

The House We Grew Up In Study Guide

The House We Grew Up In by Lisa Jewell

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Plot Summary

The House We Grew Up In, by Lisa Jewell, tells the story of the Bird family. From the exterior, the family appears to be a relatively happy, normal, suburban family. Lorelei and Colin are married and the parents of two daughters (Meg and Beth) and twin sons (Rory and Rhys). Each Easter, the family has an Easter egg hunt, which is one of Lorelei's greatest pleasures in life. She loves the colorful foils on the chocolate eggs and the whimsy of the egg hunt. It appears to be a festive tradition until the Easter when Rhys goes into his bedroom while the rest of the family is downstairs and hangs himself. Rhys' suicide devastates the family, especially since he didn't leave a note and the family is at a loss as to why he did it. While the family is in agreement that Rhys was a strange young man, the family begins to fracture following his death.

Lorelei and her neighbor Vicky build a strong friendship over time. The relationship continues to evolve into a romantic relationship, which leads to Lorelei and Colin getting a divorce. The cottage is divided into two residences; Colin lives on one side while Lorelei and Vicky live on the other. Meg moves out and into the city, eventually beginning a family of her own.

In reaction to her mother's hoarding, Meg keeps a minimalist, immaculate home. Rory gets his girlfriend Kayleigh pregnant, and they move to a commune. The relationship is short lived leading Rory to move to Thailand, where he ends up working at a nightclub. Beth stays at home, feeling a strong sense of responsibility to staying there, even after Meg tries to convince her to move out. Beth begins an affair with Meg's partner Bill. The affair comes to an end after Beth begins having panic attacks over the guilt she feels. Beth ends up following a man to Australia to try and start a new life, but the relationship is short lived.

Colin fosters a relationship with Kayleigh in order to remain close to his grandchild. Eventually, Colin and Kayleigh begin an affair, which infuriates Lorelei, who never liked Kayleigh from the start. Over time, Lorelei's hoarding becomes extreme, leaving little room for people to maneuver through the house. Meg is revolted by the hoarding and it damages their relationship. Her hoarding also causes a rift in her relationship with Vicky. While they continue their relationship, Vicky moves out to provide a better environment for her children. When Vicky gets sick, Lorelei helps to care for her.

After Vicky dies from cancer, Lorelei feels isolated and alone and continues hoarding. She begins a correspondence relationship with Jim, a man she met online. She confides in him, ultimately revealing to him her darkest secrets, including what led Rhys to take his own life. Meg learns about Beth's affair with Bill, which threatens to destroy their relationship permanently. After Lorelei unexpectedly dies, Meg is left to start sorting through the house, bringing the family together to finally heal.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

The House We Grew Up In, by Lisa Jewell, begins with an email from Lorelei to Jim. She introduces herself and gives information about her family. It's their first correspondence. It appears that Jim has contacted her first.

The next section shifts to April, 2011, where Meg, Lorelei's oldest daughter, and her daughter Molly arrive at the house Meg grew up in and where Lorelei still lives. Molly is a teenager, and the relationship between mother and daughter is improving. The house is dilapidated, with grimy windows. They prepare themselves for the worst upon entering.

The story shifts to April, 1981, during an Easter egg hunt. It's unseasonably warm and Meg and her sister Beth are collecting chocolate eggs. The girls are counting their eggs. Lorelei brings Rhys and Rory, her twin boys, around to continue the egg hunt. In the kitchen, Lorelei keeps the children's artwork. Colin, her husband, tries to get the artwork before she does to cut down on the amount she saves. Lorelei also insists on keeping the foils from the eggs, putting them in the craft box. She can't resist the pretty colors. She comments on how the foils will remind her of the day. Lorelei's sister Pandora and her sons, Tom and Ben, join them during the holiday break. Ben asks Pandora to tell them about all the stuff Lorelei collected as a child: leaves, such as ring pulls, foils, movie tickets, and the like. Lorelei asks if they're making fun of her. When Meg is asked as a grown up what her childhood was like, this is the Easter she remembers.

The story changes to April, 2011, Lorelei and Molly go around to the back door of the house to enter because the front door had been inaccessible for years.

The chapter returns to March, 1986. on a rainy Easter. Lorelei wants to show Meg a rainbow, but Meg isn't interested. She calls the other children, but they aren't interested either. Meg sees the rainbow and tells Meg that she can describe it to the other children later. Meg doesn't want to participate in the egg hunt because of the rain. Lorelei and Meg aren't getting along. Meg feels like she doesn't belong with the grownups or the children. She also begins to notice the hoarding around the house, notably the children's artwork in the kitchen. She comments on the amount of tea towels. Lorelei won't even get rid of the ones that are showing a lot of wear.

Once again, the story shifts to April, 2011, as Meg and Molly are entering Lorelei's house. The house is filled to capacity, with only a foot wide path to get through to the other rooms. Molly is scared to go through, so Meg leads the way. Meg is heavier than her mother and daughter and she squeezes through the opening. She remembers where a window should have been and uses that to guide her way through. They make their way upstairs where it smells mustier. Both are disgusted. Meg remembers arguing



with Lorelei about all of the stuff crumbling on top of her. Molly asks if Lorelei was ever normal. Meg explains that it all happened over time.

Chapter 2 begins with an email from Lorelei to Jim on Guy Fawkes Day, a British holiday. He has responded, and Lorelei is happy she hasn't scared him off. She admits to collecting things obsessively in her teens. She asks about Jim's son and signs off when the fireworks start outside.

The chapter flashes back to April, 1987. Beth has developed breasts, and Meg is jealous. Beth and Lorelei have just come from a shop called the Poundstretcher where Lorelei has purchased hangers and pan scourers. Meg and Beth talk about whether their mother has a problem, with Meg mentioning that what she'd heard about Lorelei collecting hair when she was a child. Meg goes out with her boyfriend that night and comes home early Easter morning. She finds Rhys sitting at the kitchen table; he startles her. When Meg asks why Rhys doesn't have many friends, he snaps that there's more to life than friends and that he doesn't really want to talk. Later, Meg asks Lorelei why they're having the egg hunt since the twins are now twelve. She says it's for the neighbor kids. She insists that the foils be saved from the chocolate eggs. Colin mentions selling the car to pay for a trip to Greece, since they don't need the larger car with the children grown. Lorelei refuses. Later on during that year, the house is robbed while Lorelei is out shopping; Lorelei says she won't be going on any trips because she must stay home to protect the house.

Back in the present, Meg doesn't answer a phone call. Molly asks who it was, but Meg doesn't reply. They are in Lorelei's bedroom, where she has a chair that the social worker told them she spent most of her time. Meg gets a second phone call and answers; it's Beth. Meg instantly hangs up. The chapter shifts to March, 1991. Meg and Beth are meeting in a bar in London. Meg compares herself to her sister, who is far more fetching than Meg, not to suggest that Meg isn't also attractive. Meg has moved out and asks about the family. Beth tells her that Colin, their father, is looking thin. Rory has a new group of friends who aren't great, and Rhys has been caught hanging around the girls' changing room at school. Lorelei defended him, but the family suspects something is off with Rhys.

Meg tries to get Beth to move out and come live with her; but, Beth says she can't. Back home, Beth goes to take a shower and finds Rhys naked in his parents' bed. She asks what he's doing, and he tells her he likes the electric blanket. Meg comes home for Easter and sleeps in Beth's room because Lorelei has already taken over Meg's room for storage. Lorelei and Meg argue about the state of the house. A new family, Vicky, Tim, and their baby Madeleine have moved in next door. Lorelei invites them over for Easter lunch. After Tim takes the baby back home that afternoon, Vicky returns with a bottle of wine. She and Lorelei drink and laugh for hours. Meg and Beth note their mother's behavior. Beth defends Lorelei for not being as terrible as Meg makes her out to be. Vicky thinks the house is cozy. Meg takes a tray of food up to Rhys' room. When she goes inside, she finds that Rhys has hanged himself.



Chapter 3 begins with Lorelei writing to Jim. She is sad to learn that Jim lost his son to drug addiction. She confesses that Rhys committed suicide just after his sixteenth birthday on Easter. She admits that she thinks she knows why he killed himself, but she hasn't told anyone. She then asks if Jim is at all interested in horoscopes.

In the present, Molly sits in Lorelei's chair and asks whether she slept in the chair as well. Since the bed is covered in bags and clothes, Meg suspects she had no other alternative. They go and check the other bedrooms. They can't get into Meg's old room as it's too full. They go into Beth's old room. Meg gets a call from Bill, her partner and father of her children. She asks about the boys, who are with Bill.

The chapter shifts to April, 1995. Meg and Bill have moved in together. They're unexpectedly pregnant. Bill talks about the difference between Meg and his ex-wife and how the ex-wife would have said everything was his fault. Beth calls on Easter morning. Meg notes that it is becoming more and more difficult to get Beth to leave the house. Lorelei gets on the phone and says they're getting ready for the egg hunt. Meg can hear Vicky and her daughters, Maddy and Sophie, in the background. Beth returns to the phone, and Meg asks why Lorelei isn't going to Rhys' grave; Lorelei says she's moving on. Meg is appalled and asks if Rory and Colin are going. Beth tells Meg that their father isn't there and that no one knows where he is and that Rory is didn't come home the night before.

Rory is with his new girlfriend Kayleigh, and he's in love. They talk about his mother and Rory says Kayleigh can meet her if she wants. Rory thinks about Rhys. He had esigned himself to not understanding his brother long before Rhys committed suicide. They go to Rhys' grave. His headstone reads as 'Sweet Sixteen Forever," an epitaph Lorelei decided on without consulting the family. Rory tells Kayleigh that there isn't anything "usual" in his family, stating that Rhys put an end to that. He also explains that the family tends to visit the grave on Easter, rather than on the actual date of Rhys' death. He tells Kayleigh that he loves her.

Rory takes Kayleigh to meet the family the next week. Vicky is at the house and asks where Kayleigh is from. Kayleigh explains that she's originally from Ireland, but she came to England for a fresh start. She tells them that she and Rory visited Rhys grave on Easter. She also notes the amount of plates and tumblers in the kitchen, commenting that she'd never seen so many. Later, Kayleigh and Rory talk about Lorelei. Rory explains that his mother is very nostalgic and tends to keep everything so she doesn't forget anything. Kayleigh tells him that she has a sickness, even if there's a reason for why she does what she does. She also asks who found Rhys. They go into the garden, and Kayleigh says they should go away together. Rory tells her that he would like to go; however, he does not have a passport. Later, when he asks Lorelei for his birth certificate so that he can get a passport, the document is hidden in all of the papers in Meg's old room. Lorelei says Vicky is going to help clean it out. Lorelei tells him that Kayleigh is changing him, hardening his personality. She claims that Vicky has noticed it as well. Rory bristles at the mention of Vicky. He later talks to Colin about Kayleigh and explains that while Kayleigh might not be the one forever, she's what he needs right now.

A couple months later, Colin drives Rory and Kayleigh to the airport; Lorelei didn't go to see them off. Rory thinks about going somewhere that Rhys has never been.

Analysis

Chapter 1 begins from Lorelei's point of view.. She explains herself and her family, shaping the way readers see her. Having Lorelei speak first softens the initial perception of her. In a similar way, Lorelei tells her story directly to Jim, a man she met online. By telling her own story, she can shape it to her benefit. Her voice is youthful, in spite of her age. It's unclear as to whether this is meant to make Lorelei appear younger, likely for her new suitor's sake, or if she may suffer from some sort of arrested development. Regardless, her voice is meant to be lively and congenial.

The theme of family relationships is introduced as Lorelei gives information about her parents and siblings as well as her children. The theme of memory is exemplified because the reader must rely on Lorelei's ability to remember and relate reliable information about people and events.

After Lorelei lays the foundation for the story, the narrative shifts to the third person, which is used through the majority of the novel. It moves back and forth from April, 2011 – which is the present for the characters – and past Easter holidays. While most of the holidays are meant to take place on Easter Sunday, there are some variations. For example, a scene may take place the day before or over the holiday break from school. For Lorelei, the key element of the holiday is the Easter egg hunt. Not only does the holiday reinforce the theme of family and relationships, but it also demonstrates the theme of resurrection and rebirth. While the family doesn't appear to be overwhelmingly religious, it can be assumed that there is some type of religious exposure to the family and that the family is Christian. The holiday, however, is centered on the celebration at the family home.

The theme of family and relationships is also seen in the way the relationships between mothers and daughters are juxtaposed. Lorelei and Meg have a strained relationship, which is evident from when Meg is young. She is quick to point out the trouble her mother has with getting rid of any items she has accumulated. Lorelei is defensive, justifying why she needs to keep so many tea towels. For example, even though most of the towels are damaged, Lorelei says that she can turn them into rags. There are already enough rags in the house, so this seems largely unnecessary. Lorelei defends her hoarding, even in its early stages.

The relationship between Meg as an adult with her daughter is in sharp contrast. While it is indicated that Meg and Molly had some tenuous times, as the majority of mothers and daughters do, particularly during the early teenage years, Meg and Molly demonstrate, not only a fondness, but respect and caring for each other. They are less consumed about themselves than they are each other.



Chapter 2 delves deeper into Lorelei's hoarding problem. While Meg is ready to declare Lorelei's problem a mental one, others, in particular Beth, aren't so quick to judge. The hoarding is an ongoing source of tension between mother and daughter, further emphasizing the theme of family and relationships. The theme is also examined through the relationship between Meg and Beth. Meg is both protective and jealous of her sister.

The theme of independence is introduced by Meg. Once Meg gets a taste of her own independence, she is quick to encourage Beth to do the same. However, Beth feels an obligation to stay home and defend their mother, as she does when Meg questions why Vicky would enjoy Lorelei's company. It is clear that Meg tries to insert her perception of her mother on others, particularly in the sections that take place in the past. She is different with her daughter Molly. Molly questions things about her grandmother. Meg is patient with her questions and gives modulated responses. The hoarding is far worse than Meg could have imagined, which indicates its severity given how keenly aware Meg was of it when she was younger. The final product of Lorelei's illness is devastating.

Meg receives two phone calls from Beth. She ignores the first and answers the second, only to hang up on Beth. There is no clear indication as to why the sisters have had a falling out. Given Meg's reaction, it's safe to assume that the rift is relatively fresh in her mind. She isn't taking her sister's calls after their mother has passed away, which indicates that it must be serious. In the past, Meg may have been frustrated with Beth's decision to stay at home, but Meg's attempts to lure Beth away from the house demonstrate that she was looking out for Beth's best interest. It's obvious that something big has come between them.

When Rhys commits suicide, it understandably shocks the family, but it is clear that the family noticed some troubling behavior with Rhys. What exactly was at the root of his decision to kill himself remains a mystery, however. For Meg to be the one who finds Rhys symbolizes her strength and ability to shoulder the vast scope of the tragedy. It mirrors her going into Lorelei's house following her death. Meg is the first to face the devastation.

Chapter 3 also begins with an email to Jim. The reader learns that Jim has a son who died in his early thirties. This may be an indicator as to why Lorelei is choosing to reveal more about herself than would be expected. They bond over the loss of a child. Lorelei admits that she thinks she knows why he did it, but doesn't yet reveal it to Jim. Through her correspondence, the reader begins to witness a gradual breakdown of the walls that Lorelei has built up around herself, walls that exist both literally and figuratively. Lorelei can also show more of herself to Jim than she can to her family. While she is aware that Jim could judge her for her actions, she is put more at ease by his continued responses to her emails. She begins to feel a genuine connection and this frees her emotionally.

The reader is also introduced to Kayleigh in this chapter. The relationship between Kayleigh and Rory deepens quickly. It appears that Rory is genuinely in love with her and that it may be reciprocated. This reinforces the theme of family and relationships. Both Lorelei and Vicky are critical of Rory's relationship with Kayleigh. Vicky is suspicious about Kayleigh's origins and the way she questions Kayleigh indicates that



Vicky has further inserted herself into the family, far beyond what someone might expect from a neighbor. This is one of the earliest indicators that there may be more to Lorelei and Vicky's relationship. Colin's absence at Easter is further evidence. When Beth tells Meg that no one knows Collin's whereabouts, it appears that Colin is being edged out of the family. Between the hoarding and Vicky, it's almost as though there isn't enough room for everyone in the house. This gradual move of everyone away from the house foreshadows the isolated world Lorelei clearly lived in prior to her death.

Colin remains involved in his children's lives. The only insight given about where Colin has gone is a reference to a writing retreat. In the same way that Lorelei's hoarding has been a gradual progression, Colin's move away from Lorelei is gradual as well. Colin taking Rory and Kayleigh to the airport reveals the normalcy of the parent-child dynamic. Colin can and does let his children go on to be who they need to be. This is in sharp contrast to Lorelei who so desperately doesn't want her children to go away that she can't bear to see them off, instead staying in the home where she thinks they should stay. Colin's act of taking them to the airport and Rory's decision to leave the country with Kayleigh illustrate the theme of independence.

Not long after Kayleigh and Rory begin their relationship, Rory takes her to the cemetery. There they talk about his mother and Rhys. Rory tries to piece together some kind of understanding of his brother. He seems to feel inept at doing so, but makes some clearer assumptions about him. It's easy for him to identify Rhys as a loser. In doing so, that makes him the winner. Ironically, though being twins would more than likely bond them, they are not close. Rory is trying to understand Rhys after his death when he couldn't be bothered with understanding him before he died.

The reader gets a glimpse of each of the siblings interacting with Rhys before his suicide. Meg is startled by him when she comes home late. He doesn't want to talk or explain himself. Beth is unnerved by finding him in their parents' bed. Rory simply considers him a freak and doesn't make any time for him. Rhys is very much at odds with his family members. The family doesn't appear to be a place where he belongs. His suicide isn't shocking, and the author presents the reveal of his death in a matter of fact way. Taking his own life is something else he has done that the others don't understand.

Discussion Question 1

How does the juxtaposition of timelines (the present and previous Easter holidays) illustrate the scope of Lorelei's illness?

Discussion Question 2

What does Lorelei's comment about "moving on" after Rhys' suicide reveal about her character?



Discussion Question 3

Why is Rory uncomfortable with Vicky's presence at family functions?

Vocabulary

codger, gawped, concession, tentative, entwined, allegiance, opaque, waterlogged, scant, gentrified, crevice, woodlice, lichen, flamenco, gregarious, tremulously, angora, regale, prismatic, quiff, muslin, wraith, bristling, rapt, sedately



Chapters 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4 is the first of two chapters that do not begin with an email. It begins in April, 2011, with Meg and Molly going into Rhys' room, which is exactly the way it was the day that Rhys committed suicide. Molly asks questions about the suicide, such as where he got the rope and how he got it up there. She's struck that she is the same age he was when he died. Meg considers whether or not things would have turned out differently if Rhys had an older sister like Molly.

The chapter shifts to March, 1997. Beth is visiting Meg, who is past her due date with her second child. Beth notices the way Bill looks at her, and she has developed a crush on him. Meg goes into labor the next morning. Beth looks around Meg's house and studies how immaculate it is. There is no dust on so much as a light bulb and everything is in its place. The extreme tidiness bothers Bill, but he puts up with it.

With Meg and Bill at the hospital having the baby, Beth is watching Molly. She thinks about her mother and Easter lunch, but she knows that she's where she needs to be. Beth thinks about why she still lives at home and her boyfriend of four years, Simon. She couldn't bring herself to leave after Rhys' suicide. Beth takes Molly to daycare and visits Meg in the hospital where she is still in labor. That night Bill comes home after the baby is born and asks Beth to have a drink with him. They named the baby Alfred Rhys. During their conversation, Bill tells Beth that he likes the way she dresses because she always looks feminine. Beth goes to the Bird House for Easter lunch. Vicky and her girls are in the garden. Lorelei is at the store and Colin and Tim have gone to the pub.

Chapter 5 doesn't begin with an email. It is still set in April, 2011. Molly asks about how Rory reacted to Rhys' suicide. He was very angry. Then, he met Kayleigh. The mention of Kayleigh causes Molly to roll her eyes. She asks if Rory will return. Meg offered to pay his airfare, but she doesn't know or care about the possibility of his return.

The chapter shifts to April, 1999, as it introduces Vicky and Lorelei as romantic partners. Vicky said that Lorelei's marriage to Colin had died long before Rhys' suicide. Vicky knew at once that she belonged with Lorelei. When they told the family, it was awful. Tim still didn't speak to Vicky when they met to hand over the children. Beth threw up when she heard.

Vicky is scared of Meg. When Meg arrives at Lorelei's on Easter, Vicky offers her tea and croissants. Meg asks if they're fresh. Meg assumes everything in the house is past the expiration date and thinks the house gets worse every time she visits. They talk about Lorelei, and Meg thinks about how angry she was when her mother didn't appear to be upset about Rhys' death.



Later, Rory and Kayleigh arrive. They are visiting after living on a commune in Spain the past four years. Bill and the other children arrive; Vicky likes Bill and the way they flirt with each other. Meg introduces Molly to Rory. Meg and Kayleigh are meeting for the first time as well. In the garden, Beth is in the hammock. Bill joins her outside; they have been having an affair. Vicky sees them outside together. They talk briefly, and Vicky goes back to the house. Beth is sure that Vicky knows what's going on between them. Beth heads up to the house and sees Lorelei do a cartwheel. Her mother asks where she's been, and she tells her she was having a cigarette with Bill. Lorelei can't believe she's taken up the habit in her late twenties. Kayleigh, who is sitting on the slide, tells her she needs to stop immediately. Kayleigh had overheard Bill and Beth talking about whether Vicky knows.

Chapter 6 includes an email from Lorelei to Jim in December, 2010, asking him how he will spend Christmas. The story shifts back to April, 2000. Meg and Bill have taken the kids on a holiday trip to Greece. Meg is still carrying baby weight. When Meg sees another mother with her children, she begins to compare herself to the woman's svelte figure. Bill's phone rings and Beth's name comes up. Meg answers; though somewhat confused, she thinks that Beth and Bill may be planning something for her upcoming birthday and doesn't think much of the call. Beth tells her that she called the wrong number, but she was calling because it's Easter Sunday. It's the first time in nine years Meg has forgotten about the anniversary of Rhys' death. Beth tells her she feels like a failure for not having a boyfriend and an apartment. Meg tries to encourage her. The kids call for Meg to come in the pool and she asks to call Beth back. Beth thinks about the affair with Bill and how his attraction to her makes her feel normal.

In Spain, Rory and Kayleigh are still living in the commune for the Easter holiday and have now had a baby daughter named Tia. They meet Owen. Owen and Rory get high. Tia has colic and cries all through the night. Rory can't handle the sound. He tells Owen about Rhys' suicide. Owen asks why Rhys took his own life, and Rory tells him he doesn't know. He also tells Owen that his mom left his dad for another woman.

Analysis

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 begin without an email from Lorelei. The previous email included had Lorelei tell Jim that Rhys had died. By not including emails and continuing the conversation between Lorelei and Jim, it gives the reader an opportunity to experience Lorelei's grieving process. She is a character who is fearful of the way others judge her. From time to time, she indicates how she is afraid that Jim won't write back following something she revealed to him. It's as though the reader has time to process the death and grapple with how to feel about it. Even though Lorelei has information about why Rhys killed himself, she has yet to reveal it to anyone. Lorelei's family is grappling with why; but Lorelei continues to keep the information to herself, likely out of her own guilt or shame. Further, by having the absence of her correspondence at the beginning of these two chapters, it mimics how quickly Lorelei seemed to move on following Rhys death. It is clear that letting things go is not a strong aspect of her personality. It would be logical to think that she would be someone who



would hoard her feelings as well. This break in character demonstrates how deeply affected she is by Rhys' death. His death is so devastating to her that she loses herself in the process of grieving. When she resumes her correspondence in December, 2010, she is only a few months from her own death. Perhaps, this is something she is aware of; perhaps, it's left for the reader to know. Lorelei's email, and lack thereof, supports the theme of memory.

Chapter 4 explores the beginning of the affair between Beth and Bill. The affair seems to grow organically between them. While they had been friendly prior to the affair, Beth is able to detect a sudden change in the way Bill looks at her. It is likely that the affair grows out of what they see in each other. Bill sees Beth as someone very different from Meg. While he loves Meg, he struggles with the extreme cleanliness of the home. Perhaps, Bill feels that he is at risk of being thrown away like many other items in the house. He may be self-sabotaging the relationship, while, oddly enough, trying to keep hold of Meg, with Beth becoming a surrogate for her. Beth, meanwhile, comments on how Bill's desire of her makes her feel normal. Meg has tried to persuade Beth to move out of the family home to no avail. Beth likely feels self-conscious and confused about her situation on her own, but to have a close family member, someone she admires, call her status perpetually into question takes its toll. Beth doesn't necessarily want the life she currently has, but she feels trapped by her situation. She doesn't know how to get out. Having the affair with Bill is reckless behavior, something that isn't natural to her character. Having a man desire her gives her the opportunity to feel accepted. Similarly, if Bill is someone who wants Meg, with Meg's path of leaving home when it's expected, getting involved in a relationship, and having a child is considered normal, and wants Beth, then Beth can experience a similar level of normalcy by proxy. The affair between Bill and Beth supports the theme of infidelity and betrayal. It also speaks to the theme of family and relationships.

The theme of family and relationships can also be seen in Chapter 6. Rory, who is living on a commune with Kayleigh, now has a child. He isn't comfortable being a parent, suggesting both his level of maturity and his confusion over his own parents. The novel presents Lorelei as the stronger parent in the first half of the novel. She drives the interactions with the children and is quite selfish in the way she maintains the house in the manner that she wants. She wants the egg hunt, the artwork, her collections of just about anything. The things around her and her desires come first. While she does exhibit love to her family, her mental illness takes away from her ability to relate with them. Following Rhys' suicide, Rory is left with questions. He doesn't understand why his brother did it and mentions the fact that Rhys didn't leave a note. It's almost as if there had been a note that the suicide would have been easier to understand. However, it was apparent that Rhys was unhappy and had trouble connecting with other people. While there may be an inciting incident that prompts the suicide – and there is one that Lorelei reveals much later in the novel – his suicide makes sense without it. Rory's inability to understand is likely a representation of how he feels about himself. In this way, he resembles his mother and how she can't separate herself from the rest of the family.



Meg, who has been critical of the way Lorelei mourned Rhys, is confronted with her own relationship with grief when Beth calls Bill's cell phone while the family is on vacation in Greece. The family doesn't commemorate the actual date of Rhys' death, choosing instead to remember him on Easter. Meg is on vacation with her family and is caught up in the chaos of traveling with kids. It's not until Beth calls that she remembers Rhys. While she feels guilty about not remembering the anniversary, she, in fact, does. This demonstrates how the relationship Meg has with her own family outweighs the relationship she has with the family she grew up in. Not only does this reinforce the theme of family and relationships, but it also examples the themes of infidelity and betrayal in the way that she has betrayed one family unit for another.

Also representing the theme of infidelity and betrayal is the reveal of the romantic relationship between Lorelei and Vicky. The relationship causes two divorces and generates a rift in the family. Family members don't take it well when the relationship is revealed. Colin, who has been in the background of the novel thus far, seems even more remote, mimicking the way in which Lorelei has edged him away from her.

Discussion Question 1

What does the affair between Beth and Bill reveal about their characters?

Discussion Question 2

How does Lorelei's relationship with Vicky affect the family?

Discussion Question 3

What does Kayleigh's comment to Beth about quitting reveal about her past?

Vocabulary

gait, envisaged, immaculate, accouterments, chirrup, churlish, tectonic, barrage, avuncular, indignation, cloistered, pragmatic, veritable, incongruous



Chapters 7-9

Summary

Chapter 7 opens with a New Year's Day email from Lorelei to Jim. She tells him that she hasn't seen her three children since Vicky's funeral. The story shifts to April, 2011. Meg gets a call from the coroner's office asking her to come in to discuss the findings about her mother's death.

The chapter then shifts to April, 2003, when Lorelei exclaims to Vicky that someone has been moving things in Meg's old room; specifically, a book is missing. She blames Vicky's girls for moving stuff around in the room. Vicky admits that there was second-hand book sale at Sophie's school and she took some books to it. Maddy later asks Vicky to move out of Lorelei's house and in with her father because she hates Lorelei. Vicky doesn't want her daughter to live with her father, but she refuses to move out of Lorelei's house as well.

Beth is going out with Jason, a younger Australian. She's turned him down before, but she decided to go out with him. She is still having the affair with Bill. They have several drinks at the bar. The next morning, Vicky asks how the date went and she tells her that she went to his flat, listened to music, and then she came home. She explains to Lorelei that dating him wouldn't be practical because of his age and that he will be moving back to Australia when his job is over. Over breakfast she remembers how she acted the night before, how she got very drunk and threw herself at Jason. He rejected her advances and called her a taxi.

Beth visits Rhys' grave, even though she's very uncomfortable in the cemetery. She kisses the gravestone and then runs off. At the house, Vicky and Colin have conspired to purge some things from the house and have an intervention. She agrees to get rid of some things, but only if she gets to approve of what goes or not. When Beth returns home, Lorelei is screaming at Vicky and Colin for trying to get rid of a towel that Rhys once used.

Later, Beth gets a message from Jason asking her out for a do over. Six months later, Vicky moves out and Maddy invites a friend to the house. Vicky realizes that Maddy had never asked for a friend to come over before.

Chapter 8 begins with Lorelei confessing to Jim that she is a hoarder. She explains that she keeps everything because they are a physical representation of her memories. The story is now set in April, 2011, Meg and Molly have learned that Lorelei died of severe malnutrition and untreated tuberculosis. She died in her car alone on the roadside. Colin calls Meg and informs her that he's on his way.

Then, it is back to April, 2004, Rory is meeting his father at the airport in Thailand. Rory is covered in tattoos. Colin greets him warmly and comments on Rory's tan. Rory takes



his father to where he lives behind a nightclub called the Panda. He hasn't been completely honest about his living situation. He followed Owen to Thailand after he left Kayleigh and the baby. They go and get some street food. Rory asks how Lorelei is getting along since Vicky moved out. They talk about how bad the hoarding has gotten. Colin tells him that he emails Kayleigh and she sends him photos of Tia. Rory hasn't opened any of the photos that Kayleigh has sent him. Colin tells him that Kayleigh is in a relationship with another man and that Tia calls the boyfriend dad. Rory just wants his father to shut up. That night, Rory explains to Colin that he's a bouncer at the strip club. He takes him to the club and introduces him to Owen. Colin warns Rory about trusting Owen.

Meg and the kids go to visit Lorelei. Even though she's been warned about how bad the hoarding has gotten, she still isn't prepared for how bad it is. Meg can't help but think of her own house and how clean it is; this comforts her. Even though Bill thinks her behavior is extreme, Meg knows she's not the crazy one in the family. Later, Meg and Lorelei talk in the garden. Lorelei tells her how much she loves the house. Meg comments on how thin she is and asks what she eats. She replies that she eats cottage cheese, rice cakes, and some sweets. She talks about how her things are her memories and that seeing them takes her back to when her children were babies. Meg confronts her about how piles of egg cartons are her memories. Lorelei allows Meg to clean the kitchen. Vicky arrives and is excited about being able to see the kitchen again. Lorelei later tells Meg that she and Vicky would never have ended up together if Colin had fought for their marriage.

When Colin leaves Thailand, he goes to visit Beth in Australia. She had moved there with Jason, although the relationship ended up being short-lived. Colin got a tattoo in Thailand. Colin is proud of her and happy that she's made a new place for herself in her attic apartment. He tells her that he isn't likely to go back to England. He felt forced out of the house where he lived after the divorce. Colin confesses that he's going to go live with Kayleigh and Tia and that he's developed feelings for Kayleigh. Beth is appalled; Colin doesn't tell Rory.

Chapter 9 begins with Lorelei writing to Jim about Vicky. She claims that she doesn't consider herself a lesbian, but that she loved Vicky. She also tells him that she hates Kayleigh for tearing the family apart.

In April, 2011, Colin meets Meg in the reception area of the hotel. He comments on how much weight she's lost. She explains that it fell off after Vicky's funeral. They talk about Lorelei's death and Meg says she doesn't want sympathy. She needs help. She describes the condition of the house.

In March, 2005, Lorelei is taking Vicky for her cancer treatments. Vicky thanks her and understands that the primary reason for her helping her is because she is all Lorelei has left. Lorelei spends Easter at Vicky's apartment with her girls. Meg, Beth, and Rory all receive an email from Colin. He explains that he's left Kayleigh and the commune for a bit and that he needs to make a choice to either pursue his relationship with Kayleigh because he's in love with her or to come home and hope everyone forgives him.



Meg prepares Easter for her family and Bill's. She reflects on trials with Bill and how she kicked him out two years ago because she suspected he was having an affair. She thought she was okay with it so long as the person he was sleeping with was making him happy. Whoever it was made him miserable. After she kicked him out, he asked to come back three days later. She suggested they have another baby. He wanted to get married. They tell their Easter guests that they had the ultrasound and learned that they were having another boy. Later, Meg calls Lorelei. She thinks about the email from Colin. Lorelei wonders whether the family would have turned out differently if Rhys hadn't committed suicide. She also admits that she barely grieved; Meg tells her that she thinks it's strange.

In Sydney, Beth is having trouble with blackouts and thinks she should see someone. She is supposed to go to her boyfriend Richard's place for Easter. Richard is from England and he got them Crème Eggs for Easter. She thinks about how she has assimilated to Australia and that Richard hasn't.

When Rory gets the email from Colin, he rereads it. He compares his father to the men at the club and pities him because he can't believe that Kayleigh would actually care for him. He leaves the internet café when he gets an urgent call from Owen telling him to come quickly. When he gets to the club, he finds the police there. Owen turns him over to them for dealing drugs.

Analysis

The email that opens Chapter 7 is sent on New Year's Day, a few months before Lorelei's death. The reader learns that Vicky has died and that the last time Lorelei saw her children was at Vicky's funeral. This foreshadows that it will take a death in the family to get the children together again. That death, of course, is Lorelei's.

Meg learns about her mother's cause of death. It's a very sad, lonely death. She suffered from tuberculosis and effectively starved herself to death. Lorelei was keenly aware of how isolated she had become and felt her family pull away from her over the years. She likely knew that her hoarding was the primary factor in driving them away, but she was unwilling to get help, even when offered to her. The theme of family relationships is explored Vicky's and Colin's efforts to help clear out the house and Meg convincing her mother to let her clean up the kitchen. These are the small ways in which Lorelei accepts help, but she is overcome by her illness. While the illness is something that has been worsening over time, Lorelei's reaction over Vicky and Colin trying to get rid of a towel that Rhys had once used shows the root cause of her pain. Just as with Meg finding that Rhys' room remained untouched since his death, it is clear that the memory Lorelei is most concerned with involves Rhys. About the only progress she makes is through her communications with Jim.

Vicky's relationship with her children, in particular with Maddy, is put to the test when they are living with Lorelei. Maddy and Lorelei don't get along. Understandably, Maddy is confused by her mother's relationship with Lorelei. Her illness isn't something that



could be mistaken or ignored. It literally consumes where she lives. Maddy offers the solution that they move out of the Bird house. It's a logical solution, but Vicky refuses. She knows there's a problem, but she loves Lorelei and knows that Lorelei needs her. Ultimately, Vicky chooses her daughters' well-being over Lorelei's and moves them out. Vicky understands very quickly that this was the right choice when Maddy asks to invite a friend over. Maddy was embarrassed of the living situation with Lorelei. Vicky can now see that she needed to move the children away from the house.

The themes of family relationships, infidelity, and betrayal are also evident in Beth's brief relationship with Jason and her decision to follow him to Australia. At the time that they go out on their date, Beth is still involved with Bill. While she still struggles with her relationship with Bill, she does feel some sense of loyalty to him. It's not that she consumed with guilt for cheating on the man who is cheating on his wife with her. Rather, the relationship with Bill is something that requires no commitment, just as not moving out of her mother's house is noncommittal. Jason breaks her out of her comfort zone. She sees him as an opportunity to change her life. She may be projecting on him, seeing the relationship as being more than it is because she does want change in her life. As the reader sees later in the section, Beth is experiencing blackouts. She's struggling with the changes she's making. She can recognize that she has a problem and is willing to see someone about it. This demonstrates her final break from her mother. Lorelei understands she has a problem, but she is unwilling (or unable) to seek help.

Lorelei is coming to terms with her situation. While she likes to defend her hoarding to her family by claiming that the things around her are her memories, she is able to outwardly admit to Jim that she is a hoarder. She does, however, defend the hoarding by explaining to Jim about her memories as she does with her family. The progress in her character development is evident in the way in which she admits that she is a hoarder first and then collecting memories second.

The theme of family and relationships is also seen in Colin's visits to both Rory and Beth. He is actively reaching out to his children and travels great distances to see them. This is in sharp contrast to Lorelei's relationship with them. Once the children leave, she feels as though they have abandoned her and are subsequently lost to her. Colin is willing to seek them out. During his visit with Rory, he talks about Tia and Kayleigh, but doesn't reveal his true feelings for Kayleigh to Rory, like he does later with Beth. It is possible that Colin is trying to gauge whether or not Rory holds any residual feelings for Kayleigh. It is clear that Rory doesn't want to hear about them and that he wants as much distance from them as possible. Rory may feel as though, following Rhys' death, that he is meant to be solitary. In opposition to Lorelei, he runs away from people rather than pushing people away. Solitude is something these characters have in common. Another trait that Rory may share with his mother is collecting. While Rory doesn't keep many things around him, he has covered his body in tattoos.

Once Colin sees Rory's living conditions, he has a clearer picture of the life Rory has. He is able to see Owen for who he really is, while Rory views him as a friend. Perhaps Rory does view Owen as a friend, but he may also choose to see past how Owen is



using him, and subsequently turns him over to the police in order to protect himself, because he doesn't feel he deserves any better. This may be how his guilt over Rhys' death has manifested itself. Rory's arrest comes after the email from Colin. In reading through the email, Rory finds himself rejecting his father, his daughter, Meg and her family as well. Rory appears to want solitude. With this fresh in his memory, the arrest may come as a welcome turn of events. His feelings of needing to be punished trace back to Rhys' death. He likely feels that prison is what he deserves and welcomes getting caught.

During Colin's visit with Beth, he does reveal his intentions toward Kayleigh. Beth is horrified by the possibility of this relationship. It's unclear what she is the most uncomfortable with, however. It's likely she would be okay with her father pursuing a relationship with a woman following the divorce, and may even be okay with him falling for a younger woman. With Kayleigh, however, it's different. Not only is Kayleigh the ex-girlfriend of his son's, but also the mother of his grandchild. While there's nothing abjectly wrong with the relationship, it does feel vaguely incestuous, at the very least, taboo. While at this juncture, the reader hasn't seen Colin and Kayleigh together, Colin's feelings appear to be sincere. He is willing to risk his relationship with his children in order to pursue the relationship with Kayleigh; this gives the reader the impression that his motivations don't merely stem from his desire to interact with his granddaughter.

The themes of family and relationships and memory can be seen in Beth's relationship with Richard. She's left her home country of England for a new life in Australia. She readily admits to assimilating to the country. She uses Australian slang and has adopted the accent. It is clear that Beth is trying to leave everything about her old self behind. It's not so much that she wants something new, but rather to figure out who she is. Beth can adopt the Australian accent, but it doesn't change the fact that she's English. In a way, her quick assimilation works against her finding herself. Perhaps she needed to overcorrect her behavior in order to be able to return. This may foreshadow that Beth will ultimately return home to England. Another possible foreshadowing is her relationship with Richard, who is English. Further, he is an Englishman who hasn't assimilated, kept his accent, and even gives her a traditionally English Crème Egg on Easter.

Discussion Question 1

What does Meg's reaction to Bill coming back after she throws him out reveal about their relationship?

Discussion Question 2

How does Colin's email about his true feelings for Kayleigh shape his character?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Beth move to Australia so readily?

Vocabulary

estranged, banal, vicarious, kimono, tarmac, ludicrous, adamant, refuse, juddered, eccentricity, tenable, fissure, ominous, cornices, mundane, myriad, protracted, influx, phosphorescent, capitulated, ingenious



Chapters 10-14

Summary

Chapter 10 opens with Lorelei thanking Jim for understanding about her hoarding. She also tells him that Kayleigh has told Colin to cut off the allowance he gave her. Jim asks about Rory. Lorelei tells him that Rory is currently serving a five year sentence for drug possession, but he's due to be released soon. She also admits that in having so many children, she thought she would end up being close to at least one of them.

In April 2011, Colin sees Molly at the hotel for the first time in years. Colin tells Meg that he's living off his pension and that Kayleigh makes some money conducting relationship workshops. She tells him that he'll be able to stay in Rhys' room and he's okay with it. He asks if Beth is coming. Meg tells him she sent an email, but she hasn't taken her calls.

In September, 2006, Lorelei sends an email to the family to inform them that Vicky has died and to give them funeral information. Beth returns to England for the funeral. She is recovering from a nervous breakdown. She has second thoughts about going to the funeral and the possibility of seeing Bill. She goes to Meg's and meets Meg's and Bill's newest child named Charlie. While talking to Meg, Beth blacks out. Later, Beth tries to blame the black out on jet lag. She sees Bill, and they exchange pleasantries. He asks her to join him while he picks up the kids from school. She agrees to go. They talk about their relationship. He asks if she's seeing anyone. She explains what happened with Jason and tells him about the breakdown, admitting that the breakdown was something she was having trouble with since she was a teenager. She admits she shouldn't have come. Later, Meg tells Beth that she threw Bill out three years earlier because she suspected an affair.

Bill doesn't attend Vicky's funeral the next day, which relieves Beth. At the cemetery, Meg comments on how much thinner Lorelei has gotten. Colin attends the service with Kayleigh. Kayleigh introduces Tia to Meg and Beth. Beth tells Meg she can't go to the wake with Kayleigh there, and Meg insists that she go. Lorelei gives the eulogy. When she's done, she sits next to Meg and tells her that she's all alone now. The wake takes place at a local pub. Lorelei and Meg talk about Colin and Kayleigh. The sight of them infuriates Lorelei. Meg goes to get Beth, who is outside drinking. Tia is introduced to Meg's children. Colin can't tell the three boys apart because they all look alike. Colin tells Meg that he and Kayleigh are camping up the road. Beth and Kayleigh argue about Kayleigh's relationship with Colin. Later, Kayleigh tells Meg about Beth's affair with Bill.

Chapter 11 finds Lorelei telling Jim that Beth disappeared after the wake and that Meg ended up marrying Bill. She also hints at something happening the night before Rhys' suicide. In April, 2011, Meg notices all of Colin's tattoos. He says it's an addiction. Colin finds Lorelei's laptop, and they try to figure out her password.



Another email to Jim is included in the chapter. Lorelei tells him that they'll never be able to be together because Jim can't come to her house and she would never be able to leave hers. Back in April 2011, Meg, Molly, and Colin are working to fill up dumpsters with stuff from the house. Day one and two skips had been filled to capacity. Meg invites Colin back to the hotel to get clean and have dinner somewhere. Colin gets a call from Tia during dinner. Afterwards, Molly suggests that Tia might like to come and stay with them in London sometime. Meg gets a message from Beth stating that she'll be at the house to help tomorrow.

Chapter 12 starts with two emails from Lorelei. She tells him that she loves him and longs to have sex with him. When Jim doesn't reply for a few days, Lorelei thinks she's lost him, but Jim, who is an alcoholic, went on a bender. She tells him she heard from Rory and that he's been released from prison. In April 2011, Meg finds Beth in the back garden and sees that she's thirty-two weeks pregnant. Colin arrives and greets Beth warmly, cupping her belly, overjoyed at the impending granddaughter. Meg reflects on Beth's pregnancy and how strange it seems that she would have a child because she had always viewed her sister as a child. Colin returns with storage boxes for each of them in case something has sentimental value. Later, Meg and Beth talk about the baby and Beth admits she doesn't know who the father is. After Vicky's funeral, she started drinking and sleeping with a lot of men. Beth admits how terrible she feels about the affair with Bill. She also doesn't understand how Bill and Meg could be fine; Meg says it's because they want to be, and Beth sees that Meg is wearing a wedding ring. Meg explains that Bill said Beth was the part of Meg that Meg wouldn't let him see. The conversation turns to Rhys and Beth admits that she might have seen something the night before which may have led to his decision to kill himself. She saw Lorelei coming out of Rhys' room looking disturbed. Beth also asks if Meg will help her with the baby.

Chapter 13 begins with three emails. She tells Jim about how her mother was raped by a family friend, the same man who'd tried to kill Lorelei when she was young; she punched him in response and never told her mother. The next email is written on Valentine's Day. She tells him that she's been ill and thinks it's something she ate. She also hasn't heard from Rory since his email about being released from prison. The third email is from the next day and Lorelei still isn't feeling well. She tells him she's decided to work on the house in the hopes that he can come and visit one day. She says he's making her stronger and that she loves him more than anyone she's loved before. The chapter shifts to April 2011 and Meg, Beth, and Colin have gone to the funeral home where Lorelei's body has been prepared. She's wearing a pale dress, which doesn't look like anything she would have worn. Meg and Beth both insist that they buy something suitable for her to wear. They then take Lorelei's laptop to a computer repair shop to see if they can override the password. They get back to the house and find Rory waiting for them.

Chapter 14 includes three emails from Lorelei to Jim. In the first, she talks about the baby steps she's taking at the house. In the second she tells him that she's imagining him taking her to bed, and in the third she tells him she doesn't want any money from him. The chapter returns to April 2011 with Rory greeting his family. He'd spent six weeks at a Buddhist retreat. He tells the family that he sees now the Rhys' suicide was



his fault because he'd been a bad brother. He also admits to pushing Kayleigh and Tia away and that he didn't come home after he was released from jail and should have so he could see his mother. Later Colin gives Rory a box for sentimental things and he says he doesn't have anywhere to keep it; Meg offers to keep it for him. They all go to a pub and Meg was struck by how they'd never gone to a pub as a family and was surprised to enjoy it. Rory asks Colin about Tia and whether she would like to meet him. Colin says she would and that she'll be at the funeral. They all take ownership of fault in what happened to the family. Meg declares that it was none of them and all of them.

Analysis

As Chapter 10 opens, Lorelei is excited to have Jim's acceptance as it's something she doesn't readily get from her family. She's unable to see that they're trying to help her. It's easy to get that acceptance from someone who can't see the magnitude of the problem. It is possible Jim would have reacted differently if he were to have had first-hand experience with it. She admits that Colin gave her an allowance and that Kayleigh is responsible for him stopping the allowance. While Lorelei is understandably upset with the relationship Colin has with Kayleigh, her anger clouds her judgement of Kayleigh. Colin has a history of passively enabling Lorelei's disorder. Kayleigh telling him to stop sending her money will cut down on the amount of stuff Lorelei can buy. It actually demonstrates how Kayleigh is trying to help her and shows that she genuinely cares for the family.

The theme of family and relationships is further explored in this section. The relationships between all of the family members are strained. Rory is in prison, Beth and Meg aren't speaking after Meg learns about the affair with Bill, and Colin has alienated his children by pursuing a relationship with Kayleigh. While Lorelei has concerned herself with how she is being abandoned and left alone, she is effectively experiencing the same isolation as the rest of her family. The family unit has died. Because of the repetition of the Easter holiday, it is then safe to assume that somehow the family will experience a rebirth and come back to each other. All of these instances seem rather difficult to come back from, but there is hope for the family. This is seen in the theme of resurrection and rebirth.

The family comes together for Vicky's funeral. It's at this time that Lorelei tells Meg that she's now all alone. It's fitting that she would say this to Meg since Meg was the most vocal about Lorelei's illness. Lorelei says it as much to try and hurt Meg and make her feel something as she says it for fact. Lorelei doesn't know how to communicate with Meg. Likewise, Meg seems unable to effectively communicate with her mother. They are at an impasse. The theme of independence can be seen in this because the two women exist without depending on the other.

The family difficulties have been handed down to the next generation. Tia doesn't know her father. Molly and Meg's other children don't know their grandfather. Meg has tried to keep her personal feelings about Colin to herself, but it's natural for kids to sense when something is amiss. This is seen with Molly when Colin meets them at the hotel. Molly



comes around to see Colin for who he is and gets past the relationship he has with Kayleigh. She even expresses interest in getting to know Tia. This willingness to reach out and mend the family motivates Meg. She begins the novel rejecting Beth's calls. However, by the end of the book, she welcomes Beth and her baby back into her life. She is able to see the benefit to letting old wounds heal. Though she has said many negative comments about her relationship with Bill, she chooses to make it work. Meg also wants a relationship with her sister; so, she makes a conscious choice to rebuild it.

The reader learns of some darker times in Lorelei's past. Her mother was raped and Lorelei was assaulted by the same man. These incidents must have shaped how she saw the world. Perhaps, her hoarding is in direct relation to this. The more she collects her memories of other things, the less apt she'll be to remember the bad things that happened. She also wasn't able to tell her mother about what happened to her. She was fearful of opening an old wound and didn't want to do that to her mother. This explains why Lorelei's personality tends to be childlike by ignoring the unpleasantness around her. She likely wanted to keep things okay for her mother. In doing so, she never processed what happened to her when she was a girl. The fact that she punched the man reveals her tenacity and her willingness to fight. This can also be seen in her final collection of emails to Jim where she attempts to get to him. She realizes she's sick. She may even understand that she's dying, but she knows that she needs to get out of the house and away from the ghost that haunts her.

Lorelei is also bringing sex into her relationship with Jim. She writes about how she wants him and wants him to want her. She may feel that all she has left to offer of herself is her sexuality. She wants to give and receive love, and this is a leap of faith for her to express this desire to Jim.

In Chapter 14, the family has come together. While Colin, Meg, and Beth go to the funeral home to see Lorelei's body. It is not until Rory arrives at home that the family is complete. They all go to a pub and spend time together. It's as if they are free from all the clutter of their lives and free to move around and reconnect. Rory is struggling with guilt that traces back to Rhys' suicide. In some fashion, each family member takes responsibility for the breakdown of the family. They see that it was the family at stake, and not just Rhys, although his death was what pushed everything over the edge. Meg is able to see that none of them need to bear the weight of the responsibility of what happened to the family, but she also can admit that each of them has claimed culpability in how it broke apart. In acknowledging this, it allows the family members to see what they need to bring to the family in order to allow it to heal.

When Beth returns to England after Lorelei dies, she is thirty-two weeks pregnant. The pregnancy seems to jolt Meg back into their sisterly relationship. She wants to care for her almost immediately. When they talk about what transpired between Beth and Bill, Beth appears to be genuinely remorseful. She isn't even quite clear why or how it happened. She was able to recognize that she had long had problems and that her breakdown brought that into focus. Once Meg learned about the affair, it prompted Beth to flee. She admits to drinking a lot and that she slept with a lot of men. Beth's not knowing who the father of her child is leaves her on her own. She must raise the child



on her own. This is symbolic of her last act of independence. Not only can she take care of herself, but she's ready to take care of someone else. This reinforces the theme of independence.

Discussion Question 1

How has Beth's character evolved over the course of the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What does Rory's guilt and acceptance of fault for Rhys' death reveal about his character?

Discussion Question 3

What does Meg mean by the comment that the fault lies with all of them and none of them?

Vocabulary

inextricably, frailty, proffered, lurch, precipice, façade, stoic, poignant, judicious, conceptual, aquiline, irreverent, interloper, cajole, demure, cravat, laconically, gossamer



Chapters 15-17, Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 15 begins with an email sent about a month before Lorelei's death. She complains of a persistent cough and losing more weight. She's been thinking of Rhys and feels like he's back in the house with her. She admits she suppressed her memories of him, but now she remembers him clearly in his room. She tells Jim she's going to tell him what happened soon.

The chapter shifts to April, 2011, Meg and Molly are still staying in the hotel because the house isn't livable. The kitchen is cleared and the family celebrates with dinner. Rory finds a slip of paper with Lorelei's password. Later, Rory thinks about the way Lorelei died and wonders whether starving to death is the same as suicide. Beth is staying with Sophie. Meg emails to tell her that they think they have the password to the laptop. She signs off telling her that she loves her and the baby; Beth responds that she loves her, too. The next day, Meg picks up the laptop and takes it back to the house.

Chapter 16 consists only of five emails. In the first, Lorelei says she relived the night before Rhys' died. She vacuumed his room and he had been in his room the entire day. She asked Rhys why he looked sad. She admits to Jim that Rhys was her favorite and that she was a little tipsy that night. She goes to hug him and he resists. Then he tries to kiss her. She ran from the room and didn't see him the rest of the night or the next day, which was Easter. In the second email she thanks him for his insights and tells him that the antibiotics aren't working. The third email reveals that Jim hasn't responded to her previous email and that she's really not doing well. She sends two more emails; the first asks if she'll ever hear from again. The second tells him she's leaving the house and coming to see him.

Chapter 17 takes place in April, 2011, on Easter weekend. They continue to sort through the house. Meg considers it one of the best Easter weekends. By Monday, the house is all cleared. Meg walks through, finding it spacious and unfamiliar. She understands that if it hadn't been Rhys, something else would have contributed to the hoarding. Meg sees Rory on the stairs and thinks he looks happy.

Jim sends the family an email after the funeral saying that he enjoyed meeting them. He explains that he feels bad for not telling Lorelei that he had a court date and had to serve jail time for a drunk and disorderly charge and that he wasn't there for Lorelei when she needed him. He thanks them for letting him see the house and showing him pictures of how bad it was before the cleanup. He hopes that the family will let him know when Beth has her baby and that he would like for them to write.

The Epilogue takes place in June, 2011. Meg's family is about to meet Beth's baby. Beth is living on Lorelei's side of the house, and Rory is living on Colin's side. Meg's kids go upstairs to play, and Meg goes to see Beth and the baby. The baby is named Elsa



Athena Rose after Lorelei's sister Athena. Bill brings in the three boys. Colin, Kayleigh, and Tia arrive.

Analysis

The final section begins with Lorelei admitting that her health is failing. (Since the book is not written in a linear way, it was revealed before this chapter that Lorelei died, but no cause was given.) Lorelei tells that she is suffering from malnutrition and tuberculosis. The desperation in her emails adds to the sadness of her fate. This woman's final struggle is at hand. Perhaps, through her death she will be able to experience relief.

Lorelei is able to admit her health is failing, and she is also able to admit that she has let her memories of Rhys come back to her. She promises to tell Jim what happened. It's as if she's been able to clear away all the memories that have cluttered her mind to finally find the one she tried to bury. That memory is what happened the night before Rhys died. She admits to Jim that Rhys was her favorite child. Given what the reader knows about Rhys, this may seem difficult to relate to because he was clearly troubled. It may be that she was able to see the wounded parts of herself in him and considered him her favorite because he was damaged in some way. When she reveals that Rhys tried to kiss her that night, she admits to running from him. This is likely the only time she rejected him. That rejection may have pushed him over the edge. If Lorelei was willing to see past all his other issues and then finally run away from him following the kiss, he may have thought that if she can't accept him, no one will be able to. In the end he is very much alone and isolated, much as Lorelei ends up being.

After she sends Jim the email about what happened, she doesn't hear back from him. She has finally revealed her darkest secret. Then, when Jim doesn't respond, she feels rejected. She makes additional attempts to reach him. She is on her way to him when she dies. She doesn't know that Jim's legal troubles are what kept him from responding. Her reaction to Jim's lack of response is rash, in much the same way Rhys' actions are when he hangs himself.

Jim reaches out to the family. He attends the funeral, which is not included in the novel. There isn't really need for the actual funeral since the events that have taken place in the April, 2011, sections stand in for the ceremony. The family comes together, grieves, and heals during this time. These events are symbolic of the funeral. Jim asks for the family to write to him, specifically when Beth has her baby. Lorelei has become an important part of his life and he is mourning her accordingly.

Prior to the Epilogue, the family has healed and found itself complete. Both Beth and Rory are living in the house. Colin and Kayleigh are together, and Tia is included in the family. Meg has made peace with the trials and tribulations of the past and is hopeful for the future. This is the ending foreshadowed by the repetition of the Easter holidays. It reinforces the themes of family and relationships as well as resurrection and rebirth.



Discussion Question 1

What does Lorelei's reveal about what happened with Rhys the night before he died reveal about her character?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Jim want to stay in touch with the Bird family?

Discussion Question 3

How has the Bird family changed over the course of the novel?

Vocabulary

tariff, in situ, ferreted, sedately, benevolent, epilogue, feigning, eiderdowns, tableau



Characters

Lorelei

Lorelei Bird is the matriarch of the family. She has a whimsical nature and collects what she calls treasures. Her family thinks otherwise and is concerned about her hoarding.

Married to Colin, they have four children: two girls and a set of twin boys. They divorce when the children are grown and Lorelei begins a romantic relationship with her neighbor Vicky. While she is in a same-sex relationship, she doesn't consider herself a lesbian.

Her relationship with her children is strained, especially with the oldest, Meg. It's as if Lorelei would rather have her children stay perpetually young. She resists any effort to intervene in her hoarding. While Meg takes her housekeeping to the extreme opposite, she feels that Meg also has a problem.

The hoarding also costs her the relationship with Vicky. While the women remain close, Vicky moves out for the betterment of her children's lives.

Lorelei wants her things about her. She considers them a physical representation of memories and can't bear to part with them. While she would like a better relationship with Meg and her other children, she isn't willing to compromise. She feels that Beth and Rory both have abandoned her. She also struggles to respect Colin, given his new relationship with Kayleigh, their son Rory's ex-girlfriend.

Meg

Meg is the oldest of the Bird children. She spars with Lorelei frequently over the hoarding and regards her mother as mentally ill. She is a foil for Lorelei in both mind and body. Meg keeps her house immaculate and has no room for clutter. She also tends to be overweight, with her weight fluctuating throughout the novel. She is self-conscious about her weight and it bothers her that her mother and Beth are naturally so slim.

She moves out as soon as she can. She begins a relationship with Bill, which leads to her being pregnant. They raise their children together, and while she suspects that Bill may be having an affair, she is completely clueless that it is with her sister Beth.

She wants to be different from her mother because she's embarrassed and frustrated by the hoarding. She tries to maintain a relationship with Beth. Before Rhys' death, she is open about not understanding him. She thinks that Rory will be okay, although she's not overtly invested in his life. She doesn't think it's good for Beth to still be living with her parents.



When Meg learns that Beth and Bill had an affair, she cut off their relationship. It is repaired after Lorelei dies. Meg is the driving force in getting the house cleared out. She is also capable of repairing her relationships with her family by the end of the novel.

Beth

Beth is Meg's younger sister. They have a decent relationship when they're younger, but Beth remains close to her parents, long after Meg moves away. Beth considers following Meg, but she has a strong sense of obligation to stay with the family. She lives with her parents well into adulthood. She isn't comfortable with her status, but is conflicted between feeling like she will abandon her mother and fearing starting a life on her own.

She feels guilty about her relationship with Bill, but the relationship normalizes her in some ways. Bill's attraction to her makes her feel normal, something she lacks because of her home life. She begins experiencing panic attacks. In an effort to get her life back on track, she moves out. She follows a man to Australia, but their relationship is short lived and of little consequence to her.

After Meg learns about the affair, it causes understandable damage to their relationship. She makes attempts to reach her sister. She wants to be able to repair the relationship because she genuinely wants her sister in her life. Purging the house after Lorelei's death helps to repair their bond. When she returns to England, she is pregnant.

Rory

Rory is Rhys' twin brother. In school, Rory is a popular boy who has an easy time making friends. After Rhys' suicide, he feels at a loss to understand why Rhys did it. He thinks that he should have a clearer idea about why Rhys did it because they are twins.

Rory meets Kayleigh and they begin a fast relationship. When he introduces her to the family, Lorelei doesn't like her at all. They move to a commune together and Kayleigh gets pregnant. He ends up leaving her when the baby is a few months old; he doesn't want to be a father. He moves to Thailand and ends up working in a night club and working for a drug dealer.

For someone who appeared to have his life together when in school, Rory is largely a lost soul. When Colin comes to visit him, he is embarrassed about his living situation. He is increasingly aware of and self-conscious about his life.

Colin

Colin is Lorelei's husband. He is a patient man who tolerates Lorelei's hoarding, but isn't comfortable with it. He wants to travel and see the world, but Lorelei won't leave the house overnight. After Lorelei begins her relationship with Vicky, Colin and Lorelei get



divorced. For a while he stays on one side of the cottage. He tries to maintain a decent relationship with his children, but seems fairly isolated overall.

Eventually, he decides that he wants to travel. He goes to visit Rory in Thailand and gets a glimpse at the darker side of the life his son is living. He warns him about trusting Owen. He also visits Beth in Australia. He wants the best for all of his children and seems to understand how Lorelei's problem and Rhys' suicide has affected their lives.

He wants a relationship with his granddaughter Tia. He keeps in touch with Kayleigh, which ultimately leads to their starting a relationship. He moves to a commune with Kayleigh and Tia.

Kayleigh

Kayleigh is originally from Ireland. She meets Rory at a party and they begin a fast relationship. She gets pregnant with Tia, but Rory leaves her soon afterward. A free spirit, she does make an effort with Rory's family and wants them to be involved with her daughter's life. She becomes involved in a relationship with Rory's father Colin.

Vicky

Vicky, her husband, and children move in next door to the Bird cottage. She and Lorelei become fast friends after bonding one Easter. Vicky is present at the house the Easter that Rhys commits suicide. She divorces her husband after she falls in love with Lorelei and they begin a relationship. She ultimately moves away from Lorelei after her children voice their complaints about living in Lorelei's house. They're embarrassed to have friends over because of the hoarding. When she gets sick with breast cancer, Lorelei helps to care for her, but the cancer is terminal.

Bill

Bill is Meg's partner and the father of her children. He has an affair with Beth.

Rhys

Rhys is Rory's twin brother. He commits suicide one Easter Sunday while still a teenager. Socially awkward and withdrawn, the night before his suicide, he shared an inappropriate kiss with his mother Lorelei.

Jim

Jim is Lorelei's internet boyfriend. He is a former alcoholic. Writing to Jim seems to get Lorelei to open up about her problems. His voice is only directly heard in one email that he writes to the Bird family following Lorelei's death.



Symbols and Symbolism

Eggs

Eggs have long been associated with spring and resurrection, which is why they are common in Easter celebrations. Here, eggs are used similarly and foreshadow a rebirth of the Bird family after being torn apart.

Rainbow

Rainbows are commonly used in present culture as a symbol of gay pride. Lorelei makes a special point to her children about the rainbow on Easter. This symbolizes the lesbian relationship she will eventually become involved in with Vicky.

Noose

Rhys hangs himself. In doing so, the noose symbolizes the hold his suicide has on the family. Similarly, it symbolizes how Lorelei's hoarding is strangling the house she lives in.

Tattoos

Over time, Rory ends up with many tattoos, almost as though he is collecting them. The tattoos symbolize Lorelei's hoarding and how Rhys' suicide has left an indelible mark on him.

Weight

Much is referenced about Lorelei's thin frame and Meg's fuller figure. Their weights symbolize how they react to their surroundings. While Lorelei is quite thin, she hoards things around her. Conversely, Meg is heavier, yet keeps her house clutter-free.

Emails

A collection of emails that Lorelei sends to Jim are included throughout the novel. They are the one collection that doesn't take up physical space, but rather virtual. In this virtual space, where Lorelei is free from the confines of her hoarding, she is able to express herself freely, admit to her hoarding problem, and ultimately come to terms with Rhys' death.



Cottage

After Lorelei and Colin get divorced, the cottage is divided into two living spaces. On one side, Lorelei is surrounded by all she has hoarded. On the other side, Colin keeps a simple home with minimal furnishings. The wall symbolizes, not only their divorce, but how Lorelei holds onto her emotions instead of working through them, while Colin is ready to move forward, foreshadowing his impending travels.

Rhys' Room

Rhys' room is free from Lorelei's hoarding. While the rest of the house is impossibly full, Rhys' room remains exactly how he left it when he died. The room symbolizes the origin of Lorelei's pain. While she can buy and keep many things, she is unable to fill the void left by her son.

Foils

One of the items that Lorelei collects is the colorful foils from the chocolate eggs used in the Easter egg hunts. The foils symbolize Lorelei's denial. Just as the foils cover the chocolate, Lorelei's hoarding covers her pain.

Easter Egg Hunt

The annual Easter egg hunt is symbolic of the family not knowing what happened with Rhys prior to his death. For the hunt, Lorelei has hidden the eggs and the children are tasked with finding them. Lorelei has kept the secret hidden away. After her death, the children learn about what happened while cleaning the house.



Settings

The Bird Cottage

The house is a nice, middle-class home in England. The children all have their own rooms. Every Easter, Lorelei hosts an Easter egg hunt in the back garden. The house is disheveled and cluttered when the children are young. Over time it becomes more and more cluttered and claustrophobic as Lorelei's hoarding worsens. Ultimately, there is barely a path wide enough for one person to get through to get anywhere in the house. The only room untouched by the hoarding is Rhys' bedroom. After the divorce, a wall is built to separate the cottage into two and Colin lives in the other side.

Meg's House

Meg's house is in sharp contrast to the house she grew up in. In response to her mother's hoarding, Meg keeps a minimalist, immaculate home. It barely looks lived in from all the order and cleaning.

Beth's Apartment

Beth's apartment is located in Australia. She moves there with a man with whom she has a short-lived relationship. The apartment is small. It's tidy, but not to the extreme of her sister's house. The location is only used briefly, but it shows an important leap in Beth's independence.

Rory's Home

Rory makes his home in a seedy part of Thailand. He works for a drug dealer who owns a strip club. His living accommodations are rudimentary and shared like a commune. Much like Meg's house, Rory's living arrangement is in sharp contrast to Lorelei's. Rory doesn't own much or have much around him. Unlike Meg's, however, his living space isn't very nice or truly his own.

Colin's Portion of the Cottage

After Colin and Lorelei's divorce, a wall is erected to divide the Bird house into two cottages. Colin lives on one side, while Lorelei, and for a time, Vicky live on the other side. Colin keeps his living area sparse, again in sharp contrast to Lorelei's living arrangements. The color palette is neutral and the furniture minimal and functional.



Themes and Motifs

Family and Relationships

The novel explores the theme of family and relationships. In its entirety, *The House We Grew Up In* is about one family. It doesn't veer from this focus. When characters outside of the family are introduced, they are included as an extension of one of the family members. The Bird Family is first introduced to the reader by Lorelei. She shapes and filters the reader's view of the family. She paints a setting that is idyllic, far from the dark secrets that unfold as the novel progresses. Once Rhys commits suicide, Lorelei can do little to prevent the reader from understanding that the family is far from what she'd like it to be.

The relationships between the siblings are all strained, even from early on. Meg has little patience for her mother's hoarding and calls her mentally ill long before the others do. She doesn't understand why Rhys might have killed himself, but she is aware of how peculiar he was. Rory, however, she views as okay because of his popularity and access to friends. She worries about Beth and her decision to stay at home. It causes some tension between them, but Meg is trying to help. Beth and Meg differ in how they see themselves in the context of the family. Meg wants to separate herself from Lorelei, while Beth senses an obligation to stay at home for her mother. Beth, like Rory and Meg, sensed a strangeness about Rhys as well. He becomes a foreboding shadow over all the siblings.

Rory introduces Kayleigh to the family. Together they live on a commune and they have a child. Rory isn't ready for a family, though. He ends up leaving Kayleigh and the baby. He may have some regrets over it, but ultimately knows that he's made the best decision he's capable of. He moves to Thailand and ends up working at a nightclub for a drug dealer. He's not proud of the life he leads, but owns it. Even in Thailand, he continues to live in a communal setting. It's almost as though Rory is searching for a family he can't find.

Colin's relationship with Kayleigh grows out of his desire to know his granddaughter. After the divorce from Lorelei, Colin appears to rebuild his family. He wants to be present in his granddaughter's life, even if his son doesn't want to be. He falls in love with Kayleigh and the two make the best of the relationship, even if it is atypical.

Resurrection and Rebirth

The theme of resurrection and rebirth can be seen throughout the novel. Much of the novel takes place on various Easter holidays. It's an important day for Lorelei in particular. She looks forward to it and collects the colorful foils from the chocolate eggs. She keeps these – as she does with many things – as a way to preserve her memories. In this way, she views the objects as having a second life.



Rhys commits suicide on Easter. While the reader later learns that it was likely prompted by an inappropriate kiss with his mother a day earlier, Easter would have been a meaningful day for him to choose in order to hurt his mother. While his suicide may be difficult to understand or seem like a rash decision, it gives Rhys freedom. His rebirth may exist only in the context of an afterlife, but it is his way of ridding one life for another.

The family understanding reels from Rhys' suicide. It fractures the family in many ways. Rory, who previously identified with being Rhys' twin, now views himself as an individual. He must find his new life in the world. He rejects his relationship with Kayleigh and abandons his child in an effort to find himself in his new life.

Similarly, Beth goes through a type of rebirth as well. She stays at this family home well past an age when grown children typically move away. Prior to this, she conducts an affair with her sister's partner. When that finally stops, she flees to Australia with a different man. There she is able to be reborn and understand who she is as an individual.

Ultimately, the theme of rebirth offers hope throughout what is dark subject matter. It foreshadows that regardless of how fragmented the family becomes over the source of the novel, they will be able to rebuild again.

Infidelity and Betrayal

The theme of infidelity and betrayal is used throughout the novel. The act itself leads to different outcomes for the characters. They react differently with each reaction exemplifying their given nature.

Beth and Bill conduct an affair. It's not something Beth actively pursues, but it's not something she readily rejects. The fact that Bill sees her as desirable makes her feel more normal. She feels guilty and ultimately ends the affair, but not without consequence. She experiences panic attacks. Meg isn't altogether surprised that Bill has had an affair when she finally learns about it. She is angry with Beth and stops taking her calls up until shortly after Lorelei dies. Meg gets past the affair and reconciles with Bill and Beth. This is in line with her personality of letting things go.

Lorelei and Vicky's affair is unexpected. Their friendship evolves and Vicky pursues the physical aspect of the relationship. Lorelei never considers her a lesbian, however. She also doesn't really consider the impact of the affair on Colin. Rhys' suicide likely contributed more to their divorce than Lorelei's relationship with Vicky. The affair with Vicky was the final breaking point.

Lorelei's reaction to Colin's relationship with Kayleigh, which happens after the divorce, reveals, not that Lorelei continues to harbor feelings for Colin, but rather that she had no intention of letting Colin go. She effectively collects her lovers, including her virtual relationship with Jim, just as she hoards everything else.



This complicates how the reader views her reaction when Colin begins his relationship with Kaleigh. Lorelei views the relationship as an act of betrayal, even though they are divorced. A romantic relationship between Colin and Kaleigh may seem inappropriate, but it is a relationship that builds over time and likely isn't a rash decision to pursue it. Lorelei's reaction may also be an over-reaction to her hiding what happened between her and Rhys as well.

Memory

Memory is used as a theme throughout the novel. One of the most significant ways it is utilized is how Lorelei justifies her hoarding by classifying all the objects around her as her memories. It begins benignly enough when Lorelei begins collecting her children's artwork. Over the years, however, it has gotten out of hand. The memories around her – that literally surround her – work to mask the one memory she wants to forget, but can't: the kiss with Rhys.

Much of how the family responds to Rhys' death affects their memories of him. Meg wonders why he's been born at all. Beth struggled with his weirdness, and Rory is finally capable of calling his twin a loser. What they lack, however, is how he got to a place where suicide was his only choice. His inappropriate interaction with his mother wasn't likely something he would ever be able to erase from his memory. His action reveals how he was able to heal with the memory.

Lorelei doesn't reveal her memories of what happened to her family. While the family begins to break apart, she doesn't offer any clue as to why Rhys killed himself. Instead, the family isn't privy to what happened until after her death and they get access to her computer.

While there is an emphasis on memory, and a large portion of the novel takes place in the past, the novel doesn't dwell in nostalgia. Lorelei may focus her memories on how wonderful the family Easter were at one time, but Rhys' suicide counters the need for nostalgia.

Independence

The House We Grew Up In explores the theme of independence in a variety of ways. By allowing the characters to achieve varying levels of independence over the course of the novel, it allows for the characters to find themselves in order to return to each other. Their newfound independence creates healing.

One of the most readily identifiable ways in which the theme is explored is through the twins: Rory and Rhys. Regardless of their differences in personality or social skills, Rory and Rhys are a pair. They identify as part of complete unit. As they age, they must find a singular identity. Rhys severs the bond with his suicide. This act identifies him more than any peculiarities he may have exhibited when he was alive. Rory is left without his twin and this gives him the opportunity to see himself, which over time, he discovers



isn't really who he thought he would be. It also allows him to see his brother. He feels obligated to understand Rhys because he was his twin, but is unable to. This further separates the brothers.

Beth also struggles with independence. Unlike Meg, Beth doesn't seem to be in a hurry to leave home. She feels a familial obligation to continue living at home. She may be using that obligation to mask the fear she feels from being alone. As the years go by, she appears restricted by her situation. One of the ways she acts out is with her affair with Bill. The affair doesn't offer her any independence, however. Instead, it continues to tie her to the family because Bill is Meg's partner. Once she breaks off the affair, she moves out. It is a bold decision and one that takes her, not only out of her familial home, but out of the country. She boldly flees to Australia in order to find her independence. While she eventually returns, she needed the shock to her system to truly free herself.

Colin's marriage to Lorelei wasn't exactly harmonious. There is a sense that the marriage was strained prior to Rhys' suicide, but Rhys' act cemented the downfall of their marriage. While Lorelei begins a relationship with Vicky, Colin is left to find himself and his independence. Since he was never able to get Lorelei to travel, Colin ventures out into the world. He visits Rory in Thailand and Beth in Australia. He later takes his independence from the Bird cottage when he moves to the commune with Kayleigh.

Lastly, with Lorelei, her independence comes in different ways. Her hoarding disorder isolates her from her family and friends. She is left alone with only her possessions literally surrounding her. She makes the conscious choice to stop eating, effectively starving herself to death. She finds her independence by dying in her car away from all of the things she's hoarded over the years. Further, she achieves a type of independence through her correspondence with Jim. As she begins to reveal more and more of herself, not just the good, but also the bad, she frees herself from the pain of her past. She can finally let go of what happened with Rhys.



Styles

Point of View

The House We Grew Up In is told through a third person, omniscient narrator. The narrator is neutral and doesn't provide commentary or judgement on the characters. In this regard, the narrator seems reliable in presenting the facts of the story objectively.

The narration offers some perspective on how the characters view each other. Through the narration the reader understands more clearly the family dynamics. The narration offers insights into the complicated relationship between Meg and her mother and Meg and Beth. The reader knows about the affair between Beth and Bill before Meg officially does. However, with the nonlinear timeline, the reader knows that Meg and Beth have had a falling out in the present, but until the affair is revealed in one of the past sections the reason for the falling out is not clear.

Individual focus is given to Meg, Beth, and Rory following Rhys' death. While the reader sees each of them live out portions of their lives and witness their character development, there seems to be a stronger focus on Meg. The focus on Meg is in direct contrast to Lorelei. They are foils for each other. Lorelei hoards; whereas, Meg purges things around her.

The reader gets further insights into Lorelei's characters as she reveals herself to Jim in her emails. The two began their correspondence after Vicky's death. Over the course of the emails, Lorelei appears to be falling in love with Jim. Through her correspondence, the reader can glean details about Jim's life, but the focus is on Lorelei and how she views her life. She reveals more and more about herself over time and finally brings herself to admit both her struggles with hoarding and what really contributed to her son's death. These emails offer the insights to her children as well.

Language and Meaning

The vocabulary in The House We Grew Up In is readily accessible and clearly written. The overall narration isn't overly formal, and takes the readers inside the family. Infrequently British slang is utilized, such as Lorelei stating that she went to the shops. Frequently, Lorelei, in particular, is referenced as "tutting." Variations of the word "sinew" are also used frequently.

It is clear from Lorelei's emails that she wants acceptance for her behavior. As the correspondence begins, her language seeks to justify her behavior. As the correspondence continues, she begins to admit or accept the issues with her behavior and her defenses gradually begin to break down.

Dialogue is used throughout the novel giving readers a sense of each character's voice. Meg's voice can be direct and abrupt; Lorelei's fanciful. In the earlier sections of the



novel, Colin's voice isn't really heard, but gradually comes to the forefront as his character develops.

The affair between Beth and Bill is viewed through Beth, rather than Bill. Rory's voice tends to be more lost and disheveled, reflecting how he lives his life. The dialogue of each character is easily understood and natural to their personalities.

Structure

The House We Grew Up In has seventeen chapters plus an epilogue. The chapters are further broken down by date or by email correspondence. The text of the emails appears at the beginning of the chapter. Most frequently, one email is used per chapter, although as the novel progresses, more emails may be included. All emails are written by Lorelei, with the exception of two, one from Jim to the Bird family and one from Colin to family as well.

With regard to the multiple emails, for chapter 11 there are two; chapter 12 includes two; chapters 13 and 14 both have three. Chapter 15 returns to one email and chapter 16 consists of five emails and nothing further. Chapter 17 does not open with an email, but rather closes with one, which is written by Jim to the Bird family. It is the only time the reader hears Jim's voice and is the only time an email is included that is not composed by Lorelei. No emails appear in chapters 4 and 5.

The novel is told in a nonlinear fashion. Time jumps from the present where Meg and others are dealing with Lorelei's house following her death to past Easters. The majority of the novel takes place in England, although sections are set in Thailand and Australia when Colin travels to see Rory and Beth.

While the novel utilizes a nonlinear timeline, the sections that take place in the present are told in a linear fashion. The inciting incident for the scenes in the present is Lorelei's death. Meg and her daughter arrive at the house to survey the damage. One by one family members return, starting with Colin, to help deal with the mess. As this unfolds, the family begins to heal.



Quotes

Sometimes when she looked at her little sister she felt overcome with love. Her worst enemy and her best friend.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 34)

Importance: This quote introduces the relationship between Meg and Beth and foreshadows the rift in their relationship and their ability to return to each other.

Megan didn't know what to make of him. Sometimes she wished he's never been born.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 50)

Importance: The quote gives an honest look at how Meg related, and sometimes didn't relate, to her brother. It's a problem that she'd prefer to be able to just get rid of, which is how she views her mother's problem with hoarding.

They both turned to look at the place where the windows had been. But it was hard to place them, behind the wall of things. It was disorienting. The house no longer made any sense.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 151)

Importance: The quote demonstrates how Lorelei's hoarding became extreme. There was so much stuff that the house no longer looked like a home.

For the first time in his life he's had some distance from Rhys and suddenly he's been able to see his brother objectively. And objectively, he was a loser.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 130)

Importance: The quote shows how Rory's relationship with his brother evolved. Rhys' death allowed Rory independence from the twin bond between the brothers. He's finally able to see himself without any familial bond distortion.

But still, there was something there when he looked at her. Something that had definitely not been there before. And, Beth, was pretty certain, that was sex.”

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 57)

Importance: The quote indicates the shift in the relationship between Beth and Bill. She is drawn to how he is attracted to her and desires her.

And that was before their boy had done what their boy had done and made sure that they would never again feel comfortable laying a hand on each other in this house.”

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 19)

Importance: The quote reflects Vicky's observation of the relationship between Lorelei and Colin. While the quote speaks directly to the dissolution of the marriage following



Rhys' suicide, Vicky is able to note that the separation between the two began prior to what happened with Rhys.

Because as long as Bill wanted her, then there was a chance, a tiny, infinitesimal chance, that maybe she was normal."

-- Narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 129)

Importance: Beth still lives at home at an age well-past when the average person would move out. She struggles with insecurity. Bill's attraction to her normalizes how she views herself. She's not an oddity still living at home, but a desirable person to the outside world.

The human memory is such a cruel, frustrating thing, the way it just discards things without asking permission, precious things. At least here, in my house, I have control over my memories."

-- Lorelei (chapter 8 paragraph 7)

Importance: Lorelei justifies her hoarding by viewing the objects around her as physical manifestations of her memories. She uses this justification when finally confessing to Jim about her disorder. The justification is as much for herself as it is for Jim.

He was a wonderful father to our children but he fell out of love with me and I never really forgave him."

-- Lorelei (chapter 9 paragraph 8)

Importance: Lorelei explains the downfall of her marriage to Jim. Her admission of her inability to forgive Colin demonstrates how she hoards her memories and can't let go of the past.

Oh, Jim, even I can now see it's getting out of control."

-- Lorelei (chapter 10 paragraph 3)

Importance: The more Lorelei opens up to Jim in her emails, the more readily she is able to recognize her problems. This prepares her for admitting what happened with Rhys prior to his death.

And as long as I don't find the words for it, then maybe I can keep on pretending that it never happened."

-- Lorelei (chapter 11 paragraph 15)

Importance: Lorelei still can't bring herself to admit what transpired with Rhys, but she's getting closer. She continues to build trust in Jim where she can't with her family.

She'd let herself die. Was that the same as killing yourself? He didn't know."

-- Narrator (chapter 15 paragraph 17)

Importance: Rory has returned home following Lorelei's death. He is trying to

understand his mother's death in the same way he tried to understand Rhys' actions. However, since he never felt as though he knew either one, he can't quite make sense of it.