

Jane Study Guide

Jane by Maggie Nelson

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Summary

This guide was created with the following edition of this book: Nelson, Maggie. *Jane: A Murder*. Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2005.

Interspersed with entries from her aunt Jane's diary, Maggie Nelson explores the memories of the murdered woman, all the while trying to reconstruct some sort of image of the woman who has become an important part of her family's lore over the years. Nelson has dreams in which she seems to be adopting the identity of her aunt, noticing the physical damage of the murdered woman on her own body through a surreal lens. Facing scrutiny from her grandfather over her investigation, Nelson begins to understand the basic information she has about her aunt, tidbits of information, including the fact that Jane was born in Muskegon, Michigan on February 23, 1946 and died on March 20, 1969, almost four years before Nelson's own birth. But some of the stories about Jane are in the air, including the loss of her belongings in the Michigan Law Quad after her death.

Finding Jane's journals from 1966 in her mother's belongings, Nelson secretly makes copies and then explores the history of the death in the New York Public Library, surprised at the image of 23-year-old Jane that was still the same when Nelson was younger. The history of the family in Michigan is explored through the letters of ancestors who had arrived from Sweden, working in factories in the early twentieth century. Despite some hesitation, Nelson's mother, Barb, takes a box of Jane's belongings home, including her early journals. Her mother mentions how Jane was chatty growing up, and Nelson compares the possibility of personalities between Jane and Anne Frank. Through Jane's diary entries from 1960-61, Nelson begins to compile an image of a young girl who had a contentious relationship with her sister, Barb, whom she admired and was jealous of for her social ease, with diary entries punctuating her particular vehemence for Barb during those years.

As a teenager, Jane began to have a deteriorating relationship with her mother, claiming a loss of respect for her in her diaries, which Nelson explains through her grandmother's bleak family past. Jane read the novel *Mrs. Mike*, then expressed a wish for a more fulfilling and emotionally stable life, similar to her sister Barb. After her acceptance in the University of Michigan, Jane's relationship with her sister improved, as they both attended the same college, ran in different circles, but were at ease with each other, with Jane expressing a more positive admiration for her sister in her journal. Barb's boyfriend turned out to become her husband and Nelson's father. Meanwhile, Jane's relationship with her parents worsened, as she was made unwelcome at home.

Nelson then explores the romantic history of Jane, finding some evidence of distress in a journal entry. Nelson tracks down Phil, the man Jane had a serious relationship with. Communicating with him, Nelson learns that they met during an economics class, as Phil was a graduate teaching assistant. He began to admire Jane and they fell in love, joining causes over their admiration for socialism, including doing campaign work for Eugene McCarthy. Further distancing herself from her parents, Jane applied to the



Michigan law school and won a fellowship. Through Phil's old photos, Nelson sees a different, more vulnerable side of Jane who expresses happiness in her journals.

With Phil having been offered a job at NYU, Jane decided to transfer to the law school there as well. Her plan was to drive home and reveal her relationship to her parents. While a person named David Johnson was supposed to drive her, there was a mix up and Jane went off with a stranger, unrevealed, who murdered her while on the I-96. Her body was found 14 miles from Ann Arbor the next day, as she was strangulated before being shot twice in the head, and her body was arranged on a tombstone. After her death, the family dealt with the ongoing police investigation and a series of crank calls.

Nelson wonders what happened in the five hours between Jane's departure from Ann Arbor and her death. The focus then shifts to the other murders of young, politically liberal women that transpired around the same time, with the police almost catching a young man revisiting one of the crime scenes. Nelson uses excerpts from "The Michigan Murders," a book that focuses solely on the death of Jane and other women, including information that Jane had not been raped before her death. Barb remembers a distress call from Jane but Nelson is hesitant to take it seriously. Blood was found in an abandoned barn that burned down after its discovery. A suspect, John Collins was arrested, after blood and hair was discovered in his garage by his uncle, a police officer. A contempt for females and a history of rage was revealed, while .22 bullets, the same that were used to shoot Jane, were found in his garage. He was convicted despite his plea of not guilty. Nelson imagines conversations with Collins, trying to uncover whether or not he really was the murderer, and realizes that it was Jane's death that mattered most to her, not Collins' crimes.

Barb learned to bar her doors and windows in the aftermath of Jane's death, while Nelson and her older sister, Emily, coped with the loss of Jane across time in peculiar ways, playing with the dolls that their mother and Jane had as children, and playing with the idea of ghosts in their house, where Nelson pretended a dead sister of hers lived in the basement. Nelson wonders how Jane would have turned out had she been alive, expressing jealousy that Emily's middle name is Jane. Nelson talks about her father and his burning personality, as he accomplished a lot in a relatively quick life before succumbing to a heart attack. She had a close relationship with her sister, Emily, who was troubled growing up.

When Nelson reveals her desire to revisit Jane's past, Barb surprisingly agrees to accompany her. They visit Jane's grave and the grave where she was left to die. Nelson tries to grasp some semblance of her aunt as she follows her journey before her death. Despite the lack of revelation after everything, Nelson expresses a sense of ease at having initiated the journey in the first place and the calm she feels as a result.



Beginning

Summary

The book begins with an epigraph, a section of Sylvia Plath's "The Detective," where the speaker is speaking to Watson, pointing out that they are walking on air and that he should make notes on their natural surroundings, with a moon and a crow in a tree.

Writing to her journal, Jane talks about how people write for their own therapy, and that her own journal endeavor is an attempt to do the same, even though it is only addressed to her. She is going to attempt to do it even though it is just a bunch of nothing, at least in her mind.

Analysis

The epigraph from the Sylvia Plath poem serves as foreshadowing, pointing to not only the investigative nature of the book, but also the ethereal atmosphere that the journey will take on. In this case, Watson can be surmised to be the reader, being suggested by Nelson to accompany her on her journey and investigate and notate as they go along, noticing the clues that are embedded in nature.

The first entry of Jane's journal provides an outlook into her mind, as she uses the writing exercise as a means of venting her emotional charges. The writing is her therapy, and it is only intended for her own benefit and is to be read by her only, which would allow the exploration of her own mind. When she says that the journal is a bunch of nothing, an important characteristic of her personality comes forth, as she does not have strong self-esteem, and instead tacitly mocking her own intention to offer herself therapy, even though her problems are not terribly important.

Vocabulary

embalmed, phosphorous, epistle



The Light of the Mind (Four Dreams)

Summary

An unnamed female character was shot in head, once in the front and once in the back, and walked around trying to find someone to remove the slugs. She noticed the physical clarity of the holes, and the passage of light and air going through them, wondering if the light was the light of her own mind. If the light did belong to her mind, where had it been before, she wondered. She questions how she can take advantage of it, even though the light is fading.

The female character wakes from her dream at 5:30 a.m and sees peonies under her window. In the mirror next to her bed, she sees a freckle on her forehead that was not there before. With a wet mist surrounding her, she sees the freckle growing and the flowers growing at the same time. While the color of the freckle changes to purple, the flowers begin to fall over from the weight of the petals. Finally, the freckle on her forehead becomes a hole.

The female character wakes up and notices the mist is gone and that there is no freckle or hole, but the flowers have opened up. She realizes, walking down the street on a spring day, that she is carrying a suitcase. She sings "I Wish I Were a Kid Again," and imagines that she is Cleopatra and that her guts are spears.

The fog returns after the sun retreats to the outside. She notices a bakery that she has not seen before, and realizes that places like those exist only once and have only one entrance, and that maybe she has seen the place when she was younger. Sitting down on a table, she begins to write a letter addressed to no one.

Analysis

Before she delves into either Jane or her own mind, Nelson invents an anonymous female character that seems to be a compound of herself and her dead aunt. The dream sequences provide a domain where the limited facts available can be stretched and are malleable enough to be investigated to limits that are unavailable in reality. With this anonymous female character, Nelson inserts the physical injuries of Jane's death, specifically the bullet hole in the head, using it metaphorically as a tool of enlightenment, as it shines through her head, opening up a portal of knowledge that seemed to have been inaccessible before. With a new sense of awareness available to her, the question becomes how to take advantage of it, especially as the light seems to be fading, which indicates the limited access to knowledge that Nelson is working with and the accompanying sense of urgency.

In the second dream, the knowledge is manifested in a different manner, with the freckle taking the spot of the earlier bullet hole. She wakes up in the morning, the early time signaling the beginning of her journey, while the burgeoning peonies indicate a growing



sense of foreboding and knowledge on the horizon, which becomes so overbearing that the petals find themselves folding over. The mist is an attempt by nature to muddle her thoughts and vision, while the freckle slowly turns into a hole as a means of counteracting the mist.

The final two dreams continue her quest for knowledge, as she leaves her house in search for the truth. With the flowers blooming, she has an opportunity to gather more knowledge, and she realizes that she has a suitcase, which serves as a trove of knowledge that is accessible and will aid in her journey. The song has particular importance, especially contrasted with Cleopatra, as the desire to become as innocent as a child is overpowered by the rising sense of femininity in her, which also provides her with the weapons to combat any obstacles that come in her way. But the journey is continually difficult, as the light of the sun is dimmed by the fog and she takes refuge in a familiar looking bakery, which holds importance as a place where things can grow and expand, and where she can write the letter that is addressed to no one, no one because this is her journey and her's alone.

Vocabulary

slugs, flared, shaft, peonies, contusion



Figment

Summary

Nelson's journey begins to uncover the life of her aunt Jane, and she meets resistance in the lack of knowledge about her, with her grandfather asking her if she will be a figment of Nelson's imagination. Nelson then uses her imagination to invent a Jane-like figure, one that is not aware herself of her surroundings and the mystery surrounding her, using the imaginary woman as someone she can engage with in her head (Figment).

A passage from Edgar Allen Poe is included, titled "A Philosophy of Composition," which highlights the poetic nature of a beautiful woman's murder. Jane's journal entries from 1966 show the mystery that Nelson is attempting to understand, the image being of a woman rebellious but unsure of where her life is headed.

In "Two Wrongs," Nelson brings up elephants being able to recognize the bones of their dead, saying that it is different to mourn someone as plain as Jane, her name and grave unremarkable. Nelson was born almost four years to the day after Jane's death. Despite the majority of her belongings burning in the fire of the Michigan Law Quad, Nelson finds Jane's journal in her mother's home and makes copies.

While in the New York Public Library in "First Photos," Jane finds old clippings of newspapers that have Jane's last photos, remarking on how Jane looked older when she was a child but will now always remain a 23 year old.

In "Spirit," Nelson's mother tells her the spirit of Jane lives on in her, while she recalls her grandfather confusing her with his dead daughter while sitting at the breakfast table.

Analysis

This section fully introduces the use of Jane's journal and diary entries, the former having been written in 1966, while the latter while she was 13. Nelson uses them to establish various facets of Jane's personality, and give insight into the mind of a woman who was mysterious when alive, and more so after death as a symbol. Her writing reveals someone who seems to lack direction in life, but is also not afraid to confront it, questioning her passage in life in a very direct manner through her journals. But the image of Jane is limited, and Nelson has to invent an imaginary version of her dead aunt, one that is more receptive to being explored (Figment, 25).

In "A Philosophy of Composition," Nelson uses an Edgar Allen Poe's writing to justify her investigation, since according to Poe, the murder of a beautiful woman is the most poetic idea in the world, the poetic element also informing Nelson's use of the form over the course of the book.



Nelson's engagement with the memory of Jane is difficult, as the aunt she always heard about died four years before her birth. In "Two Wrongs," the mention about elephants being able to recognize the dead by their bones is done deliberately, so as to suggest that Nelson can do the same, even if her means are limited. Most of Jane's belongings are burned outside the Michigan Law Quad after her death, with the diary and journal entries remaining as sources that could help Nelson navigate the way. In the same passage, Nelson also refers to Jane as "plain Jane," which points to the aunt as being unremarkable, making the investigation all the more difficult. Along with the diary and journal, Nelson finds an old photo of Jane in the New York Public Library while scouring through old newspaper clippings. The image of Jane here is important, as it is the same one that Nelson viewed in her parent's bedroom growing up, but it is also different. While Nelson has aged, the image of Jane has remained the same over the years, and will always be the same. Jane will always be the 23 year old. But the ghost of Jane haunts the family, as evidenced by Nelson's grandfather confusing Nelson for his dead daughter, and Nelson's mother telling Nelson she carries the spirit of Jane within her. Nelson would have to dig within her to feel the Jane of old and help her along her journey.

The form introduced in the section is consistent throughout the text, as Nelson uses a collage of different literary forms to create the emotional canvas of the investigation she has set out on. She sometimes tackles the same subject through different forms, addressing the idea of a figment through both prose and poem, while also including outside sources to provide context for what she has set out to do, as is evident by her use of the Edgar Allen Poe segment.

Vocabulary

braying, traversed, plaintive, chevrons, gelatinous



How the Journey Was

Summary

Through old letters, Nelson reveals the history of the Holder family as early twentieth century Swedish immigrants, coming to America to work in factories. Despite warnings from her father about Jane's hatred towards her, Nelson's mother takes Jane's belonging with her home, sending copies of Jane's diaries to Nelson, written from 1960 to 1961, when Jane was 13. Jane's diary entries show a teenager full of her doubts and angst, aimed at both her friends and family. She is concerned with her social status after becoming a cheerleader (October 21, 1960), but is also averse to being part of the pack. Jane's relationship with her family is tumultuous, as she initially has intense hatred for her elder sister, Barb, with whom she shares a room and who is jealous of her social ease, but whom she also loves and admires, hoping for a better relationship with (February 20, 1961). Jane's attitude towards her mother is more intense, regarding the woman with hatred, with Nelson revealing a troubled, alcoholic family past for her grandmother. Jane laments her inability to be happy, hoping to change her attitude after reading the novel *Mrs. Mike*.

Jane enrolls in the University of Michigan and her relationship with her sister improves. The sisters go on double dates, and Barb's boyfriend eventually becomes her husband and Nelson's father. Tensions heighten between Jane and her parents, as they make clear to her that she is unwelcome at home (*Of Her Blood*). Becoming politically active on campus, Jane experiences her fair share of romantic disappointment, with a Jim Hudek in particular straining her (1966). Nelson uncovers Jane's relationship with someone named Phil, who responds to her queries, revealing his and Jane's serious relationship. He was an economics TA and they shared an affinity for socialism, going to campaigning for Eugene McCarthy together. Jane travels abroad, her letters to Barb revealing a more adventurous, understated side to her (*Letter from France, 1967*), while she also desires to be more independent, cutting herself off financially from her parents and receiving a fellowship to the University of Michigan Law School. Phil's photos show a more vulnerable, intimate side of Jane that Nelson has not known before, and the section ends with a diary entry from 1960 where Jane is adamantly reveling in the joy of life.

Analysis

This section focuses heavily on establishing Jane as a person, as a teenager and college student, leading up to her eventual death, painting a picture of not just her, but her family and surrounding relationships. The early letters Nelson uses to highlight the family ancestry are telling, as they establish the theme of isolation, of Swedish immigrants who have come to America as a means of economic opportunity but find themselves socially isolated. These are people who have left their homes and the only manner in which they can talk to their loved ones and relate their emotional turbulence



is through letter writing, something that Jane takes up generations later in a different form. In her letters, Jane's relationship with her family is explored, some of her emotional variations mimicking that of a teenager, including her strained relationship with her elder sister, Barb, Nelson's mother. Growing up in the same room, they have intense hatred for each other, something attributable to sibling rivalry. Jane resents her elder sister's social ease but is admiring of her ability to enjoy life, something she has difficulty doing so. Jane does not get along with her parents either, especially her mother. While Jane improves her standing with Barb, the relationship between mother and daughter further deteriorates. Nelson gives a hint of her grandmother's personality, revealing an alcoholic family background, which leads her to be difficult and overbearing with her own children. Jane reading Mrs. Mike is important, as it represents her difficulty in enjoying life, which she states quite explicitly, lamenting that she is unable to be happy the way the protagonist of the novel is.

Once at the University of Michigan with Barb, Jane becomes more independent and she is more free in how she expresses herself, including becoming politically active. Jane begins to appreciate Barb more but her new independence rubs her parents the wrong way, as they make her aware that she is unwelcome at home. Nelson uses Jane's journal to bring out a romantic side to Jane as well, including romantic disappointments. Jane also discovers her political standing as a socialist, something she explores while traveling through Europe. But the big reveal for Nelson is Jane's relationship with Phil, an Economics TA with whom a serious relationship begins. Phil's testimony points to a side of Jane that is vulnerable and intimate, something that is only shown partially through Jane's diary and journal. With Phil, Jane shows that side to someone outside rather than just a piece of paper, and Nelson finds hints of this different woman in the pictures that Phil provides, which show a side of Jane that the family was unaware of. Despite her relationship with Phil, Jane continues to assert her dominance, as her femininity evolves and she cuts herself off financially and receives a fellowship to the University of Michigan Law School. The section ends with Jane exclaiming her happiness, which points to an emotional shift around the corner, a forbearing of sorts.

Vocabulary

chic, gushing, rheumatic, snippy, tributaries, lush



Order of Events

Summary

After Phil was offered a job at NYU, Jane planned to follow him and enroll at the law school there. She wanted to return home to reveal her relationship with Phil to her parents, whose disapproval she was expecting due to Phil being Jewish. Jane used a ride board as a means of getting home but the person who picked her up turned out not to be the man who she had agreed to go with, a man named David Johnson. When Jane did not arrive home, her father drove up and down the I-96, before calling the police and reporting her missing. The next day, her body was found propped up on a grave in a cemetery 14 miles outside of Ann Arbor. She had been strangled before being shot in the head twice, her body arranged deliberately (Position). In an excerpt from "The Michigan Murders," it is revealed that Jane's parents were composed, Nelson revealing their Calvinist background as a source of composure. During an open casket funeral, they were asked by the police to keep an eye out for strangers, while also asking them to engage with all the crank calls that continued to come in, despite the family's pleas to be left alone (Crank Calls).

Analysis

Jane's journal and diary takes a backseat in this chapter, as Nelson explores the events leading up to and after Jane's death. With her relationship with Phil progressing, she needs to reveal to her parents her decision to move with him to NYU. While their relationship was already strained, there were minimal direct confrontations, which would have to be dealt with now, especially considering the trouble with Phil being Jewish. With her mind occupied, the reader does not receive insight into Jane's emotional thinking before she heads for home, so Nelson compensates with testimony picked up from the family and "The Michigan Murders" book, which reveals the details about Jane's physical arrangement after her death. In a hurry to get home, Jane takes a ride with the wrong person and is found strangled and shot in the head twice, propped up on a gravestone. For the first time, the religious background of the family is revealed as Calvinist, as it was used as a means of strength after Jane's death, which would have been disagreeable for Jane, considering her Marxist background. The decision to have an open-casket funeral reveals a lot about the family, as they seem to be determined to not hide their daughter from the world, despite all their misgivings about her direction in life. But despite the family's resolve, they are tested constantly, with the police engaging with them as the investigation went on and the series of crank calls that haunted them.

Vocabulary

mallard, hashed, cubbies, reverential, sequestered



Some Questions

Summary

Years into the future, Nelson has questions about Jane's death, including what happened during the five hours she spent with her murderer and why she was shot twice in the head after being strangled. Fresh tire tracks and a man's shoe print are the only clues left at Denton Cemetery, where Jane was found. Nelson's mother has a vague false memory about Jane calling her before her death, a cry for help that Nelson realizes is just an opportunity for her mother to feel guilty. It turns out that Jane's death was another in a series of serial murders committed against liberal, college-going female students, with Jane being the third. Excerpts from "The Michigan Murders" speculate that the murderer could have been enraged when unable to force intercourse due to the women being on their periods. While Jane's journal and diary entries paint a portrait of a young woman struggling with the duality of life, Nelson continues to her own journey, revealing a strange dream in which she is urged to attend a church for salvation but stays outside (God's Country).

Blood was found in an abandoned barn off LeForge Road which was burned down after discovered by the police, a teenager claiming responsibility. Including excerpts from "The Michigan Murders" is problematic for Nelson, as she realizes her details are different from the book. The police failed to capture a suspect after the seventh murder but eventually arrested a John Collins who was arrested after he covered what he thought was blood in his garage with black paint, which led the police to his basement, finding hairs that were found on one of the bodies. Despite being convicted, Collins plead his innocence, his case history of anger and violent emotions towards women counting against him. Despite Jane's father believing that Collins was the man, doubts persisted in the family. Nelson imagines a conversation with Collins, trying to unearth the truth, realizing that it is Jane's murder that concerns her rather than Collins's crime (Mail Order). Her attempts to unearth information about the current investigation lead nowhere and the section ends with a Jane diary entry showing her confusion about life and death, her inability to come to terms with it.

Analysis

This section of the book is primarily expository, establishing the facts of the case involving Jane's death. Nelson takes on the role of an investigator, following the trail of the case and trying to establish her own ideas about what happened. But the clues are limited, and it turns out Jane's death is unremarkable, in the sense that it was not isolated but was part of a series of murders targeting women like her. The demographics of the murder victims points to the masculine backlash against female independence. All the women are college educated, liberals murdered in the same manner. The excerpt from "The Michigan Murders" speculates that none of the women had been raped because they had been on their periods, and that perhaps they had



been murdered once the killer discovered the fact preventing him from rape. As she attempts to piece together her own portrait of the case, Nelson finds herself frustrated while reading "The Michigan Murders," which is the first time she has a strong emotional reaction to the case in the book. Her frustrations are embedded in her inability to reconcile herself with the seemingly objective tact of the book, which almost fetishizes the murders to make a good read, while her own connection is to Jane's death and it is a familial connection at that.

The journal and diary entries that Nelson uses further paint the picture of Jane as a woman who is struggling to come to terms with the turbulence of life, feeling lost one day and happy the next. The revelation of John Collins as the possible murderer provides a certainty as to why Jane would have been a victim, as he is revealed to have a misogynistic, rage-filled background. While her father seemed to have been content with the revelation, Barb was not, and Nelson does not seem to be either. But Nelson's ambivalence about Collins has less to do with him and more to do with the nature of her investigation. Her imaginary conversation with Collins reveals the important part of her journey, and that is primarily centered on Jane, which is not influenced by Collins crime or lack of it. It is the end of Jane's life that concerns Nelson, as her relationship and emotional connection is with her dead aunt and not the man who murdered her.

Vocabulary

perforate, pretense, mohair, gully, enumerating



Two Eclipses

Summary

Nelson thinks about the ability of the mind to compensate for facts in an attempt to understand things (Two Eclipses). Nelson's mother still feels guilt about Jane, dreaming about her sister years later. She became paranoid over the years, barricading her doors and windows when alone at home with her daughters while on a trip to Europe, returning to America only to have the Manson murders over her head (Barricades). As a child, whenever Nelson returned to Michigan with her sister, Emily, they would play with dolls, Nelson taking Tracey, Jane's doll, while Emily would take Stacey, their mother's doll. While living at Palm 31, Nelson told lies, including a dead sister inhabiting her basement and being chased home by a stranger. Jane's journal and diary entries reveal a girl and woman attempting to vent her emotions through writing. Growing up jealous of her sister Emily's middle name, Jane, Nelson began to fantasize about serial murder invaders, watching horror movies repeatedly as a means of indulging in the fear.

Nelson recalls having a lot of energy growing up, a sensation of burning which she later attributed to her father, who grew quickly as a lawyer, making partner before succumbing to a heart attack, with people saying he burned brightly at his funeral (The Burn). Growing up, Nelson and her sister Emily had a close relationship, as they liked to tell people they were twins. Nelson would become Emily's physical connection to the world once she withdrew inside, and despite Emily's troubled childhood and constant escapes from school, Nelson and Emily always stayed together emotionally.

Nelson is plagued by dreams about dismembered women and strange men who fly in and whom she stabs, while also attempting to decipher the mysteries of Jane's death, including her bullet wounds and how she might have felt before her death (Getting Serious).

Nelson recalls an incident from childhood where she injured herself while playing the lead role, and her family reassuring her that her injury, and events surrounding were all part of the plan (The Script).

Analysis

With the event of Jane's death behind her, Nelson begins to examine the emotional affect of her dead aunt, indirect and direct, throughout her childhood. Jane's death still hangs over the family, with Barb having feelings of survivor's guilt throughout the years, feeling she might have been able to prevent her sister's death. Growing up, Barb would begin to bar her doors and windows as a means of protecting her daughters, feeling the fear hyped due to the Manson family murders which had happened around the same time.



Palm 31, Nelson's home growing up, serves as an entity of its own, harboring ghosts and premonitions, some deliberately invented by the girls and some just felt. Nelson's decision to lie to her friend about her basement, telling her that a sister of hers went down there and died, could be attributed to her trying to connect with her mother, trying to become part of her guilt as well, which she could do with a dead sister of her own. But Jane's death has other means of intruding Nelson's life, including her fascination with horror films that involved series murders who would invade homes.

Nelson's sister Emily is introduced for the first time, and parallels are drawn between her and Jane. Emily's middle name is Jane, something which Nelson was always been jealous of. But when the sisters play with Barb and Jane's dolls, it is as if the girls are living the lives of their mother and aunt in the future. Nelson is able to hold on to Jane's doll, which speaks to her spiritual connection with her aunt, as proclaimed by her mother and grandfather. But there are more similarities between Emily and Jane than Nelson and Jane. Emily was a troubled child growing up, and despite the distance placed between the two, the sisters always had a strong relationship, contrary to the Barb and Jane, to the point where they pretended to be twins.

Nelson continues to have surreal dreams that involve dismembered females and strange men who she attacks, signaling her continued struggles with the investigation that she has embarked upon. The final entry in the section involves a childhood memory in which Nelson is constantly assured by everyone that her injury during a school play is part of the plan, pointing to the idea of fate being a constant in her lives, and that perhaps Jane's death was fate as well, something that could be attributed to the script of life.

Vocabulary

egret, cattails, shellacked, comatose, cuticle



A Simply Stated Story

Summary

When Nelson tells her mother that she plans to visit Michigan to trace the end of Jane's life, her mother approves and decides to go along with her. After her plane is delayed, and before meeting with her mother, Nelson imagines a film version of their forthcoming adventure, with her as a young CIA agent and a killer after her (In the Movie Version). Mother and daughter visit Jane's grave, Nelson getting sunburn while leaving peonies at the grave. Without knowing why, they also go to the barn off LeForge Road. Following a map that traces the serial murders of that time, Nelson finds Number 3 and directs her mother to Denton Cemetery, where Nelson tries to find some significance to the place but is unable to.

Nelson has a dream where small articles float by, each getting a "not yet" in response, while she gets the feeling that she is getting closer (Koan). Nelson revisits the idea of a beautiful woman's death being poetic, asking how the reader would react if she told them that Jane was not beautiful in the traditional sense but her image as a 15 year old enjoying life is. On October 28, 1961, Jane went to a theater production of the "Diary of Anne Frank," feeling a sense of ease and comfort with the star of the play and overall production. Her final journal entry in 1966 shows a woman comfortable with herself, exclaiming that her therapy is over.

Analysis

While before the journey had been primarily through Nelson's head and memory, in this section, the reader is able to follow the physical investigation that Nelson conducts. Her mother's approval and decision to come along can be attributed to her desire for some sort of closure, something she had been unable to find over the years. The plane delay serves almost as premonition, as if the world is attempting to stop her from going to Michigan, a chance for her to stop her journey.

While still on her trip, Nelson attempts to prepare herself by imagining a scenario which is fraught with danger, one where she is an agent investigating where the world is against her, where the killer she is chasing is coming after her as well. Her imagination serves to underwhelm what happens right after, as she visits the different points of Jane's final hours, finding nothing of significance along the way. Mother and daughter leave peonies at Jane's grave, which goes back to the second of the four dreams in the beginning of the book.

The dream in "Koan" points to the underwhelming significance of the knowledge that is coming by her, as Nelson seems to be getting closer but none of the articles of information are earth shattering.



In "A Philosophy of Composition (Reprise)," Nelson revisits the idea that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic topic, pointing out that Jane may have not been beautiful in the traditional, physical sense, but her life, and the simple attempt to live her life through all the highs and lows, was beautiful. This need to revisit the idea of beauty also goes back to Nelson's earlier mention of a plain Jane, and since Jane's death was lost in the shuffle of the serial murders, never garnering any individual attention. Perhaps if she had been remarkably beautiful, it might have happened. The final two entries of Jane's diary and journal are inserted as well, with the diary entry from her year of 13 inviting a comparison between her own writings and the "Diary of Anne Frank," a production of which she sees and is comfortable with. But the final journal entry is the most significant, as it serves to provide a sense of ending, with Jane finding herself at ease with her life, comfortable with the therapy she had initiated with the writing of her journal.

Vocabulary

marshy, studded, koan, recessed, albatross

Epilogue

Summary

The female character from "The Light of the Mind" returns, and having finished with her letter, she leaves the bakery. She takes a pebble and presses it to her head, trying to dull her ache until the pebble sticks like a third eye. She feels the need of the pebble as she moves through a world that she can no longer see, but through which a last trickle of light is still dribbling through. She wonders about the sun, and how it is feebly trying to penetrate the mist, and how it is dull and pale instead of burning like a fire.

Analysis

Her journey over, the Nelson surrogate returns to the ethereal world, leaving the bakery where she had sat down to compose her letter. The hole in her head is no longer there, but a dull ache still exists. In a sense, the portal of knowledge that had opened earlier has closed, and now she substitutes the hole with a pebble she sticks to her forehead, which serves as a third eye, an attempt to have a better understanding of the world. Despite the pebble, she is having difficulty traversing the world, even though there is still some light coming in. The feeble sun is symbolic, as it highlights the underwhelming nature of her journey, one that did not illuminate all the facts, but whose purpose was to provide an emotional understanding rather than a factual one about Jane's murder.

Vocabulary

luminosity, pocked, dribbling

Important People

Jane

The subject of the book, Jane is Maggie Nelson's maternal aunt, someone who passed away four years before her birth and whose ghost still hangs over the family's head, generations on. There is a limited portrait available of her, and most of the information about her is derived from her diary, which she wrote when she was 13, and her journal, which was kept five years later. Through her writings, Jane is revealed to have been interested in her individuality at an early age. Despite being part of the cheerleader squad and being friends with who seem to be the elite social clique, she is unsatisfied and decides to do away with that part of her life, preferring to be on the outside. Her relationship with her family is filled with vehemence at an early age, and while she improves the relationship with her sisterhood once they go to university, her relationship with her parents - especially her mother - further deteriorates.

Throughout the journals, there is an image of a young girl unsure of her future and the direction her life is taking. She is ambivalent about the things she does, feeling happy about them in one entry and then feeling the complete opposite the other. Jane feels strongly about the different things that occupy her, including her decision to be independent and her relationships with people. A contrarian by nature, Jane enjoys her skeptical nature and refuses to take anything absolute. Despite a mention of a romantic interest, the focus of the entries resides on herself, since her writing is a means of therapy. As Nelson reveals, Jane is not especially beautiful but her desire to live life despite the turbulence in her mind provides her with a beauty that is unique to her.

Maggie Nelson

The author of the book, Nelson has a personal connection to what she is writing about, though her reasons for why exactly she is writing are never explicitly clear. The earliest mention is that there is a spiritual connection between her and Jane, as proclaimed by her mother, while her grandfather also confuses her with his dead daughter. Despite the personal nature of the investigation, Nelson is not emotionally overwhelmed, seemingly, by the task at hand. She does, however, recognize the limitations of what she is trying to do and the factual deficiencies in the case of Jane.

Instead of solely relying on her mother and grandfather's testimony of Jane, Nelson takes an unorthodox approach to understanding her emotionally withdrawn aunt, including using her journal and diary as a means of understanding the inner workings of a woman who was emotionally withdrawn. In order to compensate for the lack of factual knowledge present to her, Nelson uses her imagination to draw in the colors for herself, helping her with an emotional resonance that would otherwise be absent. Nelson's frustrations with the factual information becomes clear when she arrives at the murder case that includes John Collins and "The Michigan Murders," both of which test her



resolve. While dealing with both, she realizes that the facts of the case are not what concern her, but it is Jane's death and life that matter more, and the emotional connection that exists between the two but one that she herself does not recognize.

Since Nelson is dealing with a woman who was emotionally elusive, Nelson's grapple with the case is always one step behind. She has to create an imaginary version of herself that would be more successful at exploring the case. This imaginary version of herself also takes on the physical characteristics of the murdered Jane, especially imbuing her imaginary self with bullet holes in the head that serve as portals to knowledge. Nelson's dreams, rendered in poems throughout the book, show her grappling with the limits of facts and the elusive nature of Jane, something she finally comes to terms with by the end of the book, realizing that any knowledge she would acquire of her aunt would not be staggering in away.

Nelson's relationship with her family is highlighted throughout the book, especially her sister Emily. While she is said to have the spirit of Jane, her sister is the one who inherits Jane as a middle name. Nelson is especially close to Emily, often claiming that she is her twin. Her experiencing serving as a withdrawn Emily's conduit to the world helps prepare her for the eventual task of understanding Jane as well. While he does not feature much, Nelson relates some information about her father, as she is heavily disturbed by his death, hiding his clothes in her room as a means of preserving his smell. Even at an early age, she is sensitive to the emotional turbulence around her, something that she uses as an adult to establish an emotional connection with an aunt who died four years before her birth.

Barbra

Jane's sister and Maggie Nelson's mother, she proves to be a conduit of info for her daughter throughout her investigation. Growing up, her relationship with Jane was initially tense, but their standing improved over time, with Barb looking out for her little sister once she arrived at the University of Michigan. After Jane's death, Barb has feelings of survivor's guilt, wondering if there was some way in which she could have prevented Jane's death. Eventually, Barb proves a source of information for her daughter, accompanying her to Michigan to trace Jane's final hours.

Phil

An Economics TA at the University of Michigan, Phil falls in love with Jane and they slowly plan a future together. Nelson reaches out to him when she begins her project on Jane. He is initially wary of what Nelson is attempting to do, but helps her paint a portrait of Jane that is different from what the family knew regularly. With him, Jane was intimate and vulnerable, and he appreciated her intelligence and patience when she was his student. Phil also provides Nelson with an album of photos that Nelson uses to decipher a different side of Jane.



David Johnson

Jane had thought she was sharing a ride with a man named David Johnson, who is revealed to have been part of a play and was confused when asked about the ride.

Edward Keyes

The author of the book "The Michigan Murders," Keyes' book provides a source of information for Nelson throughout the book, something which she struggles with, as she is trying to come to terms with her own facts about the case. Some of his facts run contrary to the family's recollections about Jane's death, including his assertion that the family was strong in the face of death, which is contradicted by Jane's father's behavior as reported by Nelson.

John Collins

John Collins is the man convicted of the serial murders, of which Jane was a victim as well. He was arrested after he mistakenly spray-painted what he thought was blood on his garage, which led the police to his basement, where they found hairs that matched the ones found on one of the murder victims, and also a gun that fired a .22 round. Collins' uncle, a police sergeant, is the one who first pointed in his direction. Collins denied any wrongdoing, despite a history of misogyny and rage revealed by psychiatrists. Collins appears in some of Nelson's fantasies as well, where she tries to have a conversation with him, trying to see if he killed Jane, and eventually realizes that his actions are irrelevant to her.

Emily

Emily is Maggie Nelson's sister, her middle name being Jane creates a certain connection between the two, especially for Nelson. Emily has a close relationship with her sister, Maggie Nelson, the two of them pretending to be twins on occasion. But Emily is also troubled emotionally, as Nelson reveals a childhood that was rebellious and in constant conflict with authorities, getting expelled from school and running away once too.

Mr. Holder

Jane and Barb's father, his direct relationship with Jane is a bit unclear, though he is included when Jane mentions her general disdain for her parents. The ghost of Jane hangs over his head as well, as he constantly confuses his granddaughter for his dead daughter, even though he is adamant that John Collins is the killer.

Mrs. Holder

Jane and Barb's mother, Mrs. Holder is noted for her strict demeanor, with Barb even calling her difficult at one point. Mrs. Holder is revealed to have had a troubled family background, as her brother and father were alcoholics and she took care of them. After her marriage, she tried to distance herself from that part of her family. Her relationship with Jane is strained, as the daughter vehemently declares her hatred for the mother. Despite their relationship, Mrs. Holder insists on having an open-casket funeral for Jane.



Objects/Places

Jane's Diary/Journal

Because of her emotionally withdrawn nature, Jane's diary and journal are portals into her emotional landscape. They are used by Nelson throughout the book to establish a certain theme and reveal some insight into the mind of her dead aunt.

University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

University of Michigan-Ann Arbor is where Jane enrolls for her higher education, and where she is able to express her individuality and political freedom for the first time. The University is also where her relationship with Barb improves and where she meets Phil for the first time as a student in his Economics class.

Muskegon, Michigan

The birthplace of Jane and Barb, Muskegon is where the family's Swedish ancestors came in the early twentieth century to work in factories. Jane longs to leave the suffocating nature of her home in Muskegon and finally able to do so.

The Michigan Murders

The Michigan Murders is a book written by Edward Keyes about the serial murders in Michigan in 1966, one of which was Jane. Nelson uses the book as a supplement while researching Jane's death but eventually realizes that the book does not provide her with what she needs.

I-96

I-96 is the highway on which Jane is presumed to have been murdered. Jane's father searched for her along the highway and her body was found in a cemetery some distance off the road.

LeForge Road Barn

LeForge Road Barn is where some blood is found in relation to the Michigan murders. It is burned down shortly after its discovery by the police. Years later, Nelson visits the place with her mother, looking for clues, but finds nothing.



Tracey/Stacey Dolls

The Tracey/Stacey Dolls dolls belonged to Jane and Barb growing up. Nelson and her sister, Emily, would play with the dolls whenever they visited Michigan growing up. Nelson would play with Tracey, Jane's doll, while Emily would play with Stacey, Barb's doll.

31 Palm

31 Palm is the house in which Nelson grew up with her sister and mother. There is an element of the supernatural to the house, as Nelson invents a tale about a dead sister in the basement. She and Emily also see and name ghosts throughout the house.

Denton Cemetary

Denton Cemetary is where Jane's body is found. It is located 14 miles outside of Ann Arbor. When Nelson visits the place, she realizes there is no significance to the gravestone where Jane was found.

Two .22 Bullets

Two .22 Bullets were used to shoot Jane after she was strangled to death, and which are found in John Collins's basement. The bullet holes are used symbolically by Nelson in her dream sequences as portals to enlightenment.



Themes

Unresolved Death

The abrupt murder of Jane, an already aloof figure in her family, forces the family to deal with the issues that arise from her unresolved death, even years after the event. With Jane hanging over her head as mythic figure, Maggie Nelson strives to understand the woman who has become a symbol that haunts the memories of her mother, and has found her way into her own dreams as well. Since her death was so unexpected, the family never fully moves on from the incident, as the father confuses his granddaughter for his daughter, while Barb invents memories as a means of feeling some measure of guilt over her sister's death. Despite John Collins's conviction over Jane's murder, there is an uncertainty over whether or not he was the actual murderer. Also, it is the emotional aftermath of Jane's death that is so concerning, rather than the idea of finding the actual killer and holding him responsible. Jane dies abruptly, and the various family members were never able to resolve their emotions with the outcast before her life was taken.

Similarly, Jane's death finds itself a point of emotional contention for Maggie Nelson, even though she should be unaffected, having been born four years after the death of her aunt. However, the symbol of Jane haunts her to, as she is told that the spirit of her dead aunt remains inside her, which, along with other incidents, prompts her as an adult to explore the woman that Jane was during her lifetime, and to try and establish an emotional connection that would provide some sort of resolution that her mother and grandfather were not able to access. The lack of factual information that hindered the investigation also translates to the emotional aspect of the investigation, as only Jane's journal and diary are available as portals into her mind, a lack of information which is reflected in the fragmentary structure of Nelson's dreams. Confronted with the sense of incomplete on both ends, Nelson finds herself strained emotionally, as she constantly has to find novel ways of continuing on.

Feminine Identity

Throughout Jane's journal and diary, a sense of her feminine identity is discovered and discussed as something that provoked a strong reaction during the time she was alive. Having been born and raised in a Calvinist family during the 1950-60s, Jane finds it difficult to assert her independence as a woman, which leads to her into constant conflict with her parents. Growing up, she is initially a part of the popular clique of her high school, along with being a cheerleader. But she rejects that image of a woman, determined to find herself as a woman on her own.

Jane is able to find some measure of identity after enrolling in the University of Michigan, where she explores her political sympathies of Marxism by being active on campus and campaigning for Eugene McCarthy. Her independent streak as an adult



runs into conflict with her parents, who tell her she is not welcome at home, while Jane takes the opportunity to continue her education without their financial support. Her relationship with Phil is another avenue where she pursues her independence as a woman, as he is Jewish and she knows that will eventually be problematic for her parents, though there is no hint that she has been in a relationship with him for those reasons.

Early in the book, Nelson puts forth her "Philosophy of Composition," using Poe's idea that a beautiful woman's death is so the most poetic idea of all, and that is invariably a part of her identity as a dead woman. She is supposed to be a beautiful woman who has been murdered, which is why so much time is being spent on her. But Nelson reveals that Jane was not beautiful in the traditional sense, challenging the idea of beauty being necessary to create a poetical figure. Jane's individuality, her freedom of spirit, and desire to live life on her own terms create a sense of beauty independent from superficial ideas of looks.

Siblings over Time

With Jane and Barb, and then Maggie and Emily introduced as pairs of siblings, the book aims to understand the connections between female siblings and how those connections traverse time and space. Growing up, Jane and Barb had a contentious relationship, as they shared a room and ran into the problems that rival siblings do. Jane records her feelings regarding Barb in her diary, declaring her deep hatred for the sister who seems to have a better grasp of life than herself. Yet, Jane also admires Barb and wishes to acquire some part of what makes her happy, and also wanting to have a better relationship with her. Despite their relationship improving once they go to the University of Michigan, Jane does not have an intimate connection with her sister, and is amiable at best with her. After Jane's abrupt death, there is a sense of regret in Barb, as she seems to have missed out on a chance to be closer to her sister.

Once Jane is dead, Barb projects her sister onto her daughter, Maggie, telling her that Jane's spirit lives inside her. And while she does not explicitly encourage Nelson's endeavor, she does provide her daughter with the tools necessary to complete her assignment. Nelson feels encumbered by the weight of Jane, almost as if she is trying to understand Jane better as a means of fulfilling the role for her mother. By accompanying Jane to Michigan, Barb is able to settle any disputed feelings she still has about her sister, and find some measure of resolution that had been unavailable beforehand. Unlike her daughter, Barb was content living with the guilt of having not saved her sister, and she lived on as the surviving sister who could have done better. It required action from her daughter to break her out of that shell.

Along with Jane and Barb, Maggie and Emily are the other pair of siblings in the book. Unlike their mother and aunt, however, they have always had a better relationship growing up. They pretend to be twins and are each others emotional support when needed. In a sense, by inheriting Jane's name as her middle one, Emily also acquires some of her aunt's spirit as well, growing up as a problem child. Unlike Barb, Nelson is



better able to access her sister, and this relationship is what provides her with the necessary emotional structure needed to delve into the issue of Jane.

Mothers and Daughters

While focusing on feminine independence, the novel explores the tensions, some overt and some underneath the surface, that exist between mothers and daughters, carrying over generations. Growing up as a teenager, and as an adult, there is strong friction between Jane and her mother. Throughout her diary, Jane exclaims that she has lost respect for her mother, with Barb mentioning that their mother was strict. The ways of the mother conflicted with the independence of the daughter, and that was a relationship that never healed. While their mother insists on an open casket funeral for Jane, the affects of her daughter's death on her are never expressed, as the way Nelson's grandfather did, hinting at a tension that has been buried underneath the surface.

Unlike Jane and her mother, the tension between Nelson and Barb is not necessarily caustic and overwhelming, but it exists nonetheless. Barb has told her daughter that she possesses the spirit of Barb's dead sister, instilling an inner turbulence in her that persists into adulthood. Not having been able to deal with the death of her sister, Barb places some of the emotional burden on her daughter, who feels compelled to investigate the emotional case of her aunt, Jane. The burden of expectation is occasionally overwhelming, and while Nelson is the one who does all the work, Barb is able to learn from her daughter the resolution she needed her entire adulthood, something she relied on her daughter to do rather than do it herself.

Imagination as Compensation

Without access to a large trove of facts, Nelson uses her imagination as a means of compensation, using the mind to explore various facets of Jane's life that would otherwise remain isolated and incomplete. Since the primary source of access to Jane's mind is her diary and journal, Nelson is faced with the conundrum of how to explore the woman that had remained emotionally withdrawn her entire life. She tries different approaches, including manipulating form and content, using the warping of methods to enhance the emotional capability of her work. Instead of relying on traditional narrative techniques, Nelson mixes poetry, prose, and documentary sources as a means of imbuing the work with an ethereal quality that makes Jane a more vivid figure in the mind of the reader. Her dreams and imaginary expeditions also form a core part of the book, as she imagines various conversations and interactions through the book to come to various conclusions about her work, the purpose and direction of it. This allows her to circumvent the limited resources on hand and creates a work that is emotionally powerful, while also providing her with a sense of resolution that she had set to achieve.



Styles

Structure

The book is divided into eight parts, with the first and last forming bookends with the surrogate Maggie Nelson character trying to understand the case of Jane in the surreal world of her imagination. In between, the sections chart Nelson's journey as she tries to follow the trail of Jane through her life. She starts from the beginning, using the journal and diary entries as a means of establishing Jane's character, all the while adding her own recollections and reactions to the events transpiring, which are dreamlike states of reflection. The sections slowly build up the emotional tension within Nelson, as she grapples with the limitations of what she had set out to accomplish, realizing that facts are not the end goal, but instead some sort of emotional understanding is what she needs to aim for, which is underwhelming in a sense. The first part sets the tone for the book will set out to accomplish, as it is a letter addressed to no one in particular, and the surreal nature of the passage prepares the reader for the rest of the book, which is a mix of poetry and prose and does not conform to regular structures of narrative, instead choosing to defy form as a means of understanding the unreal nature of Jane's death. Since facts are limited, imagination is needed to help paint in the colors, which Nelson uses to establish an emotional connection.

Perspective

With the exception of Jane's journal and diary, the rest of the book is told from Nelson's perspective. She will occasionally insert passages from other sources, including "The Michigan Murders" or from Edgar Allen Poe, but it is Nelson who is reacting to these bits of information as a means of trying to grasp a better understanding of the case. Nelson is in a dreamlike state of mind for the most part, as she is trying to reach back into her memories and also use her imagination to work through the task at hand. This allows the reader to better appreciate the difficulty of the task, and this mode of narration also has more emotional resonance, since a regular narrative would be similar to "The Michigan Murders," focusing more on the objective facts of the case rather than the emotional truths that Nelson is trying to reach through her variation in form.

Tone

The tone is often muted throughout the text, partially because of the ethereal atmosphere that Nelson has created. But it is muted also because of the uncertainty of what Nelson is trying to accomplish and what she will find. Jane's journal and diary provide the vivacity of the book, as they show her emotional extremes. Even when Nelson's dreams are fraught with danger from strange men, the sense is never one of extreme threat, but instead an emotional distance is present that deliberately keeps the reader at bay. The emotional distance reflects the gulf between Nelson and Jane as

well, and the reader is able to access that distance through the understated, almost listless tone that persists through the text and to the end as well, when the Nelson surrogate feels underwhelmed by the emotional discovery she has been granted through her journey.



Quotes

I understand many people write for therapy--one's own.
-- Jane (Beginning paragraph 1)

Importance: The purpose of Jane's diary and journals is revealed, as she writes to expel thoughts from her mind since she is emotionally withdrawn.

Is this the light of the mind? Is this the light of my mind?
-- Anonymous Female Character (The Light of the Mind (Four Dreams) paragraph 1)

Importance: In the dream sequence, the Nelson surrogate wonders about the hole in her head and the light coming from it, which symbolizes the opportunity presented to her for enlightenment and investigation.

I invent her, then, as a woman emerging from the sea.
-- Nelson (Figment paragraph 1)

Importance: Without access to the actual woman or a substantial source of information about her, Nelson invents a version of Jane in her head, one that she can communicate with and around whom she bases her investigation.

Well Jane,/ he says, I think I'll have/ another cup of coffee.
-- Mr. Holder (Figment paragraph 1)

Importance: Jane's father and Nelson's grandfather confuses his granddaughter for his daughter, indicating that the ghost of his dead daughter still haunts him.

On one page I am obviously happy and on the next desperately/ unhappy.
-- Jane (How the Journey Was paragraph 1)

Importance: Jane's emotional turbulence is revealed here, as she has difficulty maintaining a stable emotional mood, going from high to low fairly quickly.

I've decided to resign from the compliment club."
-- Jane (How the Journey Was paragraph 1)

Importance: Jane asserts her individuality and desire to reject the status quo, shunning her normal group of friends.

Tomorrow: holds France, perhaps. / Pittsburgh, of course. / Loneliness, so what.
-- Jane (How the Journey Was paragraph 1)

Importance: Despite her growth and better social circles, Jane still feels a sense of unease in the world, feelings of distance overcoming her.



Pseudo-certainty is the worst. Nothing is absolute.
-- Jane (Some Questions paragraph 1)

Importance: Nelson inserts this segment of Jane's journal as a tacit reminder to not discover absolute facts, and to be okay with the uncertain nature of the world and what she is about to uncover. It also highlights the skeptical, contrarian side of Jane's personality.

Or, another way to put it:/ the imaginary is what tends/ to become real, and when it does/ there's no paint black enough/ to cover it up.
-- Nelson (Some Questions paragraph 1)

Importance: While she says this in reference to Collins covering up the supposed blood in his garage, Nelson is really commenting on the power of imagination to create a reality over the years, especially in relation to the case of Jane, where facts are limited and Nelson has to compensate with her imagination.

From here I see/ it is Jane's murder/ that interests me./ His crimes do not.
-- Nelson (Some Questions paragraph 1)

Importance: While trying to understand Collins, Nelson finally comes to terms with the fact that his crime is not relevant to her. The case of Jane as a dead woman, as her dead aunt, and the life she lived prior to her death and the life of hers that has been created after, is what primarily interests her.

They assure me that it is all part of a larger plan, the plan for my return to the starring role.
-- Nelson (Two Eclipses paragraph 1)

Importance: While recalling an incident from childhood where she is assured by her family after an accident during a stage production, Nelson comments on the idea of fate, and the idea that a plan exists that places her at the center of life's stage.

Does it matter if I tell you now/ that Jane was not beautiful?
-- Nelson (A Simply Stated Story paragraph 1)

Importance: Despite basing her inquiry on the basis that a beautiful woman's death is the most poetical topic in the world, Nelson reveals that Jane was not beautiful but immediately asks whether or not that is relevant, and whether that diminishes what she had set out to do.

Strange, she thinks, how the sun so often appears as a pale circle, not the orgy of unthinkable fire it is.
-- Anonymous Female Character (Epilogue paragraph 1)

Importance: Nelson comments on the underwhelming nature of her revelation, and how it is not as illuminating as she had expected it to be.



Topics for Discussion

How was the relationship between Barb and Jane?

As teenagers, Barb and Jane had a sibling rivalry and contempt for each other, but as they grew up, a better understanding developed between the two and became more intimate.

How was Jane's emotional makeup as a teenager? As an adult?

Jane's feelings about people and relationships are stronger and more vehement as a teenager compared to when she is an adult, but at both times, she experiences highs and lows. She seems directionless but also willing embrace the turbulence of her life.

How does Nelson's relationship with her sister, Emily, contrast with Barb and Jane's relationship?

Nelson is closer to Emily than her mother and aunt ever were, even after their teenage years. They pretend to be twins, while Nelson also provides emotional support for Emily when the latter is emotionally withdrawn, serving as a conduit between her sister and the world.

Why does Nelson use an anonymous female character at the beginning and end of the book?

Since Jane is difficult to pin down in the actual world, the realm of imagination is needed to grasp a better understanding of the dead aunt that Nelson, or anyone else, ever truly understood.

What importance does John Collins have for Nelson as she investigates the end of Jane's life?

Collins serves as a placeholder, something that helps Nelson realize more clearly why she began her investigation in the first place.



Is there a relation between Nelson's father and Jane?

Nelson's father and Jane are both people who defy expectations and stand outside the normal realm of accomplishment. Both die younger than they were expected to, and their deaths are emotionally unresolved for family members.

What importance does beauty have in the memoir?

Nelson begins her investigation of Jane's murder on the basis that a beautiful woman's murder is the most poetic thing in the world, but when she reveals that Jane was not beautiful in the traditional sense, it forces the reader to question whether it makes a difference if Jane was beautiful or not.

How does Jane's free spirit influence the course of her life?

Growing up, Jane comes into constant conflict with her parents, which eventually leads her to cut herself off from them once she applies to law school, asserting her individuality. This also puts her into the category of the kind of woman that the murderer would target.

Do Jane's journal and diary entries lose significance over the course of the book?

In the earlier part of the book, Nelson uses Jane's diary and journal as a means of developing an earlier portrait of the woman, but once that has been done, she focuses more on information around to develop her own image of Jane.

Does Nelson receive a satisfying answer at the end of her journey?

Yes and no. Nelson does not receive any factual clarification regarding Jane's murder, nothing that illuminated a new fact about the case. However, she does feel a certain emotional resolution after having completed her journey.