

A Lantern in Her Hand Study Guide

A Lantern in Her Hand by Bess Streeter Aldrich

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Plot Summary

A Lantern in Her Hand is a novel by Bess Streeter Aldrich. Abbie Deal is a true pioneer woman who lives her life on the Nebraska prairie. Abbie moves to Nebraska as a new bride and survives drought and plague as she and her husband build a farm they hope will one day bring them great wealth. Abbie dreams big, but many of her dreams never come true. As an older woman, however, Abbie comes to realize that her dreams did come true, just not for her. Abbie has lived long enough to see her children and grandchildren live the life she always wanted for herself. *A Lantern in her Hand* is not only a celebration of the pioneer women who helped build this country, but for the mothers who sacrificed so that their children could live their dreams.

Abbie Deal is eight years old when her family moves from Chicago to Blackhawk County, Iowa. Abbie meets Will Deal almost immediately and finds in him a friend she can depend on. As Abbie grows, she holds onto dreams of stardom, imagining herself a famous singer with paintings hanging in museums and books she has written lining library shelves. When Ed Matthews, the local doctor's son, hears Abbie sing, he immediately promises to take her to New York where she can take lessons if only she will marry him. Abbie readily agrees, but soon regrets her decision when she realizes that Will Deal is the only man she will ever love.

Abbie and Will marry and have a son almost immediately. When the baby is born, Abbie insists that her growing family needs a home of their own rather than living with Will's parents. Will agrees, but to Abbie's chagrin, has decided to move to Nebraska where the land is plentiful and cheap. Abbie has begun art and voice lessons and does not want to give them up. Will promises her that she will be able to continue her lessons as soon as a teacher becomes available.

Abbie is pregnant again as they begin their journey, therefore she spends much of the trip miserably ill. When they arrive in Nebraska, they are joined by two other families who have also bought land near the Deals. Abbie is grateful to have other women in the area, even if one of the other ladies is a foreign woman who is crass and difficult to get along with. Will builds a house out of sod for them to live in while they work the farm, promising Abbie that as soon as the farm begins to turn a profit he will build her a frame house.

The first few years in Nebraska are difficult ones for Abbie and Will. The soil is good, but a lack of rain causes the crops to grow small and dry. A plague of grasshoppers a few years later almost guarantees the farm's failure. However, Abbie and Will persevere with a little help from Will's parents. Abbie gives birth to three more children, including a little boy who is born stillborn. The population around them grows as well, a school is begun, a general store opens, and a doctor comes to town. Slowly the farm begins to turn a profit and Abbie finally gets that house she always wanted.

When their oldest child, Mack, becomes an adult, he decides he would rather live in the city than on the farm. Despite Will's disappointment, Mack moves to Omaha where he



gets a job in a bank. A short time later a school opens in a nearby town where students are given classes that will prepare them for college. Abbie sacrifices a trip home to Iowa in order to send Margaret to the school. John joins Margaret the following year.

At forty, Abbie is shocked to discover she is pregnant once again. Abbie gives birth to a healthy baby girl during a snowstorm that would have taken her life if not for the help of her unpleasant neighbor. A few years pass by and Margaret announces her intention to marry a doctor she met while at school. Shortly after this, Will passes away. Abbie is left alone with three children and a farm to run. John helps as best as he can, but his heart is not in it. When Abbie learns that John wants to become a lawyer, she encourages him to go to school even if it means leaving her without a man to work the farm.

Abbie begins selling off the farm a little at a time to continue to pay for Isabelle and then Grace's education. Isabelle goes to Chicago after marrying and becomes a music teacher, then later a singer. Grace continues her education until she becomes a college professor. Before Abbie knows it, she is in her eighties, surrounded by children who do not understand her desire to live in the same old house alone, and seven grandchildren who find her quaint and old fashioned. When one of her granddaughter's marries, Abbie is finally able to share with her the pearl necklace her own mother saved from the glory days of the Mackenzie family, a necklace that symbolizes all the dreams Abbie once had for herself. As Abbie looks around her, she soon realizes that her dreams came true, for her children if not for herself. Abbie dies at home, in the house she and Will built together, satisfied with her life.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary

The Mackenzie family was once wealthy, living in splendor in Scotland. However, trust in the wrong person has left them poor immigrants in America. Basil Mackenzie has passed away, leaving his wife Maggie with seven children to raise. Maggie is moving the children to Iowa from their home in Illinois in order to be closer to her eldest daughter who has married a young man with a farm in Blackhawk County, Iowa.

In chapter 1, Abbie lies in a covered wagon listening to her sister tell stories about the days in Scotland. Abbie is fascinated with her grandmother, Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie and a portrait her sister often describes of her. Abbie believes that she will one day be an important person like Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie, one who will sing on a stage, have her paintings hung in museums, and write words in books that will line library shelves. In chapter 2, Abbie and her family forge a river not far from her eldest sister's farm. Near catastrophe happens when several bags of flour fall from one wagon, but the boys are able to save them. When they arrive, the Mackenzies find that they are to live in a small shed until the house being built for them is ready. As they unpack the wagons, Abbie makes sure to be on hand when it is time to move the skin-covered box in which her mother keeps all the mementos from the days when the Mackenzies were wealthy. In chapter 3, the Mackenzies join many of their neighbors at the Deal house as rumors of hostile Indians swirl through the community. There Abbie meets Will Deal, the son of the biggest farmer in the area. Will has a deer that he has raised from infancy that he must now let go because there is not enough room in the barn to protect the animal. Abbie attempts to comfort Will who is too proud to accept her empathy. The Indians move north, allowing the families to return to their own homes. Abbie and her siblings settle in in their new home, where Abbie finds a perfect rock in the woods that she can use to pretend she is singing on stage to an enthusiastic crowd. Abbie's world is perfect, until tragedy strikes. The baby belonging to Abbie's eldest sister becomes ill with an unknown virus and dies.

In chapter 4, Abbie grows older and begins to take on more duties at home. Abbie also begins attending classes at the local school. When Abbie's sister, Isabelle, gets married, the Mackenzies throw a huge party to celebrate. Ed Matthews, the son of the local doctor, arrives with a deer he has killed. When Abbie sees a strap around its neck she knows it is the same deer Will Deal raised. Abbie is sorry for Will, but once again he refuses her sympathy. A few years later, Will's father, Grandpa Deal, is sent to the General Assembly to represent Blackhawk County. Grandpa Deal's absence forces 18-year-old Will to take charge of the family farm. Abbie, unaware of the political turmoil around her, continues to sing in the woods and fantasize about a life on stage. In chapter 5, the Civil War begins. Several of the men in Abbie's family go off to fight in the war. Will stays behind to run the farm, but when Doc Matthews pays him five hundred dollars to go to war in Ed's place, Will is more than happy to agree. The day Will boards the train to go to war, he gives Abbie a passionate kiss that she will remember for



months to come. As war rages, Abbie begins teaching at the local school where Ed Matthews often comes to visit her. One day on her way home from school, Abbie stops in the woods to sing. When Ed Matthews hears her pure voice, he promises to take her to New York where she can get lessons and become a star, if only she will marry him.

Chapters 1-5 Analysis

Abbie Deal is introduced in these opening chapters. Abbie is a bright young lady who dreams of being rich and famous one day. Abbie has a beautiful singing voice and she often uses it in the woods while dreaming that she is in front of an audience. Abbie is determined that her dream will one day come true, illustrating the theme of dreams. However, Abbie lives in an unstable world in the days before the Civil War, leaving her with very few options that will allow her to live out her dreams. Abbie has been groomed to be a wife and mother, not a famous singer, an artist, or a writer, as she dreams of becoming. Abbie has little education as well, just the education that can be provided to a girl living in a slowly growing town on the edge of the untamed West. Abbie lives in a world where babies die of undiagnosed viruses and Indians force hard working people from their homes. It is not a world where a young woman can easily be discovered, no matter how talented she might be.

Other characters are also introduced here. Most notably is Will Deal. Will is a young man several years older than Abbie, who is the son of the largest farmer in the area. Will is a strong, honest young man who takes an interest in wild animals and caring for his own family when his father is not able to do so. Will has an ongoing struggle with another local boy, Ed Matthews, who is the son of the local doctor. Ed is constantly outdoing Will, making it appear that he is the better of the two men. However, when it is time to go to war, Ed pays to have Will take his place in the draft rather than give up his education to be a doctor. Will is more than happy to go to war, to go out into the world and see things he will never see on his father's farm. However, this choice may leave Will out in the cold when it comes to Abbie. Will clearly cares for Abbie, as witnessed by his kiss when he leaves for war. Ed likes Abbie too, even going so far as to offer her marriage in exchange for singing lessons in New York. The writer leaves the reader guessing which man Abbie will choose, and which dream she will chase. The reader suspects, however, that in this one instance, Will will come out the winner.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary

In chapter 6, Abbie learns from Grandpa Deal that Will has been asking about her. At the same time, however, Abbie gets advice from the new preacher's wife who tells her she should explore her singing ability because it could one day win her fame. With this advice in mind, Abbie writes to Ed Matthews and accepts his offer of marriage. However, Abbie quickly regrets her decision. When Will Deal comes home from war, Abbie confesses her love to him and he confesses the same to her. In chapter 7, Abbie and Will are married. Before the ceremony, Abbie's mother gives her a pearl necklace from her skin-covered box that Basil gave to her when they were newly married. Abbie chooses not to wear the necklace in her wedding, but promises that someday her own daughter will wear the pearls with a fine white dress at her own wedding. In chapter 8, the newlyweds move in with Grandpa and Grandma Deal. While Abbie adores her new father-in-law, she finds her mother-in-law to be the most negative person she has ever met. No matter how hard Abbie works, it is never enough. When Abbie discovers she is pregnant, the complaints against her only grow. Shortly after her son, Mackenzie, is born, Abbie tells Will that their family needs a home of their own. Will readily agrees, announcing that he has decided to buy a farm in Nebraska. Abbie argues with him, unhappy with the idea of leaving her family and her art lessons behind. Will talks her into it, however, and Abbie and Will make plans to leave Iowa.

Chapter 9 finds Abbie miserable as she makes the journey to Nebraska pregnant and suffering morning sickness. Abbie and Will join another family, Oscar and Henry Lutz, as they wait beside the Platte River for their wives and father to join them. While happy to meet the other women, Abbie remains miserable as the two families continue their journey. Not far from their new land, the two families are joined by another, the Reinmuellers. Abbie finds Christine Reinmueller to be unpleasant and dirty, but is unwilling to express her feelings when there are so few women friends to be had. Finally they arrive at their new home. The three families circle their wagons and camp for the night. In chapter 10, Abbie becomes aware of some Indians near their camp. Abbie is frightened and unable to sleep, but the Indians leave the next morning without harming anyone, though they do leave with one of Henry Lutz's horses. The three families separate to their own land, each family making their own home before working the land. Will chooses to build a sod house with two small rooms as a temporary home for his growing family. Abbie is happy to move into her own home, even a small soddie, but this happiness quickly disappears as she faces her first winter on the unfamiliar prairie. Abbie is frightened to have her baby alone, but when her time comes Christine arrives to keep her company while Will rides for the doctor. Abbie gives birth to a little girl she names Margaret, after her mother.



Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Abbie decides to marry Ed Matthews because she so desperately wants to be a famous singer and marrying him is her best option to see that dream come true. However, Abbie soon comes to realize that she does not love Ed, but she does love Will. Abbie breaks her engagement and marries Will, proving to the reader that Abbie knows that happiness in her marriage is more important than living out her dreams. Before her wedding, Abbie is given a pearl necklace that she hopes to one day give her own daughter. The necklace symbolizes a life Abbie hopes to have one day and is of deep importance to her, an item that will be referred to many times as the plot continues to develop.

Abbie's decision to marry Will will be put to the test. Will decides to move out to Nebraska, dragging Abbie away from her mother, all her family and friends, and from the art lessons she has begun to take with the new preacher's wife. Abbie is unhappy with this move, but has not given up on the idea that she may still be able to take art lessons and live her dream of becoming an artist. Will promises that the moment a teacher comes to Nebraska, he will make sure she is the first student in line. Abbie accepts this compromise, once again giving up everything in order to be with the man she loves. Abbie's actions show the reader how she is willing to sacrifice her own hopes and dreams for the people she loves.

Abbie is unhappy in her new home which is unfamiliar and often frightening. There is a lot of work involved in beginning a new farm and it is lonely being so far from home. The reader wonders about the strain Abbie's unhappiness will place on her marriage, especially as she approaches the due date of her second child's birth. Christine Reinmueller, a neighbor whom Abbie finds brash and unpleasant, comes to her in her hour of need and helps her through her labor. Christine's actions are important at this point in the novel because Abbie so desperately needs help and Christine is there, despite the fact that she is the one new neighbor Abbie dislikes. This illustrates the bond that develops between people in stressful situations and foreshadows a long friendship between these two women.



Chapters 11-15

Chapters 11-15 Summary

In chapter 11, Will works hard planting newly plowed fields with corn, putting all his hopes into the fertile soil. In addition to planting and tending the fields, Will and Abby work to build up their homestead. Abby helps Will dig a well for water and they plant trees to create a windbreak for the house they hope to build one day. During that first summer, Sarah Lutz's young brother is bitten by a snake and dies from the venom. In chapter 12, the fall comes and finds little crop due to the lack of rain all summer. Will is determined not to give up, however. The following year the crop is fair, but still lacking the wealth Will and Abbie had dreamed of. Will continues on, planting an orchard and dreaming of the roads and towns that will soon grow up around them. Over the next few years, Will helps find a doctor for their little community and the Lutzs open a store. Abbie and Sarah come up with a name for their slowly growing town, Cedartown. In 1872 Abbie gives birth to another boy who Will insists on naming John. That spring they have a late blizzard. The crop does so badly that summer that instead of selling it, Will uses it to heat the house. Their sixth year in Nebraska the crop is doing well and it looks as though they might have finally succeeded. Unfortunately a swarm of grasshoppers settle in the area, destroying everything in their wake. Abbie knows how bad things are now and offers to allow Will to sell her mother's pearls, but Will refuses.

In chapter 13, many of Will and Abbie's neighbors begin going back to where they came from, no longer able to recover from the lack of good crop. Abbie writes to her family and receives a scorching letter admonishing her for not marrying Ed Matthews. Abbie ignores the jab and is more determined than ever to help her husband make a success of their farm. In November, Abbie and Will receive a barrel from Will's family that contains corn seed and gifts for the children. Abbie is thrilled with this gift and the hope it implies. In chapter 14, Abbie decides to create a perfect Christmas for her children. Will and Abbie make toys for the children and decorate the house, filling the tiny soddie with love and joy. In chapter 15, the government begins offering flour, beans, and surplus army clothing to struggling families. Will refuses to accept any. A short time later, a letter comes telling of Grandpa Deal's death. In the spring, Abbie tries to shake the darkness of the winter and throw herself into a garden. At the same time, Will begins to plant after burning his fields to get rid of the last of the grasshoppers. The Lutzs seem to be doing better than everyone else, buying more land while others are selling. Later that year Abbie gives birth to a son, Basil. Unfortunately, Abbie's baby is stillborn.

Chapters 11-15 Analysis

The first six years on the farm are difficult ones for the Deal family. The corn does not grow well because of a lack of rain. When it seems they have finally got enough rain, the grasshoppers come and eat everything in sight. Abbie is becoming frustrated and afraid for her quickly growing family. Abbie now has three children to clothe and to feed.



Abbie no longer sings, no longer paints, and no longer dreams of having her words in books that will grace library shelves. It takes everything Abbie has to keep from becoming depressed as she and Will struggle to survive, touching on the theme of survival. Every day is a struggle. However, Abbie shows her true colors when in her darkest moments she is able to create a magical Christmas for her children. As fate would have it, however, Abbie will again be plunged into darkness, first with the news that Grandpa Deal has died and then when her infant son is stillborn. Death is a reality on the prairie, as the death of Sarah's brother indicates, but it still does not make it easier for someone as strong and selfless as Abbie Deal to accept. Abbie hates death yet she finds herself living with its reality every single day on the prairie.



Chapters 16-19

Chapters 16-19 Summary

In chapter 16, Abbie struggles to overcome the grief of losing her son. Abbie's grief turns to resentment as she begins to think of all the things she has given up to be with Will. Eventually, however, Abbie's love for Will and their children begins to bring her out of her depression and anger. Abbie has been teaching the children at home, but a school has recently opened near the farm and Abbie agrees to allow them to attend. A few years later, Abbie gives birth to another girl, Isabelle. All around them the town has grown bigger, but the crops are still poor and Abbie is still struggling with her choices. One night a man comes for dinner with a violin, reminding Abbie of the music she once loved. In chapter 17, winter storms force the children to miss school, so Abbie has them learn passages from Shakespeare to occupy their time. In 1880 Will has the entire Deal land fenced in. That same year a dust storm hits, covering the house and all its contents in dirt. The crops are good that year, however, and Abbie begins planning for a new house. It is a year before they can begin building, but finally Abbie has a home with a kitchen, sitting room, a bedroom, and two rooms upstairs for the children.

In chapter 18, Mack is a teenager, big and outgoing. Margaret is an artist, constantly drawing. John is quiet, a serious boy like his father. Isabelle is charming, constantly singing to her little toys. When Will tells Abbie that an art teacher is offering classes nearby, Margaret is more excited than her mother. Abbie decides that Margaret should take lessons instead of her. When Mack is seventeen he goes on a visit to Omaha and decides that is where he wants to live. Will objects, insistent that Mack take over the farm. Mack is insistent, however, and moves to Omaha to take a job in a bank. That summer Abbie is to take a trip back to Iowa for the first time in twenty years, but when she learns of a new school that will prepare students for college, Abbie puts her trip on hold in order to send Margaret. In chapter 19, Will Deal is part of a group who convince railroad officials to run the new tracks through Cedartown. Around the same time, Will buys an organ for Isabelle who shows real musical talent. Shortly afterward, Abbie learns she is pregnant at forty-one. Abbie is shocked, but insists that it not change Margaret's plans to continue school. All the children come home for Christmas before John and Margaret return to school and Mack to Omaha. In the spring, Abbie decides to visit Christine before the birth of her child makes it impossible for her to visit. When Abbie leaves Christine's a storm begins to blow in. Christine insists on walking with Abbie. Soon they become trapped in the blowing snow. Abbie begins to have labor pains and wants to stop.

Chapters 16-19 Analysis

The dark side of being a pioneer woman is beginning to wear Abbie down. Abbie has dreams, she wants to be somebody important, but all she is is a wife and mother who is facing insurmountable obstacles in order to simply survive. Abbie is tired. However,



once again displaying her amazing strength, Abbie realizes that the only important thing is the love she feels for her family and this realization helps Abbie through the darkest moment of her life, the loss of a child. At the same time, Abbie begins to show the depth of her desire to see her children happy by giving up the opportunity to take the art classes she has so desperately wanted and allowing her daughter to take them instead. Abbie then sacrifices a trip home to see her family one last time in order to pay for Margaret to go to finishing school. Abbie once again shows that she is willing to give up her dreams in order to allow someone she loves to live theirs. Abbie is an amazing woman, especially when it comes to her children, touching on the theme of motherhood.

Will moved Abbie to Nebraska so that he would be able to create a farm he could hand down to Mack when the time came. Ironically, Mack decides he would rather not work on the farm all his life, but would rather live in the big city. This decision breaks Will's heart, but shows his willingness to also allow his children to live their own lives their own way. About the same time, Abbie finally gets the home she has always wanted. The crops begin turning a profit and Abbie is able to watch as her frame house is built. It is an important time for Abbie, who has lived in a tiny two room soddie since coming to Nebraska nearly twenty years before. It is a reward that is not nearly big enough for this amazing woman, but which will prove to be an important step in Abbie's life.



Chapters 20-24

Chapters 20-24 Summary

In chapter 20, Christine fights the cold and the blinding snow to get Abbie home despite Abbie's intense labor pains that cause her to fight Christine's help. Abbie gives birth to a baby girl she names Grace. Abbie is deeply grateful for Christine's help. Later that year, Margaret graduates from the finishing school and gets engaged. The day of her wedding, Abbie offers Margaret her mother's pearl necklace, but Margaret does not want it. Margaret suggests Abbie save it for Isabelle or Grace. The wedding is a grand affair, leaving Abbie proud, but surprised at how fast time has gone by. In chapter 21, John has begun helping Will with the farm chores. One afternoon John cuts his ankle badly and is saved from bleeding to death by Abbie's quick thinking and fast driving in the family wagon. That night Will and Abbie discuss what they would each do if the other died. Will assures Abbie that he would never truly leave her, even in death. A short time later, Abbie returns home to discover Will has passed away while working in the yard. In chapter 22, Abbie finds herself talking to Will, aware that he is not really there but consoled by the idea that somehow he might still hear her. John takes over Will's duties on the farm, but Abbie can see he is not happy. When pushed, John announces that he wants to be a lawyer. Abbie encourages him to pursue this dream despite the fact that it will leave her without a man to run the farm. Isabelle goes off to school while Sarah Lutz and Henry travel the world. Margaret and her husband have their first child, a son. Abbie decides that while everyone else is living their dream, it is time she put some effort into her own dreams. Abbie decides to write her life story. Unfortunately, before Abbie can begin, Grandma Deal comes to live with her.

In chapter 23, Grandma Deal buys Isabelle a piano from the five hundred dollars Doc Matthews paid for Will to take Ed's place in the draft during the Civil War. Grandma Deal never spent the money and is saving the rest to pay for Abbie to take her body back to Iowa when she has died. After two years, Grandma Deal passes away. For the first time in nearly thirty years, Abbie goes home. Abbie does not feel at home in Iowa anymore, however, and is happy to return to Nebraska. Shortly after coming home, Abbie goes to Omaha to welcome another grandchild from her son Mack and his wife, Sarah's daughter, Emma. Hard times fall on Abbie and she finds herself forced to sell off part of the farm. Isabelle moves in with Margaret to continue school. Abbie finally finds time to write her life story, but she is not happy with how it comes out on paper. Abbie puts the story aside and decides it is best to allow the children to dream their dreams. In chapter 24, the Spanish-American war begins and John volunteers to fight. Abbie is frightened for her son. Isabelle marries the boy she has been seeing before he goes off to war, leaving Abbie disappointed that another of her daughters failed to give her the chance to see her pearl necklace worn. John survives the war and goes up above the Arctic Circle when it is over as U.S. Commissioner. Mack and Emma have another child while Isabelle announces that she and her husband have decided not to have children.



Chapters 20-24 Analysis

Christine was present when Abbie had Margaret, again when Isabelle was born. Christine was around when Basil died, lamenting the loss of a boy to help on the farm, and when John was born. Christine tries to be helpful despite her harsh personality that often leaves Abbie wondering what is more important to Christine, the land or her own children. This time, however, Christine proves to be more than a helpful neighbor when Abbie goes into labor with Grace while walking home in a blinding snow storm. Christine saves Abbie's life, forcing her to continue walking even when all Abbie wants is to sit down and allow the darkness to wash over her. Christine proves herself to be a true friend, an asset Abbie needs in this harsh reality in which she lives.

John nearly dies while working on the farm and is only saved by Abbie's quick thinking. This leads Abbie and Will to have a discussion about death that causes Will to be somewhat more philosophical than he normally is. This discussion proves to be uncanny in its timing because soon after Will dies. Abbie is left alone with the farm and three young children left to raise. Abbie is not sad, however, because of this discussion she had with Will that helps her to believe that Will remains by her side despite death. Abbie continues to fight and sacrifice to raise her children, once again giving up on her dreams in order to care for Will's dying mother and to allow Isabelle to continue her musical education. When Isabelle gets married without telling her mother, Abbie is deeply disappointed that once again her pearl necklace has missed an opportunity to grace the neck of a Deal girl on her wedding day. This necklace continues to act as a symbol of Abbie's dreams. It seems that as that symbol they continue to be overlooked—just like the dreams Abbie has given up time and again in order to meet the needs of her children.



Chapters 25-28

Chapters 25-28 Summary

In chapter 25, John returns to Cedartown in order to open a law practice. John brings with him Eloise Wentworth, a woman he has known since his law school days. Eloise is a no-nonsense, straightforward type of woman with whom Abbie has little in common. A short time later, Abbie sells the remaining land, leaving her with only the land on which the house sits. When Grace graduates from high school the children encourage Abbie to sell the house and move to Lincoln while Grace attends college. Abbie refuses, however, insisting on remaining in her own home. In chapter 26, John and Eloise have a son named Wentworth. Mack buys his first automobile that same year. The following year, Mack and Emma have a girl they name Katherine. Now Abbie has five grandchildren. In 1909 Grace graduates from college and continues on to get her master's degree. The following summer Grace comes home and throws a party for Abbie. Grace is shocked when Abbie insists on having Christine as a guest at the party, sure none of her sophisticated friends would like her. However, Abbie insists because she counts Christine as one of her closest friends.

In chapter 27, John and Eloise have a daughter they name Laura. Abbie is amused to see that Eloise is raising each of her children with help from a different book. Margaret's only child, Fred Jr., begins medical school and Mack is promoted at the bank. Their children are attending colleges back East. As Abbie enters her seventh decade, her children begin to encourage her once again to sell the old house and move in with one of them. None of the children really want their mother living with them, however, so they do not push the issue when she refuses. When Laura is four, John and Eloise have their third child. Abbie volunteers to take Laura while Eloise recuperates and Eloise agrees, though somewhat reluctantly. In chapter 28, World War I begins. Abbie is saddened to see another war, the third war that has taken place in her lifetime. Grace is thirty by then, a professor in college, and refusing outright to get married. One spring Grace comes home to invite her mother to go abroad with her, to finally see the Ireland and Scotland of the old stories her sister once told her. Abbie refuses, however, afraid she would only ruin the trip for Grace because of her inability to walk long distances.

Chapters 25-28 Analysis

Abbie's children continue to grow, to mature, and to have families of their own. Abbie sits back to watch, content to watch her children find happiness in their own lives and their own dreams. Abbie's life has become about motherhood, a theme of the novel, about the achievements she has made in her life through her children. Abbie is fiercely proud of her children and no longer as sad as she once was that she had to give up her own dreams. Margaret is a fine artist and Isabelle is a wonderful singer, two of the things Abbie desperately wanted for herself. Abbie is content to see her daughters do what she never could. This again shows the strength of Abbie's character, the maturity



and the understanding that her children are an extension of who she is, therefore through them she achieved what she so desperately wanted to do.

Abbie continues to be a loyal friend to Christine, standing behind her even when Grace does not understand why Abbie would want to be friends with such an uncouth woman. At the same time, Sarah Lutz is living the life Abbie always wanted, traveling to exotic places and wearing expensive jewels, while Abbie struggles to survive day by day. When Abbie finally does have the chance to travel, however, she refuses because she knows that Grace would resent it if she asked her to go. Abbie is old now, in her seventies, and she cannot possibly keep up with Grace. Abbie is a practical woman and knows that her time has passed.



Chapter 29-36

Chapter 29-36 Summary

In chapter 29, there is a reunion of some of the original settlers in Nebraska. Abbie finds the meeting amusing as she listens to people trying to remember names and events despite their quickly advancing age. Afterward, Abbie stays for a while with Margaret. Margaret presents her mother with a painting of the prairie similar to one Abbie once created as a gift for Will. In chapter 30, Abbie's granddaughter Katherine begins visiting her often one summer. Abbie has no idea why Katherine comes around since the girl seems to dislike her quaint, old-fashioned grandmother. Katherine finally announces that she likes a boy who lives in town and she intends to invite him to dinner at Abbie's. Abbie goes along with this despite Katherine's disrespectful attitude and is pleased with the gentle boy Katherine has chosen as her beau. In chapter 31, Abbie insists on a traditional Christmas for her family despite their insistence that she can buy ornaments and gifts much easier than making them. Despite these complaints, the children spend Christmas night reminiscing about past Christmases. In chapter 32, Abbie tells Katherine about Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie and for the first time it seems Abbie has made an impression on the impudent child. A few nights later, Abbie listens to Isabelle sing in a program on the radio. During the program, Isabelle sings a song Abbie once sang often as a child, especially for her mother.

In chapter 33, Katherine announces her engagement. Abbie immediately begins a quilt for the new bride. That summer, Laura comes to spend some time with her grandmother. Laura is a budding writer and she reads many of her poems to Abbie. Abbie is impressed with Laura's work, believing she will one day be a great writer. Laura tells Abbie that she has lived a wonderful life and that she loves to hear her stories. Abbie is touched by Laura's insight. In chapter 35, John asks Abbie to make a speech at the state capitol to celebrate its sixtieth anniversary. Abbie reluctantly agrees despite her fear that no one will want to hear what she has to say. Katherine's wedding is a few weeks before the celebration. Abbie gives Katherine the pearl necklace that her mother gave to her and is pleased to see Katherine truly appreciate the gift. Katherine takes Abbie by the hand into another room where she unveils a portrait. It is the same portrait that once hung in the Mackenzie home, featuring Abbie's grandmother, Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie. Katherine insisted that Mack buy the painting for her. Abbie is touched by the gesture. In chapter 36, Abbie attends the wedding, excited for her granddaughter and filled with nostalgia for her own wedding day. A few days later, Abbie is preparing her dinner when she begins to feel sick. Abbie lies on her bed and imagines she can see Will waiting for her. Abbie realizes she is dying, but she is no longer afraid of death. Abbie goes willingly to Will, eager to begin the next stage in their time together. Abbie's body is discovered by Christine Reinmueller who calls Abbie's children. They are all saddened by her passing, but only Laura truly understands that Abbie died the way she wanted to.



Chapter 29-36 Analysis

The state has grown to maturity. Abbie attends a reunion of settlers, amused by how old everyone has gotten and how unclear their memories are. John asks Abbie to speak at a celebration in the state capitol and she agrees despite her insistence that she could not possibly have anything worth saying. Abbie's children are beginning to realize what Abbie is, what she and her sacrifices, a theme of the novel, represent to them and their home state. The children have never really seen the sacrifices until now, and never truly appreciated how difficult Abbie's life has been. Not only this, but the children's insistence that Abbie leave her home so she will not be alone also shows that they do not truly understand how strong their mother really is. Abbie is a strong woman who has endured hardships her children will never have to experience in their lifetimes.

Katherine is a spoiled brat who takes advantage of her grandmother because she can. Katherine does not understand anything about Abbie. Katherine simply thinks of Abbie as an old woman who is too old fashioned and too straight-laced. Katherine will never fully appreciate the woman her grandmother is. However, Katherine appreciates the story of Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie and in this Abbie finds common ground with the young woman. If not for Katherine, Abbie might never have seen the portrait that inspired her to dream to impossible heights. It is ironic that it is in the twilight of her life that Abbie first lays eyes on this portrait, at a time when Abbie has finally come to realize that she never really gave up her dreams, she simply handed them over to her children. It is an appropriate ending for a long, well lived life. It is also ironic that it takes a twelve year old girl to truly understand Abbie. Laura knows that Abbie died the way she wanted to, alone and in the home she fought so hard to have. Laura is most like Abbie, a quiet child with amazing insight into other people and the ability to empathize with those she loves.



Characters

Abbie Mackenzie Deal

Abbie Mackenzie is an eight year old girl with big dreams when the novel begins. Abbie wants to grow up and be a famous singer someday, and to paint pictures that will hang in a museum and write words that will live forever in a book. Abbie often practices her singing in the woods, singing to the trees and pretending they are a big audience in New York. One day Abbie is seen singing in the woods by the local doctor's son. Ed Matthews offers to take Abbie to New York where she can take singing lessons and maybe help her become a famous singer. However, the offer comes with a proposal of marriage. Abbie accepts, filled with dreams of stardom. When Will Deal comes home, though, Abbie realizes she does not love Ed Matthews and she ends the engagement.

Abbie and Will marry and move in with Will's parents. Abbie is unhappy with this arrangement because of her mother-in-law's constant negativity. Abbie tells Will that she believes their family needs a home of their own. Will agrees, but Abbie is shocked when Will insists on moving their growing family to Nebraska. Will wants a farm of his own rather than spending his entire adult life working his father's farm. Abbie follows Will, despite being pregnant with her second child during the long journey in a covered wagon. The Nebraska prairie is an unfamiliar and often scary place for Abbie. Living in a sod house and raising a family in two tiny rooms is not part of the dreams Abbie has had for herself. Abbie wants to sing, paint, and write, but there is little time for these artistic pursuits on the farm.

Abbie watches her family grow, putting off her own hopes in dreams in favor of helping Will turn the farm into a profitable business and procuring the best education possible for her children. Before Abbie realizes what has happened, she wakes to find that her children are grown and living out the dreams she once had for herself. Abbie is saddened by losing her chance, but also proud that her children have grown into such fine people who had the opportunity to do what she always wanted. Abbie dies content with the life she has lived and the legacy she leaves behind.

Will Deal

Will Deal is the son of the largest farmer in Blackhawk County, Iowa. Will and Abbie meet almost immediately after the Mackenzie family arrives in Iowa when they go to the Deal farm for protection from a group of Indians reported to be in the area. Abbie watches as Will is forced to give up a deer he raised from infancy and feels sympathy for this strong, bright young man. Later, when Ed Matthews kills the same deer, it is Abbie who sees Will's pain and attempts to comfort him. Will and Ed Matthews are rivals all their lives, with Will often coming up short. When Ed is drafted to go to the Civil War, Ed's father pays Will \$500 to go in his place. Will goes happily, glad to be able to serve his country. While Will is away, Ed proposes to Abbie, promising to help make all her



dreams come true. However, this one time Will wins out when Abbie realizes it is Will she loves.

Will wants to be a farmer. Will has been forced to work his father's farm because his father is missing an arm and cannot do much of the work himself. However, after Will and Abbie have their first child Will decides it is time to find a place of their own. Will chooses to move to Nebraska because the land is plentiful and cheap, and it is far from his father's shadow. Abbie is hesitant about this move, but agrees because she can clearly see it is what Will wants. Will works hard building his farm and refuses to give up when drought and plague threaten to leave his family destitute. Eventually the farm begins to make a profit, just as Will has always known it would. At the same time, Will has big dreams for the community growing up around his farm. Will imagines roads and a bank and doctors, dreams that seem too big for his neighbors. However, after his death, Abbie lives to see all of Will's dreams come true.

Grandpa and Grandma Deal

Grandma and Grandpa Deal are Will's parents, so called to help separate them from their grown children who are beginning to have families of their own. Grandpa is a kind man who is always telling jokes and long stories, always with a whistle on his lips and a smile. Grandpa Deal never says a bad word about anyone and never allows life's trivialities to get him down. Grandpa Deal lost an arm to an illness, but has not let that stop him from working hard and taking care of his large family. Abbie adores Grandpa Deal and cannot imagine a better life if Will were to turn out just like his dad.

Grandma Deal, on the other hand, is full of negativity. When Abbie moves in with the Deal family after her wedding to Will, Grandma Deal makes her life unpleasant. Abbie can never do enough or work in just the right way for Grandma Deal. When Abbie becomes pregnant, Grandma Deal's only concern is who will take up the slack when Abbie is down with morning sickness. Grandma Deal sees everything in dark terms, rather than the bright side of life. When Abbie has her first child, she decides she needs to get away from Grandma Deal before she drives her insane. However, years later, when most of Abbie's children are grown, Grandma Deal comes to live with her as she waits for death. Abbie is not happy with this situation, but she puts up with Grandma Deal's negativity one last time because she is Will's mother.

Mackenzie 'Mack' Deal and Emma Lutz Deal

Mack Deal is Abbie's oldest child. Mack is a robust, energetic young man who likes to play the horn and flirt with the girls. Will brought his family to Nebraska not only to have a farm of his own, but to have a farm he can hand down to his eldest son, Mack. Unfortunately, when Mack becomes a man, he decides he does not want to live on a farm all his life. Mack wants to live in the city and be around the hustle and bustle of big city life. Mack gets a job with a bank despite his father's unhappiness at his career



choice. Mack enjoys the job and works his way up, one day becoming the bank president.

Emma Lutz is the daughter of one of Abbie and Will's nearest neighbors. Emma is a spoiled young woman whose parents are able to buy for her all the best there is to have. Emma goes to the best schools and has the best clothes. Abbie struggles to give her children a good education as well, but they pale beside young Emma. After Mack moves to Omaha to work in the bank, he begins a romance with Emma. Eventually Mack and Emma will marry, producing several grandchildren for Abbie.

John Deal and Eloise Wentworth Deal

John Deal is Abbie and Will's second son, their third child. John is a studious young man, more interested in books than the farm. John is soft spoken, never expressing his own emotions unless pushed to the wall. After Mack leaves home, John is the only one around to help Will with the farm. John does the work without complaint, but is clearly unhappy. After Will dies, John's unhappiness becomes even more apparent. When Abbie finally asks, John announces that he wanted to be a lawyer, but with his father's death he has accepted he will be stuck on the farm forever. Abbie insists that John follow his dreams, forcing him to leave despite the hardship this presents for her.

John becomes a lawyer and eventually settles down in the town that has sprung up near the Deal farm. John brings home with him Eloise Wentworth, a prim young woman whom Abbie immediately dislikes. Where Emma is spoiled and laid back, Eloise is opinionated and uptight. Abbie once comments that if she could mix Emma and Eloise together, she would have one perfect mother. Eloise insists on raising her children with advice she has gotten from a book, rather than allowing her mother-in-law to offer any input. Eloise is unpleasant, but she makes John happy and therefore receives the loving support of her mother-in-law.

Margaret, Isabelle and Grace Deal

Margaret is Abbie's first daughter and second child. Margaret is an intelligent woman with some creative spark. Margaret enjoys drawing and painting. When a new art teacher comes to town, Will suggests Abbie take the lessons she has always wanted to take. However, when Margaret learns about this teacher, she becomes overwhelmed with excitement. Abbie knows that they cannot afford for both her and Margaret to take lessons, so Abbie gives up her dream in order to watch Margaret bloom into a wonderful artist.

Isabelle is Abbie's fourth child and second daughter. Isabelle is a graceful young woman who shows an interest in music almost from the cradle. When Isabelle is a young girl Will buys a second hand organ for her. Isabelle plays the organ as often as possible, often entertaining her family with her airy renditions of popular songs. When Grandma Deal comes to live with the family, she buys Isabelle a proper piano in order to listen to



the girl play for hours at a time. When Isabelle finishes school, she goes to Chicago where she becomes a famous singer, fulfilling another of her mother's dreams.

Grace is Abbie's final child, a surprise child who comes when Abbie is in her forties. Grace is studious and kind, but she has a sharp wit and a sharper tongue. Grace often says things to hurt her mother, but most of what Grace says is simply the truth. Grace follows her brothers and sisters through the local high school, but insists that she wants to continue her education in college. Grace eventually achieves a master's degree and becomes a college professor. Grace never marries in Abbie's lifetime, a deep disappointment to her mother, but lives a successful life that Abbie is proud of.

Laura and Katherine Deal

Laura Deal is John and Eloise's daughter. Laura is Abbie's favorite grandchild almost from the start. Laura is bright and creative, kind and gentle. Laura comes to stay with Abbie when her little brother is born and they spend a delightful time together, breaking all of Eloise's rigid rules. As Laura grows older, she begins to show promise as a writer. Laura often writes beautiful poems and stories about Abbie that Abbie finds inspirational. Laura is destined to become the writer Abbie always dreamed of being. When Abbie dies, only Laura has the insight to know that Abbie died a happy woman.

Katherine Deal is also one of Abbie's granddaughters, Mack and Emma's daughter. Katherine is a selfish, unkind person who often wounds Abbie's feelings with her cruel, straightforward way of speaking. However, when Katherine is to be married, Abbie decides to give her the pearl necklace her mother gave to her because none of Abbie's own daughters wanted it. When Abbie tells Katherine the story of Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie, Katherine is as enthralled by the story as Abbie was as a child. In fact, Katherine encourages her father to find the portrait of Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie that once stood in the Mackenzie family home and return it to their family. Mack does, unveiling it for Abbie the day of Katherine's wedding.

Dr. Ed Matthews

Ed Matthews is the son of the town doctor in Blackhawk County, Iowa. Ed is a selfish young man who takes whatever he wants without thought of the consequences. Ed and Will are often at odds with one another, playing a game of one-up-manship that often leaves Will out in the cold. When Ed hears Abbie singing in the woods one afternoon, he offers to help her become a star if she will only marry him. Abbie agrees, but soon realizes that she loves Will, not Ed. Abbie ends the engagement and never sees Ed again. However, years later Ed's wife comes to visit Abbie, curious about the woman who once won her husband's heart.



Christine Reinmueller

Christine Reinmueller is the wife of another farmer who settles in Nebraska at the same time as the Deals. Christine is a unpleasant woman who is always dirty and seems to care only for the land and what owning it means. Christine never seems to care about the people around her, never worries about the education her children are receiving, or worries about the way people see her. Christine makes no apologies for the person she is. Abbie dislikes Christine, but remains on friendly terms with her because there are few women in the area and Abbie cannot afford to make enemies of the few there are. When Abbie is pregnant with Grace, she goes to visit Christine one last time before the baby is due. When Abbie goes to leave, there is a blizzard blowing in. Christine insists on walking back to the Deal farm with Abbie. The storm becomes blinding and Abbie and Christine nearly lose their way. As they approach the Deal home, Abbie goes into labor. Christine forces Abbie to continue walking, getting her home safely. From that moment on, Abbie considers Christine one of her closest friends and refuses to allow anyone to say an unkind word about her.

Henry and Sarah Lutz

Henry and Sarah Lutz are farmers who settle in Nebraska at the same time as the Deals. Sarah is a bright, kind woman who is not a hard worker, but who will brighten anyone's day with a smile or a laugh. Sarah and Abbie become quick friends after settling on their respective farms. As the Deals struggle with drought and plague on their farm, the Lutz's open a general store on theirs. The store does well and soon the Lutz's are wealthy, as all the families dreamed of becoming when they came to Nebraska. In time, the Lutz's daughter Emma will marry Abbie's son Mack, making the two families relatives after their twenty years together on the prairie. Abbie and Sarah will remain close friends until their deaths.



Objects/Places

Soddie

When the Deals first move to Nebraska, they live in a small sod house, called a soddie, until they are successful enough to build a proper frame house.

Piano

Abbie dreams of being a famous singer. Abbie never does, but Abbie's daughter, Isabelle buys a piano from the money paid to her grandmother when her father goes to war and later becomes a successful singer.

Organ

Will promises Abbie he will give her an organ after their move to Nebraska. Abbie never gets her organ, but Will is able to buy an organ for Isabelle second hand when she begins to show an interest in music.

Paints

Abbie dreams of becoming an artist and is given some paints by a friend before moving to Nebraska with the hope that she will be able to take lessons to improve her skills. Abbie never becomes an artist, but her paints aid her daughter, Margaret, into becoming a skilled artist.

Brown Wrapping Paper

Abbie irons brown wrapping paper in order to write down her life story. Unfortunately, the story does not sound exciting to Abbie's ears and she gives up her dream of becoming a famous writer. Abbie's granddaughter, Laura, however shows promise as a writer.

Clock

Abbie is given an old Seth Thomas clock with a church painted on the glass when she gets married. Abbie owns this clock until the day she dies.



Pearl Necklace

Abbie inherits a pearl necklace on her wedding day from her mother. The necklace was given to Abbie's mother when the Mackenzie's were still wealthy. It is one of a few things Abbie's mother managed to rescue from their downfall.

Box

Abbie's mother keeps all her mementos from the days when her husband was still wealthy in a skin covered box. Abbie inherits this box along with the pearls on her wedding day.

Portrait of Isabelle Anders-Mackenzie

Abbie's sister, Isabelle, often tells her stories of life in Scotland before their father lost all their money and moved the family to America. These stories often revolve around their grandmother Mackenzie, a wealthy, sophisticated woman and a portrait of her that once hung in her grand home. Abbie imagines this portrait and dreams of being an important woman like her grandmother. In the weeks before Abbie dies, her oldest son locates the portrait and buys it.

Grasshoppers

One year, shortly after the Deals arrive in Nebraska, their land is overrun with grasshoppers, killing the group and sending many settlers running back to where they came from.

Illinois

Abbie grows up in Illinois before her mother moves the family to Iowa.

Blackhawk County, Iowa

Abbie and her family move to Blackhawk County, Iowa when she is only eight. It is here that Abbie meets and marries Will Deal, son of one of the more successful farmers in the area.

Nebraska

Abbie and Will move to Nebraska shortly after the birth of their first child in order to have their own farm. Abbie will live on this farm until the day she dies.



Themes

Dreams

From the time Abbie is a small child she is a dreamer. Abbie dreams of her grandmother Mackenzie, a wealthy, sophisticated woman who had style and grace. Abbie wants to be just like her grandmother, to be somebody that other people look up to. Abbie has an incredible singing voice and she imagines one day she will go to New York, take lessons, and become a world famous singer. Abbie often goes into the woods alone as a child and stands on top of a rock and sings to her imagined audience. One day while doing this, Ed Matthews happens across her. Ed is so enchanted by Abbie's singing that he promises her he will help her become a famous singer if she will marry him. Abbie agrees, imagining what her life will be like in New York. However, when Will Deal comes home from the war, Abbie recalls her feelings of security and affection in his arms and realizes her heart has always been waiting for Will Deal. Abbie breaks off her engagement to Ed Matthews and marries Will instead, giving up her dreams of becoming a famous singer.

Abbie also dreams of being an artist. Abbie loves to paint and is thrilled when she meets a young woman willing to give her lessons. Abbie believes one day she will be a famous painter. However, Will decides he would like to move to Nebraska where he can buy a lot of land for almost nothing. There are no towns near the land Will has bought, no teachers willing to help Abbie learn to paint. Abbie goes with Will anyway, taking with her paints and an extra canvass in case she should find an art teacher somewhere in the wilds of Nebraska. Abbie never does. Finally, Abbie dreams of being a famous writer. Abbie imagines who legions of people rushing out to buy her books, impressed with the depth of her story telling abilities. Abbie has watched her other dreams fade away, but decides one is never too old to begin writing. However, when Abbie sits down to write her life story, the words sound dull and boring on paper. Abbie comes to the conclusion she simply was not meant to be a writer.

Abbie dreams big all her life, hoping for a life that is radically different from the hard scrabble life she is living on the Nebraska prairie. Abbie was never meant to be a frontier wife, but she lives that life with dignity and courage. As Abbie ages and watches her children grow, leaving home to live their own lives, she slowly comes to realize that she might not be living her own dreams, but her children are. Isabelle becomes a famous singer. Margaret becomes an artist. Laura, Abbie's granddaughter, becomes a writer. All of Abbie's dreams have come true, just not for her.

Survival

Abbie Mackenzie Deal is born less than twenty years before the Civil War. Abbie's life is filled with covered wagons, incurable diseases, and Indians. Abbie is eight when her mother moves the entire family from Illinois to Iowa, where Abbie is holding her infant



nephew when he suddenly stops breathing. Abbie's world is a dangerous one, complete with unexplained tragedy and insurmountable obstacles. Despite this, Abbie manages to live a full, wonderful life for more than eighty years.

Abbie and her new husband move to the wild plains of Nebraska shortly after the birth of their first child and as Abbie is expecting their second. Abbie is alone on the prairie without her mother or a friend to help her through this trying time in her life. Yet Abbie delivers a healthy baby girl and is back to work within a week. Abbie and her husband fight every day to keep their family going during droughts and insect infestation, often going whole years without a good crop to help support their growing family. Abbie lives in a house made out of strips of sod, raising a family of six in two tiny rooms. During one of the toughest years Abbie and her family survive, Abbie gives birth to a son who is stillborn, taking from her the last bit of song that survives in her heart. Years later, Abbie will nearly die when she becomes lost in a blizzard as she goes into labor with her sixth child.

Abbie lives through tragedy and struggles that would crush a modern woman. Yet Abbie keeps fighting, keeps her family together, and survives to see her dreams come to fruition. Abbie is a strong woman who calls herself selfish and believes she was a poor mother despite the fact that she gave up her own dreams in order to see to the education of her five surviving children. Survival is an important theme to this novel because it is exactly what Abbie did. Not only did Abbie survive, but she had a life that produced five beautiful children who would grow up to be admirable members of society.

Motherhood

In the beginning of this novel, Abbie is a child who dreams of being someone more than she is. Abbie does not want to be remembered as a pioneer woman, but as a famous singer, a talented artist, and an intelligent writer. Abbie imagines herself performing on stage, of her paintings hanging in famous museums, and her words appearing between the covers of a book that will go on forever. Abbie has the opportunity to see these dreams come to life, to marry a man she does not love for the chance to go to New York and train to be a famous singer. Abbie chooses love instead.

Abbie has six children, five of whom live to become adults. Abbie raises her children the best she can, teaching them to read and write before they are old enough to go to school and sacrificing in order to pay for each one to attend a private high school. When these children are adults, Abbie allows each one to follow their own dreams even when those dreams are the opposite of what Abbie and her husband, Will, hoped for their children. Mack becomes a banker, John a lawyer. Margaret becomes an artist, Isabelle a famous singer, Grace a university professor. Each child lives out their own dream, going into the world with the values their mother taught them. Motherhood is a theme of this novel because one could not tell Abbie's story without telling about her children. Motherhood is part of what defines Abbie and it is through her children that Abbie lived her dreams.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is third person omniscient. The narrator of the novel is not one of the characters, but the author. The author often makes comments within the text in the authorial voice, commenting on future events or past events, as they relate to the plot that is unfolding at that particular moment. The author is clearly someone who cares for Abbie Deal, the main character, as is evident in the author's tone throughout the novel, a tone of pride and excitement, a tone that expresses deep admiration for the person Abbie Deal was. The reader is told that the author based the character of Abbie Deal on her own mother, explaining this deep admiration and the enthusiasm the author brings to her story.

The point of view of this novel is third person because it allows the writer to move from the mind of one character to another in an attempt to tell a well rounded story. This ability to move allows the writer to focus on more than one character at a time and to help create some intimacy between the reader and all the characters, not just one. However, the author uses the authorial voice in telling her story. This voice often breaks into the narration, making comments that may or may not be important to the development of the plot. This insertion into the story is often jarring, leaving the reader wishing the author would step back and trust her characters to tell the story rather than telling it for them. However, the point of view does allow some intimacy to develop, allowing the reader to feel real sadness as they follow the tragedies and triumphs in Abbie Deal's life.

Setting

The novel begins in the back of a covered wagon, alerting the reader from the first sentence that this novel is set in the pre-Civil War era. The wagon moves to Iowa, where the Mackenzie family takes up residence in a small shed while they wait for their home to be built. As time passes, the reader watches as several characters go off to fight in the Civil War, and then the Spanish-American War, and the First World War. The setting, too, moves from Iowa where a town has grown up around the farms, to the emptiness of the Nebraska prairie. On their farm miles from the nearest town, Abbie and Will live in a sod house out in the open, unprotected from winds and rains as they attempt to build a farm in the unfamiliar soil.

The setting of this novel immediately takes the reader back to a time when life was lived day to day, with people working for everything they had. The Mackenzie family has packed up everything they own into two small wagons and moved to a place where they do not even have a home to live in. It is a wild and untamed place, a place where people die from something as common in the modern world as strep throat. This setting is the perfect backdrop to the story of a young woman who gave up everything she



dreamed of to raise a family and love the man who saves her from a thankless marriage. This novel is about a true pioneer woman and the setting could not be any more perfect for that plot.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in English. The novel is filled with dialogue that is broken and fractured by improper grammar, expressing for the reader the type of language spoken by immigrants from Ireland, Scotland, Germany, and Holland. The novel is also filled with dialogue of a more proper English, a language that is lacking the slang modern novels are not complete without and exploring a grammar that is more formal than that taught in modern English classes.

The language of the novel is used to characterize each of the people who populate its pages. Christine Reinmueller speaks a broken English characteristic of her foreign background, while Abbie's mother speaks with a deep brogue indicative of her Irish upbringing. Abbie herself, however, is as well educated as a girl from the untamed west can be and she speaks with a proper speech that borders on formal. Abbie taught school before getting married and she spends a great deal of time teaching her own children to read and write, therefore her speech reflects her level of education. The language in this novel works because it is appropriate for each character it showcases and time in which the novel was written.

Structure

The novel is divided into 36 chapters. The novel also has an introduction that sets up the characters within the novel and the importance of the main character, Abbie Deal. The novel is told largely in exposition, with the author telling her story using the authorial voice while allowing her characters to tell their own story in short bursts. The novel does contain some dialogue and this dialogue is well written, often showcasing the speech patterns of the characters talking, including great bursts of broken grammar when one of the characters of foreign birth speaks.

The novel has only one main plot. This plot follows the life of Abbie Mackenzie Deal from the time she comes to live in Iowa as a young girl to her death in the years shortly after the end of World War I. Abbie lives to see the Civil War, as well as the development of Nebraska, and the American involvement in World War I. Abbie raises five children on the plains of Nebraska, sacrificing to give each one a good education and to see her children fulfill their own dreams, even when those dreams did not match the dreams she had for her children. The plot has a clear beginning, middle, and end and is told in a linear fashion which makes it simple and easy for the reader to understand.

Quotes

"Abbie Mackenzie was old Abbie Deal's maiden name. And because the first eight years of her life were interesting only to her family, we shall skip over them as lightly as Abbie herself used to skip a hoop on the high, crack-filled sidewalks in the little village of Chicago, which stood at the side of a lake where the bulrushes grew." Chapter 1, pg. 7

"Inside the box lay all the accouterments of another life. In its skin-covered depths was all the equipment of an entirely different world. They were symbols of things in life to come. They represented the future in which she would some day live." Chapter 2, pg. 21

"Suddenly she sat up, 'I hate God,' she said. Maggie Mackenzie hushed her quickly and told her it was tremendous wicked to say that
'But he made death. I hate death. I hate it.'" Chapter 3, pg. 29

"Ed Matthews, who had paid his way out of the draft, came home that fall for a few days. Ed was going to be a doctor like his father." Chapter 5, pg. 42

"Grandma Deal was a chronic grumbler and a born pessimist. She saw bad signs in Nature's most ordinary activities. If a dog ate grass, if a bird flew through the house, if the moon rose from a cloud, the direst things were to happen. And life meant nothing to her, apparently, but work." Chapter 8, pg. 57

"The grass out there,—would it never cease to wave? There were four rhythmic beats like music, but music that irritated rather than soothed one: Blow...wave...ripple...dip. It beat upon her brain, so that she turned wearily away from the sight. And then, as one fascinated by something distasteful, she looked again." Chapter 9, pg. 69

"That summer was a summer of hard work and high hopes. Everything was to be done. Will, in his keen desire for results, worked early and late. He broke out more raw prairie and planted it, cut and hauled wood from the creek, chopped it in stove length, cared for his stock, and did the work of two men." Chapter 11, pg. 85

"Yes, the coming of the barrel seemed to put something back into Abbie which had been gone temporarily, laughter and hope, courage and faith. She began planning right away for Christmas. Mack was nearly eight, Margaret six, and little John two. They were going to have the finest Christmas they had ever known." Chapter 14, pg. 112

"How queer people were. All the folks in the new country were hoarding things, hanging on to old heirlooms. Sarah Lutz had a painting that drew your eyes to it the minute you



opened the door. Oscar Lutz's wife had a pink quilted bedspread that she kept rolled up in newspapers. Even Christine Reinmueller had a bright blue vase with magenta-colored roses on it, standing up on top of the cupboard. They stood for something besides the land and the corn and the cattle. They must hang onto them, never lose them out of their lives, for if lost, everything was lost."
Chapter 16, pgs. 131-132

"And back on the porch of the farmhouse behind the cedars, Abbie Deal stood and watched her married daughter drive away under the starlit summer sky. Then she turned and went into the kitchen and wound the old Seth Thomas clock with the little brown church painted on the glass." Chapter 20, pg. 166

"At seventy-eight, Abbie had shriveled as the hazel-nuts near the old Iowa schoolhouse shrivel when the frost comes on." Chapter 29, pg. 243

"Abbie Deal moved lightly, quickly, over to her husband, slipped her hand into his and went with him out of the old house, past the Lombardy poplars, through the deepening prairie twilight,—into the shadows." Chapter 36, pg. 306



Topics for Discussion

Who are the Mackenzies? Why are they moving to Iowa? Who are they moving to be near? Who are the Deals? Why does everyone go to the Deal home when Indians move into the area? Why are the people afraid of Indians? What are they afraid might happen?

Whose portrait does Abbie Mackenzie imagine? Why does Abbie fantasize about this portrait? What is important about the woman in the portrait? What kind of person does Abbie imagine this woman was? How does Abbie hope to emulate this woman? What happened to the portrait? How does Abbie get it back?

What is significant about the fur box Abbie's mother owns? What does the box contain? Who comes to own the box? Why? What does the box and its contents symbolize for Abbie? Why? Who does Abby hope to give the boxes content to some day? Why? Does she? Why or why not?

Discuss the theme of dreams. Name some of Abbie's dreams. Why does Abbie have these dreams? Does Abbie ever have the opportunity to make these dreams come true? Does Abbie take this opportunity? Why or why not? What happens to Abbie's dreams? Do they ever come true? Explain.

Who is Will Deal? How does Abbie feel about Will before he goes to war? How does Abbie feel about Will when he comes back? What does Abbie give up to be with Will? Why? Why does Will decide to move to Nebraska? What does Will hope to achieve so far from home? Does he? Who does Will do this for? Does this person appreciate Will's efforts? Why or why not?

Why does Abbie begin to write her life's story? What does Abbie hope to achieve by doing this? Does she? How does Abbie live vicariously through the achievements of her children and grandchildren? Which ones in particular does she admire? Why? What does this say about Abbie's own life and her own achievements? Are Abbie's achievements as admirable as those of her children and grandchildren? Why or why not?

Abbie's children want their mother to move out of her home. Why? What do the kids want for their mother? Why does Abbie refuse to leave? Is this a good choice for Abbie? What might have been different had Abbie moved? For whom?