and he ultimately responds by running away. Isobel and Charles's father, Gordon, hides a terrible secret and cannot share it or any version of the truth with anyone. The children's other living relative, Vinny, is a caustic person and not liked by anyone.

Each of the characters because of specific circumstances suffer from loneliness and isolation.

Belief versus Truth

Near the close of the novel *Human Croquet*, the author includes an excerpt from the poem "Thomas the Rhymer". The excerpt presents three choices a person can make in choosing a route to follow. There is the way of righteousness. There is the way of wickedness. And there is the way to "Elfland", a place of magic and imagination. This presentation of choice in matters of truth relates to a larger message the author presents: that truth is often a matter of what we chose to believe.

The first and simplest example of this concerns the children's suppression of a memory and continued belief that their mother is well and alive. Though they witnessed real and vivid events, they chose to believe first a variety of stories told by relatives, and later in their teens Isobel and particularly Charles like to search for relics of their mother and play detective. These consist of a shoe, a compact mirror, a handkerchief, and a lock of hair. There might exist some "truth" buried in their memories, but Isobel and Charles chose to believe that the few artifacts point to a living and real mother.

The element belief plays in truth cannot be dismissed as an aspect of a naïve and underdeveloped child's mind. When Isobel is experienced and well past middle age, she receives news a skeleton and an engraved ring have been found during a construction project. To anyone else, these items would constitute conclusive proof of the fate of Eliza, but not to Isobel. As Isobel says, she chooses to believe her mother is alive and well. To Isobel, the fleeting encounter with the woman at the grocery store is true, and the evidence in the woods is irrelevant.



Style

Point of View

The narrative point of view is one of the many interesting features of the novel *Human Croquet*. On the surface, the narrative is presented by the character Isobel who introduces herself at the opening of the book. In describing her role as narrator, Isobel says, "I am Isobel Fairfax, I am the alpha and omega of narrators (I am omniscient) and I know the beginning and end". This seems to say that Isobel is the narrator throughout, but in the matter of point of view it is not so simple.

The chapters that take place in the present, 1960, are told in the first person by Isobel, and the narrative perspective seems simple and straightforward. In other chapters, the setting is in the past, often when Isobel was too young to perceive events in a coherent manner or often many years before Isobel was born. These chapters are most often presented by a third person narrator, though at least one of them is presented by a first person narrator in the form of the character, Lady Fairfax, a contemporary of William Shakespeare.

Adding further complication to the matter of narrative perspective are the settings of some of the chapters Isobel narrates. Well into the novel the reader learns that the majority of the tale is not set in the reality of Isobel's life in 1960, but in her confused imagination during a one-month period following her sixteenth birthday. Regardless, each of the novel's settings and narrators present riveting tales that compliment those that precede and follow.

Setting

The general physical setting of the novel *Human Croquet* is the village of Lythe in the year 1960. Other more specific settings include the Fairfax home, which they call Arden. Isobel also spends a significant amount of time in her next door neighbors home, called Sithean. The undeveloped area, Boscrambe Woods, is the setting for a few of the violent incidents in the story.

The physical setting, particularly the year 1960, is merely one element of the general setting. The principle character and narrator, Isobel, believes she encounters time warps which transport her to various times in the past, even as far back as the sixteenth century. In this sense, the imagination of the narrator is every bit as important a setting as any other single physical location. Perhaps Isobel's imagination is an even more significant setting once the reader learns that the majority of the tale has been created while Isobel lies in a hospital bed in varying states of consciousness. The episodes that repeat and seem to progress in a different manner only to have the same ending are wholly a product of Isobel's detailed imagination.



Other settings that add color to the tale include Fairfax Manor in the sixteenth century and London during World War II. In the sixteenth century setting, the readers meet the characters Lady Fairfax and Robert Kavanagh and get to witness their adventuresome romance. In 1940s London, the readers meet Eliza (a.k.a. Violet Angela) and her rescue by the dashing RAF pilot, Gordon Fairfax.

Language and Meaning

The language of *Human Croquet* is surprisingly mainstream, considering the great variety of time periods and literary topics Isobel and the other narrators cover. Even when covering sixteenth century people and events, the narrators use modern contemporary English and do not engage in mimicry of Shakespearean English as some readers might expect. In one chapter of the novel, William Shakespeare is an active character. This portion of the novel is presented by a first person contemporary of Shakespeare, and the language of the narrative is compatible with all other sections of the novel.

However, to say that the language is mainstream is not to say that it is mundane. On the contrary, the narrators, particularly Isobel, love language, and it shows in the wide variety of terms and vivid descriptions of events. Isobel is a student of English history and literature, and her narration demonstrates an impressive knowledge of each. Late in the novel, one learns that Isobel becomes a successful writer of historical romance, and this, in part, explains some of the delightful language, particularly methods of describing situations and people. The inclusion of specific vocabulary is not limited to literary terms. To explain some of the more peculiar occurrences, Isobel sometimes borrows vocabulary of a science fiction nature from her brother Charles.

While the language is certainly approachable and easily understood, there are likely terms that are unfamiliar to some contemporary American readers. Rather than present an impediment to understanding and enjoying the novel, these terms enrich the readers' experience.

Structure

The novel *Human Croquet* consists of fourteen parts that usually contain one or more chapters. In addition, there is a poem and an excerpt from a book on party activities originally published in the 1920s. This structure is not without deviations. One part of the book, Part IX, contains no text at all. Some of the chapters within the larger parts can be lengthy, and one consists of only a single page.

The plot progression of *Human Croquet* is non-linear. The narrative moves freely between the "current" setting, 1960, and both the past and the future. These shifts in time setting are easy to follow because the parts are usually titled "Present" or "Past". Exceptions to these titles include one section that has no title, one section titled "Future", and one section titled "Maybe".

The frequent departures from the principle setting of 1960 England are surprisingly non-disruptive. This might be attributed in part to the sections taking place outside of 1960 having different narrators than Isobel. Another reason could be the relevance those other sections have to the plot development of the 1960 narrative. For instance, the reader learns that Isobel and Charles desperately miss their mother, and then an entire section is dedicated to their early childhood while their mother was still present in their lives.

Even within the parts set in 1960 that Isobel narrates, departures from linear time are abundant. Isobel encounters what she calls "time warps," and she seems to relive the same day multiple times.



Quotes

"But time has already begun to fly, soon Eliza will come and ruin everything. Eliza will be my mother. I am Isobel Fairfax, I am the alpha and omega of narrators (I am omniscient) and I know the beginning and end. The beginning is the word and the end is the silence. And in between are the stories. This is one of mine."

Part 1, p. 20

"My human geography is extraordinary. I am as large as England. My hands are as big as the Lakes, my belly the size of Dartmoor and my breasts rise up like the Peaks. My spine is the Pennines, my mouth the Mallyan Spout. My hair flows into the Humber estuary and causes it to flood and my nose is a white cliff at Dover. I am a big girl, in other words."

Part II, p. 23

"I miss my mother. The ache that is Eliza comes out of nowhere, squeezing my heart and leaving me bereft. This is how she affects me—I'll be crossing the road, queuing for a bus, standing in a shop and suddenly, for no discernable reason, I want my mother so badly that I can't speak for tears. Where is she? Why doesn't she come?"

Part II, p. 77

"Eliza stood on tiptoe and whispered in Gordon's ear, her curls tickling his check, her voice burning like sugar, Darling, if we don't get a place of our own soon, then I'm going to leave you. Understand?"

Part III, p. 105

"When she's talking to boys, Hilary has a way of holding her head on one side and half-closing her unnaturally blue eyes, a position that for some reason has the effect of raising the testosterone levels in a radius of ten feet."

Part IV, p. 128

"In the days after Gordon drove into the night, the Widow and Vinny were as nervous as cats. Every car engine, every footstep seemed to put them on alert. They scoured the newspapers every day as if there might be a secret message hidden in the text."

Part V, p. 157

"Debbie was right—the baby has been accepted on the streets of trees without a murmur and, as no one has come forward to claim their mislaid infant, we appear to have it for life. Perhaps it really is a changeling, deposited by mistake, the fairies not realizing that we had no real baby in the house to exchange—for of course, the fairies' tithe to hell must be paid in human life every seven years."

Part VI, p. 191



"Slightly chastened for only a moment by Dorothy's commanding presence, the baying pack now close in on me in a way that's really quite frightening. They're all built like half-backs and I don't think that the fox tippet's going to be an adequate champion if it comes to a contest between us. Richard's keeping his distance on the outside of the circle, reviewing my discomfort with a supercilious smile. I vow to kill him at the first opportunity."

Part VIII, pp. 237-238

"Do I still have free will—maybe if I just stay in bed—not go to the Walsh's party, certainly not go driving anywhere with Malcolm Lovat—then everyone will be safe. I close my eyes and try and force myself back to sleep (perhaps this is what cats are doing—sleeping to try and make things disappear. Dogs maybe), but I've murdered sleep as soundly as I've destroyed the laws of time."

Part VIII, p. 251

"'Changeling,' Maude Potter said out loud to herself as she put the week's laundry through the wringer in the wash-house out back. That's what happened when you picked up a child without knowing anything about it. For all she knew that baby in its lace-clad finery had been placed in the pram, in that park, especially to fool them. As some kind of trap."

Part XI, p. 296

"An avalanche of white snow seems to envelop the car and we're plunged into a white world of silence, the silence of absolute deafness. I am doomed to relive this experience again and again, each time the details are different, but the ending is always the same."

Part X, p. 278

"The only sound is that of opalescent fairy wings, beating in the dark air and the sweeping of the tiny fairy brooms, cleansing our house. I take his hand. I let him pull me down next to him. I let him kiss me. He tastes of cloves. We melt into one and time collapses."

Part XII, p. 323



Topics for Discussion

In examining the point of view in *Human Croquet*, the reader might at times become confused over the question, "But how could Isobel know this?" At various times in the novel, Isobel offers explanations. Discuss some of those explanations, or discuss alternate explanations that Isobel does not offer.

On several occasions, Isobel or other characters make reference to her tall height or large size. But then in one instance, Isobel gives her exact height and weight (though she gives her weight in the British units of "stones"). Find that instance, convert to units everyone understands, and discuss whether Isobel truly is a large sixteen-year-old, particularly by today's standards.

Several times in the novel, Isobel makes reference to psychiatrists. Usually this in conjunction with Debbie's odd behavior, and never in terms of suppressed memories on the part of her and her brother Charles. Both Charles and Isobel both saw Eliza's body. How could they go the rest of their lives thinking her disappearance was a mystery?

Relative to the ending, Isobel dreams while in her hospital bed, the circumstances of life in Lythe, and the end of the novel that Isobel presents after her recovery are happy. But even in her happy ending, it still seems there was a murder and possibly a conspiracy to cover up the crime. Can the crime be written off as merely a product of Isobel's imagination, or is there any concrete evidence that still causes doubt?

At various points in the novel, particularly early on, Isobel discusses her family lineage. How accurate of a family tree can be constructed starting with Isobel and going back to the sixteen century? Can any portions of the tree after Isobel be constructed?

As the novel progresses, we learn more about some character's history. Are there characters that inspire different opinions from when readers first meet them and after the characters' histories are presented? How does a character such as Aunt Vinny fare?

Often Isobel tells of horrifying events, yet she still manages to keep the reader laughing. Discuss how humor is used to temper the impact of some of the harsh events in the plot.