

Life After Life: A Novel Study Guide

Life After Life: A Novel by Jill McCorkle

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

[Life After Life: A Novel Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....3](#)

[Joanna, Notes About Lois Elizabeth Malcolm Flowers, Lois Flowers, C.J. \(Carolina Jessamine\), Sadie, Joanna, Notes about my Dad: Curtis Edward Lamb, Curtis Edward Lamb.....4](#)

[Abby, Notes about: Gregory Luke Wishart, Luke Wishart, Rachel, Kendra, Notes about: Willis Morgan Hall, Willis Hall, Stanley, Notes about: Mary Grace Robertson, Mary Robertson.....8](#)

[Toby, Notes about Suzanne O'Toole Sullivan, Suzanne Sullivan, Rachel, Kendra, Notes about: Jeremiah Mason Bass, Jeremiah Mason Bass, Stanley.....13](#)

[Toby, Notes about: Martha Marie Anderson Stone, Martha Stone, C.J., Rachel, Joanna, Notes about: Judge Henry Morton Walker, Henry Morton Walker.....17](#)

[Abby, Stanley, Rosemary Sewell Carlyle, Rosemary Carlyle, Sadie, C.J.....21](#)

[Abby, Kendra, Joanna, C.J., Joanna.....24](#)

[Characters.....27](#)

[Symbols and Symbolism.....30](#)

[Settings.....32](#)

[Themes and Motifs.....33](#)

[Styles.....36](#)

[Quotes.....38](#)

Plot Summary

Life After Life is the story of some people who live in Fulton, North Carolina, and the nursing home there called Pine Haven. A woman named Joanna Lamb works as a hospice volunteer at the nursing home and also keeps a diary of the people she has helped in the final phases of their lives. She wants to remember them both as exceptional as individuals but common in their death experiences. Joanna has been married several times and has lived a very colorful life, much to her parents' chagrin, but she returned to Fulton when her father got ill. She has stayed to run the family business, a hot dog restaurant, and also helps a young woman named C.J. with her infant son. C.J.'s mother had committed suicide so she has had no maternal guidance and is grateful to have Joanna in her life. C. J. is a beautician and does the hair and nails of the women at Pine Haven.

Some of the other residents at Pine Haven include a former attorney named Stanley Stone who puts on big displays of obnoxious behavior so that his son, Ned, won't stay any longer than necessary when visiting his father. Another attorney, widowed Rachel Silverman, is a transplant from Boston who has moved to Fulton to be near her deceased lover, and she visits the cemetery every day to talk to him. Pine Haven's darling resident named Sadie Randolph is the one who keeps the peace among the residents with her pleasant demeanor and positive outlook on life. Sadie is especially good to the 12-year-old neighbor girl, Abby Palmer, who lives next door to Pine Haven and visits every day.

Life After Life is a character-driven novel with the personalities and thoughts of the characters taking precedence over any real plot line. The stories of the people that Joanna helps transition in hospice are captured in her diary giving the book movement and capturing the characters who so want to be remembered after they are gone.



Joanna, Notes About Lois Elizabeth Malcolm Flowers, Lois Flowers, C.J. (Carolina Jessamine), Sadie, Joanna, Notes about my Dad: Curtis Edward Lamb, Curtis Edward Lamb

Summary

Joanna Lamb, a hospice volunteer at the Pine Haven Retirement Home, is at the bedside of Lois Flowers, a resident who is near death. Lois had been one of the home's most vital residents, a classy woman who loved fashion and old ballads. Joanna keeps a notebook with an entry of all the people she sits with in order to remember them properly. She started keeping the book when her husband, Luke, was dying and he declared that everybody deserves at least a page. Joanna has had a lot of transitions in her life but she finally feels free now that her parents are both gone. Joanna wasn't around when her mother died but she was with her father when he died and feels that that may have been the greatest gift of her life. Joanna has learned a lot about making peace in your life. Her father wanted her to keep his Dog House hot dog restaurant open and she has honored that request.

'Joanna' spends a lot of time talking about life issues with a young woman named C.J. whose punk, pierced and tattooed lifestyle is radically different from hers. C.J. has a baby named Kurt and she has yet to tell Joanna who the baby's father is. C.J. also keeps a journal and hides it in a box of sanitary napkins in her closet. C.J. has also had a colorful life with many jobs such as cleaning house, reading palms and grooming dogs. She now works as a beautician at Pine Haven. C.J. rents the apartment over the Dog House hot dog business owned by Joanna.

In 'Notes About Lois Elizabeth Malcolm Flowers', Joanna's diary recalls Lois Flowers' elegance. Lois loved to shop and never bought anything that didn't coordinate with her Winter skin color palette. Lois was interested in high fashion even though no one in Fulton wore such things. Lois' favorite holiday was Halloween because she liked to see the children enjoying themselves. One summer Lois burned her bra in the hibachi in the backyard because she wanted to feel part of the women's movement, something larger than herself.

'Lois Flowers' is a stream of consciousness flow about Lois and her interest in choosing colors based on her skin tone, her love of music and fine dining.

In 'C.J. (Carolina Jessamine)', it is revealed that C.J. was named for the Jessamine vine growing in the arboretum where C.J. was conceived. C.J.'s mother had a hard life,



committed suicide and is buried close to that arboretum. C.J. never knew her father, so she hasn't had much guidance in her life. C.J.'s mother was beautiful but she was poor and abused her body which dramatically ages a person. C.J. is 26-years-old with a string of menial jobs to her credit. She now works at Pine Haven as a beautician for the elderly women who live there. She enjoys helping them feel better when she fixes their hair and nails.

C.J. is having an affair with a man who is the husband of one of the women for whom she cleans house. C.J. wants a different life than this but she knows that her mother also sold herself to men for money because she had no other way to take care of her baby. C.J. wants a better life for herself and her baby, Kurt.

In 'Sadie', Sadie Randolph is an 85-year-old resident at Pine Haven who is loved for her kindness and positive demeanor. Sadie used to teach school and married a boy named Horace from her hometown. They had three children and Horace died young while playing football with family members on a Thanksgiving afternoon. Sadie recalls having Joanna Lamb as a student in her class and how she always seemed like she needed a hug. People say that Joanna has been married too many times but Sadie knows that she is kind to her and that's all that matters. Sadie's favorite student of all time is Bennie Palmer whose daughter, Abby, comes to visit her every day. Sadie doesn't care for Bennie's wife but she never says anything, she just listens when he visits and hopes that one day he'll open up to her.

Sadie has started a little business at Pine Haven where she takes pictures of people and glues them into photos of places they had visited or would have liked to have visited. Sadie started her picture business when other people began scrapbooking. Marge Walker has the best scrapbook at Pine Haven; it is filled with murder and crime stories, most probably the result of being married to a judge. Marge is the only person Sadie has a hard time relating to because she is always focusing on negative things. Sadie spends time talking to former attorney Stanley Stone when he isn't in his obnoxious mode. Sadie is especially fond of little Abby who comes to visit every day, longing for the return of her lost dog, Dollbaby. Sadie is good for Abby whose parents fight constantly and don't seem to remember that she even exists.

In 'Joanna', Joanna recalls doing magic tricks with her friend, Ben. She also recalls Luke, who helped her come to peace with her past so that she could be with her father when he died. Joanna's father had built a hot dog restaurant called the Doghouse as an investment but he wanted Joanna to run it after he died. Joanna and her mother were always at odds with each other because her mother wanted a slim, elegant daughter but Joanna was free-spirited with wild hair. Joanna also traveled a lot and never settled into the typical life of wife and mother that her mother would have preferred for her. Joanna resents that her parents only focused on her negative traits and listened too much to what other people said.

Joanna is with her father when he dies in her old bedroom at the brick ranch house she grew up in. She waits, hoping that he will say he loves her but he doesn't; telling her



only that she is his little girl. Joanna looks out the window at the azaleas and daffodils and thinks that it looks like any ordinary day.

When Joanna thinks of dying, she thinks about the day she almost committed suicide. She was at a low place in her life and rented a cottage in New Hampshire and took pills a few times to practice so she would know how many she would need to finish the job. Joanna had married a widower with two small children and she was devastated when he fell in love with someone else. When Joanna had taken more pills and climbed into the hot tub to die, she was startled when a huge dog bit her shoulder and rescued her. She learns later from the dog's owner, Luke, that the dog is named Tammy after the Debbie Reynolds song.

Joanna and Luke become friends and he talks to her about his love, David. In exchange for saving her life, Luke demanded that Joanna go to therapy and to take classes so that she might learn to love herself. Joanna learned that Luke was dying and she was embarrassed for almost throwing hers away. Joanna eventually married Luke so that she would give all his possessions to David after he died since he couldn't marry David legally.

'Notes about my Dad: Curtis Edward Lamb' is Joanna's journal entry about her father's death. She writes that he loved fishing, hot dogs and the ocean and that he died on a spring day in her old bedroom while she looked at the azaleas and daffodils blooming outside. She wishes she would have been able to make amends with her mother before she died but it never happened.

'Curtis Edward Lamb' is a stream of consciousness flow about Joanna's father who had tried to get his wife to call Joanna to make amends but she would never do it. Joanna's father wishes that his wife would soften toward their daughter but she maintains that Joanna owes them for all the sacrifices they have made for her and she is unbending.

Analysis

The author establishes a style of sharing information in the book by providing chapters that focus on certain characters. Interspersed with those are pages of Joanna's journal that provide brief notes and descriptions of the people she helps transition in the hospice center. Following each journal page is a brief dedicated section about the subject in that journal page. The style is a stream of consciousness flow that comes from memories and thoughts of that person. This treatment allows the reader to have a more intimate view of these people than would be provided had the author simply stated facts about the person's life. These journal pages and accompanying stream of consciousness pages are deeply personal and moving and the author succinctly captures what it is to die with regrets, love, and all the emotions people carry within them.

The theme of death is a pervasive one in the novel. The nature of Joanna's work as a hospice volunteer brings her in contact with it on a daily basis. It was also her father's



imminent death that brought her home from all her travels so that she could be with him. Death comes to everyone but the residents in the nursing home are closer to it because of their age and illnesses so it is ever-present for them. The nursing home sits next to the cemetery which constantly reminds the residents of their mortality.

Death also comes to young people as evidenced by C.J.'s mother's suicide, Joanna's attempted suicide, and Sadie's husband's fatal heart attack. Death has the final say on relationships, too, and the theme of regret comes into play when people don't have the occasion to mend them. Joanna's situation with her estranged mother was a situation of a stubborn, wild girl who wanted to be everything that her mother wished she wouldn't be. Joanna was never the child that her mother wanted; she would have preferred that Joanna be thin and elegant instead of spirited with wild hair. Joanna moved away with little contact and her father tried to get her mother to talk to Joanna but she refused, declaring that Joanna should be the one to make the move because of all that her parents had sacrificed for her. After her father's death and Joanna is alone, she wonders why she hadn't been the brave one to make amends with her mother and she has to live with the regret of her not making the attempt.

Discussion Question 1

What has brought Joanna back to her hometown and why does she stay, given that she has always liked to move around in her life?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is C.J. repeating the destructive life pattern that her mother did?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it ironic that Luke, who was dying, saved Joanna who wanted to throw her life away?

Vocabulary

linger, litany, perplexed, ethnicity, sentry, prognosis, docile, Pavlov, splotched, ignorant, hospice, vengeance, coincided, bonemeal, mantra, pendulum, murky, sleight, agitation, complex, conservative, redemption



Abby, Notes about: Gregory Luke Wishart, Luke Wishart, Rachel, Kendra, Notes about: Willis Morgan Hall, Willis Hall, Stanley, Notes about: Mary Grace Robertson, Mary Robertson

Summary

In 'Abby', Abby Palmer is upset because her mother is making her have a thirteenth birthday party with a theme of First Ladies. She also believes that you should be able to keep a dog that shows up at your house and have friends of any age. Abby's dog, Dollbaby, disappeared when she and her father went shopping to buy things for the disappearing chamber he is building for Abby's party. Dollbaby is Abby's best friend and they used to go everywhere together. Abby doesn't like her mother because she likes to show off and wear clothes that are too young for her. Abby's parents fight all the time and Abby likes to visit at Pine Haven because at least the people there see her.

Abby does get along with her father and the two are united in their dislike of Abby's mother. Abby's parents got married because her mother thought her father was going to be a successful lawyer but he didn't follow through with that and Abby's mother has never forgiven him. Abby's mother doesn't think Dollbaby will ever come back but Abby refuses to give up hope. Abby's mother also doesn't want Abby to walk through the cemetery, but Abby likes it there because it is cool and quiet - the opposite of her home environment.

Abby cuts through the cemetery to get to Pine Haven, where her friend Sadie always has a candy bar waiting for her. Sadie was Abby's father teacher when he was a boy; actually Sadie knows everybody in town. Abby enjoys spending time at Pine Haven listening to the adults talk and refuses to tell her mother where she spends so much time.

'Notes about: Gregory Luke Wishart' is Joanna's journal entry about her husband, Luke, who died in New Hampshire. He wanted her to make a note of how sophisticated he looked and how he loved the song, "Tammy," which Debbie Reynolds sang in the movie of the same name.

'Luke Wishart' is a stream of consciousness flow about Luke being at the lake as a boy. His grandparents are cleaning fish that was caught and his parents are dancing in the living room. When it's dark, they all sit by the lake to watch fireworks and Luke holds the gleaming face of his father's watch.



In 'Rachel', Rachel Silverman has moved to Fulton from Boston, Massachusetts, where she lived all her life. Rachel has come to Pine Haven to live out her days in the hometown of a man, Joe Carlyle, who wasn't her husband. They met on Cape Cod in 1970 and had an affair off and on until the winter of 1976. Loving Joe complicated Rachel's life but she couldn't bring herself to stop. Rachel was an attorney which was quite an accomplishment for women in those days. Now Rachel's life is much simpler and when C.J. finds out that Rachel would like a tour of Fulton, she readily offers to take her. Rachel wants to see all the places that meant something to Joe so she is looking forward to the tour.

Rachel visits Joe's grave in the cemetery next door to Pine Haven twice a day and feels a little awkward because his wife is buried beside him. Rachel has told the other residents that Joe was her husband's, Art, cousin and that's why she is so interested in Fulton. None of them can ever remember Joe mentioning anybody named Art.

In 'Kendra', Kendra Palmer has spent most of the day putting little stickers on the underside of the pieces of furniture she plans to keep after she divorces Ben. She's not quite ready to leave, but this way she'll be prepared when she does. Kendra also plans to keep Abby and the house which she plans to turn into a Bed and Breakfast. Kendra also has her sights set on getting Andrew Porter, a heart surgeon, after he, too, is divorced. Andrew always flirts outrageously with Kendra whenever they run into each other and tells her she has to be patient for their relationship to become public.

Kendra always thought she would live in a metropolitan area but she fell for Ben in college when she thought he was going to be a lawyer. If she had known all he would become was a film projectionist and amateur magician, she would have never given him a second look. Even though Kendra wants finer things for herself and her home, she is not willing to get a job because it wasn't part of their marriage agreement. Kendra is also disappointed in Abby who has turned out to be a chubby girl with wiry hair who has no interest in fashion. Kendra thinks that Abby will understand why she had to leave Ben someday but she will never understand what happened to Dollbaby so Kendra keeps silent. As it is, Kendra plans to tell Abby one day that she got a phone call from someone saying that Dollbaby had been hit by a car and died.

'Notes about: Willis Morgan Hall' is Joanna's journal entry about Willis Hall who had been a handsome, charming man whose three former wives gathered at his deathbed and his girlfriends brought casseroles to the house. He had credited the amicable relationships with the women to his being silent, being a mirror to reflect them and they always came back for another look.

'Willis Morgan Hall' is a stream of consciousness flow about Willis Hall living in the snowy cold White Mountains of New Hampshire. The reflections include his being a little boy lifted over a snow bank by his mother to being a soldier in the Ardennes Forest during World War II.

In 'Stanley', Stanley Stone, a former attorney and Pine Haven resident, has two sons; Pete, a successful software salesman in the Midwest and the younger, Ned, who is a



health and physical education teacher at the elementary school in town. Ned's life began to fall apart when his wife left him. Ned stayed with Stanley for weeks after Stanley's wife, Martha, died, even sleeping on his mother's side of the bed to help his father through the transition. Ned was always more emotional than Pete and caused fewer problems in the family. Stanley always had a difficult time relating to Ned and he was almost as detached from his wife, especially when she began to experience depression and fatigue a few years ago. When Martha got cancer, Stanley was even more unavailable.

Stanley and Martha never talked about their future but he took care of things financially for her because he assumed she would be the one to survive him. After Martha died, Stanley decided to make his own move into Pine Haven so that Pete wouldn't put him somewhere in the Midwest. Ned had vowed to stay with Stanley and take care of him but that's not what Stanley wants. Stanley wants Ned to get out and live his own life so he tells both his sons that he will be happy to have the care and attention of the professionals at Pine Haven. Stanley then decides to create his own style of dementia to ensure that he will have to stay at Pine Haven.

Joanna had been at Stanley and Martha's house when Martha was dying and she had to encourage Stanley to take Martha's hand and tell her that it was okay to die. Stanley was haunted by regrets after her death and Ned helped him adjust. Now when Ned visits him every day at Pine Haven, he deliberately behaves in an outrageous manner so that Ned won't stay long. Some of the things that Stanley does include burping the alphabet during dinner, talking explicitly about sex to embarrass the women and playing Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass albums from the 1960s.

'Notes about: Mary Grace Robertson' is Joanna's journal entry about Mary Robertson, an elderly woman who died in a rundown house in New Hampshire. She was a charity case who was born in Portland, Maine, but has no family at the time of her death. Luke had encouraged Joanna to document these situations because too many people die alone.

'Mary Robertson' is a stream of consciousness flow depicting Mary Robertson as a girl running through a field with a boy. He tells her to hold some rags over her mouth as he pours kerosene and the field burns blue and gold. He is a boy from school and he holds his hand out to help her.

Analysis

The theme of regret is important in this section of the story. Kendra hates her life with Ben and regrets marrying him. When they met in college, he had plans to become an attorney and she expected that he would make a good living which was an important criterion for her. However, Ben did not follow through with that career goal and now runs a movie theater in their small town and does amateur magic shows on the side. Kendra also regrets that their daughter, Abby, is more like Ben than her. Kendra had wanted a daughter who is slim and sleek, but Abby is chubby with wiry hair. Abby also has



sensibilities that line up better with her father than her goal-oriented mother. Kendra thinks that she is better than the life she has and plans to get out as soon as possible which includes taking up with a local heart surgeon in town whose lifestyle better reflects what she desires.

There is also regret in how Stanley remembers his wife, Martha. He never was as attentive to her as he should have been, and when she got cancer he distanced himself even more. As he looks back over their life together, he regrets his dismissive behavior toward her and he is haunted by how he treated her.

The theme of loneliness is also important in this section. Abby is a lonely child who spends a lot of time visiting at the nursing home next door. Abby is an only child who lives in a dysfunctional home and she tries to escape as much as she can. Her best friend is 80-year-old Sadie who lives at Pine Haven. Abby's loneliness had abated when she found her dog, Dollbaby, but now that Dollbaby is lost, Abby is plunged into loneliness again. Ironically, Abby's parents are lonely too. Neither one of them ended up with the spouse they intended to have and they live distant lives even though they are under the same roof.

It was loneliness and love for her lost lover that drove Rachel to move to Fulton. After her husband's death and the end of her career in Boston, Rachel had no purpose anymore so she made the decision to be close to the man she truly loved even though he is now dead. She visits his grave every day to assuage her loneliness and longing for a life that can never be again.

Most of the residents at Pine Haven fight loneliness all the time. Either their family members don't visit them or visit so infrequently that it's difficult to manage the loneliness. To their credit, they make friends at the home and have created their own little family of sorts to help ease the pain of loneliness.

Discussion Question 1

How has Kendra's husband disappointed her and how does that impact the family's life?

Discussion Question 2

Why has Rachel chosen to live out her life in a nursing home in a town she has never before visited? Is this healthy or unhealthy?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Stanley exhibit such outrageous behavior at Pine Haven? Does he intentionally want to alienate people?

Vocabulary

impersonators, tarot card, prestige, somber, bleak, monogrammed, espadrilles, prelaw, populate, sociopath, spontaneous, random, philosophical, denominator, ventured, tendrils, arboretum, pavilion, lush, jasmine, wisteria, persecuted, cringe, thespian



Toby, Notes about Suzanne O'Toole Sullivan, Suzanne Sullivan, Rachel, Kendra, Notes about: Jeremiah Mason Bass, Jeremiah Mason Bass, Stanley

Summary

In 'Toby', Toby Tyler came to Pine Haven because she didn't have anyplace better to go. She had had a good life in Columbia but it got to be too much work to keep up her little house and yard. Toby had been a high school English teacher who never married and spent a lot of her life looking after her mother. Toby is the youngest of the residents at Pine Haven and she enjoys talking to Abby on her visits. Toby adores Rachel because she is smart and direct and would love to be friends with her. Toby goes on rants about the kids she used to teach and how disrespectful they were in their attitudes and language.

Toby has definite ideas about what to do to live a good life and that includes drinking lots of water every day and always taking the stairs instead of the elevator. Marge insinuates that Toby is a lesbian and did not retire from her job; she was fired. Toby is fed up with stereotypes and rumors. In reality, Toby was asked to retire because she swore in the classroom and parents had been questioning her character. A student had also reported that Toby had been looking at her inappropriately.

'Notes about: Suzanne O'Toole Sullivan' is Joanna's journal entry about Suzanne Sullivan, a 41-year-old woman who died in New Hampshire. She had two young children and a husband who brought her flowers every day. She had worked as a speech pathologist and loved to be near the water. She died one afternoon as soon as her husband got home from work to take care of the kids.

'Suzanne Sullivan' is a stream of consciousness flow about Suzanne Sullivan listening to Bugs Bunny on the TV. She thinks about the home she has created with her husband and riding her horse, Charlie, until all she can hear are the sounds of his galloping hooves.

In 'Rachel', Rachel Silverman thinks about the course of her life. It seems as if she was just a young wife and then her marriage grew empty and she filled that space with Joe. For years she thought about leaving her husband but she never did. After Joe went back to his wife, she decided to stay in her marriage but she had a feeling that something would be changing. Her husband, Art, got cancer and died and Rachel was at loose ends at what to do next. She decided that she would get as close to Joe as she could and booked her flight to North Carolina the day after Art's funeral. Of course,



Rachel knew that Joe was dead but she needed to see where he had lived his life and wanted to be close to that.

Now Rachel goes to Joe's grave every day and talks to him in spite of his being buried next to his wife, Rosemary. On occasion, Rachel apologizes to Rosemary if she had ever hurt her but she was emotionally drowning in her life when she met Joe and she hung on to him for dear life. One day, C.J. spots Rachel in the cemetery and C.J. tells her a little bit about her life. C.J. agrees to take Rachel on a tour of Fulton tomorrow.

In 'Kendra', Kendra tries to decide what sexy outfit to wear to Abby's party tomorrow so that when she leaves Ben, he will regret not being better to her. Kendra had never wanted a child, preferring instead to have a career in broadcasting and an enviable body, but she got pregnant and the career was over. Fortunately, Kendra can control her body now and she loves flaunting her shape. Kendra wishes that Abby would take more interest in clothes but all she wants for her birthday is a phone and for Dollbaby to come home. Every shopping outing is an exercise in frustration and anger for both of them. Kendra tries to be compassionate with Abby and others who struggle but she just doesn't feel it and it's a waste of time. In fact, Kendra had secretly taken Dollbaby to the vet to be put down because she said the dog had bitten a child. Now she has to pretend to be sad when Abby talks about her lost dog.

'Notes about: Jeremiah Mason Bass' is Joanna's journal entry about Jeremiah Bass, her last hospice assignment in New Hampshire. All his life, people called Jeremiah by his nickname, Bigmouth Bass, both because he loved to fish and he had an outgoing, colorful personality.

'Jeremiah Mason Bass' is a stream of consciousness flow about Jeremiah's love of fishing and the need to feed his children which he thinks fish will do just fine. All you need is a line, a pole and some lucky lure.

In 'Stanley', Stanley has been listening to music and reading a lot about roses, Martha's favorite flower. She had had a magnificent rose garden and made it available for brides to cut flowers for their wedding bouquets every year. Stanley considers starting a garden outside his window at Pine Haven because it might get some of the others involved in doing something again. Ned visits Stanley and Stanley torments him about the need for Ned to start dating again. Ned's ex-wife has remarried but he's just not interested in anyone else. Stanley tries to humiliate Ned by making fun of how Ned had cried at Martha's funeral so that he will leave. Ned's feelings are hurt but before he leaves, he places two tickets to a wrestling event on Stanley's table. After Ned leaves, Stanley cries, not so sure that his plan to get Ned out on his own is working out the way he thought it would.

Analysis

The theme of loneliness is very important in this section. Toby has lived a solitary life and has chosen to live at Pine Haven because she had nowhere else to go. Toby's life



has been taken up by care of her mother and teaching high school English, but she doesn't have a family and is lonely at this point in her life. It can be assumed that Toby has been lonely for quite awhile too. She briefly mentions a woman she had lived with for awhile but that didn't work out. There were claims that Toby is a lesbian and that is a lonely life for those who can't find a partner or be who they really are because of where they live or the profession they have chosen.

Rachel is another person who has been lonely for quite awhile. Even though Rachel had a very comfortable life with her husband, Art, the marriage was lifeless for many years. Meeting Joe brought Rachel back to feelings she had long ago forgotten. Now that Art is dead she wants to feel those things again even though Joe is also dead. The closest Rachel can get to the emotions she needs is by moving to Joe's hometown and visiting him in the cemetery twice a day. Rachel's life is also important in the theme of regret. She had lived a passionless marriage for most of her life and then met Joe who brought out all those types of feelings in her. Rachel regrets that she spent so many years not even realizing what she was missing, and regrets that she only had Joe in her life for four years.

Kendra and Ben are also examples of living lives they regret. Kendra can't get over her disappointment in Ben for not being ambitious and providing her with the things she wants to make her feel complete. Ben, in turn, can't understand why Kendra is so self-centered, even when it comes to Abby. The regrets with these two loom so large that it would be nearly impossible to un-do the emotional damage that has been done.

Stanley is also learning to live with regret. When his wife, Martha, was alive he essentially ignored her, even chastising her and making fun of her when she tried things to enliven their marriage. Now that Martha is gone, he realizes how much he really did value her and what she meant to so many other people including their sons. He never really validated her locally celebrated rose garden or built her the greenhouse she would have loved, but now he's reading books on roses and thinking of starting a garden outside his window at Pine Haven to encourage others there to participate in something beautiful.

Stanley has also come to regret the plan he initiated to act outrageously so that Ned wouldn't come by so often, and, instead, get a life of his own. He can see now that his behavior is only hurting Ned and that was not part of his plan.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the reasons that Toby was so disgruntled as a high school English teacher?

Discussion Question 2

Why did it make perfect sense for Rachel to leave Boston and move to a nursing home in a town she had never even seen before?



Discussion Question 3

Why is Kendra so bitter about her life? How could she change how she feels?

Vocabulary

liability, namaste, utopia, intimations, immortality, aura, throes, scarce, intimidated, recitation, damsel, frock, flimsy, troll, schnoz, stereotype, compassion, derivation, malarkey, euphemism, glimpsed, sluggish, stench, shiva, colleagues, leprosy, genetic, insightful, fibromyalgia, pruning



Toby, Notes about: Martha Marie Anderson Stone, Martha Stone, C.J., Rachel, Joanna, Notes about: Judge Henry Morton Walker, Henry Morton Walker

Summary

In 'Toby', Toby is in her own cottage thinking about the hurts that other human beings inflict on each other and she'll never understand that. She puts on a meditation CD and thinks about a woman named Sally whom she lived with for awhile but nothing ever really came of the relationship. Sally went on to marry a man and have children but Toby wonders if she ever thinks about Toby. Love is love, no matter what form it takes.

'Notes about: Martha Marie Anderson Stone' is Joanna's journal entry of Martha Stone, Stanley's wife. She had been a beautiful young woman and the house is filled with portraits. She loved to dance and garden and she had a collection of glass figurines and special boxes. Her sons and her husband were with her at their home on the day she died and she waited until her husband said it was okay to go before she let herself die.

'Martha Stone' is a stream of consciousness flow about Martha Stone who was so pleased that Stanley chose her to marry but their marriage grew stale and he chastised her when she bought negligees and high heels which he said cost too much. He never liked her glass figurines either and wiped out an entire shelf of them one day, sending glass and her memories crashing to the floor.

In 'C.J.', C.J.'s friend, Sam Lowe, keeps asking her to go out but she doesn't want to ruin their friendship. Plus she is seeing someone, even though it has to be a secret for now. She has wanted to tell Joanna about her secret man but he reminds her all the time about how they have to be careful not to get found out. She doesn't like that this man communicates with her by leaving notes in the cemetery but he has made her promise that she would never call him and she hasn't. She has been seeing this guy for a year and a half and thinks that he needs to loosen the restrictions a bit. He doesn't like going to C.J.'s apartment over the Doghouse because it smells like hot dogs. And every time she does something to try to better herself, like getting the job at Pine Haven, he gets mad and distances from her.

Sam had told C.J. one day that Abby's mother had brought her dog to where Sam works demanding that it be put to sleep because it bit a child. She paid extra and left but Sam couldn't see anything wrong with the dog so he took it home with him. C.J. really likes



Sam but he seems so young to her compared to what she has had to deal with in her life.

A phone call from her mystery man orders C.J. to be at the cemetery at 8 o'clock tonight. He sounded mad but C.J. will go because she needs the money he gives her and Kurt will soon have a lot more needs.

In 'Rachel', Rachel is a person who never liked a lot of dialogue so it is fitting that she enjoys her time at the cemetery every day. However, she has started eating with some of the other residents instead of taking her meals in her room. Rachel notes that Sadie has been staying in her room more and that the last time she came to the dining room she was wearing her pajamas. Sadie has also begun to talk to people who aren't there and acts as if she's answering an invisible switchboard.

One day at lunch, Rachel asks if anyone knew Joe Carlyle whom she says was her husband, Art's, cousin. Everyone in the group agrees that Joe was a real ladies man who put his poor wife through so much grief because of his affairs. Joe was also known for not paying his bills and for trying out schemes on people from out of town. Rachel feels sick at these revelations and leaves the table abruptly. Stanley follows her and wants to know why she is so upset. He tells her that there is some good in everyone, even Joe. Rachel is devastated, feeling robbed of a life and a person she didn't really know.

In 'Joanna', Joanna recalls how she stayed with Lois Flowers' daughter, Kathryn, after Lois died and how the room went so suddenly quiet. Joanna has experienced this many times; the energy suddenly disappears and the room feels like all the air has been sucked out. Relatives always say they want to stay in touch with Joanna but they never do because she represents pain and loss to them.

Joanna thinks about C.J. and wonders who Kurt's father is and who the new guy she is seeing is. Where does C.J. go on the nights that Joanna keeps Kurt all night? There's so much that C.J. keeps hidden and Joanna worries about her. C.J. has told Joanna that she has written down lots of things, especially for Kurt, and keeps a journal stashed in her bathroom closet. Joanna told C.J. that if she ever got married again, she didn't want gifts, rather she wanted people to take things that she has been holding on to for too long. Joanna doesn't think she'll ever marry again so she has started to gather things to give to C.J.

'Notes about: Henry Morton Walker' is Joanna's journal entry about Judge Walker, the husband of Pine Haven resident, Marge Walker. Marge had gone into military mode when her husband got sick and she took care of him with rigid precision. The judge called her bossy and bully but knew that he could have never found a better wife. The judge had seen so many lives cut short during his career that he felt grateful to have the time to bring closure to his as he was dying.

'Henry Morton Walker' is a stream of consciousness flow of the judge's recollection of a case in which a husband killed his wife and child by stabbing them repeatedly. The man



claimed he had been out hunting when the murders occurred, but he was convicted and sentenced to die. The judge was present for the man's execution but he wonders if justice had been miscarried and he felt guilty.

Analysis

It is interesting to note how control plays a big part in some of the relationships in the book. The most obvious case is how Andrew controls C.J. Because he is a noted heart surgeon and a married man, he wants to keep his affair with C.J. a secret because if his wife found out, she would probably divorce him and his medical practice may also be impacted. C.J. is an easy target for him because she has nothing in her life and he offers up the promise of vacations, jewelry and even a family someday. He knows that this is something that C.J. desperately wants especially because she didn't have one growing up and also because they have a son. C.J. wants her baby to have a better life than she did and she puts up with Andrew's moods and delays in making their relationship public. Most of everything she does now is for her baby's future but she admits to herself that it would be nice to hope for some things for herself as well.

Another situation of a controlling relationship is that of Stanley and Martha. He rules their marriage and is not afraid to humiliate her or hurt her feelings when she does something he doesn't like. It is very sad that even while she's on her deathbed, she instinctively waits for Stanley to give her the okay to go. She needs his approval even up to the very last breath.

Rachel reaches a turning point in this section when she learns from other residents that Joe Carlyle was an unsavory character, not at all the person she thought he was. Her image of him has been shattered by stories of multiple affairs with other women, unpaid bills and get rich quick schemes. This is doubly upsetting for Rachel because she had not only risked compromising her marriage with an affair with Joe, but also made the decision to move from her home to be in his hometown for the rest of her life. She had built her idea of him on falsehoods and she is just another woman in his web of inappropriate behavior.

Discussion Question 1

Why does C.J. allow herself to remain in a relationship with a man who isn't available?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Rachel so devastated when she hears the opinions that people have of Joe Carlyle?



Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Joanna wants to give away her possessions if she should ever remarry instead of receiving wedding gifts like most people do?

Vocabulary

snippets, particles, vulnerable, debutantes, Ouija, cryptic, discreet, jot, lard, quaint, bigot, gefilte, hysterical, matriculate, laden, demented, exhumed, expunged, exorcised, mantra, corpse, fluctuating, trivet, mohair, vibrant, matrimonial, orthopedist, masochistic, condiments



Abby, Stanley, Rosemary Sewell Carlyle, Rosemary Carlyle, Sadie, C.J.

Summary

In 'Abby', Abby has come to visit Sadie but Sadie can't stay awake and tells Abby to come back later. Abby cuts through the cemetery on her way home and is stopped when she sees a folded scrap of paper tucked under an urn. The note says, "Time's up. Fuck you." Abby panics and bolts out of the cemetery and sees her mother standing on their front porch. Abby's mother tells Abby that she got a phone call from a farmer who said that Dollbaby had been hit by a car and he buried her. Abby is devastated and runs to her room. Abby later hears her parents fighting over the fact that he should have built a better fence. Abby doesn't get the sympathy she thinks she deserves so she packs her backpack and heads off to spend the night with Sadie.

In 'Stanley', Stanley is tired of pretending that Rachel had more involvement with Joe Carlyle; that Sadie is fading away; and that Ned is still not out trying to find a new life for himself. Stanley chats with Rachel at Lois Flowers' memorial service and then follows her out when she leaves the room. Stanley makes some inappropriate comment and Rachel takes him to task, however she does tell him that if he ever wants to have a civilized conversation sometime, she would be open to that. Rachel also tells him that she knows he's been putting on an act; that they're both lawyers and she knows how to read people and he is clearly hiding from something.

Stanley knows he is caught now and invites Rachel in to his apartment to talk. Stanley admits that he has been putting on an act because Ned wouldn't leave him alone and he needs for him to find his own life. Rachel settles in while Stanley talks about his family and that he has never really had a relationship with Ned; it was always just Stanley telling Ned what to do. Rachel then tells Stanley about her relationship with Joe Carlyle and how she ended up at Pine Haven. Both of them agree that they have missed real conversation with another person. They continue to talk and agree that they've become interested in each other. Stanley shaves and puts on good clothes so Rachel can see what he's supposed to look like. Rachel decides to stay so Stanley puts on some music and they dance.

'Rosemary Sewell Carlyle' is Joanna's journal entry of Joe Carlyle's wife, Rosemary, who told Joanna that she was pregnant and fifteen when she married him. She died in a tiny, cluttered ranch house, with no word from any of her children. Her only request of Joanna that she notify a few women in her address book when she died.

'Rosemary Carlyle' is a stream of consciousness flow about Rosemary and how she knew that Joe was unfaithful to her for years. She never trusted him all that time but she did feel sorry for him toward the end when he was paralyzed and had to wear diapers.



But she also thought it served him right for all the misery he put her through during their marriage.

In 'Sadie', Sadie finds it hard to stay awake. She knows that Abby had been here a while ago and she so enjoys the girl's company. Sadie's mind drifts to earlier times when she cared for her young children and her husband was still alive. She goes even further back in her mind when she had a list to get some things for her mother at the grocery. Finally, her mother is with her, holding her hand.

In 'C.J.', C.J. arrives home but has a weird feeling that someone has been in her apartment even though nothing seems out of place. She puts Kurt down to play and gets ready for her evening with Andrew Porter. Andy had told her that she was to keep their affair secret until the right time and now she's beginning to wonder if there will ever be a right time. She's worried that he may have changed his mind or found somebody new because they haven't slept together in several weeks and he has been in a really weird mood. She also wonders if some of the kids from the Doghouse have been in her apartment because she does notice that the linen closet door wasn't closed the whole way. She may have left it ajar herself because she's always adding notes to the journal that she keeps in there.

C.J. drops Kurt off at Joanna's house for the night and tells her that she is going to apply for a job at Macy's and then meet her mystery man at Olive Garden by the mall. Joanna tells C.J. that it bothers her that she is so secretive lately but C.J. insists that she is fine. C.J. promises to pick up Kurt early in the morning because she has promised to give Rachel a tour of the town. C.J. is early to arrive at the cemetery so she stops in at Pine Haven to check her hair and makeup.

Analysis

The theme of fear is important in this section. First, Abby is afraid when she cuts through the cemetery on her way home. She is doubly frightened when she finds the note that says, "Time's up. Fuck you." Abby isn't sure if it's intended for her or not and she feels as if someone is watching her. Abby makes it home just fine, but she lives in unspoken fear there that her parents will divorce, plunging her into a scary place emotionally. And then, Abby is afraid that Dollbaby will not return home.

C.J. is also in a fearful state of mind right now. Andrew has been acting weird and distancing from her and she is afraid that he has found someone new. This would mean that the money he gives her for the baby would be cut off and she wouldn't have enough to care for him properly. Plus, C.J. had hoped that Andrew would marry her one day, providing an easier life for her, and she doesn't want to do anything to risk that hope being taken away.

C.J. is also afraid that someone has been in her apartment lately. Even though nothing is missing, she has an uneasy feeling that somebody has been there when she's out. When she sees that the linen closet door is left open, her fears grow.



This section is also important for Stanley and Rachel who both decide to come out from under the lies they have been living. Stanley admits to Rachel that he has been putting on a foolish act so that his son won't want to come to see him so often. His intent was that if he acted in an obnoxious manner, his son would be repulsed and not inclined to come around, instead focusing on getting his own life on track. Rachel also drops the facade she has been maintaining about Joe Carlyle and tells Stanley that he was not her husband's cousin, but actually her lover for several years. Stanley had been surprisingly kind to Rachel and they both admit that they miss having conversations so talk and unburden themselves. They have more in common than either had probably thought and it looks as if a nice relationship is forming.

Discussion Question 1

Stanley has been pretending that a lot of things are okay at Pine Haven when they're not. How is his evening with Rachel so cathartic for him?

Discussion Question 2

What is happening to Sadie when she can't stay awake and dreams about her children and then being a child herself?

Discussion Question 3

Why does C.J. keep the truth about Kurt and her mystery lover from Joanna?

Vocabulary

prissy, splotchy, uppity, gruff, synagogue, interfaith, dickey, sarcastically, demented, haunches, imbecile, indebted, mesmerizing, libido, dormant, pavilion, asinine



Abby, Kendra, Joanna, C.J., Joanna

Summary

In 'Abby', the side door at Pine Haven is open so Abby slips inside and heads to Sadie's room where she sees that Sadie is still sleeping. Abby shakes her but she doesn't stir so Abby sits down to watch TV for awhile. Abby cries when she thinks about Dollbaby and wants to tell Sadie but she is still asleep.

In 'Kendra', Kendra tries to call Andy but gets no answer. She decides to take a bath since Ben is gone and Abby is visiting at Pine Haven. Kendra's cell phone rings but she doesn't get it in time. She notices that it is Andy's home number so she redials and his wife, Liz, answers warily. Liz tells Kendra that she and Andy are going away to work on their marriage. Liz hangs up on Kendra who is at a loss for what to do or say.

In 'Joanna', Joanna finds Ben on her porch and he tells her that he comes here often. Ben tells Joanna that Abby's dog is dead and so is his marriage. They talk about their past relationship and their lives since then and he wonders if it's too late for them to get back together. Kendra calls on Ben's cell phone and he has to leave but they agree to talk again.

In 'C.J.', C.J. walks through the cemetery but Andrew isn't there. Instead she finds a note telling her to go home, that dinner is waiting. C.J. is hopeful now because this is the type of note that Andrew used to leave for her. When she arrives at her apartment, Andrew is drinking champagne and has a glass waiting for her. She notices a wrapped box on the table and tells him that he scared her by sending her to the cemetery after he had been acting so weird lately. C.J. can't smell any dinner and Andrew tells her to be patient. Andrew keeps filling her champagne glass and begins to seduce her, telling her to tell him where she would want to go on vacation, how many kids she wants, etc.

Andrew quickly turns angry and asks who the person whose last name is Lowe keeps calling her. He then pushes her into the bedroom where she sees the pages of her journal spread all over her bed. Andrew doesn't like that she talks about him in her journal and their affair could be found out. He tells her that he is the one who calls the shots and that she has become too much of a risk.

In 'Joanna', C.J. has not shown up to pick up Kurt so she goes to C.J.'s apartment where she finds C.J. lying on her bed, half dressed and with a needle stuck in her arm. Also on the bed are two pages, one stating details about her mother's death and the other titled, "If Anything Happens to Me." Joanna recalls that C.J. had seemed upset the night before but that she would have never killed herself. After a few minutes, Joanna calls 911 and sees that there are very few pages left in C.J.'s journal and she jams them into her purse. She also finds the note saying to go home, dinner is waiting, and she puts that in her purse too. Joanna is puzzled because there is no sign of dinner being cooked or consumed.



Joanna also found a flyer for Abby's dog lying on the apartment floor. She calls a phone number written on it and got Sam Lowe's voice mail and she asks him to call her. The authorities are calling C.J.'s death a suicide but Joanna knows that C.J. would have never killed herself because she loved Kurt so much.

In 'C.J.', C.J.'s death passes quietly among people while Sadie has also died and the town has never witnessed such a big funeral. Abby had been in the room when Sadie died; she thought the old woman was just sleeping very soundly. Abby's birthday party has been postponed a week.

Joanna has a small service for C.J. in the little chapel at Pine Haven. Joanna knows that C.J. was afraid of the cemetery and she's unsure of what to do with her ashes. Sam Lowe shows up and Joanna shows him the flyer of Dollbaby that she had found at C.J.'s apartment. Sam confirms that the dog he saved is indeed Dollbaby. On the day of Abby's party, Joanna meets Sam who gives Dollbaby to her and later that day she drives to the edge of the Pine Haven parking lot. She walks Dollbaby through the cemetery and lets her loose to run to Abby's house. Joanna can hear Abby's squeals of joy and can only imagine Kendra's shock.

Joanna makes plans to take care of Kurt and she will make sure that he will always know how much his mother loved him.

Analysis

Beloved Sadie has died in her sleep but Abby is not aware of this. Sadie has been Abby's safe place and she runs to her tonight to tell her that Dollbaby has been hit by a car and is already buried. The situation is sad that Sadie is gone, but extra painful because Abby does not yet understand that her comforting friend will no longer be there for her.

The author ties up some ends for the reader, the first being that Kendra now knows that a relationship with Andy will never happen. She learns from his wife that the two of them are going away to work on their marriage which is the death knell for Kendra. Ironically, neither one of the women knows that Andy is with C.J. at the moment and has been having an affair with her for a year and a half. The wife has been doubly betrayed and Kendra's dreams of a better, easier life will die.

It looks as if Joanna and Ben might reconnect after all these years. They have both been driving past each other's houses lately and Joanna learns that Ben sometimes hangs out in the hammock on her porch at night. Ben's marriage is over and Joanna still loves him so picking up on their relationship seems viable.

Tragically, C.J. has been killed by Andrew who had determined that she was getting to be too big of a risk to maintain in a secret relationship. After reading her journal, Andrew determined that C.J. would want more from him than he was willing to give and that a revelation of their affair could come at anytime. This was a risk he wasn't willing to take so he killed her by injecting her with a lethal dose of medication.



Ironically, when people learn of C.J.'s death, they assume it was suicide because her mother had also killed herself. It's almost as if they were expecting the same fate for C.J. and they're not surprised. Joanna is the only one who doesn't believe that C.J. could have committed suicide. She knows how much C.J. loved her baby and she would never have left him intentionally. It is a very sad ending to a sad life.

It is interesting to note the differences in how C.J.'s and Sadie's deaths are treated. C.J.'s death is no real surprise to anyone in town because they think she was an accident waiting to happen. C.J. was a social outcast, really, while Sadie was a beloved character. Having been a school teacher in town for many years, Sadie knew everyone and everyone loved her for her kind, gentle manner. It is sad to note that C.J. never really had a chance in life but she did the best she could given her circumstances. All she wanted was love and people took advantage of that, which ultimately ended her life.

Finally, the theme of redemption is important with the return of Dollbaby. Something good has happened out of all the tragedy and disappointments for the characters. Kendra will know that good beats evil and Abby will at least have Dollbaby's affection in her life.

Discussion Question 1

How does Kendra learn that she will have no future with Andy?

Discussion Question 2

How does Joanna know that C.J. didn't kill herself?

Discussion Question 3

Compare the lives and deaths of C.J. and Sadie.

Vocabulary

devastated, coax, unnerve, hammock, narcissistic, abstract, smudge, rickety, mimic, reupholstered, impulse, ruffled, babbling, squelch, murmur



Characters

Joanna Lamb

Joanna Lamb is a hospice volunteer at the Pine Haven Retirement Facility. She is a native of Fulton, North Carolina, and has led a very colorful life, returning to Fulton when her father became terminally ill. Joanna has taken over the family hotdog business since her father's death. Joanna has a nurturing personality and likes to see the good in other people. Joanna has been married several times, once to a dying gay friend who knew he could trust Joanna to give his things to his lover after his death because he couldn't legally marry the man. She had also married a young widower and helped raise his two small children until he fell in love with someone else and Joanna was forced to move on.

Joanna has a soft spot for underdogs and people who need help. She takes a special interest in C.J. and her baby, letting her live upstairs above the hotdog business and babysitting on a regular basis. After C.J. is killed, Joanna vows to take good care of C.J.'s baby and to keep his mother alive for him by talking about her and what a good person she was. Joanna is also noted for keeping a diary with entries about the people she helps transition in hospice. She wants to honor them by keeping them alive in her memory and in the words she keeps in her book.

Carolina Jessamine (C.J.) Loomis

Carolina Jessamine (C.J.) is a beautician who works at the Pine Haven Retirement Facility. Her mother named her after the jessamine plant growing in the area of a cemetery arboretum where she was conceived. C.J.'s mother committed suicide when C.J. was very young so C.J. has had no guidance in her life. She is a beautiful girl but she covers it up with piercings and wild colored hair. C.J. lovingly takes care of the people at the nursing home and is happy to groom them and make them feel better.

C.J. longs for a happy family life and has an affair with the husband of a woman whose house she was cleaning. He promises her a rich, full life and they conceive a child together. The man is a prominent physician in town so he keeps his relationship with C.J. secret, even to the point of leaving notes and meeting her in the cemetery. C.J. is a very loving mother and reads many books with the intent of giving her son advantages she never had. When her relationship with the doctor comes too close to being revealed, he kills her with an injection, making it look like a suicide. Joanna is the only one who can see past C.J.'s troubled history to declare that she loved her son too much to ever have taken her own life.



Sadie Randolph

Sadie Randolph is a resident at Pine Haven nursing home. She was a school teacher in Fulton and knows almost everyone in the town. Sadie is beloved among the other Pine Haven residents because she is so kind and gentle. Sadie also befriends little Abby Palmer and comforts her when her home life is in turmoil.

Abby Palmer

Abby Palmer is a 12-year-old girl who lives next door to the Pine Haven nursing home. She is an only child of constantly fighting parents. She is more like her father in temperament and is a little chubby with wild hair, much to the chagrin of her mother who wishes for a slender, elegant daughter. Abby visits Pine Haven resident Sadie, as a friend and confidante, to help her manage through the dysfunction of her family life.

Luke Wishart

Luke Wishart was one of Joanna's husbands. She met him when his dog rescued her from almost drowning herself in a hot tub in New Hampshire. Luke was a gay man and she married him because he could not marry the man he loved. At his death, Joanna then gave Luke's estate to David. Luke tried to get Joanna to see the good in people and encouraged her to keep a journal of the people she helped in hospice so that they would always be remembered.

Rachel Silverman

Rachel Silverman is a new resident of Pine Haven. She was an attorney in Boston who moved to Fulton after her husband's death. Rachel had had a long-term affair with Fulton resident, Joe Carlyle, and she moved there to be close to his grave and live in his hometown.

Kendra Palmer

Kendra Palmer is a bitter woman who has not achieved what she had wanted to in her life. She married Ben because he said he was going to be an attorney but that didn't pan out so she is grossly disappointed in her marriage. Her daughter, Abby, doesn't live up to expectations of beauty either and they have a hard time connecting. Kendra does not have a job and relies on her slim figure and good looks to get by in life.

Stanley Stone

Stanley Stone is a resident of Pine Haven. He is a former attorney who fakes an obnoxious persona in an attempt to dissuade his son from visiting him too much. Stan



makes outrageous comments, professes a love for professional wrestling and plays music from the 1960s. Underneath it all, though, Stan is a man who enjoys the classics and business news, and is learning to live with regrets over how he treated his dead wife.

Ben Palmer

Ben Palmer runs the movie theater in Fulton, never having become the attorney he had promised his wife. He loves doing magic tricks and performs at parties on the side. Ben used to be in love with Joanna and tries to rekindle that spark when it becomes clear that his marriage to Kendra is over.

Sam Lowe

Sam Lowe is a young man who works at a veterinarian's office. He plans to become a vet one day. He is a nice, clean cut kid who is interested in C.J. but she thinks he seems too young to get involved with someone like her who has seen way too much of life. Sam saved Abby's dog, Dollbaby, when Kendra brings him in to be put down because he didn't see anything wrong with the dog.

Andrew Porter

Andrew Porter is a noted heart surgeon in Fulton. He flirts outrageously with Kendra, leading her to believe that there is the potential for a relationship with him. Andrew, however, has been having an affair with C.J. and the two have a baby named Kurt. When C.J. becomes too much of a risk for him and he's afraid that their affair might become public, Andrew kills C.J. by giving her an injection of drugs.

Toby Tyler

Toby Tyler is a resident of Pine Haven, admittedly having arrived there because she had nowhere else to go. Toby was a high school English teacher for many years until she was asked to retire because of speculations that she was a lesbian and might have been inappropriate with students. Toby had once lived with a woman who went on to get married and have children but Toby still thinks about her. Toby is a lonely character who covers her emotional pain with humor.

Marge Walker

Marge is a Pine Haven resident who is the wife of a former judge in Fulton. Marge is very conservative and chastises some of the other residents when they act inappropriately in her eyes. Marge keeps a large scrapbook of crimes and murders.



Symbols and Symbolism

Joanna's Journal

Joanna keeps a journal of notes and stories about the people she helps transition in hospice. Luke had told her that it was important work so that people would not be forgotten. So each time she visits with a dying patient, she records their story and their death and what will remind her about them. In this way, she's keeping them alive in some way.

Cemetery

The cemetery sits next to Pine Haven nursing home and is the center of a lot of activity. Abby, a young girl, runs through on her way home from visiting Sadie at the nursing home. C.J. is terrified of the cemetery, especially when Andrew makes her go there at night to retrieve messages. Rachel, in contrast visits Joe's grave there twice a day and it is a place of comfort for her. Abby is young and not a viable candidate for the cemetery just yet so she flies through it. Rachel is closer to death and willingly goes there every day. C.J., whose life will be cut short, is symbolically terrified at the prospect of spending any time there at all.

Sadie's photo business

Sadie is the darling of Pine Haven and the residents flock to her for her kindness and gentle ways. Most of the people live through their memories or in dreams that never came true so Sadie starts a business in which she glues a photo of themselves into a background image of a place they loved or wished they could have visited. In this way, Sadie is able to transport them to a different time and place and make them happy at least for a little while.

The Doghouse

Joanna was always a free spirit, never giving in to her mother's suggestions about how she should live her life. She and her mother were always at odds and Joanna felt as if she lived her life always in the dog house, so it is fitting that she is now running the family business called the Doghouse.

Tammy's teeth marks

Luke's big dog, Tammy, bites Joanna hard on the shoulder to rescue her from drowning in the hot tub. Now Joanna looks at the scar on her shoulder and is reminded of Luke's



kindness and how he saved her and turned her life around, making her glad to be alive again.

Herb Alpert's "Tijuana Brass" album

Herb Alpert's and his Tijuana Brass band were popular in the 1960s. It is music that would have been played during the time that the residents of Pine Haven would have been young. It is symbolic because when it is played, the residents are transported to a different place in their minds and they can remember when they were young and healthy.

Disappearing chamber

Ben works on a disappearing chamber for Abby's birthday party, even though he secretly wishes he could use it. Ben has always been fascinated with magic tricks but his life has not worked out as he had hoped and he probably wishes he could disappear and end up somewhere else and be happier.

C.J.'s journal

C.J. keeps a journal of her hopes and wishes as well as ideas to raise Kurt to be a loving, productive person. The journal symbolizes C.J.'s hopefulness for a better life for her and her son. Ironically, it becomes the thing that leads to her death when Andrew discovers it and reads her thoughts. He determines that she is too great a risk and kills her before their affair becomes public and ruins him in the community.

Arboretum

The arboretum at the entrance to the cemetery symbolizes both the beginning and the end of life. C.J. is conceived there and those who are buried there must pass through it to get to their final resting place.

Dollbaby flyer

Joanna finds a flyer with Dollbaby's picture and Sam's phone number on it in C.J.'s apartment. That is the turning point of redemption in the story as it is revealed that Dollbaby is not dead at all and is able to return to Abby whose life is happy again.



Settings

Fulton, North Carolina

The town of Fulton, North Carolina, is the setting for Pine Haven nursing home and the residences of the local characters. It was also the hometown of Joe Carlyle.

Pine Haven Retirement Home

Pine Haven Retirement Home is the setting for much of the story. It is where the residents live, eat and visit with each other. Pine Haven is situated next to the cemetery and close to the Palmers' house.

C.J.'s apartment

C.J.'s apartment sits above the Doghouse hot dog restaurant. Joanna owns the business and lets C.J. stay in the apartment. It is the site of C.J.'s murder.

Cemetery

The cemetery sits next to the Pine Haven nursing home, separated only by an arboretum. Abby must pass through it to get to the home to visit Sadie. It is also the spot where Andrew leaves notes for C.J. Rachel visits the cemetery twice a day to talk to her former lover, Joe, at his grave site.

New Hampshire

Joanna had left Fulton several years ago and ended up living in New Hampshire. It is there that she met and married Luke. Several of her hospice journal entries focus on people she helped while living there.



Themes and Motifs

Regret

The theme of regret is an important one in the book. As people age, it is common for them to review their lives and most people have some regret about some things.

As the book extends, Stanley has time to think about his marriage and life with Martha. He now can see how controlling he was with her and how he stifled her joy at times. He never really supported her interests such as gardening, but now that she is gone, he reads books about roses and plans to make a garden outside his window at Pine Haven. It is especially poignant that while on her deathbed, Martha was waiting to die until Stanley told her that it was okay to die. When Joanna reminds Stanley of this, he is shocked that he still had that much control over his wife even at the very end of her life.

A very obvious example of regret is the marriage of Ben and Kendra. When they met in college, Kendra had thought that Ben was going to be an attorney so she married him, thinking that she would have a comfortable life. Ben didn't follow through on that plan, opting to manage a movie theater and do magic tricks on the side. Their entire marriage is a disappointment to her. Ben regrets marrying Kendra because she is so materialistic and self-centered.

Rachel also exhibits regret, as she met Joe later in life, when they were both already married. They ultimately decided not to end their respective marriages and begin again with one another. Rachel's action following her husband's death (moving to Joe's hometown, even though Joe was already dead, just so she could get to know the places he loved better) demonstrates that she likely had regret for not moving forward with her relationship with Joe when she had the chance. She may have also regretted how much of her life she lived without true love, believing that is what she had finally found - and realized what she'd been missing - with Joe.

Redemption

Redemption is an important theme in the book. Redemption occurs in situations where a person sees a way out of a situation or is given another chance at life and happiness. In this book which is filled with life and death, redemption is a natural theme when people review their lives.

Two obvious instances of redemption occur with Joanna and Abby. Joanna is redeemed when Luke saves her from committing suicide. Luke, who is dying, is able to convince Joanna that she can do good in her life, especially helping with hospice patients. Joanna now enjoys that work and is grateful that Luke saved her, giving her a chance to create a better life than the one she had.



Dollbaby's return to Abby is another example of redemption in the story. Dollbaby is all that Abby has to hold on to in her troubled life with her dysfunctional parents. When her mother tells her that Dollbaby is missing and then reported dead, Abby feels like her life is over. All her joy is gone. Fortunately, Sam Lowe, did not euthanize Dollbaby as Kendra had requested and she is able to return to Abby at her birthday party, both of them happy to be reunited.

Fear

Fear is an important theme in the book. In a story about life and death, it would seem natural that fear would be prominent. However, the residents of Pine Haven, who are closer to death than others, really don't seem afraid to die; they simply come to terms with their lives quietly.

Fear resides in the characters who are younger and have more angst. For example, Kendra lives in a disappointing marriage, anticipating a better life with a heart surgeon who flirts with her. When Kendra learns, however, that nothing will ever come of the flirtation, she is instantly panicked. She is afraid to be alone and afraid to build a life on her own passions and interests. The future without a successful man is frightening to the point of paralysis for her.

C.J. is another character who lives with fear. She is afraid that her mother's legacy of committing suicide will claim her too. She lives in fear that she won't be a good mother to her baby and that she won't have the resources to provide what he needs. She remains in a clandestine relationship with Andrew, the baby's father, because he provides money for her and the baby even though she is afraid of his moods. She is afraid of the cemetery but most go there to retrieve secret messages from Andrew. She has put so much trust in a man who just uses her but she is afraid to break away. Ultimately, her fear plays out and the man she loves is the one who kills her.

Loneliness

Loneliness is an important theme in the book. As might be expected in a story about nursing home residents, many of the people have lost their spouses and their children visit rarely, if at all. Many of the people they used to know are now gone, too, so they live on memories and the friendships they're able to cultivate at the home.

Some obvious examples of loneliness include Rachel and Toby. Rachel lived in an unsatisfactory marriage for many years and then found Joe who became the love of her life. They were not able to maintain their relationship, however, and Rachel goes forward in her life until her husband dies. By that time, Joe has also died and Rachel has no children or close family to spend time with. So Rachel, in her loneliness, opts to move to Joe's hometown so she can be close to the things and places he knew during his lifetime. She visits his grave twice a day to talk to him but her life is a study in loneliness.



Toby is another character who is filled with loneliness. Being a lesbian at a time when the world was not tolerant at all of gay people, Toby was never allowed to enjoy a fully loving relationship with another woman. Toby has no family either so she arrived at Pine Haven because she had nowhere else to go.

Death

Death is an important theme in the book. Obviously, the residents at Pine Haven are elderly and moving toward death sooner than some of the other characters. They talk about it but they seem to accept it and are peaceful in their attitudes toward it.

Because of Joanna's work with hospice, death is always prominent in the story. Through her diary she shares the stories of people she has helped and how they faced and managed the end of their lives. Joanna is good to note special things about the people to remember them by, not that they were just more cases in her day.

During the course of the book, there are some people who die. The story begins with resident Lois Flowers, one of the people Joanna helps. Sadie's death has a big impact on others because almost everyone in town knows who she is. And, sadly, C.J. is murdered by her boyfriend at a time which should be one of the happiest of her life. The author wants the reader to know that death comes to everyone and that age is not a factor.

Styles

Point of View

Life after Life is written in the third person omniscient point of view. This means that the author writes the story using third person pronouns such as "she" and "he." The author also has insight into what the characters are thinking which makes it an omniscient view, as opposed to a limited view where only the activities of the characters are reported.

For example, the author writes, "In her work, Joanna has learned the importance of making peace. She sees it all the time, the stubborn child who won't come to the bedside and so the parent lasts far longer than should be asked of anyone. It is painful to watch, and for this reason she feels lucky to have journeyed her way back to this place." Joanna's observations and thoughts are revealed to the reader as opposed to just saying that sometimes stubborn children won't come to see their dying parents.

In contrast, Joanna's journal entries are written in the first person point of view. The entries are written as if Joanna is speaking directly to the reader. For example, she writes, "It seemed his breathing was a little bit faster whenever David leaned close and twice he moved his finger along my wrist where a watch would be if I wore one. He always said I needed to wear one so that I will never ever miss anything again, but I will always miss him. Every day I will speak to him. Every day I will remember."

Language and Meaning

Because Life after Life is set in modern day, the language is current for the times. The author uses 21st century terminology and euphemisms in narration and dialogue to show authenticity. The author uses things like current movies and pop culture icons so that the modern day audience can relate to them.

The author also keeps the language authentic to the characters. For example, Stanley who has adopted an obnoxious persona as an act says, "We got some new mares in the stable," he told Ned recently, and waved his arm around the dining room, his pointed finger stopping to rest on that woman from Boston--Rachel Silverman. "There's a tough broad," he said, and resisted when Ned tried to shush him. "We got 'em all here on the ranch. A couple of high-stepping ponies, a hell of a lot of nags gone to glue, but that new one's got some fire in her, haunches like a sack mule, but you can't have it all now, can you?"

Structure

The structure of a novel usually takes one of four forms: character, milieu, event or idea. And while a story can contain all four forms, one usually predominates. Life after Life



takes the structure of a character form. These types of novels tend to show the personal growth of characters as the story extends. A character structure shows transformation as being important as opposed to an event story which is more concerned with what a character does. It is easy to identify a character structure novel because there comes a point in the story when the main character reaches a point of frustration with life or a set of circumstances that are no longer acceptable for personal growth. The character then decides on changes, both small and dramatic, that will move the character's life in a different direction. The story concludes then when the character has resolved his or her issues and feels satisfied with the transformation or decides to stay in the current situation.



Quotes

Keep us close," he said. "Keep us alive. Don't ever let us disappear.
-- Luke (Joanna paragraph 1)

Importance: Joanna started to keep her notebook at the urging of her husband, Luke, who was terminally ill. He wanted to be kept alive in her memory and she promised she would keep the diary for him and she continues the practice with everyone she helps transition in the hospice center.

The longest and most expensive journey you will ever make is the one to yourself.
-- Joanna (Joanna paragraph 2)

Importance: To Joanna, it is important to capture the essence of people in her diary but she struggles with trying to make sense of the random pattern of her own life. But all the events and things that happen to you are part of your story that lead up to fully understanding who you are.

People get old, but in the eyes they might as well be eight--always they are about eight--and so Sadie is well-versed in eight-year-old fear. She knows the heart of eight-year-olds and believes when all is said and done and hard times come, that's how old we are in the heart--forever eight years old.
-- Sadie (Sadie paragraph 3)

Importance: Sadie is a former school teacher who taught third grade so she is familiar with their capabilities and development at that stage. Through her life, Sadie has witnessed that people respond to most events in their life as though they were seeing them through their eight-year-old selves, regardless of how old they get. According to Sadie, everything can be reduced to an eight-year-old's perspective to see the real truth of life.

Do you believe in ghosts? Do you believe in the power of magic? Do you believe that a normal ordinary girl can disappear right before your eyes?
-- Joanna (Joanna paragraph 1)

Importance: Joanna used to do magic tricks with her friend, Ben, and she remembers these words now as they relate to the people who are dying and otherwise disappearing from her life.

I'm their mirror," he said. "And they always come back for one more look.
-- Willis Hall (Notes About Willis Morgan Hall paragraph 1)

Importance: Joanna has captured the last days of Willis Hall and learns the secret of why his former wives and girlfriends remained in amicable relationships with him. He states that it was his silence which was his mirror. By being quiet, he allowed the



women to see themselves without criticism, engendering love and feelings of affection for him.

I'm telling you that you can look at a person and most likely see all you need to know.
-- Toby (Toby paragraph 1)

Importance: Toby is a no-nonsense person who has very definite ideas about people and how they should behave. She prides herself in being a good reader of people and that most people share information about themselves even without uttering a word.

A big change I notice in myself now is that I have no fear and it feels good. It is comforting. It is as close to religion as I likely have ever been. This readiness, this satisfaction, this love.

-- Rachel (Rachel paragraph 2)

Importance: Rachel talks to Joe at the cemetery, telling him that she is happy and filled with love. It is sad that she is in love with a man who was never truly hers, yet she feels more content at his grave than she did in her marriage to her husband.

You sat there and cried, remember? Cried like a two-year-old." "Yes, I remember," Ned says, his voice a little louder, jaw clenched. "And I remember how you just sat there.

-- Stanley and Ned (Stanley paragraph 5)

Importance: Stanley tries to humiliate Ned by bringing up the fact that he cried so hard when his mother died in the hopes that Ned will leave him alone. This time, though, Ned doesn't shrink away and responds that he thought his father didn't show enough emotion. It is after this push back from Ned that Stanley feels that his plan to alienate Ned is failing miserably.

Our whole marriage has been about me making the decisions," he said when asked to help her, to give her permission to go. "Do you really mean she can't die without me telling her to?

-- Stanley (Notes About: Martha Marie Anderson Stone paragraph 4)

Importance: As Martha is near death, Joanna encourages him to tell her that it is okay for her to go because it is clear that she is holding on for a sign. Stanley is incredulous that his wife needs his permission to die and it finally occurs to him what a hold he has had over her all their married life.

Sadie?" she whispers. "Sadie? Are you awake? Please wake up.

-- Abby (Abby paragraph 1)

Importance: Abby is devastated because she has learned that Dollbaby has been hit by a car and already buried by a farmer. She doesn't get the comfort she wants from her parents so she runs to Pine Haven to see Sadie. Unfortunately, Sadie has died in her sleep but Abby is unaware of this. When she soon finds out, Abby's world will be doubly devastated at the loss of another important person in her life.



This has all gotten out of hand," he says. "I'm the one in charge. I call the shots. I leave the notes. I decide how much money when. You're a risk.

-- Andrew (C.J. paragraph 1)

Importance: Andrew has reached the point where he can't trust that his relationship with C.J. won't be revealed. He wants to let her know that she has had no say in anything that happened. He has used her all along and now he kills her.

She never would have chosen to leave.

-- Joanna (Joanna paragraph 1)

Importance: Joanna knows that there is no way that C.J. would have killed herself. Given her past with her mother's suicide, C.J. was very aware of trying to live and not give in to what made her mother take her own life. And because C.J. is a little bit rough, the people in town are not surprised that her life ended in this way. Joanna is a true friend and will know forever that C.J. had no part in ending her own life.