The Liars' Club Study Guide

The Liars' Club by Mary Karr

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Introduction

Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club*, published in 1995 in New York is a memoir of Karr's turbulent childhood in the fictional eastern Texas town of Leechfield, and later in Colorado. Karr's immediate family consists of her sister Lecia, two years older than she; her father, Pete Karr, who works at an oil refinery; and her mother, who is emotionally unstable and hates living in Leechfield.

The memoir describes the sort of childhood that many people would wish to avoid. Mary's parents fight constantly and eventually divorce only to remarry later. Her mother's alcoholism and addiction to diet pills lead to many strange episodes, some of them frightening, as when she becomes unhinged and appears to be about to kill her children.

Mary's father is a rough-and-ready, quarrelsome native Texan with Native-American blood who excels as a teller of tall tales in his group of buddies who meet at the American Legion. This group is christened the Liars' Club.

Although the pages of *The Liars' Club* are chock full of arguments, fights, and unsavory incidents of all kinds, the memoir was hugely successful. This success is due to Karr's skills as a poet, her finely honed sense of humor, and her wonderful ear for the slang of eastern Texas. Readers probably also sense that underneath the surface turbulence, this dysfunctional family still loves each other.

Author Biography

Mary Karr was born in January 1955 in Texas, the daughter of J. P. Karr, an oil refinery worker, and Charlie Marie Karr, an artist and business owner. She had a difficult childhood which she describes in *The Liars' Club* and she left home when she was seventeen. Karr enrolled at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, but left after two years in order to travel. In 1978, she was admitted to Goddard College in Vermont where she met writers Tobias Wolff and Frank Conroy, both of whom encouraged her to write.

Karr found her calling as a poet. She has remarked that she wanted to be a poet from about age seven. Her first volume of poetry, *Abacus*, was published in 1987; her second volume, *The Devil's Tour*, appeared in 1993.

After *The Devil's Tour*, Karr wrote *The Liars' Club: A Memoir*, which brought her fame along with critical and commercial success. Published in 1995, *The Liars' Club* spent sixty weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. In 1996, the book won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award and the Texas Institute of Letters' Carr P. Collins Prize. It also won the New York Public Library Award.

Karr's third volume of poetry, *Viper Rum: With the afterword "Against Decoration*," was published in 1998. This was followed in 2000 by *The Liars' Club* sequel, *Cherry: A Memoir*, in which Karr recalls her turbulent adolescence. *Cherry* was generally less well received than *The Liars' Club*.

Karr has been an assistant professor of English at various institutions, including Tufts University, Emerson College, Harvard University, and Sarah Lawrence College. She is currently the Peck Professor of English at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York. She is a two-time winner of the Pushcart Prize in poetry and essay. In 1983, Karr married a fellow poet, whom she divorced in 1993. She has one son, Devereux Milburn.

Plot Summary

Part 1: Texas, 1961

The Liars' Club begins at a traumatic moment in Mary Karr's life, when she is seven. There has been a disturbance at her home in the town of Leechfield, Texas, as a result of which Mother is being taken from the house, having suffered a nervous breakdown. Mary and her nine-year-old sister Lecia are taken away by the sheriff and stay for a while elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Karr relates how her parents met and married and also tells of her father's childhood, explaining that she learned about these things by listening to the stories Daddy told to his drinking friends at the American Legion. This group of friends was known as the Liars' Club.

Mary's childhood is not easy. Her parents fight frequently, and although her mother threatens divorce, the couple stays together. Mary develops a sharp tongue, frequently using vulgar language she learned from her parents. She gets into fights at school.

Life for Mary becomes even more difficult when her grandmother, who has cancer, comes to live with her family. Grandma Moore is a bossy, critical, eccentric woman who carries a hacksaw around in a black doctor's bag and demands that Mary be spanked for misbehavior. Mary blames Grandma Moore for the worst times in her family, and Mary's own behavior deteriorates. She throws tantrums, bites her nails, walks in her sleep, and is suspended from second grade for attacking other children. To add to her misery, she is raped by an older boy in the neighborhood.

Grandma Moore dies a slow death. Her leg is amputated and the cancer spreads to her brain, making her, in Karr's words, crazy. She takes no pain medication but drinks beer all day. Since she dislikes Mary's father, he makes himself scarce while she is there, working double shifts and entertaining himself with hunting and fishing.

Grandma shows Mary a photo of a boy and girl, Tex and Belinda. She says they are Mary's halfbrother and sister, but she does not explain what she means. She threatens that if Mary misbehaves, she will be sent away, like Tex and Belinda were. When Grandma Moore dies, shortly after the family returns home after fleeing a hurricane, Mary is relieved, although her sister Lecia is genuinely upset.

Another crisis erupts on a trip to the beach. Lecia is attacked by a man-of-war that leeches onto her leg, leaving bright red welts. Having wished many times for her sister to die, Mary now prays that she lives.

With Mother depressed and spending her time reading in bed, Mary is relieved when Daddy takes her to the Liars' Club once more, where she hears him spin a tall tale

about how his father hung himself (his father is in fact still alive). Mother starts drinking to excess and this leads to even more vicious fights between her and her husband. On Mary's birthday, after a bitter quarrel, they all go out for the evening. But on their return, Mary's disturbed mother tries to grab the steering wheel and take the car over the edge of a bridge. Pete responds by knocking her unconscious. When she recovers she scratches his cheek bloody.

The situation gets worse. One night, Mother becomes unhinged, scrawling over all the mirrors with lipstick, smashing light bulbs, and burning the children's toys, furniture, and clothes. Then she advances on the children with a butcher's knife. She does not harm them and puts the knife down, but she calls the doctor and says she has just stabbed both children to death. This is the traumatic incident referred to at the beginning of the book. As a result, Mother is taken to a hospital for the mentally ill. Mary goes further out of control, shooting a BB gun at a boy who had been in a fight with her sister. The pellet hits the boy in the neck.

Part 2: Colorado, 1963

Having inherited money from Grandma Moore, the family is living in more comfortable circumstances. They move to Colorado Springs, where Mother buys a stone lodge on the side of a mountain. Mary is now eight years old. From the bedroom window, she and Lecia enjoy watching bears roaming around, and they learn to ride a horse. They spend an idyllic day fishing for trout with Daddy. Mother spends much of her time at the local bar. Soon Mary's parents announce they are to divorce, and they give the girls a choice as to with whom they wish to live. The girls choose Mother. Daddy returns to Texas the next day. A Mexican man named Hector moves in with Mother, and Mother calls him the girls' new daddy. The girls resist Hector's attempts to bond with them, and they miss their real father whom they unsuccessfully try to lure back.

They visit Antelope, the biggest city Mary has seen, but it is a disappointment to her. Mother rents a colonial house there, and the sisters each have their own bedroom for the first time. They attend a local school, where Mary still gets into fights. Mother's mental health continues to deteriorate. She becomes dependent on diet pills and spends most of her time drunk in bed. Her relationship with Hector sours, and she becomes moody and depressed, seeing no point in life. On one occasion she throws herself out of a moving car. In another traumatic incident, Mary is forced to perform oral sex on the man who is supposed to be baby-sitting her. She tells no one of how she was violated.

Life becomes so intolerable that Mother comes close to shooting Hector. Lecia and Mary, although they do not like Hector, try to protect him. That night, Lecia calls their father collect and tells him she and Mary are coming home. Daddy pays their airfare and is overjoyed to see them when they return. He prays their mother will soon join them. Mother returns soon after with Hector, intending only to pick up some clothes. However, Daddy beats up Hector, and Mother decides to stay and live with her family again.

Part 3: Texas Again, 1980

In 1980 Daddy has a stroke at the age of seventy and is incapacitated. Mother has stopped drinking but has become addicted to prescription drugs. She remains depressed. Mary, having left home permanently at seventeen, lives in Boston. She and her father have grown apart and no longer have much to say to each other. After Daddy's stroke, he loses the ability to speak coherently. Mary returns and helps her mother care for him.

One day, while searching the attic for old medical records, Mary comes upon a number of wedding rings. She asks her mother about them and Mother's anguished story comes out. Her first husband ran off with her two children, Belinda and Tex, and she saw them only once again. Each time she remarried, she expected her new husband to help her get her kids back, but the men quickly lost enthusiasm for the task. It was the strain of losing her children that led to Mother's mental instability over the years.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Mary Karr begins telling her life story with the most striking memory from her childhood. At the age of seven, she trembles on a bare mattress in her bedroom as the family doctor, Dr. Boudreaux, gently asks to see where she is hurt. She has no bruises, though the room is torn apart with furniture upended and emptied drawers. The local sheriff holds her sister, Lecia, who is pretending to be asleep. Eventually, Mary's daze clears up, and she realizes that the neighbors are outside watching her yard. Her parents are nowhere to be found. Her father Pete is working the graveyard shift at the oil refinery, and her mother Charlie has been taken away for being Nervous.

The concept of Nervousness weighs heavily on Mary. She knows that members of her family are prone to this state, but no one ever bothers to explain what it is. When she is older, in her twenties, she comes home from college to hear that a Leechfield resident has shot his family and himself and burned the house down. Mr. Thibideaux is deemed Nervous even though his behavior was obviously extreme. As Mary stands confusedly outside, she gets the sense that her family is Not Right and will be deemed so from this day forward. She has a childish anxiety about which neighbor will come forward and offer to take her in for the night, but more than anything she feels self-conscious about the spectacle. The adult Mary acknowledges the giant blank spot she is leaving by not finishing the story of this night. However, this is how she experienced the events for most of her life, and so she wishes to leave it this way for now.

The story really begins with Mary's parents, Pete and Charlie, and how they came to be married. A chance encounter brought them together. A blown tire on Charlie's car sent her to the nearest gas station, where Pete happened to be filling in for a friend. Charlie was headed west to stay with her mother after the ruin of her fourth marriage, but Pete caught her eye. She stopped in Leechfield. Charlie's husband eventually came from New York to win her back, but he insulted her in the process. Pete fought for Charlie's honor, which endeared him to her. They were attracted by each other's differences. Pete loved Charlie's intelligence and sophistication; Charlie loved Pete's loyalty and straightforwardness. At their wedding reception, Pete toasted Charlie by saying, "Thank you for marrying poor old me."

Pete grew up on a logging camp during a time of simplicity that is long gone. Mary knows most of his childhood stories by heart because Pete takes her to gatherings of the Liars' Club. The Club is nothing more than a group of male friends who spontaneously come together to drink and tell stories. The name "Liars' Club" came from one of the men's irritated wife. Mary is the only child allowed to come to the Liars' Club, an indication of how much Pete spoils her. She knows it, though, and she fully appreciates the honor. Mary revels in listening to her father's stories and feels that he is the best storyteller in the group. Pete has the gift - the ability to keep his listeners enraptured no matter how long or tall the tale.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter begins with a mystery that Mary Karr is unwilling and unable to solve right away. She describes the events surrounding her mother's disappearance as a blank spot in her past. If Mary's memoir is an exercise in unraveling her past, then this is the core to be investigated. She openly states that it took her years to fill in the gap, and she makes it clear that she is not about to reveal the truth just yet. A vague but piercing feeling that her family is Not Right pervades the scene. What this means exactly is not given much detail, but it is Mary's recognition that is important. Even at her young age, she senses the judgment from other people, and it colors her behavior. Mary admits that she has a spirited disposition, but it is the injustice of having a family that is deemed Not Right that gives her an added fierceness.

Mary's parents meet under complex circumstances, and they fall in love despite great differences. The story of their courtship and early marriage is charming, but it has hints of the kind of drama that could lead to trouble. Charlie alone sounds like trouble. She impulsively marries men and has a perpetual case of wanderlust. Pete is described as the stabilizing force, part of what attracts Charlie to him. Mary has a deep love for her father and clearly relishes any time he spends with her. The gift of storytelling is identified with Pete and gatherings of the Liars' Club. Mary is allowed to sit in on the group as a child, and they seem to have a significant effect on her. The basic fact that she grows up to be a writer and tell stories of her own speaks to their influence on her.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Mary Karr's mother, Charlie, was born in the Dust Bowl of West Texas. Only one tale of her mother's childhood endures in Mary's memory, and there is a photograph to go along with it. When Charlie was two years old, she got sick and nearly died of pneumonia. The doctor failed to bring her fever down after many attempts and finally resigned the case as hopeless. He predicted that Charlie would be gone by midnight. Mary's Grandma Moore decided they had better take a photograph of the child before she passed. There is an image of Charlie propped on the front porch in a red coat, staring straight at the camera with no smile. Of course, she went on to survive, which makes the story even more memorable.

Grandma Moore stayed on in West Texas, though Mary remembers visiting her house in Lubbock only once. The trip is really a hasty retreat from Leechfield, after Charlie threatens to divorce Pete for the first time. There is a storm on the way to Lubbock. What starts out as a black cloud in the sky turns into a swarm of locusts surrounding the car. Charlie pulls over, but the locusts continue to hover. Some fly around the inside of the car. The insects finally let up, though Mary's memory does not drift back into focus until she is in her grandma's bathroom, with her mother and sister. Charlie lies soaking in the bathtub with a washcloth on her face, while Grandma Moore stands around talking about trivial topics.

The next day, Charlie and the girls visit Charlie's cousin Dotty and her family. While taking a tour of the cotton fields, Grandma Moore's prattle doesn't let up. She very pointedly compliments Dotty on making a good marriage, while looking at her daughter to fully express displeasure for her choice of husband. Charlie grows quiet and wanders off with a sketchpad. No one asks to see her drawings when she gets back in the car, and this bothers Mary. Later on at Dotty's house, Mary's older cousin Robert takes an interest in her. Only a teenager, he already has a fiancy and a child on the way. The attention he pays to Mary seems to be practice for the child he has coming. A few years later, at twenty, Robert comes home from Vietnam and commits suicide with his wife and son in the next room. This is the first case of family Nervousness that Mary cites.

The hiatus in Lubbock comes to an end when Charlie decides her husband would be easier to take than her mother. The girls drive back to Leechfield to find Pete standing at the sink shaving, as if they had never left. The threat of divorce becomes commonplace in the Karr household, but Pete never takes Charlie seriously. Mary and Lecia hear the fights at night from their bedroom. For entertainment, they make a secret game out of imitating their parents. On the mornings after particularly loud fights, Mary wonders whether the neighbors are looking at her differently. If the neighbors are judgmental, it may be on account of Mary and Lecia's wild behavior. At the age of six, Mary remembers cussing at a friend for bloodying her nose. When the mother of the child comes out to scold Mary, she says that she doesn't give a shit.

When Grandma Moore comes to stay in Leechfield, the unruly rein of the Karr girls is temporarily curbed. Mary remembers the day she is out playing when her mother, who never does this, calls through the streets for her. The reason is to tell Mary that her grandmother has cancer and will be staying with the family while she is sick. From that day forward, Grandma finds nothing to do but criticize. She complains about the curtains, the food, the cleanliness of the house and especially her granddaughters' behavior. The family's habit of eating dinner in the middle of Charlie and Pete's bed is the most confounding to her. One by one, Grandma intends to correct every dysfunctional habit in the household, beginning by supervising the girls' religious training. Mary considers the fact that her grandmother's presence makes her own behavior much worse. More than anything, Grandma Moore introduces the terrible idea that up until her arrival, the Karrs had been doing everything wrong.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter further introduces the mythology surrounding Mary Karr's mother Charlie. Like the wild storms that captivate her, Charlie is prone to sudden flights and changes of mood. She is capable of making brash decisions without any forethought. Mary and Lecia are particularly vulnerable to these whims, as in the case of Charlie's fight with Pete when she impulsively decides to drive hundreds of miles west to Lubbock. On their drive to Grandma Moore's, the girls encounter a cloud of locusts that surround the car. This natural phenomenon is reflective of the private storm that going on in Charlie's head. The locusts swoop in out of a previously empty sky. In Charlie's case, her angry temper flares up in a previously calm household. Both types of storm naturally pass on by after running their course.

Grandma Moore is a foil to Charlie's character, highlighting the extent of Charlie's untraditional lifestyle. Though Charlie drives to her mother's house for refuge, it seems to be a decision made purely by instinct. Once she arrives, Grandma Moore is nothing but critical toward her daughter and especially toward the way her granddaughters have been raised. In response to her mother's criticism, Charlie regresses into childish behavior. She barely speaks, and when given the opportunity, she sneaks off to drink with the farmhands. Charlie's coping mechanism is effective but alienates her from Lecia and Mary.

When Grandma Moore comes to stay with the Karrs in Leechfield, Mary's worst fears and suspicions are confirmed. The passing glances from the neighbors are significant. The Karrs are not a normal family. Grandma Moore brings home this point with her non-stop nagging about anything and everything. She is suffering from a terminal illness and chooses to unleash her demons by taking over the entire household. No longer can Mary and Lecia eat dinner in their parents' bed or run around the house naked and screaming and acting like children, which they are. Grandma Moore's arrival signifies a shift in power and the first significant rift between Charlie and Pete.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The death of Grandma Moore is surefire material for garnering sympathy, or at least free cookies, from the ladies of the neighborhood. Mary describes the bluntly grotesque description she offered up whenever people asked. For a while, the "eighteen-month horror show," is contained by her succinct retelling. The adult Lecia claims to have genuinely mourned her grandmother's death, while Mary was too young and uncaring to remember the woman how she really was. The truth of how Mary felt is muddy, but she is willing to delve into what really happened. From the silence, her memories begin to emerge.

The first real horror of Grandma Moore's illness is visual. In an attempt to stop the spread of cancer, the doctors pipe mustard gas into her leg. The treatment results in gangrene, causing Grandma to scream for weeks despite the morphine, and in the end, the leg is amputated. Charlie takes the girls to visit Grandma in the hospital after the surgery, thinking they might be able to cheer her up. The atmosphere of the cancer ward and its patients is disturbing, but once Mary reaches her grandmother's room, the experience is much worse. Grandma Moore's leg, cut from above the knee, looks like a piece of badly hacked and hastily stitched-together pork roast. She lies in bed, mouth gapingly open without her dentures, and starts calling Lecia "Belinda." As the girls leave the hospital, Charlie throws a terrible fit at the doctors for leaving her mother in this condition.

On the way home, Charlie inexplicably takes Mary and Lecia to the Houston Zoo. Charlie is sullen for most of the visit, but she walks around and occasionally buys treats for her daughters. They receive Peter Pan hats and charm bracelets, and they sit outside at a picnic table eating burgers. Charlie just sits, not speaking a word and drinking black coffee. Mary leaves the table to go look at the animals, and she stops in front of the tiger exhibit. The big cats are pacing back and forth in their tiny cage, looking miserable in the heat. Mary thinks of a poem she discovered after she grew up. The poem is by the German poet Rilke, and it speaks of a panther behind bars whose, "mighty will stands paralyzed." Looking back, Mary can see her mother sitting at the table. She reflects on the misery her mother is in and how she resembles the imprisoned cats.

When Grandma Moore comes home from the hospital, she gets set up in Charlie and Pete's bedroom. The Liars' Club takes on the project of converting the garage into a bedroom, so Mary's parents have a place to sleep. The men arrive every day and work steadily through the heat of the summer. Lunch arrives by mid-day, brought over by somebody's wife. Mary remembers the time they ate oysters for lunch and the almost holy reverence they took in eating. The steady routine of the men's work makes them seem like a fellowship of good Samaritans. Mary takes comfort in their presence, and she is sad to see them leave in August when their work is done.

The women in the house have their own routine, although it brings no comfort to Mary. Charlie paints to escape while Grandma yells and stalks the house in her wheelchair. In addition to the bedroom, the Liar's Club built a separate studio attached to the house. Charlie begins her first painting promptly after its construction - a portrait of her mother. Mary sneaks into the space before the work is finished and smears orange paint all over the mouth. Grandma, meanwhile, does nothing to hide her grotesque stump of a leg. She keeps her wheelchair well oiled, so that she may move around silently and sneak up on her misbehaving grandchildren. Whether or not Mary and Lecia are causing mischief, Grandma automatically suspects they are and always shouts, "Ah ha!" after coming upon them.

Around this time, Mary is singled out by an older boy in the neighborhood. She is seven years old and part of a group of kids that run together. One of the games they play is called "Torture." It involves all but one of the kids gathering in some small, dank place and staying there until the leader allows them to leave. One time, Mary ends up alone with the older boy, either by chance or by his will. The boy leads Mary to an isolated place and crudely sexually assaults her. In a parenthetical aside, the adult Mary addresses the adult boy as a potential reader. She asks, "Where will you be when the news of this paragraph floats back to you?" At the time, Mary says nothing to the boy or to her family. She rearranges her clothes and walks back home, knowing that speaking up about the violation is not an option.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Grandma Moore's grotesque illness and eventual death is a dark enough memory on its own for Mary to exhume. The subsequent depression her mother falls into makes the circumstances much worse. This chapter contains the first signs of Charlie's detachment from her family and what Mary calls "Nervousness," the stand-in word for her family's variety of psychosis. The eerie characteristic of Charlie's depression is the way she keeps up with her necessary everyday affairs, but in such an isolated, unreachable way. She seems to feel affection for her daughters and has concern for their well being after the horrifying hospital visit. However, her attempt at cheering them up is ineffective. Charlie's sadness is clear to Mary, and because of it, she can only see her environment through that gloomy lens.

Men distinguish themselves from the women in this chapter. While Charlie is alone during her time of grief, the men of the Liars' Club come together to help Pete convert the garage into a bedroom. Mary takes solace in the community environment that springs up as the men come to her house every day to build. Even though the men avoid discussing Grandma Moore's illness, the sole reason they are converting the garage, their dedicated collaboration says enough. Charlie doesn't speak about her mother's disease either, but her silence is destructive because she chooses to suffer in isolation. When the garage is finished, the men build a studio for Charlie, where spends her days painting. Mary's dissatisfaction with this seclusion is best expressed when she ruins the first painting Charlie creates - a portrait of Grandma Moore.

For the most part, Mary suffers in silence too. After she is assaulted by a neighborhood boy, she has an acute awareness of how this incident could crumble the remaining shreds of her mother's sanity. Even though she is only seven, she reflexively buries the terrible secret. Though Mary takes greater comfort in her father, she tends to behave like her dysfunctional mother during this stressful time.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

By mid-fall, Grandma Moore's cancer spreads to her brain. The advancement does not slow her down in any way. Instead, she bears down harder on the Karr household. Grandma drinks a six-pack of beer everyday, instead of taking morphine to ease her pain. She does not appear to get drunk, though she frightens Mary nevertheless. Mary practices tightening her stomach muscles to stave off her anxiety whenever she has to look in the cataract-clouded eyes of her grandmother. Meanwhile, Grandma Moore finds fault with the girls' behavior daily and commissions Charlie to administer beatings. Charlie is emotionally beaten down herself, and she goes through with whatever her mother wants. Her one objection is when Grandma wants to beat the children with a leather horsewhip she built out of craft store material.

As Grandma Moore alienates Charlie from her daughters, she also succeeds in alienating Pete. Rather than stay and endure Grandma's sickly ranting, Pete stays away from the house. He works all day and only comes back late at night to sleep, before leaving again the following day. Mary remembers a rare occasion when her father is home during the day with several squirrel carcasses he intends to make a gumbo out of. A disgusted Grandma Moore insists that Charlie take her out for shrimp remoulade instead, a refined dinner compared to the gumbo. Pete stays home with the girls, unfazed by his mother-in-law.

When Mary is alone with Grandma Moore one Sunday, the old woman says she's got something to show Mary upstairs. The smell in Grandma's room is one of death, decay and more specifically, water moccasin snakes. It is a scent that the adult Mary can still conjure up to this day. Grandma brings out the photographs of two children, a boy and a girl, and she says she's been waiting until she could be alone with Mary to show her. The children are Charlie's from her first marriage, Tex and Belinda, and they are nearly grown now. The news of her mother's abandoned children deeply disturbs Mary. When her grandmother threatens the same fate if Mary doesn't start behaving, she represses her memory of Tex and Belinda. For nineteen years, they cease to exist.

There is a hurricane threat looming in the background during this time. Townspeople speculate whether the storm will hit Leechfield directly, and as the reports roll in, most people decide to evacuate. The Karr household is as divided as ever. Pete disappears completely, but he calls to check in. Charlie worries about the storm's onset, but does nothing to leave. After a neighborhood girl tells Mary that the four horses of the apocalypse will be coming when the storm hits, the dire reality of the situation sets in for her. It takes a national guardsman to carry Grandma Moore out before the family leaves their house.

On the way to Aunt Iris's house, sixty miles away, Charlie's Nervous breakdown officially begins. While driving through the blinding rain and violent wind, Charlie starts quietly

singing "Mack the Knife" to herself. As they approach a bridge and the song reaches its scariest verse, the car goes into a 360-degree spin. Whether this is accidental or deliberate on Charlie's part is unknown. The car launches into the air over the pedestrian walkway and crashes into a rail. Mary has, by this point, vomited down the front of her shirt from fear and is crying in the backseat. Miraculously, the car suffers minimal damage, and they are back on the road after Charlie calls out, "Everybody all right?" in a disconcertingly cheery voice.

The events of the night leave Mary distressed long after she arrives at Aunt Iris's house. There are some minor improvements. Grandma Moore is put to bed, and Mary gets a bath. However, in place of Grandma, there is Grandpa Karr to contend with. He is in his eighties and known for wandering off to climb things if left unsupervised. Mary's cousin Bob Earl offers a dime to the girls if they will watch Grandpa, but they are torn between this and watching their mother. Mary finally decides to keep an eye on Charlie. Growing bored of this, she rambles down the hall and notices Grandma Moore's hand hanging off the bed where she is sleeping. Upon closer inspection, she notices a dozen tiny red ants crawling on Grandma's arm, and Grandma doesn't seem to feel it. Mary backs away and sits in the living room until a few hours later when Charlie finds her mother and starts screaming.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The disharmony between Pete and Charlie becomes a significant rift. Grandma Moore is the initial agitator with her vocal criticism, but the pair makes things worse by ignoring each other. Mary is faced with the first of many choices between her mother and father, until Pete makes the decision to stay away from the house. Even as the threat of a hurricane looms over the town, Pete will not come home. It seems as though the adults are willing to be at odds with each other despite the effect it may have on the children. Pete periodically calls the house until the phone lines shut down, and then the women are on their own.

Before the storm hits, Grandma Moore takes Mary aside and reveals the existence of two children that came before her. She explains that Charlie's other children were sent away for being bad, and the same thing is likely to happen to Mary if she doesn't behave. Grandma Moore and the smell emanating from her come to represent death in this moment. Mary endures the terror of the moment and the information that comes to light, but she immediately shuts the memory out of her mind.

Before Charlie only showed signs of Nervousness, but in this chapter she is in full panic mode. She waits until the last possible moment before gathering everyone, including Grandma Moore, into the car. The skies are black, and the storm bears down. Charlie's mental state is an exact replica of the conditions outside. As she drives across a bridge, she nearly takes the car over the edge, showing for the first time how far her Nervousness has gone. Mary and Lecia are no longer safe in their mother's care. The moment she almost loses control is over as quickly as it began. The girls are more

aware than before of their mother's tenuous grip on sanity, though Mary develops the advanced skill of repression in order to forget most of it.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

While the Karr women leave Leechfield, Pete stays and watches the hurricane roll in from a giant tower at the refinery. He sees a twenty-foot wall of water move up the canal toward town, but amazingly the hurricane shifts toward a town called Cameron across the border in Louisiana. The direct hit on Cameron causes severe flooding, resulting in many casualties. Along with the town, the surrounding bayous flood, bringing up all kinds of creatures into the streets. Nurse sharks, snakes and nutria-rats are dangerous and on the loose, making the town an even more hellish place to be.

Grandma Moore passes away during the storm, although Mary cannot recall exactly when. She is actually in a coma at Aunt Iris's house, but she dies shortly afterwards. When the official news comes, a school official drives the girls home, with Lecia sobbing in the front seat. After the girls get dropped off, Mary is surprised to see that her sister's tears are real, for she could not be happier to be free of her grandmother. Charlie goes to Lubbock alone for the funeral. Left at home, Mary becomes acutely aware of the presence of death around her and of those in Cameron. She also has her first experience with insomnia. The world made more sense before so many lives were lost in the unlucky neighboring town. Mary feels a bitter anger toward the girls her own age who naively continue to trust in the world's order.

Charlie returns to Leechfield soon after. She walks into the house one evening unannounced, looking utterly exhausted. Everyone gravitates toward her tired body. Pete massages her neck while the girls rub her feet. The next day, the family goes to the local beach to try and cheer Charlie up. The intentions are good, but once there, Charlie heads straight for the Breeze Inn bar for a drink. Mary is already concerned for her mother's burgeoning drinking problem, but she tries to relax and wander along the beach instead of following Charlie. Pete takes the girls to see some washed up sea oddities, including the colorful man-of-war. He describes how dangerous an encounter with the jellyfish can be, because its tentacles reach far to wrap tightly around a leg.

After Pete heads up to the bar to keep Charlie company, the girls dive into the water. Despite their father's caution, Lecia and Mary only worry about staying lined up with the shore and not drifting out too far. Lecia swims farther out as Mary watches her feet disappear into a wave like the tail of a mermaid. For some reason, Mary hangs back, worrying about her mother. She hops out of the water and points at the bar, trying to get Lecia's attention. When her sister doesn't respond, she spears a dead cabbage-head jellyfish with a stick to scare Lecia. Mary wades into the water, and Lecia starts screaming. Her reaction seems mocking at first, until Mary sees Lecia slapping at her leg underwater. Mary takes off running toward the Breeze Inn.

Someone on the beach drags Lecia out of the water by the time her parents arrive. Pete finds a jagged rock to cut the man-of-war clinging to Lecia's leg. The head of the

creature bursts, but its tentacles hold fast. As Mary remembers this event again, the memories move forward like slides. The next image she has is of her sister growing increasingly pale while Charlie speaks in a low, soothing voice about the phosphorescence in waves. Mary remembers falling asleep and praying for her sister not to die. It seems that God has answered her wishes by killing Grandma Moore, and now he wants payment for the favor by taking Lecia too. However, when Mary wakes up the next day, Lecia has hundreds of blisters on her legs, but she is otherwise fine. Mary is so grateful that she acts as Lecia's servant for the day, buying her candy and bringing her lunch. Lecia quickly finds a way to take advantage of her injuries by charging the neighborhood kids money to touch her wounds.

Chapter 5 Analysis

After the storm passes and Grandma Moore finally dies, there is a brief time of peace for the Karrs. Charlie comes home from the burial completely exhausted, but she is still able to accept the consolation of her family. The tension is still evident between Pete and Charlie, though his mere presence at home suggests his willingness to work through their difficulties. After Charlie comes home, the Karrs go to the beach in attempt to cheer her up. This family outing is the first attempt to glue together what has been fractured due to Grandma Moore's stay at the house.

While at the beach, Pete points out the man-of-war washed up in the sand as a particularly dangerous sea creature. Mary is fascinated by the creature's bright colors, but she is more concerned with how Charlie is behaving than what kind of dangers are in the ocean. Although the hurricane moved past Leechfield, the proximity to such destructiveness has planted a seed of fear in Mary's head. She stops seeing the world in a napve way, and instead she becomes aware of all that can go wrong. She is overly aware of her mother's well-being and closely monitors her drinking.

The welcome distraction that comes from the beach outing is disrupted when a man-of-war stings Lecia. Pete and Charlie share a rare moment of unity as they come together to take care of Lecia. For once, Charlie behaves like a mother and attends to her daughter instead of focusing on herself. The situation veers away from the tragic, but Mary falls asleep dreaming of the worst possible scenario. Mary's imagination often colors a more vivid picture than what is really there.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Mary is allowed a rare treat when she is invited to a gathering of the Liars' Club. She sits happily spraying cheese whiz on crackers while listening to her father spin a tale about his father, who died by hanging. Mary knows her grandfather is very much alive, but she listens to the rest of the story with enjoyment. Pete paints a picture of his father as an unstable man who suffers through various indignities until the end of his life. The end for his father comes the night he climbs the roof and falls through, his neck breaking in the process. Pete taps his cigarette on the table to signal the end of the story. His lie marks a boundary between him and his friends, but storytelling is something he enjoys doing.

Charlie, on the other hand, doesn't say a word about her intense grief over her mother's death. To make things worse, Charlie and Pete enter into a rough patch of near-constant drinking and fighting. The blame cannot be clearly assigned. Pete says Charlie's drinking drove him out, while Charlie says that Pete's abandonment drove her to drink. Drinking of the general sort is not unfamiliar to Mary. Her father openly drinks six-packs of beer, and he is known to keep a fifth of whiskey in his truck. The difference is that Pete's personality does not change due to alcohol. Charlie becomes the worst kind of mess when she drinks. Depending on the night, her mood shifts uncontrollably from gloomy to ragingly mad.

Music is one of the biggest contributors to Charlie's mood. On the nights she listens to opera, Charlie becomes nostalgic for New York and will regale the girls with stories of her youth there. If Charlie is not feeling talkative, she will pull out her collection of art books and point out all the great paintings she has seen. On one such evening, Charlie recalls seeing Maria Callas sing and later watching as Marlene Dietrich stepped out of a limousine in a shimmering white gown. Feeling inspired, she mixes Vaseline with the ash from a candle's flame to paint charcoal eyes a la Dietrich on Mary. The downside to these otherwise interesting evenings is when Charlie descends into a crying fit. Lecia learns that it is best to simply lead Charlie to bed when she is feeling this bad.

The worst kinds of nights are when Charlie puts on blues music when Pete is home. Mary's birthday takes place on one of these nights, though it has a promising beginning. Earlier in the day, Pete gives her a present of binoculars and a comic book, and Mary convinces him to come home for lasagna dinner that night. When Pete gets home, Mary is waiting to tell him about her wonderful day. Charlie bought her a new dress and a chemistry set for Lecia, and she took them all out for lunch. At this point, the family does not have much money, and Charlie's behavior is overly extravagant considering their situation. A fight breaks out between Charlie and Pete and is overheard by the girls upstairs. He storms out, and she chases after him, throwing the plate of lasagna to the ground in protest. Mary comes downstairs to see that her mother is serving the birthday cake for dinner instead, and her father is sitting alone in the dark of the garage.

Mary's memory of that night doesn't come back into focus until the family is in the car, returning from a dinner out at the Bridge Cafy. She can see the outlines of her parents in the front seat and the way Charlie's head lolls back against the seat from all the wine she drank. The old snake smell, first discovered through Grandma Moore, enters the car as Charlie and Pete start fighting. As the car approaches the bridge marking the entrance to Leechfield, Charlie starts ranting about how terrible the town is. She reaches for the wheel and wrestles with Pete for it before he knocks her out with a punch and regains control. Charlie wakes up when they arrive at home, and she starts fighting again. She claws at Pete's face as he drags her inside. To Mary's embarrassment, the neighbors are standing nearby watching.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The struggle between Pete and Charlie is constant and fierce. From a child's point of view, it is difficult to discern who may be in the right, but either way the result is hard to bear. Mary has continually conflicted feelings for both of her parents, but her inner compass usually sides with Pete. On Mary's birthday, Charlie takes her and Lecia out for an extravagant shopping trip and fancy lunch. Upon returning, Mary proudly announces the day's events to Pete until she realizes how excessive Charlie's spending was. Charlie seduces the girls with lavish material goods that are temporarily more popular, but Pete's hard-won simplicity and his sincerity of the heart earn a more enduring loyalty. In the same vein, Charlie tells more exciting stories about her past in New York, but usually they are kept locked up like jewels in a vault. Pete takes Mary to gatherings of the Liars' Club and openly shares his tall tales with her.

This chapter gives a greater sense of the adult struggle between Charlie and Pete that takes place outside of Mary's childish lens of the this time. Pete is struggling to keep the family together. while Charlie is slipping into a deeper and more selfish depression. When Charlie is gregarious and charming, she is only a few drinks away from a mood that is desperately sad, or worse. Mary's memory is vulnerable to fading in and out depending on how bad the scene gets. After the birthday argument, she cannot recall how her parents reconciled. Her memory returns to the car ride home after the family goes out for dinner. Even after all the previous drama, Charlie is so disturbed that she tries to take the car off the road after their presumably peaceful dinner. Pete is the guiding, if sometimes furious, force that keeps the Karrs on course while Charlie is on the verge of breaking down.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Not only is the Karr family undergoing emotional strain, but they are also under a lot of financial stress as well. Pete manages to keep up with the mortgage payments, but he struggles to pay the food and drug bills. Mary remembers the weekly visits her father would make to the pharmacy to pay off part of his debt. On the evenings that Pete wasn't working, he would spread out all of his receipts and study which were paid and which were not. Charlie involves herself in drinking, reading and/or crying throughout all of this. The chasm between Pete and Charlie only deepens.

The family also endures a collective case of insomnia during this time. Each member walks around the house in various states of undress, so as to more easily slip into a nap if the feeling overcomes them. Charlie might be found in the buff at the stove in the middle of the night, cooking up an omelet. Lecia watches TV in her underwear. The only time Charlie gets out of bed for any extended length of time is when she decides to seal off all the outside windows. The impetus for this project is Mary. One day she is spotted by an entire carload of neighbors, hanging naked from the curtain rod in her bedroom window. Lecia and Mary take pleasure in Charlie's determination to privatize their house, but mostly they are happy to see her motivated by something.

One afternoon, Mary comes home to see the front door ajar. This strikes her as odd, for it is springtime and insects could easily enter, but she goes inside anyway. On the table there sits a letter regarding a large inheritance from Grandma Moore. Mary cannot remember the exact amount, but later she learns in greater detail that the Charlie received mineral rights to the oil fields her grandmother owned. Whether it was $100,000 or half a million, it was a lot of money for the Karr family. At the time, Mary entertains childish fantasies of buying ponies and going to Disneyland with the fortune, but as she walks further into the house, she senses something is wrong. All of the mirrors are streaked with lipstick, and Charlie is nowhere to be found.

After looking to see that the car is still there, Mary walks out to her mother's art studio and finds her sitting in a rocking chair. Charlie has her back to the door and is facing a burning stove where inside she has stuffed all of her paintings. When she turns around, Mary can see that her face is painted all over with lipstick. The next series of events are choppy memories, and they advance rapidly. Lecia is present in the next scene, which takes place in the girls' bedroom. Charlie overturns the dresser and the mattresses, tearing the room apart while drunkenly yelling that she wants to be a good housewife. Then they are outside near the garage, where Charlie has made a giant pile of toys and other belongings. She lights a match and throws it onto the fuel-soaked mound.

As Charlie lobs all of the girls' dresses into the fire, one by one, Mary begins to feel completely alone in this insane situation. There are no neighbors who come out to investigate the disturbance. It is as if everyone has systematically closed their curtains

and locked their doors to the Karrs. After everything has gone up in the fire, Charlie goes back inside the house with the girls following after her. Lecia gets a sudden urge to break loose, and she prods Mary along to their bedroom where they hide under a blanket. Charlie is in the kitchen now, and they can hear the sound of metal crashing to the floor while she is emptying out the drawers.

Mary describes a strange coping phenomenon that occurs once Charlie appears in the door brandishing a butcher knife. The figure threatening them no longer possesses any mass in Mary's mind, for she has converted the figure into a stick-figure. It is no longer her mother standing above her, but only a likeness of her mother. Lecia becomes her stick-figure sister, holding Mary tightly in their cartoon of a bedroom, and with this method she is able to lock down her fear. In this version of events, Mary's stick-figure mother puts down the knife and picks up the phone. Charlie calls the family doctor and tells him, falsely, that she has stabbed the girls and that he must come quickly.

Chapter 7 Analysis

This chapter gives partial context to the mysterious and terrifying events of Mary's first memory in Chapter One. After enduring the painful death of her mother, Charlie descends into a deep depression from which no one can shake her. There are indications that Charlie is not mentally stable, but nothing as dramatic as when Mary finds her in the painting studio. There is no trace of Mary's mother in Charlie's face. She has physically transformed herself into a madwoman, and her actions prove it. What drives Charlie to such an insane frenzy, where she comes very close to harming her children, is unknown.

Mary experiences her own psychotic break during this episode, but it is a coping mechanism designed to protect her. As Charlie's behavior becomes more erratic and scary, Mary disassociates herself from the situation. Her mind translates the real images into images that are easier to take. Her mother is no longer a woman holding a knife, but instead she is a paper doll holding a toy knife. Even in the retelling, the adult Mary uses coping mechanisms to get through it. She cannot reconstruct the events without skipping over large portions, because her memory has repressed most of what happened.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Mary is extremely lonesome for her mother after she is committed to the psychiatric ward. In an effort to bolster spirits around the house, she starts behaving remarkably well in school and earns satisfactory conduct grades for the first time. Both girls are silent on the subject of their mother with Pete, even though they spend considerable time discussing her whereabouts. Since Pete is not forthcoming with any information, Mary and Lecia concoct a picture of their mother's mental-ward life based on a movie they see. The cinematic version is stereotypical, full of shock therapy and straight jackets, but it is the only depiction they have.

The kids in the neighborhood offer up an even worse picture. Mary's streak of good behavior quickly ends after the kids start spouting insults about Charlie. After several losing fights and encouragement from Pete to start defending herself, Mary literally sinks her teeth into the shoulder of Rickey Carter. She draws blood, which sends him into a fury of retaliation. Rickey attacks Lecia, who pins him down in a matter of seconds, which sends his brother up behind her with a bat. When Lecia gets smacked unconscious for a few minutes, Mary decides to take her revenge. Early the next day, she sits in the upper branches of a tree with her BB gun in hand. Soon the entire Carter family passes underneath, giving Mary the perfect shot at Rickey. If Rickey's father did not look up just then, Mary would utter the worst cuss word heard out of a Leechfield child's mouth. Even though Mary is clueless about the meaning of the word, she says it anyway and gets punished by her father.

If the decided lack of maternal influence is affecting Mary, Pete does not take notice, for he continues to bring her to meetings of the Liars' Club. The latest gathering of men is in a hunting shack, where they are cleaning freshly caught ducks and, of course, telling stories. Pete slowly ambles through a tale about lying to his mother when he was a boy. He and his brother swam in a flood-swollen river, against their mother's explicit instructions. Later, when she asked if they had disobeyed, Pete lied, and his brother told the truth, resulting in beatings for them both. Pete took revenge on his brother for the betrayal by pouring a stinging liquid into his sores. As he tells the last part of the story, Mary wonders about the mean side to her father that she has never experienced. Pete treats his daughters with kid gloves, but the Liars' Club men possess an undeniable caution toward him.

During the car ride home, Mary takes a chance and broaches the subject of her mother. She asks about the place where Charlie is staying and wants to know why she can't visit. When Pete says children are not allowed to visit and turns to light a cigarette, this is Mary's cue to stop asking questions. She ignores the signal and asks Pete if the other patients in the psychiatric ward scare him when he visits Charlie. He tells Mary that the patients are not scary. They just seem very sad. Against her better judgment, Mary blurts out that she doesn't want her mother to come back home if she's going to go

crazy again. In response to this comment, Pete sharply jerks the wheel, pulling the truck to the side of the road. Neither of them speaks for a few seconds. Pete fixes his sight off into the distance before he tells Mary that he will slap her senseless if she ever speaks about Charlie that way again. Pete has never made such a threat, and Mary's face grows hot with shame.

Eventually, Pete gives in and takes the girls to go visit Charlie at the hospital. She stands behind a mesh screen waiting for them as they walk in. Pete lifts Mary up by the waist, but even then she can barely see over the windowsill. Mary presses her hand against her mother's on the other side of the mesh and says, "I'm sorry you're all locked up." Charlie laughs and says that she's not the only one who is locked up. Mary just happens to have a bigger room. When Lecia gets raised up to the mesh, her body stretches up far enough so she can see all of Charlie's face. Mary is jealous of Lecia and Charlie's intimacy. Even before Charlie went away, Mary felt as though Lecia was in the inner circle while she stood outside the ring with Pete. Later that night, Mary falls asleep easily for the first time in weeks. She dreams of her father cleaving off a human hand that appears to be her mother's. The dream hand is in the same position that Charlie's hand was earlier, pressed up against the screen to meet Mary.

Chapter 8 Analysis

In this chapter, Mary becomes more aware than before of the dark undercurrent to all things. Mary's fears of losing her mother have come true, and the reality of the situation is both more manageable and stranger than she thought. Pete is not a substitute for Charlie and does not attempt to be one. He continues to take Mary to Liars' Club gatherings. At one of their meetings, Mary listens to Pete tell a story about his childhood. She senses a different, and crueler, side to his personality from the man she knows. Mary muses on this disparity amusedly, and she ultimately dismisses the more complex view of Pete in favor of the caring father she knows.

Pete's love for his daughters is clearly evident, though he possesses feelings for Charlie as well, despite her actions. During a car ride when Mary speaks ill of her mother, Pete makes it immediately clear that negative comments about Charlie will not be tolerated. Again, it is hard to discern what the adult relationships are truly like during this time, as Mary is only able to remember the events from her childhood vantage point. What can be determined is that Pete and Charlie have a very strong tie to each other despite their problems.

In addition to learning about what lies beyond the surface of things, Mary becomes more aware of the difference between reality and fantasy in this chapter. The image she and Lecia concoct of Charlie in the hospital is garishly melodramatic compared to the scene they encounter during a visit. Mary tells Charlie she is sorry to see her all locked up, and the corresponding image she expected was her mother in a straitjacket. Charlie is nothing more than a tired adult trying to work through her problems, albeit behind bars. There is no glamour to it, and like Pete says, the other patients are not crazy looking, just very sad.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The Karr family heads out on vacation toward the Seattle World's Fair after Charlie is released from the hospital. While passing through a particularly gorgeous stretch of Colorado, Charlie insists on getting out of the car so she can take in the view. Mary pipes up with a complaint from the backseat because she wants to make it to the hotel before the pool closes. After a full-blown argument unfolds, Pete jerks the car to the shoulder, and Charlie's desire to paint wins out. In the same vein, Charlie impulsively decides to buy a house in the random mountain town they are stopped in. With no logic or foresight, the Karrs end up living in Cascade, Colorado.

The boldest use of Grandma Moore's inheritance money is the purchase of their mountain home. The house itself is ostentatious - modern architecture with picture windows overlooking the woods. Before, the distinction between the newly moneyed Karrs and their Texas neighbors was less significant. People started talking after Pete installed window air conditioning units and Charlie bought a leopard skin coat, but news of their road trip to Seattle was scandalous. The most inconceivable idea was Pete flying back to Texas, because he only had three weeks of vacation to spend. When the family left for their trip, the neighborhood kids chased after their car throwing handfuls of gravel at them. The fact that they now have a second home in the mountains is the final separating factor.

Mary does find new pleasures to her life in Colorado. Shortly after they settle into the new house, Lecia and Mary receive horses named Sure Enough and Big Enough, respectively. Both of the girls spend most of their days at the stable, where the McBride family oversees all of the horses. Learning to saddle and bridle Big Enough helps Mary to gain confidence. She and Lecia go out riding and exploring the landscape that is so foreign to their Texas sensibilities. In Colorado, there are cold mountain streams with waterfalls, caves full of bats, and abandoned mines to investigate. Even at home there is an abundance of nature at the doorstep, for the house rests on a cliff right up next to the woods. One day the girls go out fishing with Pete and take their bounty back home that night. They build a campfire, make dinner and sleep outside. There is a peaceful serenity to this time.

The girls are too busy with their horses to notice that Charlie and Pete are spending most of their time apart. Most days Charlie hangs out in the local tavern with the bartender, Hector. When she is home, she sits alone reading Russian history books while sipping vodka. Pete spends most of his time talking with Mr. McBride at the stable. Mary laments the fact that she is away the night her parents decide to divorce. She arrives home, after missing all of the buildup, to find Charlie and Pete sitting like strangers in the living room. After the announcement, Pete cries openly, his tears dropping like raindrops to the floor. Charlie remains dry-eyed. They ask the girls directly to decide which parent they want to live with.

Lecia, after calling for a separate consultation in the kitchen, makes the point that Charlie will get into big trouble if she is left alone. Pete, being the dependable one, can always be found back in Leechfield. Mary lets her sister make the choice for both of them. Early the next morning, Mr. McBride comes to take Pete to the airport. Before he leaves, he finds Mary asleep and zipped up in his duffel bag. It is a heartbreaking departure, but Pete leaves with his dignity intact. Mary is stunned as the truck Pete sits inside takes off down the road. Her father is the most dependable person in her life, and now he is gone.

Charlie celebrates with fancy dinners and expensive clothing after Pete leaves, saying that she feels like a freed slave. Mary is temporarily seduced by the luxuries so freely offered, although guilt sets in soon after when she realizes that Charlie is trying to buy her off. Despair turns to cynicism when Mary comes home to find her mother topless on the living room floor, receiving a massage from a stable hand. When Charlie says that it is nice to see her daughter home for lunch, Mary feels wounded by the lie. Not long after, Charlie goes away to Mexico for a few weeks, leaving the girls with the McBride family. She returns with a man by her side, standing in the shadows. For a moment, the man resembles Pete, until he steps forward. It is Hector the bartender. Charlie announces, "Say hello to your new daddy."

Chapter 9 Analysis

When the Karrs leave Texas, Charlie gains the upper hand while Pete's ability to hold the family together weakens. For one thing, Charlie no longer behaves like a woman. She is a child. The impetus for stopping in Cascade, Colorado while en route to Seattle is a temper tantrum from Charlie. Once they arrive, Charlie proceeds to buy the most ostentatious house available without a thought to the long-term effects of owning real estate in Colorado. The girls enjoy the fringe benefits of Charlie's impulsive spending. Both of them get stable horse, which they are delighted with. Colorado life with its diversions and excesses has an overall distracting effect on Lecia and Mary. It does not seem to be Charlie's intention, but she nevertheless accomplishes it.

Charlie and Pete's separation is inevitable, but the announcement takes Mary by surprise. She is truly caught when asked to decide which parent to live with. Lecia makes the final decision to stay with Charlie in Colorado, but Mary goes along with it. Up until this point, Mary has been much more drawn into her mother's rocky mental state and is more prone to neglect her father. However, when Pete departs it signifies a deep loss for Mary. Not only does she lose her father, who she loves, but she also loses the only stable adult in her life. As soon as Pete leaves, Charlie's behavior becomes even more exaggeratedly adolescent, as though her parents had left her alone for the weekend. The pleasures that come from Charlie as the sole parent are flashy and temporary. After the glamour fades, Lecia and Mary are left with the deeply unsettled feeling of not knowing what their mother is capable of doing next. This chapter marks the beginning of the Karrs' transition from troubled family into an absolute nightmare.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The newlyweds, Charlie and Hector, quickly fall into a routine of serious drinking. After one too many benders, Hector invents a disgusting hangover remedy utilizing raw eggs and Pepto-Bismol, the sight of which launches Charlie into a vomiting fit. These rough and tumble mornings send the girls even more frequently to the stable, just so they will be out of the house. One Sunday morning, Lecia and Mary arrive at the stable to find the doors locked and the grounds vacant. With nowhere else to go, they pull out their sandwiches to eat and wait. They kill most of the morning playing kickball and hunting for snakes before Mr. McBride's car pulls into the drive. He gets out and asks the girls whether or not they know what day it is. Polly, his wife, steps out and tells the girls it is Father's Day.

Mary feels instant shame for forgetting, but Lecia doesn't miss a beat. Lecia lies and says of course they know and that they sent out a nice present already - a new fishing pole and a box full of hand-painted lures. Nevertheless, a bad feeling sets in for Mary, and she feels a bitter resentment toward the McBride children for having a father so near. The girls leave the stable to find a payphone, where they attempt to make a collect call. The operator is very unhelpful, and after several attempts and a huff of disappointment, they give up trying to call Pete. Mary thinks about all the letters she sent during the first weeks of Pete's absence and how the number slowly dwindled and then stopped. The girls go home and make belated Father's Day cards, and Charlie gets out of bed early the next morning to mail them. At first, they are obsessive about checking the mailbox for a reply. A few weeks later, Lecia loses the mail key, and it is too much trouble to stand at the counter, checking for mail twice a day.

Mary wages a final campaign to lure Pete back into her life with Green Stamps. She becomes fanatical about saving stamps every time Charlie shops for groceries. she collects them from strangers, and she even digs through trash cans for a hint of green paper. Mary's fantasy is that she will be able to redeem the stamps for the perfect gift that will win her father over. When Charlie takes Mary to the Redemption Center in Colorado Springs, Mary runs into some problems. After paging through the inventory book, she keeps getting turned down. Nothing that she wants is in stock. The clerk tries to be helpful, but Charlie gets frustrated after all and eventually begins one of her famous tirades. Mary drags her mother out of the store and has her wait in the bar across the street while she goes back and picks out two very lackluster gifts - a pot-bellied ceramic monk holding a fishing pole for Pete and an electric can opener for Charlie. After sending Pete's gift in the mail and giving the appliance to a gushingly drunk Charlie, Mary gives up on the stamp idea.

On the last day of summer, the girls help Mr. McBride and his crew to herd the horses to winter pasture. The animals surge together like a swiftly moving river, and Mary feels alternately empowered and frightened by their force. Later, after the girls return home,

Mr. McBride drives up with their horses in a trailer. This is how Mary and Lecia learn they are moving. Charlie has bought a bar as an "investment" in another mountain town where Hector has family. The fact that their alcoholic mother has just purchased a bar is troublesome, to say the least. On the car ride toward their new home, Mary sits in the backseat as a deep vein of worry sets in. She falls asleep to the sound of her mother in the front, happily singing a cowboy song to herself.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter demonstrates the first noticeable difference between Lecia and Mary. Both girls choose the same coping mechanism of staying out of the house and spending the day at the stables. The general idea is to avoid contact with Hector and Charlie. However, Lecia takes a more active approach to her mental survival than Mary. While Mary is still apt to become emotional about the family situation, Lecia maintains the fazade that everything is fine. When the McBrides point out that the day is Fathers' Day, Lecia doesn't miss a beat and immediately lies about already sending out a present. She has an acute understanding that she must avoid a stranger's pity at all costs. Though she is guarded with outsiders, she will still let her guard down around Mary. After Lecia tries unsuccessfully to place a collect call to Pete, she breaks down crying in front of Mary.

Mary expresses her own variety of determination with the green stamp collection. As a reverse reaction to the indulgences bestowed by Charlie, Mary focuses her attention on winning a prize for someone else. She fantasizes about saving enough stamps to buy the perfect gift for Pete, one that will woo him back to her. Mary exhaustively collects stamps from anyone she can, but after she has saved enough, the selection of available prizes is a disappointment. There is no material object that can miraculously bring Pete back. Once Mary realizes this truth, the reality of her life with Charlie really sets in. By the end of the chapter, when Charlie buys a bar in a neighboring town, even her children can foresee the perils of that situation ahead.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

When Mary arrives in Antelope, her new home, it is nothing like the wonderful city her mother described. The daytime landscape is stunningly beautiful, but after nightfall the mountains looming over the town remind her of the skies in Transylvania. Mary is fascinated with the book *Dracula* at the time, and she even goes so far as to found a Vampire Club with herself as the only member. Although her imagination is particularly wild at this point, the town truly does have a sinister atmosphere. Founded during the Gold Rush, Antelope emptied out afterwards and became just a brief stop for lunch on the way to exclusive ski destinations up the road. The family stays in an old resort hotel until Charlie rents out a two-story furnished house that once belonged to the bank president-turned-embezzler.

Soon after, Mary starts school and finds the Antelope system to be very different from Leechfield. The town has only one school that serves all grades, and to Mary, the older kids seem even older. On the first day, she finds the girls outside smoking, and one of them is performing a dance that Mary deems the moral equivalent to a strip show. The classroom setting is also very different, for the school follows the philosophy of "self-paced learning." This amounts to absent teachers and students who must teach themselves the material by working through a stack of folders. Even more astounding to Mary, all of the students stay immobilized at their desks for the entire day, despite the lack of supervision. On one occasion, the classroom monitor (a fellow student) dispatches Mary to fetch the teacher. She finds her in a basement lounge with the other teachers, all of them chain-smoking and eating cake.

After Mary's first week of school, she moves up eighteen reading levels and twelve levels in math. Mary's accomplishment is announced over the school loudspeakers, but none of her classmates seem impressed. Even worse, she is harassed on the playground by an overweight girl known as "Big Bertha." Without a word, Big Bertha walks up to Mary and slaps her on the face for making her little sister look dumb in class. Mary doesn't even know Bertha's sister, but she makes a saucy retort anyway and incites more aggression. Lecia can see Mary from across the playground, and from a distance Mary's arms look like a windmill smacking against Bertha's flabby stomach. In a wild motion, Mary jerks on Bertha's shirt, and it miraculously splits open to reveal her bra underneath. Bertha runs off, but the fight leaves Mary with a big black eye. Later, while sitting in Charlie's bar with a steak pressed against her eye, Mary imagines that Pete would be proud of the quality of her shiner.

For Mary, the success in school triggers an even worse scenario than her fight with Bertha. To Mary's mortal embarrassment, the school principle wants to talk with Charlie about skipping her ahead another grade. The prospect of moving ahead is not a terrible one, but watching her washed-up alcoholic mother meet with Mr. Janisch is excruciating. Charlie doesn't bother to dress for the appointment. She simply throws a

fur coat over her silk nightgown. She brings along Gordon, one her bar lackeys and part-time chauffeur. Mary sits and watches as Gordon pulls out a semi-pornographic magazine. Charlie can't stop crossing and uncrossing her legs. The worst part of the meeting comes at the end, when Charlie invites Mr. and Mrs. Janisch to her bar for a drink. She describes it as a "family place," but everyone in town knows it is not.

Lecia and Mary spend quite a lot of time in the bar, even though it is no place for children. They play arcade games, learn crude bar tricks and get to know the depressing lives of the regulars. Gordon, for one, is unemployed and living at home with his mother. He tells pathetic lies about his military service, though his grossly feminine appearance makes the stories hard to believe. Joey is a slightly sadder case. He is on disability for the black lung he caught from working in the mines. Joey can't speak more than a few sentences without stirring up a nasty, hacking coughing fit, and he goes through most days high on painkillers. On any given morning, either Gordon or Joey can be found sleeping on the couch in Mary's house, ready to be startled awake and drive the girls to school. The day that Charlie sends them all out to bring the horses out of pasture is a sorry example of their ineptitude. After Lecia and Mary have given up trying to bride the horses, Gordon and Joey wander farther out. Hung over and tired, they get to the place where field turns to rock before they start limping back, horseless.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Without the influence of Pete, Mary's naturally sassy demeanor gets tough. She gets challenged to a fight on the playground and comes away with a black eye that makes her proud. While sitting in Charlie's bar after the fight, Mary dreamily imagines what Pete would say if he was there to witness the fight. She imagines his advice to her, to be tougher, and she takes comfort in conjuring up his image. At this point in time, Pete is very distant from the girls, not for lack of love, but due to his strained relationship with Charlie. The only contact Mary has left with her father is a fantasy, but with her vivid imagination, it is almost enough.

Meanwhile, Charlie assembles a menagerie of losers to take care of the girls, because she can't pull herself together to do it. The one occasion Charlie is required to attend a school meeting is a grave embarrassment for Mary. The extent of Charlie's decline comes into sharp focus after Mary sees the way the principal interacts with her. Both Lecia and Mary are still concerned with Charlie's health, but they have given up all hope that she will act like a mother toward them. The barflies, Gordon and Joey, are feeble caretakers. Both men are drunk, hung over or too ill to keep up with the girls, and their attempts at it are pathetic.

Mary's classroom setting is no better. If she hoped to find a responsible adult in the form of a teacher, she comes up short. The school system of Antelope is designed in a hands-off manner, which means the school day is a solitary affair of each child at his or her own desk working alone. The lack of school supervision is yet another example of how the adults in Mary's life have bowed out and left her to fend for herself.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

As fall transitions into winter, both Charlie's depression and her addiction to painkillers get worse. During this time, she drinks more than ever, loses weight and practically stops sleeping. As a result, Charlie's already fiery temper becomes more exaggerated, and Hector pitifully bears the brunt of her tirades. His lack of employment releases a particularly violent wrath in Charlie, though her mood always improves by the next day. The depressing influence starts to infiltrate Mary, as sometimes Charlie reads her existential philosophy books aloud to Mary in bed. Both Lecia and Mary develop superstitious habits, like avoiding sidewalk cracks, and begin a vigilant watch over their mother. Both girls are hyper-aware of Charlie's depression, and they fear she may commit suicide if they don't watch her closely enough.

Charlie and Hector go on vacation to Mexico twice this winter. The trips are pointless. Charlie has the daft idea to buy land there, but she and Hector spend the whole time drinking and fighting. The couple comes back from their travel with hangovers and bad diarrhea. During their first trip, the girls stay with Hector's cousin Purdy. She is a naively optimistic twenty-year-old mother of two gurgling toddlers. One night, Purdy's roving husband arrives screaming and banging on the door. Purdy demands that Mary and Lecia take the children and hide underneath the bed, for fear of losing their lives. The dispute ends when Purdy gets her face smashed through the glass door. The husband takes off again, and the police arrive. The household that Lecia and Mary are farmed out to for the second trip seems more promising. Hector's sister Alicia seems too old for violence, but it turns out she has some spark left in her when she brings a frying pan down on her husband's head. After this, Mary insists that her mother stop going on overnight trips.

There are plenty of hazards for Mary at home. One night she wanders downstairs because she cannot fall asleep. Charlie pours her a glass of what she is drinking, burgundy wine topped off with 7-Up. Mary has tasted alcohol before, but she never really enjoyed any of the drinks. The primary association she has with drinking is very negative, since her parents' fights were usually fueled by bottles of vodka or whiskey. This drink, however, tastes different. Mary distinctly remembers the phrase "drinking stars" pass through her mind as she starts feeling drunk. After she gets back in bed, she stays up awhile longer with a case of the "whirlies," or bed spins.

The darkest memory of Mary's time in Colorado occurs on an afternoon she stays home sick from school. There is a man downstairs responsible for watching her. Mary, in her recollection, does not ever name him. She sits up in her room reading the end of *Charlotte's Web,* and out of sheer wonder at the story, she calls down to her sitter. The man listens very patiently to Mary as she explains her feelings about the book in great detail. He asks in a gentle voice if she would like to be his "special friend" like the characters in the story. From here, he guides Mary to his erect penis, which he pulls out

of his pants. Mary is alternately terrified and in awe of the situation. At first she imagines the penis is only a little bald man. After the sitter coerces Mary to perform oral sex, he violently shoves himself into her mouth until he ejaculates, and she vomits onto the floor. The entire encounter is over in minutes, and afterwards Mary likens it to inviting Dracula into her bedroom. She feels as though she invited the evil by calling out to her sitter to come upstairs. When Charlie returns, Mary does not tell her what happened.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The sitter's horrific assault causes Mary further psychological damage. When the first sexual assault occurs in Leechfield, Mary keeps it to herself out of a sense of duty to protect her fragile family. In this case, she feels responsible for what happens and feels as though she invited the crime. The combination of traumatic events - her mother's breakdown, her parents' separation and the previous assault - cause Mary to feel marked. Her imagination alternately protects and damages her psyche during the violent act. Mary remains calm during the beginning of the attack because she is able to disassociate herself from the situation by imagining something harmless in its place. It is not a penis; it is a little bald man. As things progress, Mary internalizes the evil and accepts it as her own. She accepts all the blame for that which she is blameless.

This chapter contains the most extreme result of Charlie's careless behavior. After a steady downgrade, Charlie has utterly abandoned her children to the hands of strangers. At first, Lecia and Mary are left with Hector's relatives, who turn out to be unsafe. After Mary refuses to stay the night at a stranger's house, Charlie relents, but the worst possible crime occurs in Mary's own house, where she believes herself to be safe. Mary does not name the man who assaulted her, but it is inferred to be a man who Charlie knows from the bar. Now that the danger has come inside Mary's house, there is no sense of reason left. This chapter foreshadows the lawlessness to come.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Mary's exile in Colorado nears its end as the adults around her behave more extremely. Charlie and Hector stay out late drinking, and Mary anxiously waits every night for their car to careen safely into the driveway. Not only is the drunken drive home treacherous, but the atmosphere inside the bar can be dangerous as well. The last time Lecia and Mary are allowed at Charlie's bar, the Longhorn, is the night a depressed Joey points a gun at his own temple. After that, most of the patrons start carrying guns. This includes Charlie, who keeps a pearl-handled pistol in her bag. Mary is familiar with guns, having handled them in Texas, but the edge of desperation to the gun-holders at the Longhorn makes her nervous.

This seething air of violence comes to a sharp point the night that Charlie decides to shoot Hector. Hector stumbles out of the bedroom, drunk, and makes a song request to Lecia at the piano. She is uninterested in his choice of song and says as much, causing Hector to call Lecia a "spoiled little bitch." The last derogatory word in the phrase incites Charlie, but as soon as the gun is raised, Mary throws herself over Hector. Lecia tries using reason and the threat of jail time to convince Charlie to put the gun down. Charlie has an absent look on her face, as though some ghost inside of her is compelling the action. Lecia tries another approach. She talks to Charlie as another woman might. She says that Hector is not worth the bullet that it would take to kill him. Hector gives his muffled approval from beneath Mary, and he even starts asking for Charlie to pull the trigger. Finally, Lecia climbs across Hector and quietly urges Mary to run to the neighbors for help.

The school principal, Mr. Janisch, lives in the house across the street. Mary runs toward it through the snow with bare feet. Time takes on a slow, dreamy quality, as she gets closer to the house and rouses Mr. Janisch out of his house. It is not until they walk across the street and reach Mary's door that she realizes there has been no noise. Mary wasn't listening for the sound of gunshots and didn't hear any, but she imagines a shooting scenario with Lecia lying dead on the floor. There is no answer when Mr. Janisch knocks. After waiting a minute, Mary can't stand it, and she starts banging on the door. Charlie opens the door fully dressed and acts puzzled over Mary's story about a gun. She leads Mr. Janisch inside to find Lecia and Hector reading a book together. Nothing about the situation appears strange, so Mr. Janisch leaves. After he is gone, Mary brushes against the hard edge of the pistol tucked into Charlie's pants.

Later that night, after Hector and Charlie have passed out or occupied themselves, Lecia calls her father collect. She explains the situation and doesn't ask, but demands that Pete send them two plane tickets to Texas the next day. As Mary listens to her sister, she starts to feel a distance sprouting up between them. Lecia has crossed over into some region of rational adulthood, where Mary cannot follow just yet.

The girls leave for the airport the next morning. Although Mary can imagine a tearful goodbye with her mother, she cannot remember one. She recalls that Joey is hired to escort the girls to Texas, and he mistakenly, or rather, drunkenly puts them on a plane to Mexico. The border patrol keeps Joey behind for questioning, but they send Lecia and Mary off on a series of planes that go from big to tiny. During one of the flights, Mary awakes to a cluster of clouds outside the window with the full moon shining a path of light straight toward her. She feels a deep sense of renewal and hope by this sight. Finally, Lecia and Mary board their smallest plane and land on the tarmac where Pete is waiting to greet them. They both run into his arms, and he pulls them close. That night, Pete lets the girls sleep in his bed after not much convincing. He lies in bed crying after the lights go out, and finally, after Mary thinks he is asleep, he says a prayer. Pete says, "Please bring these babies' momma back."

Charlie does turn up in Texas. She arrives unannounced in a yellow sports car, with Hector behind the wheel. The supposed purpose of her visit is to pick up some clothes she left at the house, but she is clearly there to see the girls. As Charlie starts bringing piles of clothing out to the car, Hector makes a rude comment telling her to hurry up. Pete overhears, walks directly towards Hector and throws the first punch. The fight is brutal, but it is over quick, with Hector rolling on the ground in pain. Pete, after all of his violence, gently lifts Hector in his arms and places him in the car. After dropping Hector off at the emergency room, Charlie drives back home and sails into Pete's arms. The reunited couple slow dance into the bedroom, and later, when the police arrive to investigate, Charlie answers the door in her kimono. She tells the officer that nothing happened they couldn't handle. It was just a "domestic disruption."

Chapter 13 Analysis

With no adult figures to maintain order, Lecia steps forward and takes on the responsible role. The evening that Charlie decides to shoot Hector has an atmosphere akin to the night Charlie crazily hovered over the children with a knife. However, this time around, Lecia keeps her wits about her and incites Mary to run for help. Mary is still a child and completely vulnerable to the forces at hand. She runs blindly to the neighbors' house and does not fully understand the gravity of the situation until she returns to find everyone still alive. After the situation is diffused, Lecia takes action by calling her father. As Mary sits next to her and listens to the conversation, she understands for the first time that Lecia is focused on survival. Pete grants Lecia's request immediately, sending for them with no questions asked. The girls are no longer two children under these appalling circumstances. Lecia behaves like the adult from this point forward.

Only a crisis of this magnitude can effect change. After Lecia makes the call, Mary cannot remember the details of how they extract themselves from Charlie. She can only remember the journey home. Though the trip lasts an entire day, including the mistaken detour in Mexico, Mary feels relief in the knowledge that she no longer has to endure the life in Colorado. There is a moment during one of the flights when a path of moonlight shines through the window. Despite the hardships Mary has endured at such

a young age, she feels the purest kind of hope from this sight. She interprets the light as a sign of good things to come.

Pete is completely forthcoming with his relief and love for his daughters. Though the family is still fractured, there is a sense that Charlie may come back. On the first night the trio sleeps in Pete's big bed, and he recites a prayer for Charlie's return. When Charlie does appear, she is aloof toward Pete. However, they both harbor deep feelings for each other despite the hardship. Charlie comes back home for good that night, and her homecoming shows that she and Pete are like magnets to each other. Their relationship has not been healthy, but the attraction between them is too strong for either to stay away.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

As Mary grows older, she slowly begins to distance herself from Texas. Short trips to nearby cities and across the border into Mexico eventually lead her away to a small college in the Midwest. She moves to the East Coast after graduating and pursues a master's degree in poetry. Lecia is a successful businesswoman who marries a wealthy Texan later in her life. Pete runs errands for his son-in-law after he retires, but he still finds many hours in the day to drink. Charlie stops drinking, under direct orders from her daughters, but she continues to take Valium and immerse herself in esoteric philosophy books. Mary maintains a connection to Charlie over the phone, despite the geographical distance, but her relationship with Pete becomes more removed as she grows into an adult.

During college, Mary hitchhikes down to Texas for Easter break. During this vacation, she can pinpoint when her father put the final barrier up. Mary and Pete go to the American Legion bar to shoot some pool and also, she suspects, to see the bartender Lucy. She is a lively, buxom woman who flirts with Pete and dotes on Mary. The combination of a few perfect pool shots and just the right amount of beer puts Mary in a dreamy mood. She stops playing when a drunken bar patron challenges Pete to a game. When the drunk loses all of his money after a series of games, he gets angry and wants to fight. There is a moment when the dispute has a chance to go either way, but it shifts toward violence. The drunk clumsily swings a pool cue at Pete's head, but Pete knocks it out of the drunk's hands and throws a punch that knocks the man to the ground. Mary, even in her woozy state, realizes that this signifies the end of her father taking her anyplace where men may be present. She is no longer a child, and her adult femininity is enough to cause men to act stupidly in her presence.

Over the course of Pete's hard-drinking years, he grows steadily meaner. Mary hears from her mother about the various fights Pete picks with neighbors and random strangers over trivial events. It is not until Mary comes home to work on her dissertation that she experiences his nastiness for herself. One morning, Charlie comes into Mary's room crying and asks for help with Pete. He is lying in bed, barely able to breathe, but he refuses to allow Charlie to plug in the dehumidifier. When Mary enters the room, Pete is no better toward her, although it is painfully obvious that he needs help. Mary endures a barrage of hurtful insults from her father until she collapses onto the floor in tears. She manages to find the outlet to plug in the dehumidifier before leaving the room.

The next day, Pete does not acknowledge the incident. Mary finds him upright at the kitchen table holding his cat Bumper, and she gives him a kiss on the cheek. Bumper is the ragged sole survivor of a sick litter of kittens that Pete took in. After a few minutes of terse conversation, Mary forthrightly tells her father that drinking is killing him. She says that she loves him and doesn't want him dead. Neither of them speaks after this. Pete

does not become angry or deny anything she has said. He simply replies, "I don't give a shit." This is the single most hurtful response he could have. Mary thinks, at this moment, that the contents of her father's mind are unknowable to her. Considering the dark thoughts he may harbor, Mary wonders if being spared his knowledge is a blessing.

A few weeks later, Pete suffers a stroke while sitting on a stool at the American Legion bar. When Mary arrives at the hospital, Lecia gives her a concise rundown of Pete's condition. He is incontinent, can't talk and may or may not understand what people are saying to him. The doctors say that Pete is in an "immediate recovery period," meaning that in the coming weeks he will either greatly improve or remain in his current state. When Mary goes in to see him, Pete is underneath an oxygen tent sleeping. When he wakes up, she can see that half his mouth is drawn down like a sad mask, and his language is muddled and childlike. On the car ride home, Charlie finds a copy of Mary's first published poem folded up in Pete's wallet. This sends them both into tears for the rest of the trip until Mary pulls into the driveway and hits Bumper the cat. After experimental surgery that the vet offers for free, Bumper miraculously survives.

Chapter 14 Analysis

Pete's more conventional point of view comes to light as Mary grows up, and this causes a separation between them. He is unable to adapt his feelings for Mary as a child to the woman she is becoming. The freedom of expression they both enjoy when Mary is young becomes edited, and eventually all communication is lost. Mary cites her last few visits to gatherings of the Liars' Club as evidence. When the Liars' Club men stop knowing how to speak to Mary and become shy around her, Pete does too. Mary's choice to pursue higher education puts further strain on her relationship with Pete. All his life, Pete has worked a job full of hard manual labor, and he cannot relate to his daughter, who has chosen a more traditionally intellectual life.

As Pete gets older, his health gets increasingly worse. Whether old age is the cause of Pete's meanness or he's trying to protect his family from something worse, he becomes more difficult to communicate with. The most emotional exchange between Mary and Pete occurs when she tries to turn on a dehumidifier to ease his breathing. The force of his determined outrage scares Mary, and she, a grown woman now, collapse into tears on the floor. The day after, Pete acts as though nothing has happened between them. When Mary bravely tells him what is on her mind, that he needs to stop drinking or he will die, Pete deflects her comment with a cruel simplicity. He will not stop. He will do whatever he pleases. Pete's compassionless response effectively shuts Mary out, whether she likes it or not.

Mary and Charlie's connection evolves into a closer, more dependent relationship as Mary gets older. Mary's teenage curiosity for the bohemian lifestyle intrigues Charlie, though she opposes it at first. Charlie has a long-held interest in the arts, and so she can relate to her daughter in this way. Also, after Pete suffers a massive stroke, they have no choice but to support each other.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

After Pete's condition stabilizes, members of the Liars' Club start showing up at the hospital for visits. They come before dinner and directly after work. They come in pairs or alone. They act as though nothing about Pete has changed. During one visit, Ben and Shug animatedly discuss a baseball game without any acknowledgment that Pete has just defecated in bed. After this, Ben cannot continue visiting while Pete is awake. It is too difficult to be a witness to his condition, so Ben comes and stands in the hall at night after Pete is asleep. The men of the Liars' Club keep coming to see if Pete's condition will change, but it never does.

The only noticeable change in Pete comes when he sees part of a D-Day memorial show on television. Afterwards, Mary brings in old magazines and photos related to the war, and Pete is able to identify the places and names of people he served with. The doctor explains that there are sections of the brain that remain intact after a stroke, but the patient must have a strong feeling attached to the memories. After Pete's surprising level of recognition, Mary holds up a fork, and he is unable to name what it is. Mary is disheartened, but she continues to visit until the time she tries shaving her father. The experience is just too much for her. Pete looks at the results and says, "Purty goo." Mary leaves the hospital, buys a quart of malt liquor and sneaks into three different movies at the theater.

Dr. Boudreaux comes by the house to discuss Pete's condition with Charlie. Upon his arrival, Mary instantly fears that her father has died and that the doctor is coming to break the news. This is not the case. The doctor has come to discuss Pete's insurance coverage. Gulf Oil's insurance won't cover the hospital bills or the home nursing care that Pete will need. Dr. Boudreaux is gracious and says that Charlie will never get a bill from him, but the next day the hospital calls. When Charlie hears that Pete will be coming home in an ambulance and that someone needs to come by to "settle the bill," she gives the caller an earful.

The challenge for both Charlie and Mary when caring for Pete is that they do not know how lucid he really is. After a particularly difficult day, when the nurse tells Charlie that she needs to learn some equanimity, she replies, "I can't tell if he's in there or not." Pete develops bedsores that blister and ooze, keeping Charlie busy dressing his wounds along with her other household duties. Mary, for her part, tries to help out, but she generally does a terrible job. On one occasion, she spoon-feeds Pete some shrimp gumbo. His normally bad appetite seems to disappear as he laps up the soup. An hour into the feeding, Mary realizes that Pete is not chewing the shrimp, but storing it all inside his cheek. Mary tries to get the food out so that Pete won't choke, but after he bites her finger hard, she gives up. A very confused nurse finds the shrimp in his mouth the next day.

There are some moments of reprieve from the hardship. One evening, Mary wants nothing more than to hear her father's voice. She has a few tape recordings that she made before Pete's stroke, and she plays one of the tapes. The room is filled with Pete's voice, telling a story about his father and the characters that passed through their house when he was a boy. On another occasion, a retired captain from the war tracks Pete down and comes to visit. Pete salutes the captain, his first coherent gesture in weeks, and they sit together and look at old photos. During conversation with Charlie, the captain mentions an old head injury Pete suffered during the war. The injury could be responsible for Pete's stroke, and if they can dig up his old medical records, Pete might be eligible for insurance.

Mary offers to look in the attic for her father's records. She is stunned when she comes across a small collection of wedding rings in a small chest. Charlie refuses to discuss the rings, but Mary follows her therapist's advice and pushes the issue. The night Charlie locks herself in the bathroom for hours is the night that she finally gives in. Mary and Charlie go out for margaritas, intending to get drunk, and Charlie begins telling her story. She got married at fifteen, not because she was pregnant, but because her mother wanted her out of the house. A few years later, Charlie had a boy, Tex. Afterward, she became desperate to get out of Texas and convinced her husband to move to New York City. Once there, Charlie wanted to experience art and culture, and she wanted to get a job. After the birth of their second child, Belinda, there was a brief reconciliation, but when Charlie took a job doing mechanical drawing at Bell Labs it was the last straw.

Charlie's mother-in-law came up from Texas to care for the children while the couple worked. One night, Charlie came home from work to find her apartment completely empty. Her husband, spurred on by his mother, had picked up and left. Charlie was finally able to track down her children after several months, but by that time her husband had remarried. The children did not recognize her. Devastated, she realized she had no way to support them, and she tore up the paper containing her custody rights on the spot and left. Her strategy, Charlie tells Mary, was to get married to a man who would help her get her children back. The last man she married, Pete, was the one who agreed to help. Charlie wrote to her children, but the stepmother wrote back to say that they had no interest in meeting her. This was the cause of Charlie's breakdown. The night she stood in Mary and Lecia's room with the knife, she hallucinated that she had killed the girls, thinking it was the only merciful thing to do.

The day after Charlie's confession, Lecia calls a detective to track down the now-grown children, who are quite eager to be found. The story of their reunion is something Mary does not presume to tell. However, she does reflect upon the moment of release that comes with knowing what her mother's demons were for all those years. Upon leaving the Mexican cafy where they have been drinking and talking for hours, they both feel weary. Mary drives toward home, passing the landscape of oil tanks and rice fields. The sun is luminously setting in the distance, but the beauty of the sunset does not strike either Charlie or Mary on that afternoon. Looking back, Mary believes that they should have felt more freed by the truths Charlie revealed. Mary writes, "All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear."

Chapter 15 Analysis

Mary Karr's entire memoir is framed by her first memory - the aftermath of her mother's psychotic breakdown. In this chapter, the specter of guilt that has hovered over both Charlie and Mary's lives is revealed to be a myth. A complete understanding of Charlie's character can only be had after she reveals the full story of her past. The similarities between Mary and Charlie come into greater focus after this event. Mary shows bravery and adult maturity in her ability to confront her mother. Charlie shows maturity as well, though long overdue, by confessing the truth to her daughter. Charlie's vulnerability during the telling of her story allows Mary to feel empathy for all that her mother endured.

In Mary's telling of the event, Pete and Lecia are the supporting characters to this revelation. Pete's role is significant, though unwitting. Before his illness, Pete's gradual shift toward nastiness pushes Mary away and slightly closer to her mother. Mary's natural allegiance has always been with Pete. His stroke is the final driving force, creating a strong unification between Charlie and Mary as they manage the difficulties of caring for him and mourning his old self. Also, if it were not for Pete's medical records in the attic, the story may have remained a secret. Lecia, who matured at a more rapid pace, is out of the house and essentially out of the way. In the Karr family unit of four, Lecia always had a closer bond to Charlie. With the absence of both Pete and Lecia, Mary and Charlie are left with each other, and the opportunity is ripe for self-exposure.

The final chapter not only reveals all of the missing pieces, but it also casts a more light upon the life story Mary has described. There are no villains in her memoir, though some of the events of Mary's childhood could rightfully be described as hellish. Mary owns up to her parents' personal histories and does nothing to avoid describing their faults. The result is clear. The love her parents gave to her, the only kind they were capable of giving, remains a strong guiding force despite Mary's years of self-doubt.

Characters

Ben Bederman

Ben Bederman is one of the members of the Liars' Club. He always listens carefully to Pete Karr's stories and is usually the first to ask a question. He visits Pete in the hospital after Pete has a stroke and is distressed at Pete's condition. Almost every night he sits for hours outside Pete's hospital room.

Cooter

Cooter is one of the members of the Liars' Club. He often picks on Shug and scolds him because he is bothered by the fact that Shug is black.

Daddy

See Pete Karr

Hector

Hector is a Mexican bartender who marries Mary's mother while they are living in Colorado. Mary and Lecia do not like him and refuse to accept him as their stepfather. Hector does not have a job and the couple lives off Charlie Marie's money. However, the marriage is not a success. Hector is frequently drunk. Charlie Marie criticizes him mercilessly and at one point she threatens him with a gun while he cowers in a chair and tells her to go ahead and shoot since his life is not worth anything. When Hector accompanies Charlie Marie to Texas to pick up some of her clothes, Pete overhears a derogatory remark that Hector makes to Charlie Marie. He drags Hector from his car, punches him to the ground, and then repeatedly hits him in the face. Then he kicks him, breaking one of Hector's ribs. Charlie Marie takes Hector to an emergency room and leaves him there. She then returns to live in Texas.

Charlie Marie Karr

Charlie Marie Karr is Mary's mother. She married seven times including twice to Pete Karr. Her fourth marriage, to an Italian sea captain named Paulo, was the one that first brought her to Leechfield, Texas, where she later met and married Pete Karr.

Unlike her husband, Charlie Marie is educated and intellectually curious. She spends a lot of her time reading widely in topics such as Russian history and French existentialism. She is also an artist, having studied art in New York's Greenwich Village, and has her own studio in the family home. She also listens to opera.

Charlie Marie's marriage to Pete Karr is happy at first, but they soon fall to fighting. She bitterly regrets leaving New York for the barren landscape of eastern Texas, and she threatens divorce many times. After her mother dies, Charlie Marie starts to drink, which has a bad effect on her already volatile temperament. In Texan parlance, she is considered "nervous," a term that covers a wide range of mental problems. The fights with her husband become more frequent, and eventually she has a mental breakdown. She smashes mirrors and light bulbs in the house, burns the children's clothes an furniture, and threatens them with a knife. As a result, she is taken away and spends a month at a hospital for the mentally ill.

When the family moves to Colorado, Charlie Marie's mental condition does not improve. She drinks to excess and becomes dependent on diet pills. Much of the time she just stays in bed, too depressed to get up. When she and Pete agree to divorce, the children elect to stay with their mother because they think that left alone she would get into serious trouble, whereas Pete could manage on his own. After Pete's departure, Charlie Marie marries Hector, but this marriage is no happier than her former one. When Charlie Marie almost shoots Hector, Mary and Lecia decide they will return to live with their father. However, it is not long before Charlie Marie leaves Hector and returns to live in Texas, eventually remarrying Pete.

At the end of the book, it transpires that the reason for Charlie Marie's chronic mental instability is that Tex and Belinda, her two children from her first marriage, were taken from her by her husband when he walked out on her. She saw these children only once again.

Lecia Karr

Lecia Karr is two years older than her sister Mary. Lecia is tough and frequently gets into fights, most of which she wins. She is able to beat boys several years older than she. She and Mary have a quarrelsome relationship, and on one occasion Lecia beats Mary in a fight. As the older of the two, Lecia often bosses Mary around, and she takes the lead in deciding what to do. It is she, for example, who decides that they will stay with their mother in Colorado rather than go back to Texas with their father. Lecia's role in the family is to be the competent one while Mary is the cute one. Often, even at the age of ten or eleven, Lecia is more competent than her own mother. For example, she knows that when her mother has a crying fit after listening to opera music, it is time to put her to bed.

Lecia is also resourceful. Within two days of being viciously attacked by a man-of-war at the beach, she is charging the neighborhood kids money to see or touch her blisters. Mary's reaction at the moment the man-of-war wrapped its tentacles around Lecia's leg says a lot about the sisters' stormy relationship: having many times wished for Lecia to die, she at that moment prayed that Lecia would live.

Mary Karr

Mary Karr is the narrator of the memoir. She is a resourceful girl who has inherited her father's aggressive temperament and her mother's intelligence. She is dark-haired, unlike her blonde sister, and she looks vaguely Native American, like her father. As a young girl she adores her father and is enthralled by his storytelling at the Liars' Club, which she is allowed to attend. As a child, she cannot help but be influenced by her parents' quarrels, and she and Lecia fantasize about escaping and living somewhere else, such as a shack on the beach or the rest room of a convenience store.

Mary's life includes many traumatic incidents. She is raped by an older boy from the neighborhood when she is seven. She tells no one about it, because she is scared of the consequences of speaking out. In Colorado, when she is no more than nine, she is sexually abused by a babysitter. She also has to witness her parents' constant fighting; her mother's mental breakdown, during which her mother threatens her and Lecia with a knife; and her mother's threatening of Hector with a gun, during which incident Mary and Lecia throw themselves across Hector to protect him.

Not surprisingly, given her family background, Mary learns how to take care of herself physically. Feisty by nature, she acquires a reputation for herself as the worst little girl in the neighborhood. This reputation is sealed when she shoots a BB gun at a boy named Ricky Carter, hitting him in the neck. She has learned from her parents how to curse, and when she is challenged by the boy's father she retorts, "Eat me raw, mister." Mary frequently gets into fights with the neighborhood kids, and because she is small she never wins any. But she refuses to give in, and prides herself on being able to take a beating.

In spite of all the traumas Mary suffers in her dysfunctional family, she still feels loved by her parents and she loves them in return. She shows her love by caring for her father after he has a stroke and by forgiving her mother for the wrongs she did to Mary.

Pete Karr

Pete Karr is Mary's father. A World War II veteran, he is a handsome, black-haired man with Native-American blood who works at the oil refinery. In forty-two years he never misses a day at work, even though he is a hard drinker. Pete is known for his storytelling abilities, and he holds his friends in the Liars' Club spellbound with his vivid tales of his childhood, although few of his stories are true. He is also known as a quarrelsome personality who is quick to get into fights, which he always wins. He even gives Mary, whom he affectionately calls Pokey, tips on how to fight, urging her to bite her opponents. His relationship with his children is warm, and he likes to indulge them, but he is also thrifty and does not like to waste money. He keeps scrupulous financial records and does not trust banks.

When Grandma Moore comes to live with the family, Pete stays out of the house as much as possible, and he is also absent for long periods during a strike at his

workplace. A union man, he would hang around the union hall, waiting for news. During these periods, Mary would see little of her father.

Although his love for Charlie Marie is genuine, they quarrel frequently. After their divorce, Pete returns to live in Texas and makes little effort to stay in touch with his daughters. But he is delighted to see them when they return, and he is also eager for Charlie Marie to rejoin the family.

Pete has a stroke in 1980, seven years after his retirement at age sixty-three. After the stroke he cannot speak coherently and he is cared for by Charlie Marie and Mary.

Grandma Moore

Grandma Moore is Mary's grandmother on her mother's side. She is a bossy, critical woman who disapproves of Mary's marriage to Pete. When Grandma Moore gets cancer, she comes to live with the Karr family, and Pete makes himself scarce. Grandma immediately tries to impose her will on the way they all live. She has firm ideas about the proper way to do things. She tries to get Mary and Lecia to read the Bible every day, for example, and she never expresses a tender word to Mary. Instead, she is a disciplinarian and urges Charlie Marie to spank her daughter, even making a leather whip for the purpose. Grandma Moore is also eccentric; she carries a hacksaw around with her in a black doctor's bag.

When the cancer worsens, Grandma Moore's leg is amputated above the knee, and she wears an artificial leg. The cancer eventually spreads to her brain, making her even more cantankerous. Mary is not sorry when she dies. Grandma Moore leaves Charlie Marie a considerable amount of money in her will.

Mother

See Charlie Marie Karr

Shug

Shug is one of the members of the Liars' Club. He is the only black man that Mary ever sees in the American Legion, but he goes there only when the Liars' Club meets. He is openly skeptical when Pete Karr's stories get too incredible. He and Cooter are sometimes antagonistic towards one another.

Themes

The Liars' Club is in many ways a grim story of the disruption of family life caused by a quarreling husband and wife, and a mother's alcoholism and mental instability. Although the devastating effect of this behavior on the children is apparent everywhere, especially in the aggressive behavior of Mary, it is not the main theme of the memoir. The main theme is the endurance of familial love in the worst of circumstances. The bonds generated by blood ties, even when put under tremendous strain, exercise a continual hold on the emotions and loyalties of the characters in the memoir.

It is noticeable that Karr, although writing as an adult, has preserved the nonjudgmental ways in which young children view their parents, even when the parents behave as badly as the Karrs do. Mary and Lecia never seem to blame their mother for her actions; they seem to be quite mature in their realization that it is simply the way Mother is and sometimes they even take the initiative to look after her.

The love between father and daughter is never in question either, even though there are long periods when Mary sees little of her father. One of the most poignant moments in the memoir is when the two sisters return to Texas from Colorado to live with their father. He lies on the bed with the girls on either side of him and weeps tears of joy at their return. He prays that Charlie Marie will come back to him and sobs as he does so. As they do with their mother, the girls sense what their father needs, and they gently pat him until he quiets down.

The fact that Pete Karr prays for the return of the woman with whom he regularly had such vicious fights is also significant. There seems to be a bond between them that is hard to break, no matter what happens. In their own turbulent way, the couple continues to love each other.

The triumph of love is made most explicit in the last section of the book, set in 1980, when Karr was in her mid-twenties. It shows that the bonds of this thoroughly dysfunctional family remain tight. For example, there is a moment during the time Karr is caring for her father when she plays the audiotape she recorded of one of the stories he told to the Liars' Club. It takes her back to the days when by his storytelling gift her father could take her to times and places she had never known except through his voice. Just before playing the tape, she looks at her father's face, so shrunken and gaunt, and for a split second sees it as a death's head. At this point she wants nothing more than to hear him tell one of his stories. Playing the taped story while they both listen is a way of affirming life and the bond they share.

The endurance of love is also shown when Karr discovers the truth about why her mother went through such long periods of depression and mental instability (i.e., the loss of her children from her first marriage). This knowledge frees them both from feelings of guilt and allows more love to be present, even though it is a while before they both realize this.

A symbol of the endurance of love occurs on the last page of the memoir. As mother and daughter drive home from the Mexican café where all the secrets have been divulged, Mary notices small gatherings of fireflies in the flowers at the roadside: "How odd, I thought, that those bugs lived through the refinery poisons." She is referring to the toxic fumes that emanate from the oil refineries of Leechfield, but she also means for the reader to make the connection: the light of love, like a firefly in the night, continues to live in spite of the toxic atmosphere generated by a quarreling family.

Style

Imagery

Although Karr often uses vulgar expressions that are part and parcel of the way many of the local people speak, she also on many occasions uses highly poetic imagery. This creates quite a contrast for the reader. In one of the milder examples of local slang, for example, a girl emerging from a coma after contracting encephalitis is "half-a-bubble off plumb." But on the next page, Karr uses a more literary form of expression, a simile, to describe the effect of her father's voice on the neighborhood children: "the kids all startled a little the way a herd of antelope on one of those African documentaries will lift their heads from the water hole at the first scent of a lion." Examples of similes (figures of speech in which one thing is compared to something else in a way that brings out the resemblance between the two) might be found on almost every page. Karr's similes are often original and memorable. The oil storage tanks in Leechfield are "like the abandoned eggs of some terrible prehistoric insect." Mary's mother's eyes are like "the flawed green of cracked marbles." A large woman in a "flowered dress" looks "a lot like a sofa." When Mary and Lecia visit their post office mailbox in Colorado twice a day to see if there is a letter from their father, the box "always sat empty as a little coffin." This simile perfectly expresses the feeling of abandonment the girls feel when they do not hear from Daddy.

Setting

The fictional town of Leechfield, in eastern Texas, is important in creating the atmosphere of the memoir. Leechfield is in every way an oppressive place. Sitting in a semitropical latitude close to the Gulf of Mexico, it is three feet below sea level at its highest point and two rivers run through it. It is so damp and swamp-like that the homes are built without basements, since it would have been impossible to keep them dry. The many oil refineries and chemical plants give the whole town a smell like rotten eggs, a smell that gets worse the hotter the weather becomes. The night sky is an acid-green color because of the flames that rise from the oil refineries. According to Mary, the magazine *Business Week* voted it one of the ten ugliest towns on earth.

Leechfield was also the manufacturing site for Agent Orange, a herbicide used by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War to defoliate trees and shrubbery where the enemy could hide. Agent Orange is poisonous to humans, although this was not known at the time.

To add to Leechfield's hazards, the city is also afflicted by swarms of mosquitoes, which necessitates the spraying of DDT (a now-banned poison) from a huge hose on a mosquito truck. The neighborhood kids "slow race" their bicycles behind the truck, inhaling the fumes. The aim is to come in last, which means that the winners often vomit and faint from the poison they inhale.

This image of poison, as well as the whole unsavory atmosphere of Leechfield, is an apt metaphor for Mary's early life, lived in the poisonous arena of family discord. Yet when Daddy says the town is too ugly not to love, it also seems appropriate for the story that Mary tells, a story that is at times ugly, but also in its own way full of love.

Literary Techniques

Numerous additional literary devices are employed in the memoir, as noted in the critical essay. These devices include starting the memoir *in medias res;* the use of suspense; the technique of foreshadowing; and "genre blur," a writing trend Karr describes as blurring the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction.

Historical Context

A memoir differs from an autobiography in that it does not cover the writer's entire life, only selected portions. Traditionally, memoirs were written by public figures late in their lives, reflecting on great events in which they had played a part. Thus, politicians and statesmen have been noted memoirists. In a memoir, the focus was usually not on the writer, but on other well-known people the writer had known or encountered.

While there have always been literary memoirs as well as those by statesmen, in the 1990s the nature of the memoir genre began to change. Many of the new memoirs were written by relatively unknown writers with unusual experiences to relate rather than by well-known public figures. Susanna Kaysen's *Girl Interrupted* (1994), for example, was a bestselling memoir of Kaysen's life in a mental institution. Frequently, the new memoirs were about the author's childhood, with an emphasis placed on the honest, if painful, recall of unsavory details, including various forms of degradation, such as alcoholism, poverty, or sexual abuse.

In 1995 alone, approximately two hundred memoirs were published. *The Liars' Club* turned out to be the most popular of them all. It was followed in 1996 by Frank McCourt's bestselling memoir *Angela's Ashes*, about the author's impoverished upbringing in Ireland.

Commentators link the rapid growth of this kind of memoir to the popularity of confessional television and radio talk shows, in which people discuss the intimate details of their private lives. As James Atlas puts it in his *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Age of the Literary Memoir Is Now":

In an era when "Oprah" reigns supreme and 12 step programs have been adopted as the new mantra, it's perhaps only natural for literary confession to join the parade. We live in a time when the very notion of privacy, of a zone beyond the reach of public probing, has become an alien concept.

Karr has her own explanation for the rise of the memoir genre. In an interview with Charlotte Innes in the *Los Angeles Times*, Karr says that it is due to "distrust of institutions; loss of faith in the moral authority of belief systems; and a corresponding turning inward and listening to one's own voice." She argues that because many families today break up, this leaves many people with a feeling of failure. They reach out to television and books in order to reestablish a sense of community, the feeling that they are not alone. In an essay in *New York Times Magazine*, Karr relates how hundreds of people came up to her after book readings she gave on nationwide tours and told her that her family reminded them of theirs. People felt encouraged and reassured by Karr's record of her personal experience. She concludes:

Just as the novel form once took up experiences of urban, industrialized society that weren't being handled in epic poems or epistles, so memoir—with its single, intensely personal voice—wrestles subjects in a way readers of late find compelling.

Not all commentators see the growth of this type of memoir as a desirable trend. Novelist William Gass, writing in *Harper's* magazine a year before the publication of *The Liars' Club*, suggests that many writers of memoirs are too self-absorbed. They make the mistake of thinking every small thing that happened to them is important enough to be recorded. Gass also argues that it is almost impossible for a writer to convey a true account of his or her own past:

Every moment a bit of the self slides away toward its station in the past, where it will be remembered partially, if at all; with distortions, if at all; and then rendered even more incompletely, with graver omissions.

Critical Overview

The Liars' Club remained almost sixty weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list. Critical praise for the work has been unanimous, and critics have searched for the most glowing adjectives to describe it. Louis Ermelino, for example, in *People Weekly*, calls it "an astonishing memoir" and praises Karr's use of "the rich cadence of the region and poetic images." In the *Nation*, Molly Ivins makes a similar point, commending Karr for her "bilingualism," by which she means Karr's ability to switch freely from literate, educated prose to down-home Texan expressions. Ivins also praises Karr's observations about class, and she concludes her review in laudatory terms:

This is a book that will stay gentle on your mind, stirring up memories of childhood and family. To have a poet's precision of language and a poet's gift for understanding emotion and a poet's insight into people applied to one of the roughest, toughest, ugliest places in America is an astounding event.

A *Publishers Weekly* critic notes that Karr "views her parents with affection and an unusual understanding of their weaknesses." In *Time*, John Skow observes that there is probably a touch of exaggeration in some of Karr's more outlandish stories, such as when she finds the artificial leg of her dead grandmother while rummaging around in the attic, but Skow feels this exaggeration does not detract from the effectiveness of the book or its power to amuse: "The choice in the book is between howling misery and howling laughter, and the reader veers toward laughter."

Karen Schoemer in *Newsweek* notes Karr's "captivating, anecdotal style," which "meanders" like a good story told by a member of the book's Liars' Club. The effect of Karr's style, says Schoemer, is that when she gets around to relating the story's most horrifying incidents, "you're so completely in her corner that you feel just as trapped as she is. She's figured out a way to make every reader live through what no child should ever have to endure."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey shows how Karr uses novelistic techniques in her memoir, and he also discusses how a memoirist may present a truthful account of her life even though she does not rely on a strictly literal, fact-by-fact approach.

Many readers of *The Liars' Club* have commented on Karr's acute memory of the intricate details of her early life. Some readers wondered whether the memoir was really true, since Karr's memory seemed so remarkable. After all, few people can remember their early childhood in such detail. This reaction on the part of some readers raises many interesting questions about how a memoir is written and what it means to say that something is "true."

The Liars' Club is as artfully arranged as any novel. It is not simply a chronological account of the events of Karr's life, like a diary would be. It begins, for example, in *medias res* (a Latin phrase which means, literally, "in the middle of things"). The first incident Karr relates is the aftermath of Mother's demented rampage in which she burns the children's belongings and seems about to kill them. The incident is told in chapter 1 from the point of view of a child surrounded by large adults, a child who is bewildered at what is going on around her. But Karr is very careful not to let the reader in on the secret of what has led to this unsettling scene, even though Mary as the little girl is quite capable of explaining it, since she watched it all unfold. Karr's purpose in adopting this technique is to create interest and suspense for the reader. Readers continue on in the book because they want to know the full story of what happened in that incident. Karr keeps readers waiting until she explains the incident fully near the end of part I. In so doing, she accomplishes what every good novelist must do, which is to create suspense. Suspense means a state of uncertainty about what is going to happen.

Of course, the writer must also establish sympathy in the reader's mind for the character, so that readers are interested in her and concerned for her. Karr does this in masterly fashion by having the first incident revolve around the perceptions of a child who only half-understands what is happening around her. Like many children faced with disruption in the family, she feels that it is she who must have done something wrong. Karr also captures the child's irritation at being left out of whatever serious business is taking place because the grown-ups think the child would not understand: "When you're a kid and something big is going on, you might as well be furniture for all anybody says to you." It would be hard for any reader not to be on Mary's side after comments like this one.

Creating a sense of mystery by the technique of foreshadowing is also part of Karr's array of novelistic techniques. The mystery is created when Grandma Moore shows Mary a photograph of two children, whom she calls Tex and Belinda. She tells Mary that they are Mary's brother and sister. Mary does not understand what she means, since she has never seen these children. Grandma says the children were sent away, and if Mary is bad, she will be sent away too. The full story does not emerge until the last few

pages, when the adult Mary learns from her mother the circumstances under which Tex and Belinda, her mother's two children from her first marriage, were taken from her mother. The fact of that terrible loss explains Mother's history of mental problems. As in a good mystery novel, the author produces the solution only at the end, which also enables the memoir to end on a note of reconciliation and optimism.

Karr's artful way of telling her story, using techniques that fiction writers employ, resembles her father's technique in telling stories to the Liars' Club: "No matter how many tangents he took or how far the tale flew from its starting point before he reeled it back, he had this gift: he knew how to be believed." Like father, like daughter. Incidentally, Mary comments that most of Daddy's stories were not true. Not only this, but Karr has stated that she herself made up the stories told by her father in the memoir. The only exception to this was her father's one story that she recorded, which she played back for him after his stroke in 1980.

In spite of such acknowledged inventions, Karr has insisted that the events of the memoir really happened. In her acknowledgements in the front of the book, she states that she checked the veracity of what she had written with her sister. In interviews with journalists, she has indicated that many of the details came back to her during the long years she spent in psychotherapy, dealing with the legacy of such a disturbed family background.

However, there are many ways of presenting truth, and it is possible for a writer to convey the essential emotional truth of a situation without necessarily sticking to a laborious account of the moment-by-moment facts of a person's life. "Readers expect the truth," Karr told Charlotte Innes for the *Los Angeles Times*, "but nobody carries a tape recorder around with them all the time."

Karr points to a modern trend that she calls "genre blur," in which the usual boundaries between fiction and nonfiction have become less rigid. She explains, according to Innes, that the memoir "may offer its own aesthetic lies of compressed time, authorial bias and manipulated details."

By the phrase "compressed time," Karr means that events that were separated by perhaps days, weeks or months in real life can be condensed by the memoir writer for dramatic or other effect, so that they appear to have taken place over a much shorter period of time. This supplies the memoir with a much tighter structure and a consequent increase in narrative drive—the speed at which the story moves forward. This device makes it more interesting for the reader.

When Karr refers to "manipulated details," she means she has again used a storyteller's license. Most likely, she has on occasions taken several separate but similar incidents and condensed them into one, taking the most appropriate details from each incident. The result would be a composite that in the author's judgment tells the incident in the most powerful and effective way. At times also, Karr may not have adhered strictly to the real-life sequence of events. In other words, incidents in the memoir may not necessarily follow the order in which they occurred in real life. Karr reserves the right, as

the creative author, to sequence the story in the way she thinks will produce the effect she wants. This is often how writers of fiction (and many contemporary memoirists too) work when drawing on incidents from real life. The point to bear in mind is that something can be true to the emotions and feelings involved in a situation, and to the relationships between the characters, without being strictly factual in all its details.

The last of the "aesthetic lies" that Karr identi- fies is "authorial bias." In writing about her own life, a writer may consciously or unconsciously shape her narrative to present herself the way she thinks she is or the way she wants to be perceived. All manner of things can be distorted in this way. It is almost impossible for a writer or anyone else to be objective about her own life. However hard a writer looks, there are things about herself that she simply cannot see. And even if she is sure of her own feelings and motivations, she cannot know for certain what others are thinking or how they view her. She cannot know their motivations with the same certainty that she thinks she knows her own.

There is also the problem of memory. Often people misremember past events, even as they are certain that they remember clearly. If two people are asked to remember an incident they shared, say, a different sets of memories. But people usually make little allowance for these distortions that the passage of time imposes on them, confident that they remember things the way they "really" were, as if such a notion has an objective status, beyond the realm of one's fluctuating subjectivity.

Bearing all this in mind, perhaps the question of whether a memoir or an autobiography is true or false is irrelevant. A memoir is simply a viewpoint of one individual at a certain point in his or her life, and that individual will be conditioned by temperament, experience, desires, and beliefs to see her life in a certain way. Her viewpoint may change over time, rendering earlier judgments and beliefs obsolete. Karr tells us this in no uncertain manner on the last page of her memoir. After she learns the secrets of her mother's troubled life and has had some time to reflect on them, she realizes that the way she has habitually interpreted her life is not only a distorted view, but is altogether false:

All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear. We expected no good news interspersed with the bad. Only the dark aspects of any story sank in. I never knew despair could lie.

In other words, Karr never realized that the interpretation she used to put on events, that at the time seemed so clear, certain, and obvious, could actually have been a false way of seeing things. It did not enter her head that there might be a completely different way of interpreting those very same events, a way much "truer" than the previous one.

What Karr reveals in the last few paragraphs of her memoir is that all personal judgments about one's life should be provisional only, subject to revision as later facts become known, as full stories are puzzled out, and as one gains more and more wisdom. There is no final truth, only successive revisionings, for today's truth may be tomorrow's lie.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *The Liars' Club*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Blevins's is a poet and essayist who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College system; Blevins' first full-length collection of poems, The Brass Girl Brouhaha, *is forthcoming from Ausable Press in September of 2003. In this essay, Blevins argues that Mary Karr's penchant for concrete details undermines* The Liars' Club's *believability.*

The English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge uses the term 'the willing suspension of disbelief' to talk about how important it is for readers to *at least* pretend to believe that what they're reading is true. In fact, it is so common to assess the merits of literary fiction by evaluating its believability that even people who have never heard of Coleridge appraise the merits of texts and films on the basis of their willingness—or their lack of willingness—to suspend their disbelief. Bad actors can undermine good films by being "unconvincing" or by being scripted into too-unlikely situations and circumstances. Even unbelievable dialogue, which forces actors to speak in ways human beings do not and never have spoken, has the potential of limiting an audience's pleasure by reminding moviegoers that the narrative they're watching is an imaginative construct.

Although there are a multitude of ways fiction writers generate believability in their novels and stories, one of the most famous techniques is a reliance on concrete detail. In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner says that the fiction writer "gives us such details about the streets, stores, weather, politics, and concerns of Cleveland (or wherever the setting is) and such details about the looks, gestures, and experiences of his characters that we cannot help believing that the story he tells us is true." Even *The Elements of Style*, which is more of a rule book than a guide to writing fiction, promotes the importance of concrete detail. Strunk writes:

If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers— Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter.

In this age of the memoir, however, it is a surprise that few critics have discussed the ways in which concrete detail, which is so necessary in fiction, might actually *damage* creative nonfiction. The most notable stylistic quality of *The Liars' Club* is the extremely specific detail with which Mary Karr records the generally horrific events of her childhood. Because this detail is *suspiciously* concrete or specific, it actually undermines the book's believability.

The Liars' Club begins when Karr is seven years old, after her mother has had the most violent and frightening of her many nervous breakdowns. The family doctor is kneeling before Karr, wearing "a yellow golf shirt unbuttoned so that sprouts of decade ago, they are likely to come up with two very hair showed in a V shape on his chest." Karr also tells us that the doctor had "watery blue eyes behind thick glasses, and a mustache that

looked like a caterpillar." She says she's wearing "her favorite nightgown," which has "a pattern of Texas bluebonnets bunched into nosegays tied with ribbon against a field of nappy white cotton," and that her sister is wearing "pink pajamas." She describes "a tallboy [that] was tipped over on its back like a stranded turtle, its drawers flung around," and "the nutty smell [of coffee mixed with] the faint chemical stink from the gasoline fire in the back yard." Karr then tells us "the volume on the night began to rise":

People with heavy boots stomped through the house. Somebody turned off the ambulance siren. The back screen opened and slammed. My daddy's dog, Nipper, was growling low and making his chain clank in the yard.

Although it's possible that a child whose mother may or may not have been trying to kill her would remember all these details—neurologists say that trauma slows down time and helps victims focus on details—Karr also remembers events that aren't as traumatic in *The Liars' Club*. She tells us, for example, that one night after she and her family moved to Colorado, they ordered "meatloaf and mashed potatoes" that Karr and her sister Lecia "molded into volcanoes."

The most tender parts of the memoir are the passages in which Karr goes fishing or to the Liars' Club with her father to listen to him and his friends "Cooter and Shug and Ben Bederman" tell funny stories. The first such passage happens early in the book and here, too, Karr luxuriates in her obvious love affair with concrete detail. She tells us not only what each man says just exactly, but also, on one occasion, that the men and Karr "each have a floatable Coca-Cola cushion to sit on" and that Karr "[jerks] the banana-yellow lure across the surface of the water so its tiny propellers whir and stop . . . "

In other words, in *The Liars' Club*, Karr has completely abided by the rules governing the American creative writing workshop and associated texts and manuals. She's showing, rather than telling, by appealing to senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Karr also takes great advantage of her experience with the image—the verbal picture—to evoke her memories in her readers' minds. Yet, since her acute memories of such details are sometimes impossible to believe, they make Karr suspect as a speaker.

As mentioned, fiction relies on details because readers have a difficult time enjoying anything they don't believe. Lyric poets also focus on details, which they're inclined to call images, not only because such details increase believability, but also because lyric poems use the particular as a kind of clay in order to still time and make individual experience seem more universal. The goal of personal essayists is to use concrete detail to expose their processes of mind and thought rather than to depict a series of narrative events. They are more inclined to admit to what they can't remember than to pretend to remember it. This technique increases the personal essayist's sincerity, which Phillip Lopate in "The Art of Personal Essay" says "is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist's self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor." In other words, in admitting what he doesn't know and can't remember, the personal essayist increases his credibility. Isn't a memoir more like a personal essay than a novel? Shouldn't it be?

One of the most explicit passages in *The Liars' Club* describes Karr's memory of her first rape, which happens when an "evil boy" from the neighborhood smells "some kind of hurt or fear" on her and takes her "into somebody's garage":

He unbuttoned my white shirt and told me I was getting breasts [. . .] his grandparents had chipped in on braces for his snaggly teeth. They glinted in the half dark like a robot's grillwork. He pulled off my shoes and underwear and threw them in the corner in a ball, over where I knew there could be spiders. He pushed down his pants and put my head on his thing, which was unlike any of the boys' jokes about hot dogs and garden hoses.

This passage, like a later one in which one of Karr's babysitters forces her into a similar, if less complete sexual act, *should* inspire the reader's sympathy. But because of the book's almost obsessive reliance on concrete details, Karr does not always generate a sincere tone. The memoir seems at these times either overwritten or false.

In *The Situation of Poetry*, Robert Pinksy makes it clear that many modernist ideas, including those associated with the advantages of concrete details over abstractions and generalizations, have become too commonplace to continue to be interesting. Pinksy even criticizes certain images by the American poets Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore, saying, "the aggressive yoking of unlike things [can] sometimes amount to little more than showing off."

Mary Karr is, of course, a poet, and her penchant for detail serves her intentions in her poetry. In the title poem of her collection *Viper Rum*, for example, she compares "a tiny vine serpent" to "a single strand of luminous-green linguini." In so doing, Karr reminds us that one of the poet's primary tasks is to see the world so fully that we're reminded of its beauty and strangeness.

But in *The Liars' Club*, Karr's penchant for detail, which presupposes that very small children— even very small children who grow up to be writers—can, among other very specific details, remember the way a doctor's hair falls out of his shirt, destabilizes her reliability as a speaker. This lack of reliability undermines the entire book. In "Such, Such Were the Joys," George Orwell, one of the best prose stylists ever to write in English, says, "whoever writes about his childhood must beware of exaggeration and self-pity." Although Karr avoids self-pity by being absolutely merciless toward her parents' weaknesses, addictions, and collective lack of judgment, she commits the sin of exaggeration by claiming to remember such things as "the odor that came out of [her father's] truck when [they had] crowbarred the padlock off and opened it." It would have been more profitable for her to more openly admit that, when it comes to recording memories, all writers must be lifelong members of the Liars' Club.

Critical Essay #3

Ozersky is a critic and historian. In this essay, Ozersky looks at the fine line between memoir and novel—a line nowhere finer, he contends, than in The Liars' Club.

As a book, *The Liars' Club* was so good that it transcended its genre; reading it today, it's easy to forget how influential it was when it was published in 1995. The literary memoir has a long and noble history, but the late 1990s saw what had been a fairly marginal genre move into the center of the publishing world as one memoir succeeded another at the top of the bestseller lists. Books like Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, Carolyn Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story*, and David Sedaris's *Naked* sold like hotcakes, and their authors became major literary celebrities. But prior to the success of *The Liars' Club*, literary memoirs were much more of a specialized taste.

Mary Karr's childhood, though marked by domestic upheaval and an eccentric mother, wasn't really that unusual. Nor is the setting particularly exotic. Although she is molested by schoolboys twice in the book, she doesn't present this as a lifechanging trauma. What makes *The Liars' Club* come alive is the force and art of her narration, which is so lively and expressive that it almost qualifies as a character itself.

Take, for example, the way she writes. In fact, it doesn't sound so much like writing as it does like talking, Karr is a very conscientious writer—a poet in fact—with a meticulous care for her choice of words. When she uses colloquial expressions, then, she's making a conscious decision. Why? Part of the reason is pure charm: *The Liars' Club* wasn't a phenomenal bestseller because it's hard to read. But a larger reason lies in her use of colloquial language to conjure up character, both her own and those she is writing about. For example, of her dying grandmother coming to live with her family, Karr writes, "maybe it's wrong to blame Grandma Moore for much of the worst hurt in my family, but she was such a ring-tailed b—— that I do." That sentence begins with an adult, educated point of view—the language of therapeutic culture ("much of the worst hurt"), but it ends with a colloquial punchline, a funny Texas expression which serves to anticipate and dismiss an objection that might make Karr's character less than sympathetic. That mean, ornery, spunky little girl is the heroine of the book and has complete claim upon the reader by moving seamlessly between her adult character and the character of the child she was, Karr uses the best of both worlds. It's a calculating mixture of high-minded adult language and Texas sass, and it makes the book hard to put down.

Another payoff of Karr's skill is her ability to seem both within the action and also far away from it. When describing something especially vivid, like her experiences sitting in on a Liars' Club meeting or being molested by a neighborhood boy, she shifts to the present tense: "I am eye-level to the card table, sitting on an upended bait bucket, safe in my daddy's shadow, and yet in my head I'm finding my mother stretched out dead." Karr is simultaneously little Pokey, her father's favorite child, existing in a time and place so specific that she can tell you the tiniest physical detail of it and also outside herself,

understanding her conflicted young mind better than she possibly could have at the time.

Besides creating her own presence, Karr's narrative strategies do something else too. They create for the reader the reality of her mother and father, the two most important other characters in the book. Unlike most memoir writers, Mary Karr doesn't really dwell on her own experiences and emotions. (Her molestation, for example, takes up less than two pages.) The book is really about her father and mother, their unique characters and the loving but rocky relationship between them. Mary Karr's mother Charlie is a bohemian, a romantic, irresponsible, impulsive, passionate, flighty, and given to bouts of insanity. Her father provides a grounded opposite; he is laconic, earthy, and unswerving in his devotion to his family. "With Mother," Karr writes, "I always felt on the edge of something new, something never before seen or read about or bought, something that would change us. . . . With Daddy and his friends, I always knew what would happen and that left me feeling a sort of dreamy safety." The tension between the two is the engine which pushes the book forward. "Back then, heat still passed between my parents. You could practically warm your hands on it," Karr remembers.

The primary way readers get to know Charlie and Pete is through their language. Charlie's voice has little in it of Texas. But really, readers don't hear much of Charlie's voice. Karr describes what her mother does and says in her own language. She doesn't seem to talk much; in her most memorable scenes, such as her near-murderous car accident, she is singing "Mack the Knife." At other times, she is quoted in italics:

We'd be driving past some guys in blue overalls selling watermelons off their truck bed and grinning like it was as good a way as any to pass an afternoon. She'd wag her head as if this were the most unbelievable spectacle, saying *God, to be that blissfully ignorant*.

The fact that readers so rarely hear Charlie's voice, and that it is so often stilted or cryptic when it is heard, contributes to her aura of mystery and menace. Who is this woman, readers ask. If the answer isn't clear, it's because it isn't clear to Mary Karr either, then or now. Charlie Marie comes through as a fascinating woman, whose bizarre behavior is only partially explained by the revelation Karr saves for the very end of the book.

Pete Karr, on the other hand, comes alive precisely because Mary Karr understands him so well. There may have been more to the real Pete Karr than his daughter Mary knew, but if so, it's not apparent in *The Liars' Club*. Mary Karr adores and admires her father in a way that illuminates her memoir from within, and the ultimate tribute is how frequently he dominates her narrative. The tall tales with which her father dominates *The Liars' Club* really don't have much to do with the book's action; the club itself only shows up a few times over the course of the book. But his language, with its expressiveness and Texas poetry, cuts through Mary Karr's narration. In a way, Pete Karr functions as a kind of masculine archetype in a book dominated by women.

"I s—you not," Daddy said as he tore off a hunk of biscuit. "You touch a dead man sometime." He took a swallow of buttermilk. "Hard as that table. Got no more to do with being alive than that table does."

Mary Karr would no more be capable of speaking those lines than she would be able to knock out a romantic rival with one punch, any more than she could have her father's raspy chin, Lava soap and whiskey smell or superhuman virility. But she can, and does, use her father's colorful Texanisms to pepper her own language, which for the most part is like her mother's—vociferous but colorless, without regional flavor—an educated person's words. Like the fighting streak she is so proud of, this is a gift from her father that she cherishes.

In the end, *The Liars' Club* creates a space to live in Mary Karr's memories. Readers may not have anything in common with her or her family or with Texas or with the troubles she experienced. But by creating such a richly textured memoir in which language itself develops character so powerfully, we feel that we know the people at least as well as she does. Karr along with Frank McCourt, helped to change American letters by demonstrating how a novelist's eye for detail and ear for the way people talk could turn one person's memories into literature as moving and universal as any novel.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay excerpt, Harmon comments on Karr's move from poetry to prose in The Liars' Club *and praises how Karr captures certain elements of childhood including sound and scent.*

We may have financial straits to thank for Karr's decision to turn her family dramas into a memoir. It's certain that *The Liars' Club* has enjoyed much greater success and sales than her poetry; and criticism, God knows, makes money or friends for nobody. My review copy of *The Liars' Club* arrived in the custody of a thousand-word *blurbissimo* and a schedule of cities where Karr was to be available for publicity interviews: Philadelphia, Washington, New York, Boston, Syracuse, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Chicago—but nothing in the Southeast (where Viking may think we don't read) and nothing even near Texas (where Viking may think they read but are sensitive about stories of serial divorce, boozing, and worse excesses).

The Liars' Club, vulgar hoopla notwithstanding, is as good as anything of its kind that I know of. It includes much that I can still be amused but at the same time shocked by, in a kind of Tex-Mex- Cajun-Cherokee Gothic with some colorful reckless endangerment, like the conduct we find in the lower precincts of Pat Conroy or the less grotesque passages of Harry Crews, with moments of narcosis from Jim Carroll or Kathy Acker, along with gestures toward intellectual respectability in the form of sizable epigraphs or quotations from R. D. Laing, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Cormac McCarthy, and Zbigniew Herbert.

The first-level Liar's Club is a group of East Texas workingmen who gather to drink and swap stories. At a second level, The Liars' Club is everybody in the book and, by a readily extended metaphor, everybody everywhere. The book focuses on the author's parents: a woman with a man's name and a man with no name but initials. Charlie was married seven times, twice to J. P., who fathered two of her children, Lecia (pronounced "Lisa") and Mary Marlene, who were born in the l950s and went through an upbringing that veered from numbing poverty to million-dollar comfort, from warm familial love to malice hard to believe except as a symptom of madness. The book starts *in medias res*, with Charlie being taken away for committal after a hair-raising episode involving delusion, alcohol, fire, and a butcher knife. The rest of the memoir unfolds the circumstances of this focal nightmare and comes to a close with the family temporarily reunited in a moribund twilight of fatigue and mortal illness.

Someone who has read *Abacus* will encounter much familiar material in *The Liars' Club*. Late in the book, the father has suffered a stroke and is hard to feed. Mary tries to dislodge a bolus that may cause him to choke: "Then he bit me. Even before his eyes creaked open to thin slits, he clamped down with his slick gums hard enough to hold me by that finger. Like some terrier who'd caught me snitching his biscuit. We stood that way a minute—my finger in his mouth, his black eyes glaring out with no glimmer of

recognition." Here, for comparison, is part of the poem "Home During a Tropical Snowstorm I Feed My Father Lunch":

And when he choked
I pried the leather jaw open,
poked my finger past the slick gums
to scoop an air passage
till he bit down hard and glared,
an animal dignity glowing
in those bird-black eyes,
which carried me past pity
for once, for once
all this terror twisting into joy.

The teacher who in a few years offers a seminar on Mary Karr's writing will find such moments a splendid way to illustrate the differences between prose and poetry.

Those quotations suggest another change when Karr moved from the poetry of *Abacus* to the prose of *The Liars' Club*. Readers do not handle poetry the way they handle prose or speech. If a poem says, "And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made." I think, "Poetic inversion." If a piece of prose said such a thing, I would think, "Stupid: why not say, 'And build there a small cabin made of clay and wattles'?" Or try this: to be poetry and peculiar is to be poetry; to be prose and peculiar is to be peculiar. With a definite narrator, such as Huckleberry Finn or Holden Caulfield or Ellen Foster, a reader takes the voice, with its idiosyncratic vocabulary and spelling, as just another functional fiction, something you read through or read past, murmuring to yourself, "Well, I suppose some kids must talk like that." I don't think Karr has quite solved this problem, or (and this may be what Mark Twain and J. D. Salinger and Kaye Gibbons accomplished) has made her peace with it. If you try to put yourself into the person of a seven-year-old girl (as Mary Marlene is at the beginning of *The Liars' Club*), you may benefit from the colorful language of childhood, but you may forfeit some distance, perspective, and proportion. Writers employing a juvenile narrator or at least a narrator with access to a juvenile perspective seem to settle for a degree of compromise that allows for irony and travesty. Karr now and then seems stuck on the horns of a dilemma. She writes sentences like these: "Tatting is an insane activity that involves an eensy shuttle, thin silk thread, and maniacal patience"; "They're going to make their webs somewheres else, so you think for a minute that Wilbur's gonna sink back into his porcine misery all over again." You have to work very hard indeed to make a reader believe you are justified in using *eensy*, *somewheres*, and *gonna* in sentences that also contain *maniacal* and *porcine*. The outcome for me is a defiant retention of disbelief. It comes down to a question of husbanding your resources. A poet can just steal and be done with it: poets repeat, quote, echo, refer, and allude all the time, so much so that it seems that poems are made of other poems. That's part of their defining peculiarity. But prose is something else. Consider this description: "Gordon's being there embarrassed me. He had white girly hands. His skin was a mass of acne pits and scarring. Some poet wrote once about 'the young man carbuncular,' and that was Gordon." That's so wrong-sounding that I want to hit it with my rubber stamp that says DECORATIVE. Not

even "some poet" is invoked in a passage about Charlie's "very critical mother-inlaw, whom we might describe metaphorically as a broomstick-wielding German housewife with a gaze merciless as the sun's." Weirdly, Mary Marlene had, many pages earlier, viewed her *other* grandmother through the lens of Yeats's "The Second Coming": "And the worst being full of passionate intensity always put me in mind of Grandma, who was nothing if not intense"; but the earlier quotation is overtly identified as something from "the famous Yeats poem about things falling apart."

Style is also mismanaged here: "Mother had a book of them, one portrait more gray-faced than the next," which I think ought to read "more grayfaced than the one before." And there's the varmint *The New Yorker* used to call The Omnipotent Whom: "The next time Hector and Mother traveled, we stayed with his sister Alicia, whom I'd have guessed was too old and fat to fight with her husband, Ralph."

But these are mere blemishes. I want to testify that Karr captures one part of childhood sublimely: the world of artificial smells that is one of the first things we know about people and one of the last things to go away. Today a whiff of bay rum or Arrid can take me back fifty years and more, and Karr has a genius for specifying just what essence was in attendance when something important happened: Shalimar, Old Spice, Jergens, Burma Shave, Lava.

Adaptations

An audiocassette of Karr reading *The Liars' Club* was published in 1996 by Penguin Audiobooks.

Topics for Further Study

Write your own one- to two-page memoir about an incident you remember from your childhood. Try to capture the child's way of seeing things. Write it in your own voice and style rather than trying to imitate Karr.

Research the topic of alcoholism and the effects it has on families, particularly children. Why do some people become alcoholics while others who drink do not? Is there a cure for alcoholism?

The Karr family is forced to flee Hurricane Carla in 1961 in Texas. Using the Internet, research Hurricane Carla and other major hurricanes along the Gulf Coast. What are the weather conditions that produce a hurricane? How has the technology of predicting the path of a hurricane changed since the 1960s? (Remember that in *The Liars' Club*, the storm unexpectedly hits a town in Louisiana rather than Leechfield, Texas, its predicted path.)

Karr defines a dysfunctional family as "any family with more than one person in it." She means that every family is dysfunctional in one way or another. Do you agree? Why or why not? How would you define dysfunctional? Do you think that people can put bad childhood experiences behind them, or do those experiences mark people for life?

What Do I Read Next?

Karr's second memoir, *Cherry: A Memoir* (2000), describes her life as a rebellious adolescent. The memoir is written in the same style as *The Liars' Club*: by turns gritty, vulgar, and poetic. Karr goes through various adventures—many of them involving sex, romance, and drugs—in her quest to escape the confines of Leechfield, Texas. She turns a harsh light on her own follies as well as those of others.

Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996) followed *The Liars' Club* onto bestseller lists. McCourt tells of his impoverished childhood and adolescence during the 1930s and 1940s in Limerick, Ireland. The story is a long catalog of deprivation and hardship, including his father's alcoholism and his mother's despair. McCourt describes the events without bitterness, anger, or blame, and many episodes are hilarious.

James Salter's *Burning the Days: Recollection* (1998) is a highly acclaimed memoir. Unlike the authors of *The Liars' Club* and *Angela's Ashes*, Salter had an upper-middle-class upbringing, and in this memoir he describes his experiences as a fighter pilot in the Korean War and his subsequent life in the film business, traveling throughout the United States and Europe.

Like *The Liars' Club*, Elizabeth Spencer's *Landscapes of the Heart: A Memoir* (1997) describes an upbringing in the American South, although in this case it is Mississippi rather than Texas. Spencer's narrative is more elegant and less rugged than Karr's, and she looks back at an earlier period (mostly the 1930s through the 1950s) with nostalgic affection.

Tobias Wolff was one of Karr's writing mentors, and his *This Boy's Life: A Memoir* (1989) was exceptionally well received by reviewers. Like Karr, Wolff describes a difficult childhood in a dysfunctional family. However, as with Karr's memoir, his sense of humor and literary skill in telling his story alleviate the darkness of many of the events.

Further Study

Karr, Mary, and Frank McCourt, "How We Met: Mary Karr & Frank McCourt," in *Independent Sunday* (London), July 8, 2001, p. 7.

Karr and McCourt (McCourt is the author of *Angela's Ashes*), describe their personal relationship and offer comments on each other's work.

Karr, Mary, and Gabby Wood, "The Books Interview: Mary Karr," in *Observer* (London), June 24, 2001, p. 17.

In this interview, Karr talks about her life and her method of writing, saying that she discards large amounts of writing before settling on the final version.

Smith, Patrick, "What Memoir Forgets," in the *Nation*, Vol. 267, No. 4, July 27, 1998, p. 30.

Smith argues that the trend in autobiographical publishing is to share vivid emotional and personal details of individuals' lives. These books go beyond enlightenment in their relentless effort to entertain. What they lack (although Smith makes an exception of Karr's memoir) is insight into the impact of human relationships on the human condition.

Young, Elizabeth, Review of *The Liars' Club*, in *New Statesman & Society*, Vol. 8, No. 375, October 20, 1995, p. 39.

This British review is as laudatory as most of the American ones. Young praises Karr's vivid, beautiful writing; the care with which it has been constructed; the mastery of East Texas slang; and Karr's sense of humor and emotional honesty.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
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- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
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- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

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NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

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