

Little Children Study Guide

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Plot Summary

"Little Children" tells the story of a group of adults who feel trapped in their lives in middle-class American suburbia. The story takes place in a fictional town called Bellington, Massachusetts. Bellington is considered an quiet, idyllic town, but it is thrown off its axis when Ronnie James McGorvey, a convicted sex offender, moves into town. The story is told in past progressive tense, one character experience at a time.

Todd and Kathy are married with one son, Aaron. He is a stay-at-home dad and is supposed to be studying to take the bar exam for the third time; she is a documentary film maker who is working on a project at the local Veteran's Affairs (VA) hospital. Both adults are miserable in their lives, as Todd doesn't want to take the bar exam and Kathy doesn't want to be the working spouse, yet neither one of them seems to know how to talk that through with one another.

Sarah and Richard are married with one daughter, Lucy. Sarah was a literature major in college but stays at home with Lucy, and Richard is a brand consultant who is addicted to pornography. They've been married for less than four years, but both adults are miserable and looking for ways out of their marriage. Sarah turns to an extramarital affair with Todd, whom she meets at the school playground, and Richard turns to pornography.

Larry is married to Joanie and they have twins, but Larry's story is more about his fight with Ronnie, the convicted child molester who recently moved to town. Larry is a traumatized ex-cop who emotionally and cognitively cannot handle being on the police force. Yet, he fights for justice as a lay-citizen by trying to drive Ronnie out of town. His violent outbursts scare the town and upset his wife, who ultimately leaves him.

Ronnie is alienated from the entire town with the exception of his mother and her best friend Bertha. He goes on one date to satisfy his mother, but after that seems to accept the fact that he has no friends. After his mom dies, he cries on Sarah's shoulder and subsequently admits to killing a young girl several years earlier, a crime for which he was originally cleared.

May is Ronnie's mother. She is elderly and knows that she is ill, even though she hasn't been to a doctor any time in the recent past. She is upset by the town's treatment of Ronnie, especially in regards to Larry. Her response to Larry's treatment of Ronnie - including a lit bag of dog poop on her front step and neon orange graffiti on her driveway - is to support and love her son.

Mary Ann is married to Lewis, though they are minor characters in the novel. Mary Ann represents the judgmental parents who point out to others what they're doing wrong. Mary Ann works hard to keep up appearances of a perfect life, however, by the end of the novel her marriage is on its way to ending.

The adults in "Little Children" are the main characters, despite the title. They deal with unmet expectations, social expectations, feelings of loneliness, anger, and frustration, and work to eliminate feelings of boredom in their lives.

Part One: Decent People Beware

Summary

Part one is titled "Decent People Beware" and it consists of seven chapters.

The first chapter is titled "Bad Mommy," and it takes place at a local playground. The mothers - Mary Ann, Cheryl, Theresa, and Sarah - were talking about how tired they each were. Sarah didn't talk as much as the other wives, and in fact she saw herself as an outsider, instead of being part of the group. While the women talked about movies and their sex lives, their children played on the nearby playground.

Play time turned into snack time on Mary Ann's watch, as she was the mother who kept things moving on a specific timeline, but Sarah forgot to bring her daughter Lucy's snack. Mary Ann pointed out that it was Sarah's second time that week forgetting Lucy's snack, however she still shared some of her child's snack with Lucy.

The narrator describes how Sarah never thought she'd end up living in Suburbia with people who do as they believe social convention tells them to do. Sarah saw the chain of events that led her to the playground as starting when she was a feminist in college and had volunteered at the Rape Crisis Hotline, among other socially-conscientious activities. She even had an affair with a Korean-American woman named Amelia, yet that lasted just a few months before Amelia ended it, citing medical school as the reason.

After college Sarah completed graduate school. She worked at Starbucks, which felt demoralizing but necessary. After two seasons of working at Starbucks, Richard walked in one morning and asked her if she was having as bad a day as he was, and Sarah thought it to be the kindest thing anyone had said to her in months. They later married and had Lucy, their only child.

The second chapter is titled "The Skateboarders" and focuses primarily on Todd. He was nearing the end of his third set of 100 push-ups when his wife Kathy called, leaving a message on their answering machine that she would be late getting home. He was annoyed with his wife, but exhilarated from the exercise. Kathy was a documentary film maker. Todd stayed home during the day with their three-year-old son Aaron and studied for the bar exam on weeknights.

Todd liked being Aaron's dad and spending his time with his son. Aaron was a generally happy kid who liked to wear his jester cap all day and night, but Todd felt that Aaron cared more for Kathy than he did for him.

Todd liked studying for the bar exam on weeknights because it got him out of the house. Each night when he went to the library to study, Todd watched at a distance a group of skateboarders. Todd wanted to learn how to skateboard so he could eventually teach Aaron, but the skateboarders didn't acknowledge his presence.



When Todd was a child, he had been throwing snowballs at cars on the day his mother died. From that point on it was just him and his father. They didn't talk about Todd's mother's death. Instead, Todd did what he thought his dead mother and quickly-remarried father wanted, which was for Todd to do exceptionally well in the classroom and on the playing field. It wasn't until Todd was married with his own children that he realized what the lack of processing his mother's death had done to his psyche.

The third chapter is titled "The Prom King," and it takes place at the playground. The same mothers from chapter one were back at the playground, discussing the fact that a child molester, Ronnie James McGorvey, had just moved to town. Someone had distributed flyers declaring "DECENT PEOPLE BEWARE!!!" and "THERE IS A PERVERT AMONG US!" Their discussion broke up when Todd arrived across the playground with Aaron.

The group of mothers called Todd The Prom King because of his striking good looks. Mary Ann offered Sarah \$5 if she could get his phone number. Sarah approached Todd and Aaron at the swingset and the two had a normal conversation. To get a rise out of the mothers, Sarah and Todd gave each other a tight hug that quickly turned into an intense kiss. Sarah reported back to the mothers that his name is Todd, as though nothing had happened.

Chapter four is titled "The Committee of Concerned Parents," which is what Larry called himself in his efforts to get Ronnie removed from the community. In this chapter, Todd is back home with Aaron, who had recently discovered his penis. He played with it while watching television, though it was of little concern to Kathy and Todd, as they figured self-exploration at that age was normal. Kathy was more concerned about her and Todd, but he assured her there was nothing to worry about.

For the next several days, Todd looked for Sarah at the playground, but she wasn't there. The other mothers were snarky with him when he asked where she was. He replayed the kiss regularly and wished she would show up either at the Town Pool or at the playground.

One night, as Todd watched the skateboarders, Larry called to him from afar. He had Todd join him in his van. They talked about the fact that Ronnie was living in their town, and then Larry made sure Todd joined his football team, called The Guardians since it was all ex- and present cops. Todd had played football in high school, and he liked the thought of being among men, doing something physical. The other guys on the team were somewhat hesitant, but they kept him on the team anyhow.

After football practice, Todd and Larry went out for drinks. Larry's mood darkened as he told Todd why he was no longer a police officer; he had shot a 13-year-old kid whom Larry thought was carrying a real, loaded gun through a populated mall. The gun had turned out to be a toy, but Larry's shot killed the boy, and he was never able to move past the incident. His wife wanted him to find another job, but Larry didn't want to do anything except to be a cop. When the men were done with their drinks, Larry took Todd by Ronnie's house. He had a stack of anti-Ronnie flyers and a roll of tape in the car.



When Todd arrived home, he told Kathy he had joined the Committee of Concerned Parents to explain why he was so late getting home. She was wearing a semi-sheer camisole that excited Todd, and since they hadn't had sex in more than three weeks he was hoping she was in the mood. However, Kathy didn't want to move Aaron out of their bed.

Chapter five is titled "Blueberry Court" and focuses on Ronnie, the convicted sex offender who recently moved to the town of Bellington to live with his mother, May. She tried to convince Ronnie to try dating via the personal ads. May blamed Ronnie's problems on his father, who was a mean drunk to his entire family.

Bertha went to May's house to visit; she brought with her some wine coolers, which she called fruit juice. May and Bertha met in the waiting room of the county jail as both their sons were awaiting trial. They bonded over each of them having a son behind bars. The two remained friends, and May appreciated the company. At May's house, Bertha asked who had spray-painted May's driveway. May wasn't aware of the spray-paint, and she didn't know what it said, but she was horrified. Bertha helped her finish Ronnie's personal ad; she thought that adding the word handsome made it worth reading.

Chapter six is titled "Red Bikini" and focuses on Sarah. She wanted to go for a walk with Jean, her newly retired neighbor. However, Sarah had to wait for Richard to be done in his office so he would watch Lucy. In the meantime, Sarah tried on bathing suits Jean had convinced her to order.

As Sarah tried on the swim suits, she thought of the boy she liked in high school. She had pined for him for months before they finally talked at a dance. Sarah liked the kissing, but she was embarrassed when he put his hand up her shirt and she stopped him when he tried to put his hand up her skirt. The next day, the boy acted like nothing had happened.

After trying on all the suits that had come in the mail, Sarah chose the red bikini as the one she liked the best. Jean and Lucy liked it, too, but Richard didn't say a word about it when he came downstairs from his office.

Chapter seven is titled "Where the Hell Have You Been?" Larry's flyers had turned the town against Ronnie. Todd became angrier the more he learned about Ronnie, especially that he was accused of kidnapping and murdering a nine-year-old girl in 1995. He was never convicted of the crime, but the town of Bellington remained convinced that Ronnie had committed the murder.

The mayor of Bellington called a town meeting, where citizens were allowed to voice their concerns about Ronnie living on Blueberry Court. The Guardians were present at the meeting, and while Todd waited for it to start he thought about how Kathy had responded to his news that he was on a football team. He told her that he needed something physical in his life, and she responded without much interest or fanfare. Todd knew their relationship was in trouble, but he didn't see how it would change without him passing the bar exam. He thought instead about being a cop or a fireman.



Todd hadn't seen Sarah in a month, but he still kept an eye out for her at the pool and other places around town. He almost didn't recognize her when they saw each other at the town meeting, but when their eyes met their attraction hadn't faded. Todd attempted to follow Sarah out of the auditorium, but one of his teammates didn't want him leaving the town meeting.

Todd rode with Larry, but before either of them went home Larry dropped off a bag of dog feces that he lit on fire on Ronnie's doorstep. His mother answered the door, however, and after watching the fire for a few seconds calmly closed the door.

Analysis

The first section of "Little Children" sets the stage for the rest of the novel. Each of the major and minor players and plot-lines are introduced.

The title of the section speaks to the catalyst of the disarray which occurs in the novel, which is the fact that a child molester moved into town. However, the reader should note that it is also tongue-in-cheek, because the decent people to whom the title refers are full of secrets too.

One of the author's major points in the novel is that nothing is as it seems, and at first glance the residents of Bellington seem completely decent and normal. However, once the reader learns that one man is addicted to internet pornography, two characters have an illicit affair, and the mothers are catty to one another, the idea of decency no longer remains. Conflict abounds, both internally and externally. The reader may note that external conflict increases throughout the novel while internal conflict decreases steadily until the last section, when it quickly escalates and ultimately aids in the characters' final decisions about what their lives are going to be.

The backgrounds of several characters are given through flashbacks, and each time shows that each character, at one point in his or her past, had a concrete plan for where he or she wanted his or her life to go. Whether it was academia, wealth, or love, each character is presented as having known their intended direction. It seems to be marriage that throws each character off. For example, the following: Sarah feels trapped in her marriage with Richard, and vice versa; Kathy feels disappointed with Todd and he feels like he can't meet her standards; and Mary Ann felt passionate until the love of her life broke up with her and she married an average guy. The reader should note that American suburbia is not the enemy to these characters, it is only the setting. The real enemy, as presented in the first section, is being trapped in who they've made themselves out to be.

Mary Ann is present only in this first section as well as briefly in the last, yet her presence is imperative to the novel. She represents the social expectation the other mothers hold themselves to, the very one Sarah bucks against. It is Mary Ann's watchful eye that intimidates the other mothers yet empowers Sarah, as her desire to throw her life off course is only exacerbated by Mary Ann's self-righteousness.



Sarah's boredom with her life is obvious from the first paragraph, since she has to think of herself as an anthropologist instead of a participating member of the moms group. Her brazenness with Mary Ann and eventually Todd lets the reader know that she is someone who wants her life to be different - just as the others do - and is not afraid to let some of her desires show, especially since her husband pays her no mind. Sarah's sarcasm and not-so-subtle passive aggressiveness shows the reader - and the other characters - that Sarah is a woman who is self-aware enough to know that her life is both not what she wants, and not as perfect as it looks from the outside. The author's description of her, her words, and her thoughts give the reader some foreshadowing into the fact that she will initiate the affair with Todd. At the playground during their first meeting, she initiates the hug, and she doesn't pull away from the kiss. She also doesn't apologize for it, and the way she carries on by buying a new, sexy bathing suit tells the reader that she will be pursuing more than just a one-time kiss.

Todd's experience as a father seems to be what saves him from going crazy before he begins his relationship with Sarah, likely because with Aaron, Todd feels needed and worthy of the boy's love. With Kathy, Todd feels like a burden and a disappointment, two experiences that would make his marriage less enjoyable, which would naturally lead to an affair with a woman who fulfilled Todd's need to be valued by a woman. Though Aaron valued Todd, it's a different kind of valuing from a son than from a peer whom Todd finds desirable.

Todd's involvement in the football team is likely for the same reason, so he can feel valued by his peers. He is also feeling like a failure, and seeing as how football is something Todd has always been good at, he can get on the field and reasonably assume that he will be successful.

Larry's actions can be seen through multiple lenses, such as that of a concerned parent, a traumatized individual, or a depressed alcoholic who also happens to be an ex-cop. To see Larry as simply a concerned parent would be accurate, since he has two children whom he feels obligated to protect from a known child molester, as any parent would. The fact that a child molester is close to his twins would send him, as a concerned parent, to a point of worry. Though Larry's actions may seem extreme, one could say he is simply passionate about protecting his children.

To view Larry's actions as though they are the result of a traumatized brain is also plausible. A person who has been traumatized and has not emotionally healed from said trauma oftentimes has difficulty dealing with everyday emotions, such as sadness, anger, or even joy, in a socially acceptable manner. Larry's extreme actions in regards to Ronnie could be seen as the actions of a man who cannot appropriately handle his emotions due to a disconnect created as a the result of a trauma. The same could be said for viewing Larry as a depressed alcoholic who also happens to be an ex-cop; he cannot properly handle his emotions, so he drinks, but, being an ex-cop, has knowledge of intimidation tactics that he's not afraid to use.



Discussion Question 1

Why might the author have chosen to focus most of the first section on Sarah and Todd?

Discussion Question 2

What are some indications of Larry's sense of entitlement, despite the fact that he's not the community's favorite cop?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sarah seem more apologetic to the mothers than to Lucy when she forgets Lucy's snack?

Vocabulary

anthropologist, swaggered, piteous, diaphragm, syntax, flagellants, sullen, inexplicably, plaintively, magisterial, incorrigible, dubiously, consternation, luminous

Part Two: Madam Bovary

Summary

Part Two is titled "Madam Bovary," which is a classic piece of literature about a woman who has multiple adulterous affairs and lives well beyond her means in order to escape what she views as an exceptionally boring life with her doctor husband. Part Two has five chapters.

The first chapter in the section, titled "Sex Log," is primarily focused on Richard, Sarah's husband. He had been addicted to internet porn for more than a year when he mail-ordered a pair of used panties from the only porn site he ever visited, sluttykay.com. He knew it was pointless for him to try and resist his urges, as he believed it was ridiculous for a man to be at war with his own desires.

Richard knew he was neglecting his work and family on account of sluttykay.com, but he felt he couldn't help it. He didn't agree with some of her sexual practices, but appreciated the thousands of photographs of her on the website. His order of the panties were an attempt to materialize Kay and move along his arousal so he could return to his wife and daughter, who he knew were always downstairs waiting for him.

Richard's first marriage had been wrong from the start. He and Peggy married because Peggy had gotten pregnant with twins. After almost twenty years Richard felt trapped in his lifestyle. He had a long-term affair with a client's receptionist who revealed the affair to Peggy as retaliation for Richard not remembering her birthday for a second year in a row. Richard and Peggy stayed together for two more years, until their daughters graduated from high school, during which they were amicable and calm toward one another.

Presently, Richard opened the panties and read the sex log, which supposedly detailed the day Kay wore the undies in Richard's hand. He thought about Sarah and how he genuinely liked her when they got together. She had gotten pregnant within the first year of their marriage, and Richard was disappointed that Lucy was a girl. Their sex life stalled, and it was about then that Richard started looking around on swingers websites. At the conclusion of the chapter, Sarah walked in and caught him with the panties covering his face.

The next chapter, titled "Electrical Storm," is about the start of Sarah and Todd's affair. The opening scene details the first time they were intimate with one another. Sarah didn't feel guilty about it; Todd did, though not heavily. The week before, Sarah had gone to the pool with her new red bikini and, acting as though it were a blind move, sat herself and Lucy next to Todd and Aaron. She asked Todd to put sunscreen on her back, which aroused them both. They sat together every day, talking to one another and playing with their children in the pool.



The following Wednesday, a heat wave had moved in for the previous three days, so the pool was packed. Ronnie the child molester showed up, at which point every parent demanded their child exit the pool. Ronnie kept swimming for about five minutes until police asked him to leave on account of creating a stir. Before leaving the area, he made sure to yell to the people at the pool that he was only trying to cool down. After he left, there was a mass re-entry into the pool by children and parents.

The merriment lasted a couple minutes until the lifeguards ordered everyone out on account of an electrical storm. Todd offered to walk Sarah and Lucy home with Lucy in the stroller and Sarah holding on to Big Bear. Sarah had Todd and Aaron stay at her house during the storm and while Lucy and Aaron finished their naps.

The third chapter in Part Two is titled "Night Game" and focuses on Todd and Larry. The Guardians had their first game since Todd joined the team, and he was a nervous wreck. He tried talking to Kathy about it, but she was uninterested. The two talked about housework and dinner as Todd thought about why he was having an affair with Sarah since Kathy treated him so well. Kathy didn't want to go to work because of a depressing story she was filming.

Todd and Aaron continued going to the Town Pool every day, as did Sarah and Lucy. Todd's attraction to Sarah surprised him most days, but it never waned. Sarah was insecure about her appearance, but Todd reassured her regularly. The day of Todd's first football game, he asked if they could take a break so he could focus on football. The two talked about their high school experiences and eventually had sex.

The Guardians' opponents for opening night were The Auditors, accountants from around town. The game started roughly, as the Auditors were a physically aggressive team. The rest of the football game went just as harshly, with the Auditors being extremely physically aggressive, with the Auditors winning by a landslide. Simultaneously, at home, Kathy called her mom to wonder out loud about Todd, as she sensed something wasn't quite right. Marjorie, Kathy's mom, insisted he was having an affair and that she should come visit to keep an eye on him.

Kathy felt guilty about calling her mother to complain about Todd. She knew she wasn't upset about the football, that it was more about the fact that the football team had made Todd so obviously happy, which in turn made Kathy feel full of shame and sadness that she had put Todd under a certain kind of pressure that he was never up for. But it was knowing Todd would eventually become a successful lawyer was what got her through the days she hated.

After the Guardians' loss, the team went out for drinks. The guys were treating Todd with a new respect and he soaked it up. After most of the guys had left, Todd and Larry remained. Larry's mood went sour as he confessed that his wife left him, an event for which he took full responsibility. On the guys' way home, the subject turned to Ronnie; Todd mentioned he had recently been at the Town Pool to swim, which caused Larry to turn his van toward Ronnie's mother's house.



Back home, Kathy thought about college. She had dated quite a bit until she fell in love with a guy named Jay, but he broke up with her because she was too tall; he didn't want to get laughed at. Two months later she was in a sociology lecture about gender expectations and conflict. Todd was the only man to raise his hand when the professor asked if any men would be willing to be a stay-at-home dad/husband.

When Larry and Todd arrived at Ronnie's house in the middle of the night, May answered. She told the men to leave her son alone, but Larry kept antagonizing her. When Ronnie came to the door, Larry spit in his face and threatened him to stay away from the pool.

The fourth chapter in Part Two is "Book Group" and is about Sarah's participation in Jean's book group. She had decided to go after spying on Todd and learning what his wife looked like. The group was discussing "Madame Bovary." The first time Sarah read the novel, she was bored and didn't identify with the main character. This time, she related to the character of Madame Bovary and found more in the text than she had before.

Sarah had expected the club to be stuffy and snobby, but found it to be quite the opposite. She appreciated the company of intelligent women until Mary Ann showed up, at which point Sarah felt as though her night was ruined. The women discussed the novel and what themes they saw in the narrative. Mary Ann judged Sarah for her outlook on the novel, but Sarah was not afraid to voice her opinion.

The final chapter in Part Two is "Dream Date" and is about Ronnie's first - and only - date in the novel. A woman named Sheila answered his personal ad, and the two went on a date. They made little small talk at the restaurant. The narrator focuses on Sheila for a short time and a bit of her past is learned. She was a perfectly healthy individual until she had some sort of mental breakdown. Since then, she had been on medication which made her brain foggy. After paying for the meal - and wishing Ronnie would have said thank-you for it - Ronnie had Sheila drive to the playground, where he masturbated in the front seat as they sat in the car. Afterward, she drove him home.

Analysis

The chapters in Part Two are about the activities the characters engage in that are meant to distract them from what they see as boring lives, which is likely why it is titled, "Madame Bovary," as that is the basis for the classic novel.

For Richard, the fact that he mail-orders panties that come with a sex log suggests that he is lonely not just for sexual companionship but for genuine human connection. He ordered the panties to feel a tangible connection to Slutty Kay because the intangible connection through the computer screen isn't doing anything for him anymore. Sarah hasn't been enough for him since their sex life stalled after Lucy was born, and since human connection is a basic need Richard feels he isn't getting from his wife, he's



turning to another woman. Even though Slutty Kay is across a screen, he feels a connection to her that is meeting his sexual needs.

Richard's addiction to pornography can be viewed through several lenses. One, the addiction can be seen as an escape from his marriage, since Sarah doesn't satisfy him either emotionally or sexually. Two, the addiction can be seen as an illness born of an emotional void. Third, the addiction can be seen as an inevitable piece of his personality since neither his first wife nor Sarah were satisfactory to him.

The start of Sarah and Todd's affair had been alluded to in the first section, with their hug and subsequent kiss, as well as Sarah's purchase of a sexy new bathing suit. Sarah's lack of guilt for the affair shows the reader that she was in the same emotional place Richard was in, in regards to their relationship, they just chose to handle their crumbling marriage in different ways.

The author's characterization of Sarah sets her up for an affair. She is a woman who has never felt as though she belonged with anyone for any long period of time. Her low self-esteem in regards to her looks, the way she remembers rejections from earlier relationships, and the way she sees herself as an outsider in the mom's group all suggest that she is desperate to belong and to feel desired, especially by someone who, under normal circumstances, she would consider to be out of her league. Though Todd's interest in her and their affair doesn't improve Sarah's self-concept in regards to her beauty, it seems to bolster her confidence and her sense of acceptance of her life. After Sarah and Todd start their affair, she seems more patient with Lucy and more willing to do the menial tasks she had before seen as inconsequential.

Todd and Larry's involvement in football is a continued sense of accomplishment and belonging for the both of them. Todd's need for something physical in life, as well as reinforcement that he's not a loser, is fulfilled on the football field. Similarly, Larry's need for acceptance and purpose is fulfilled on the football field. The fact that the Guardians lose their first game is not a surprise, given how tough their first opponents are. The author also suggests some disorganization in the team, especially since they had trouble finding a quarterback. Yet, the fact that they played their hearts out still matters to the men on the team.

Larry's second sense of purpose comes with trying to humiliate Ronnie and run him out of town. He seems to see himself as a community vigilante, especially since he can no longer be a cop. In his mind, Larry is able to blame Ronnie for his anger since it's his presence that gets Larry all riled up. However, Ronnie's presence is simply the most obvious target of Larry's anger. He's also angry with himself for ruining his marriage and his career. However, pointing his anger inward is a responsibility that seems too overwhelming for Larry. Instead, he finds an external target - football field, Larry - and expresses his anger that way.

Kathy's characterization is an example for the reader of why an omniscient narrator is beneficial. The shame she feels for putting Todd under a certain kind of pressure may be intended so that the reader may feel sympathy toward Kathy. The fact that Todd is



having an affair is tied to the idea that his wife isn't giving him what he needs. If the reader can see that she wants a good marriage and notices her part in making it less-than-mediocre, she might work to make it better, thus giving Todd less of a reason to continue his affair.

Sarah's decision to join the book club after seeing Kathy is a logical decision. The fact that she went to Todd's house in a covert fashion suggests that she is playing the part of an undercover voyeur; she wants to know how Todd lives and pretend that she's part of it, if even for a short period of time. After seeing that Todd's wife is gorgeous, her already-low self-concept was pushed even lower, and she feels shattered, wondering why Todd would ever want to be with her if he has a goddess in his bed every night. Her withdrawal from Lucy and Richard is inevitable, since the anger and shame she likely feels is strong enough that she wants to be alone, or at least in a different environment than the life she has been trying to escape, hence the book club.

The topic of the book club is also likely a factor in Sarah's desire to join. Since the book of the month is about a woman having an affair to escape her boring life, Sarah would be able to speak from experience without having to explicitly state that she's speaking from experience; all she has to let the women know is that it's her second time reading the novel, and since she was a literature major in college, her fervor for the text would likely be attributed to that.

Mary Ann's presence during the point where Sarah is covertly open about her current situation is meaningful. Though continually under the watchful eye of a judgmental small town, which Mary Ann represents, Sarah is desperate enough to be desired that nothing can deter her from moving forward with what she wants.

Ronnie's role in the second part of the novel is about him half-trying to assimilate himself back into a community. Going to the pool is his way of trying to be a regular citizen of a town, a normal part of society. The fact that he's not surprised about being asked to leave suggests that he understands the discomfort others feel in his presence, and he's not willing to overtly create a stir in the town. He's not willing to stay hidden in his mom's house for fear of offending people, but he's also not willing to make his grand entrance loud and obvious; rather, he seems to want a nondescript reentry. His date was simply to please his mother, and the way he masturbated at the conclusion of the date suggests at least three things: one, he is not ready to assimilate into society; two, he has an extreme disregard for social convention; and three, his psycho-sexual illness is real.

Discussion Question 1

What actions does Sarah intentionally take to make sure she and Todd start an affair?



Discussion Question 2

Todd doesn't think Sarah would take it as a compliment that he thinks he would happy having sex with her when they are old and droopy. Why else, maybe subconsciously, might Todd decide not to share that thought with Sarah?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does Larry act like an injured party when he visits Ronnie at his mother's house?

Vocabulary

complicity, illicit, boilerplate, paradoxically, idyll, trudging, tedium, interlude, gambits, unrepentant, dialectical, lithe

Part Three: Lovebirds

Summary

Part 3 is titled "Lovebirds" and consists of four chapters. The section is about the various states of the romantic relationships between Todd and Sarah, Todd and Kathy, and Larry and his wife present in the novel.

The first chapter in Part 3, "Truants," is about Todd and Sarah's plan to have a day to themselves under the guise of Todd going to his first day of the bar exam. He acted nervous that morning and told Kathy not to get her hopes up that he would pass the exam.

Instead of taking part one of the bar exam, Sarah picked up Todd at the train station and the two headed to the beach. They also got a hotel room for some intimacy time. Todd felt guilty at first but, as it was a beautiful sunny day without a cloud in the sky, his guilt was stifled. Sarah was happy to be alone with Todd on their first real date. At the hotel Sarah asked Todd to give her a real chance, that she wouldn't put as much pressure on him as Kathy did.

Todd felt the day had been a success, as he had replaced feeling completely dejected by the exam with feeling elated and relaxed with the woman he was dating. Inwardly, he compared Sarah to Kathy, thinking about how in many ways, he much preferred Sarah to Kathy. He especially appreciated the way Sarah took an interest in his life experiences.

That evening, Kathy was talkative at the dinner table and offered to have sex when they got to bed. Todd refused, claiming he needed to conserve his energy for day two of the test. When Todd returned the following day from supposedly taking the test, he looked exhausted and worn down, stating the test went horribly. Later that night, Kathy asked Todd to tell her about Sarah.

The next chapter, "Church on Sunday," focuses mostly on Larry, who was advised by his lawyer to attend St. Rita's Catholic Church in order to look good to the court when Larry and his wife go for their divorce and custody hearings. The lawyer also suggested that he find a job or go to school to learn a new skill, but Larry insisted he would rather spend his time keeping an eye on Ronnie McGorvey.

The narrator tells the reader how Larry and his wife, Joanie, met a little more than ten years previously at a bar during a Miss Nipples Contest, in which Joanie was competing. The two slept together that night. Despite their actions indicating otherwise, both Larry and Joanie considered themselves to be good Catholics. Larry drifted from his faith, more so as time went on, while Joanie's only increased with time, especially during their trying to conceive. They fought over their views on God regularly, and after



one particularly intense argument, Larry realized it was never the same between them from that moment on.

The chapter focus switches to Ronnie, who spent most of his time with his mother. The two watched a movie at May's command, though all Ronnie could think about was getting a computer. May made a comment about being gone sooner than he thought, which unnerved Ronnie.

The following morning, Larry reluctantly went to church. He saw his family there, and his sons' faces lit up upon seeing him. Joanie sat with the boys near the front, while Larry stayed near the back. He took advantage of sitting in the rear of the church to admire her looks from afar. However, partway through the service he realized Ronnie was sitting near his children. Though he tried to distract himself, it didn't work. He disrupted mass, yelling threats and obscenities at Ronnie, eventually dragging Ronnie out of the church by his ear. Next thing he knew, Ronnie was on the ground, though Larry couldn't remember anything but a flash of anger.

The following chapter is titled "Reasons It Might Be True," and is all about Richard, Sarah, and Lucy's dinner visit to Todd, Kathy, and Aaron's house. Kathy was uncomfortable with Todd spending so much of his time with another woman, so she wanted to meet Sarah. Once they met, Kathy was immediately un-intimidated, as she knew Sarah wasn't Todd's type.

Sarah was complimentary of Kathy, yet Kathy remained uncomfortable with Todd's secrecy and denial about knowing Sarah. It wasn't until Sarah used a certain relationship-like tone with Todd that she thought there might have been something going on between the two of them.

The last chapter in Part 3 is titled "Bullhorn" and is mainly about the Guardians' football game. Todd's mother-in-law had been watching him like a hawk, and so he hadn't had substantial contact with Sarah in about five days - since before their dinner - and felt as though he would go crazy if he didn't see or talk to her soon.

The Guardians' game was their season finale and it was against the Controllers. Todd was surprised to see Larry so ready to play, given the fact that he had faced a great deal of media scrutiny over the incident at St. Rita's. The game ended up being an evenly matched affair right up until the last seconds of the game, when Todd scored the winning touchdown. Then, to his delighted surprise, when he looked up into the stands, Sarah was waving down at him.

Instead of spending time after the game with his teammates, Todd went to Sarah. Before Larry left, Todd took a moment to warn Larry to stay away from Ronnie's to keep himself out of trouble.

Larry ended up at the bar alone after his teammates left, and going on the feedback he had received from citizens of Bellington, claiming he did the right thing by hurting Ronnie at the church, Larry made his way over to Ronnie's neighborhood. Once there, he made bold declarations about Ronnie through a bullhorn, calling him a murderer and



a pervert. One of the men who lived on the same street came to quiet Larry down, telling him he was scaring the children. May tried to wrestle away the bullhorn from Larry, and ended up falling to the ground and shaking uncontrollably.

Sarah and Todd lay on the 50-yard line. They talked about how difficult it was to be away from one another that week and how they wanted to make sure it never happened again.

Analysis

The significance of the section title, "Lovebirds," lies in the fact that even though some of the relationships - such as Richard's relationship with Slutty Kay (Carla) and Sarah and Todd's affair - are illicit and secretive, each individual in their respective relationships feels genuine affection toward their counterparts. The title may also be tongue-in-cheek in regards to Larry's attitude toward Ronnie.

Sarah and Todd's secret day at the beach is a testament to how far they are willing to take their relationship. Not thinking - or not caring - that they might run into someone they know at the train station, not even making themselves to look any different, and not giving themselves much time between when Kathy dropped him off and Sarah picked him up, are all indications that Sarah and Todd are comfortable enough in their relationship that it's second-nature to them. They know it's a secret from their spouses, though mostly from Kathy than from Richard since he's never home anyway. Other than that, however, they seem to feel invincible in their affair. Further proof of such feelings occurs when Todd moves quickly past his guilt as he lies on the beach under a cloudless sky, the perfection of the weather being a juxtaposition for the internal conflict Todd starts to feel in regards to sleeping with Sarah.

A similar comfort in a romantic relationship ironically comes from Kathy in her marriage to Todd. She believes she knows him well enough to know that he would never cheat on her, and feels even more comfortable in that knowledge when she meets Sarah and discovers that Sarah is not her husband's type. It isn't until she notices subtle nuances in the way Sarah and Todd speak to one another that she wonders if the two are having an affair. A person's tone can communicate just as much, sometimes more, than a person's words. In Sarah's admonishing of Todd, Kathy hears her own voice and sees between the two of them a connection that she hadn't seen before. Her ability to keep it together as she makes the realization is an example of how the characters in "Little Children" do not easily express their true feelings or desires.

Larry's anger is further explained, as the author details his relationship with his wife and how the two grew differently in their faith and otherwise. When he first meets and marries Joanie, he has a specific picture of who she is and who she will be as they grow old together. When the two drift apart over the next few years, expectations are shattered as Joanie's attitude toward Larry turns to contempt, and Larry begins to go back and forth between anger and withdrawal. Larry is a character who seems to feel



quite alone, but he doesn't want to deal with it so he keeps his anger turned all the way up.

Joanie's side of the story is not explained, so the reader may only base an opinion on Larry's side of the story. However, the text relating to Larry is mostly angry, edgy, and miserable, all traits associated with the ex-cop. Due to his characterization, the reader may understand why Joanie decided to leave Larry.

Ronnie's experience with Larry at church is par for the course for his failure to easily assimilate into mainstream society. He hasn't received any formal help with working his way back into a community, so his lack of success may not be surprising. It is unlikely that he was intentionally trying to torment Larry by smiling in his direction, as Ronnie's character of not wanting to cause big scenes in public places. Larry's anger, however, was at a point of explosion so his reaction to Ronnie being in church near his children may not be a surprise to the reader.

Ronnie's passiveness as a response to Larry's violent removal of Ronnie from church indicates that Ronnie continues to expect disrespect. He may even believe he deserves to be treated as a lesser member of society, given his criminal background and his lack of fighting back when he is shamed by other members of the community.

The victory of the Guardians' football game is perfect timing for Todd and Larry, both of whom feel they need some kind of life-win in order to emotionally survive their current situations. For Larry, he misses his wife but he more misses his children. He feels useless to his community aside from trying to run Ronnie out of town, so helping his teammates win the game is a big accomplishment for Larry and it should, theoretically, give his mood a boost. For Todd, he's had to stay away from Sarah for a week due to his mother-in-law watching his every move, and given that Sarah was the factor in making Todd feel joy, he had been going crazy not being able to talk to her or be intimate with her.

Discussion Question 1

Who seems to be full of a wider array of emotions during their affair, Todd or Sarah?
How can you tell?

Discussion Question 2

How can Todd tell that refusing Kathy's sexual advances is his mistake in accidentally letting her know that he and Sarah are having an affair?

Discussion Question 3

Does the alcohol help or hurt Larry's state of mind in regards to Ronnie? How can you tell?

Vocabulary

penitent, conspiratorial, untoward, exuberance, anarchy, jubilation, incarnation



Part Four: Meet Me At the Playground

Summary

Part 4, titled "Meet Me At the Playground," is also its own chapter, titled "Swing Me." All characters' stories come to a culmination point in this last section of the novel. The characters' stories go back and forth between one another, which is the way they are presented in this summary.

At the beginning of this section, Todd and Sarah planned to start new lives together. They would each write a letter to their respective spouses and leave town for a period of several days, coming back only after the shock of their departure wore off. They planned to run away on Tuesday when Richard returned from California.

Richard was at Beachfest in San Diego, a Slutty Kay Fan Club event he had given into after much deliberation. There, he learned that Kay's real name was Carla.

The culmination of Ronnie's story starts with him having to get to the hospital as quickly as possible to see his mother. The cab driver didn't make small talk, which Ronnie appreciated until he realized it was because the cab driver recognized Ronnie and thought him to be disgusting. Ronnie retaliated by insulting the man's physical appearance.

After Sarah returned home from the pool, she received a call from Richard letting her know he wouldn't be coming home. He was surprised at her calm acceptance of his news, but didn't feel the need to stress himself out about it. She felt the timing to be inconvenient, but was otherwise relieved.

When Ronnie got to the hospital, he was happy to be among people who smiled at him and didn't treat him as though he had no right to be there. When he arrived to the ICU, he learned his mother was dead.

At Beachfest, Richard had one-on-one time with Carla. He wanted to tell her about a business idea for her mail-order panties, but was distracted by a partying gift she brought him which included a picture of their recent day on the beach.

Bertha brought Ronnie home from the hospital because his sister wouldn't let him in her car. Bertha was mad that May had fought off Larry in the middle of the night and because of that, fell and died. Ronnie insisted that he couldn't have done anything about it because of his broken arm. Once back home, he found a note from his mother that read, "Please please be a good boy."

It was Tuesday night. Mary Ann was at home and was having trouble getting her son to go down for his bedtime.



At her house, Sarah gave Lucy a chocolate bar in an attempt to keep the little girl awake, as Lucy was going to have to go with Sarah to the playground to meet Todd since Richard wasn't coming home. Lucy fell asleep by the time Sarah was ready to go meet Todd, but she brought her anyway.

Ronnie was in his house and had no idea what to do next. He tried to stick to his normal routine but had trouble doing so without his mother present. He made a phone call to a woman named Diane, whom he used to call before going to prison and taunt her with, "I know where she is. But I'm never going to tell you." As though his mother were standing right there, Ronnie told her he was going out for awhile.

Mary Ann returned to the living room after putting her son to bed. She and her husband Lewis read their own magazines until Mary Ann approached Lewis about having their weekly date, as in having sex. Lewis said they didn't have to, and that she needed to stop talking about Harvard to their four-year-old son.

Sarah got to the playground a little after nine. She talked to Lucy about Aaron and how someday he might be her step-brother, but Lucy didn't want to hear it. For awhile after their conversation, Sarah pushed Lucy on the swings.

Todd left his house on time, but got sidetracked by the skateboarders at the library. He thought about the previous four days, which were spent mostly with Kathy. At her insistence, the couple spent the weekend at an inn in the Berkshires where they spent their honeymoon. They hiked, swam, and had a lot of sex that pleased Todd in a surprising and delightful way. Kathy admonished him for having a summer fling with Sarah but spent the weekend reminding Todd of how their relationship used to be.

Larry went to Ronnie's house and let himself in when nobody answered. He found Ronnie's mother's note, along with Ronnie's response of "I'M SORRY, MOMMY, I DON'T THINK I CAN."

Sarah continued pushing Lucy in the swing, telling Lucy of what their new life was going to be like. She heard footsteps and assumed it was Todd, but when the man made his face known she realized it wasn't him but rather another familiar face.

Todd continued watching the skateboarders, as he had trouble willing himself to go to Sarah. He thought about the previous two days with Aaron and how difficult they had been. He had reassured Aaron of his love, just to make sure the boy had something happy to look back on. He wrote a long letter to Kathy with a long post-script to Aaron. The skateboarders offered Todd a try on their boards.

Mary Ann went to the playground. She pulled out a cigarette she had stolen earlier from Theresa. She knew her marriage was floundering at best, but she knew that had been inevitable since it hadn't started out that well. She hadn't minded her life until Todd started playing with Aaron at the playground, at which point Mary Ann felt jealous of what her life could have been like had she married someone handsome and whom she was passionate about. As she smoked the cigarette, she saw Sarah and Ronnie on the playground.



Ronnie approached Sarah, who was calm, and asked if he could just talk to her. He cried on her shoulder about his mother's death. Mary Ann asked why Sarah was supporting Ronnie when suddenly Larry arrived.

Todd tried the skateboard but fell hard enough that the skateboarders called 911. Todd insisted he didn't need the help and told the kids to head on home. Before one of them left, Todd posed that he might become a cop someday.

Larry ran toward Ronnie and Sarah and yelled at Ronnie for being on the playground. The air was tense and angry. Ronnie admitted that he killed the girl scout, and the others knew that he was in trouble. All four smoked a cigarette together as Sarah realized that Todd was not coming to the playground, and that her life would not be what she ever thought it would be.

Analysis

The final section of the novel completes each character's story. It is one chapter, instead of being broken up into multiple chapters as the other sections are, which may be a metaphor for the fact that even though the characters' stories contain different details, they are all ultimately trying for the same thing: belonging and resolution.

The conclusion to Sarah and Todd's affair is foreshadowed early in the section. Logistically, Todd is having more difficulty seeing Sarah, since his mother-in-law is constantly in tow. Emotionally, he is having a harder time reconciling his affair with Sarah with his moral compass than he did toward the beginning of their relationship. The closer it gets to him having to commit to Sarah and crumble what he's built with Kathy over the previous years, the harder time he has convincing himself that it's a good idea.

Todd's internal conflict indicates to the reader that Todd had never intended for the affair to be long-term or permanent. Rather, it is an unplanned, tangible escape from his boring life. It is a way for Todd to feel desirable and successful, two things he doesn't feel at home. The fact that Kathy fights for him is likely an eye-opening experience for Todd, since throughout the whole book he thinks that Kathy doesn't respect him or care much about his presence or their marriage anymore. When he learns differently, his affair with Sarah doesn't seem as necessary or right for his future.

Sarah's response to the end of their affair seems to be one of assumption, as in deep down she assumed the affair was going to end and it was going to be ended by Todd. Throughout the novel, Sarah's low self-esteem causes Todd to constantly reassure her of how attractive he finds her. Even though her affair with Todd makes her happier, it does not fix her emotional wound of unworthiness, which is something she had expected to happen. Her own conclusion to the affair is a bitter wishing that she had, indeed, been the kind of person who would live a fairy-tale life.

Richard's decision to stay in California and try to make a life for him out there impacts Sarah in more ways than one. First, she has to keep Lucy, when she had planned to



have Richard take her so Sarah could run away with Todd. And second, Richard's decision at the time he makes it means that he is the one breaking up with Sarah instead of Sarah breaking up with him. Though Sarah knows she is about to end their marriage, it is Richard who does it first; he gets to break up with her, leaving her to be the one who is technically left, instead of being the one who does the leaving. The effect of this on a person's psyche, especially a person who has a history of feeling unworthy, could be that the person feels even more dejected and therefore permanently defective.

Ronnie's admission that he killed the missing girl may not come as a surprise to the reader. Everyone in town assumes he did it, and his denial of involvement in the girl's disappearance is unconvincing. What may be surprising, however, is Larry's reaction to his admission. When the four characters - an unlikely group to begin with - are standing at the playground and Ronnie admits to killing the missing girl, Larry simply tells him that he's in pretty big trouble. Larry had already been violent enough times with Ronnie, and the calm way in which Ronnie divulges the information indicates that he has no intention of running. Going back to prison might even be a relief for Ronnie, since at least there he knows where he belongs. Also, Larry might be out of energy; he has been fighting with his wife, members of the community, and Ronnie for long enough that he just might have lost steam.

The final scene of Larry, Ronnie, Sarah, and Mary Ann gathered around the playground, all smoking a cigarette, has multiple points of significance. For one, each is standing in a circle of his or her greatest nemesis, and especially for Sarah, that was absolutely not who she had planned on being at the playground with. Second, each character is part of a half that is no longer. For Larry, that's his wife; Ronnie, it's his mother; Sarah, it's Todd, and Mary Ann, it's her husband. Third, they all have one trait in common: their desire, yet inability, to belong where they want to belong: Larry can't be a cop and he lost his family; Ronnie lost his mother, the one person who hadn't rejected him; Sarah lost her lover, the one person with whom she felt secure; and Mary Ann lost her marriage, the only thing holding together her image of perfection.

The main characters of "Little Children" are the adults, regardless of the title indicating the narrative is about children. The adults behave as children, though, by acting out their desires without thought or care to the repercussions. And though the impact of the adult's actions on their respective children is not included in the narrative, the reader can assume that the effects of extramarital affairs, explosive anger, violence, and sexual exploitation cannot be positive.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Ronnie addressing his mother as though she were still alive?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the emotions that tie all of the characters together in this final section? How can you tell?



Discussion Question 3

Does the novel end abruptly or gracefully? Defend your answer.

Vocabulary

vehemence, self-deluding, recrimination, transcendent, shortcomings, assignation, jowls, virtuosos, metronomic, cornucopia, convoluted, ungainly, feeble, errant



Characters

Sarah

Sarah is one of the main characters in "Little Children." She is in her early 30s and married with one daughter. Sarah's discontent with her life is apparent in the first chapter when she is obviously bored at the playground, not just with having to watch her daughter play but with having to sit through the dull, predictable conversation among the other mothers.

Sarah's desire for something grand in her life is clear, as is the fact that she wouldn't mind if that grandness, or excitement, is something illicit or dangerous. The fact that she is passive when she catches her husband sniffing mail-order panties suggests she has given up on her current life getting any better. Also, the fact that she so easily stays in the hug with Todd and then comfortably transitions to kissing him - a man whom she had just met not an hour ago - lets the reader know that she is ready to do whatever it takes to change her situation.

Sarah is someone who, while seemingly confident to the other mothers, secretly needs constant encouragement and reassurance. She is confident in her intellect, but is the complete opposite when it comes to her physical appearance. Sarah doesn't like anything about her body and says so to Todd almost every time they are alone together, leaving him to regularly compliment her so she feels more comfortable with him.

Sarah's relationship with her daughter Lucy is not discussed at length. She does not love being a mom, but that seems to be more a byproduct of her desire to live a more exciting life. Sarah seems to believe that if she could be a mom with another husband who made her feel more desirable and less trapped, it would be a better situation. At the conclusion of the novel, when Sarah wholly accepts that from then on she will be a single mother, she seems to do so somewhat willingly, because at least that would be better than being completely alone.

Todd

Todd is another main character in "Little Children." He is married to Kathy and they have one son, Aaron. Todd's missing element in his life is passion. He is supposed to be studying to take the bar exam for the third time. Instead, he joins an adult football league. Though he is somewhat forced into being the quarterback for the Guardians, he doesn't refuse the position, either. The only physical aspect of his life up until then were his daily work-outs, but those were done solo. His sex life with his wife is desolate, which is also one of the reasons he enters into the affair with Sarah.

Todd is lonely for affirmation. His son adores him, but only until Kathy gets home and then Todd feels pushed to the side. Kathy keeps Aaron in the bed at night, so they can't be intimate with one another. Also with Kathy, Todd knows he has let her down by not



passing the bar exam on one of his first two tries. On the football team and with Sarah, Todd receives the affirmation and the value he doesn't find at home.

Todd's friendship with Larry is fairly one-sided. Though Todd is unhappy in his own life, Larry's unhappiness and darkness is so big that Todd needs to be his anchor in order for the relationship to work, which is likely one of the reasons he doesn't talk about his own life when he and Larry spend time together.

Todd sees one of the greatest transformations of all the characters in "Little Children." He goes from being lackluster about his life, surviving each day, to feeling joy and triumph, mostly thanks to Sarah and football. However, even after the season and affair end, Kathy has worked hard enough to reconnect with Todd that he sees a different future with her and Aaron than he did at the beginning of the summer. He is the one whose heart and motivation for the kind of life he wants to live have changed.

Larry

Larry is a third main character, though he is not as much in the forefront as Todd and Sarah. Larry is a retired police officer who does not want to find another career. Therefore, he acts as a civilian cop, though without any of the authority of a real cop, but still working to protect his community.

Larry views Bellington's new resident, Ronnie James McGorvey, as public enemy number one, and makes it his mission throughout the novel to run Ronnie out of town by humiliating him and turning the town against him. Larry is married with twins, and he claims the twins as his reason for trying to run Ronnie out of town. However, Larry's actions are aggressive, sometimes violent, and sometimes conducted when Larry is intoxicated. Eventually, the adults of Bellington - including Larry's own wife - grow tired of his attitude.

Larry's biggest struggle in "Little Children" is finding his purpose. He plays on the Guardians where he feels a sense of camaraderie, but his sense of belonging and purpose from the football field is not sustained once a game ends; after each game, his mood spirals downhill when he and Todd are out for drinks. Alcohol worsens Larry's mood and increases the aggressiveness of his actions toward Ronnie.

The reader may note that the trauma Larry experienced while on the police force remains with him; it has paralyzed him from moving forward with his life. Without the ability to be a police officer, Larry has nothing. He might want to be a good father, but he has let his anger from the trauma overshadow any positive feelings toward anyone in his life.

The reader may also note that since the trauma remains with Larry, his anger with Ronnie is only exacerbated by the fact that Larry has unresolved inner conflict that has likely been building for some time. Thus, Larry's justification for his anger toward Ronnie is not only the fact that he's protecting his twins.



Ronnie

Ronnie is a fourth main character in "Little Children." It is his appearance in Bellington that the author uses as a catalyst for the other characters to take their liberties in the choices they make. As Ronnie is a convicted child molester, his presence in a quiet, small town seems to shake the foundation of everything the citizens of Bellington thought to be true.

Ronnie is fairly unapologetic for his past, though whether or not that's a facade or his true feelings is somewhat ambiguous. He has been diagnosed as having a psychosexual disorder, so he knows that his brain is wired a certain way, but he also doesn't apologize to the citizens of Bellington for what he's done, where he's been, or what his presence has done to the town.

His relationship with his mother is a typical mother-son relationship, with May trying to help him fix what's wrong and him insisting he can't be fixed. The reader can see that Ronnie respects his mother, though, since his vehemence isn't expressed to her, only to others.

The manner in which Ronnie conducts himself with anyone in the town suggests that he took much worse attitude from others in prison, given the fact that most of the time he accepts whatever angry word or action is directed toward him. The only time he fights back is when Larry pushes him down the stairs at church, and even then, it's only to threaten a lawsuit.

Ronnie knows he is unwelcome in Bellington, but he also knows he would be unwelcome no matter where he went. He is forced to live with his mother since, without income, he couldn't pay any bills. He doesn't act resentful of his living situation, though. Rather, he seems to know this is his only option and, therefore, believes it's better to accept it and do what he can with it instead of fighting it.

Kathy

Kathy is one of the supporting characters in "Little Children." She is Todd's wife, is the working spouse in her marriage, and loves being a mom. She is not immune to the desires of wanting a different life, which is a common denominator among most of the adult characters in the novel. She, like others, has had experiences in the past that, as they were happening, thought that was going to be her future. When what she wanted didn't happen, however, Kathy became dejected and fairly passive about her life from that point on.

The author's description of Kathy make her the most aesthetically pleasing character in the novel. Her beauty remains a turn-on for Todd and is largely intimidating to Sarah. Kathy seems to take it for granted, though, thinking nothing of her beauty and in fact berating herself for letting her butt get too big.



Currently, Kathy's desire for a different life centers on Todd passing the bar exam and getting a job, as she doesn't want to do hers anymore and would rather stay home with her son. She sees her intentions as noble, but when she realizes all the undue pressure she's been putting on Todd, she takes responsibility for killing his spirit. Kathy's realization and self-admission is one of the only times in the novel that an adult takes responsibility for emotionally damaging another adult. Most of the others see everything they do as necessary in order to survive. Kathy, however, is one of the only characters who self-reflects, adjusts her behavior, and fights for her family.

Richard

Richard is another supporting character in "Little Children". Richard is married to Sarah, but he seems to see their relationship as a nuisance.

Richard is addicted to internet pornography, and specifically a website that makes him a somewhat active participant in the subject's life. The first time the reader sees how the addiction has impacted his marriage is when Sarah catches him sniffing mail-order panties; she is passive about what she sees and he doesn't move the panties from his face when she walks in. His addiction is strong enough that it now matters as much as - or more than - his marriage to Sarah.

Richard sees his life as one of entrapment. He felt pressured into his first marriage, and though he feels like he tried with Sarah, a short while after Lucy was born he just knew that being a family man was not in his nature. The only person he cares about pleasing other than himself is Slutty Kay, also known as Carla, whose pornography website he is addicted to.

Richard doesn't act like he cares about what Sarah does or is interested in, as he doesn't talk much to her when they're home together. He addresses Kathy more often than he addresses his own wife when the two couples have dinner, and in front of Kathy he pretends to be an actively participating father. He cares about appearances, but only outside of his own marriage.

Richard is a man who seems to feel entitled to live the life he wants, no matter the cost to others. He wants wealth, free sexual rein, and little-to-no obligation in regards to being part of a family.

May

May is Ronnie's mother and is another supporting character in "Little Children." She is an elderly woman who wants nothing more than for her son to be normal and to live a normal life. She holds unwavering support of Ronnie, as the reader can see by the fact that she was present at his court hearing and trial, and has no problem with Ronnie living with her. She sees the best in her son, which the reader can see when she tries to find him a companion by writing him a personal ad.



May is a woman who is shocked and saddened by the man her son has grown up to be. She blames his father, but as a mother she likely cannot help but wonder what she could have done differently to make Ronnie into a different person.

Though Ronnie takes in stride the strife he receives from Larry, May does not. She fights back each and every time Larry approaches her house, partially in defense of her own home and partially in defense of her son. When her son and her home are attacked, May is feisty and unafraid to fight back.

The cause of May's death is technically a stroke, though the reader may see it as being more from stress than old age. Having to watch her son be rejected and attacked - both verbally and physically - had to have taken a toll on her.

Bertha

Bertha is a fairly minor character in the novel. She is May's best friend. Ronnie can't stand her, but Bertha and May formed a strong bond when both of their sons stood trial for committing a crime. At a time when nobody else understood why May would be there for Ronnie, Bertha understood.

Bertha is close to being an alcoholic, evidenced by the fact that she has wine coolers every day at lunch. She calls them fruit juices, though, which suggests that she views the wine coolers as harmless and is in denial about her addiction.

The woman is blunt, unafraid to say what's on her mind when it's on her mind. She doesn't back down from confrontation and even enjoys starting it. Her presence in the story is important because she is May's only ally. "Little Children" is a story about adults who feel isolated and trapped in their lives. May is no exception, and so having Bertha as a friend when nobody else around her is willing to be one is important.

Mary Ann

Mary Ann is a fairly minor character in "Little Children." Though she is present in the first scene, she is sparsely present throughout the rest of the novel. However, her personality and impact on the narrative are clear.

Mary Ann is uptight, predictable, and thrives on schedules and on making sure everything and everyone act the way she wants them to be. She is the den mother of the mothers, keeping everyone on track for play-, snack-, and nap-times. Mary Ann is married with one son. She and her husband have a standing date night each week where they are intimate with one another, however, at the end of the novel her husband puts a stop to it.

Judgement toward others comes easily to Mary Ann. Though she does not explicitly state her judgments, they are obvious in her actions and in her tone of voice. For example, when Sarah forgot Lucy's snack at the playground Mary Ann snootily



reminded her that it was the second time that week. She likely does this in order to protect the life she knows is falling apart, even though it looks perfect from the outside. Mary Ann seems to think that if she can schedule everything and get everyone to be what and who she wants them to be, then two things will happen: one, her life will not fall apart; and two, if it does fall apart, she can pretend it wasn't her fault because she tried her hardest.

When Mary Ann admits to herself that her marriage is in shambles, she has a cigarette, which she has just stolen from a friend of hers. Taking the cigarettes was another way for Mary Ann to make another person who she wants them to be under the guise of protecting that person from harm. Smoking the cigarette was a desperate surrender to what she tried so hard to pretend wasn't happening, which was that her marriage - and therefore the life she created - is in ruins.

Lucy

Lucy is Sarah's daughter. She has a small role in "Little Children," but as she is a major part of Sarah's life, she is essential to the story.

Lucy is a typical three-year-old; she doesn't like to nap, she'd rather play all day, and she asks a lot of questions. Sarah finds her somewhat annoying, but that is likely because Sarah wants a different life. It's not Lucy that annoys Sarah, it's Sarah's life that annoys Sarah, and Lucy is just the main part of it. Lucy's fits at home and at the playground are developmentally appropriate for a three-year-old.

Though Lucy is unaware of what her mother is going through, she is compliant when her mom needs her to be, which speaks to an intuitiveness that Lucy may possess. The fact that she started napping each day when Todd and Aaron joined their everyday lives suggests that she could sense her mother's sense of peace, something Sarah had not felt until she began her close friendship and subsequent affair with Todd.



Symbols and Symbolism

Bar exam

The bar exam Todd is supposed to take for the third time represents different things for two different people. For Todd, the bar exam represents failure, unmet expectations, and rejection. For Kathy, the bar exam represents hope and potential for a different future.

Football

Todd and Larry's involvement in the Guardians symbolizes for both men the need to be valued, something neither man receives at home. On the football field, Todd and Larry are necessary to the team. They are valued, trusted, and counted on. In both Todd and Larry's home lives, none of that is true. Thus, football fulfills a basic need for both Todd and Larry.

Anti-Ronnie flyers

The anti-Ronnie flyers created and distributed by Larry signify his and the town's attitude of apprehension at their new resident. The fact that the parents take the flyers seriously indicate that they trust an angry cop who accidentally killed a 13-year-old, over a child molester. The citizens of Bellington trust one of their own over an outsider, especially one who has a criminal record that could prove dangerous to the town's children.

Richard's mail-order panties

The supposedly used panties Richard mail-orders represent arousal and secrecy for Richard, and for Sarah they are an object of disgust. Though Sarah doesn't seem surprised when she sees Richard sniffing them while his pants are around his ankles, her aloofness and tone of voice indicate disgust at his practice. They are also the object that puts Richard over the edge in regards to Richard's decision to visit Slutty Kay in person.

Sarah's swimsuits

Sarah's swimsuits symbolize Sarah's desire to be desired. She feels ignored and rejected by her husband on a regular basis, and when she has the chance to feel desirable to another man, she takes it. Though it takes a friend (Jean) to convince her to find something new that she feels great in, once Sarah finds it, she feels desirable for the first time in a long time.



Graffiti on Ronnie's driveway

The graffiti on Ronnie's driveway symbolizes the fact that Larry sees Ronnie as having marred their town. Bellington is a relatively quiet Northeastern town that is thrown into disarray with the presence of a child molester. Just as the bright orange graffiti ruins May's driveway, so Larry believes Ronnie's presence is ruining Bellington.

Sarah's copy of "The Handmaid's Tale"

The fact that Sarah is reading "The Handmaid's Tale" is appropriate, since the story is a dystopian novel and Sarah sees her own town as a trapped corner from which there is no escape. It also signifies Sarah's divergence from her peers, as the other mothers don't seem willing to admit how miserable they are in their marriages and in their lives in general.

Dog poop lit on fire

The bag of dog poop that Larry left on Ronnie's doorstep symbolizes the fact that Larry - as well as other members of Bellington - view Ronnie's worth as being equivalent to dog feces. It has a toxic presence and is repulsive, just as Larry views Ronnie to be.

Skateboarders and their unbuckled helmets

The skateboarders Todd watches every weeknight near the library represent to Todd and uninhibited lifestyle he sometimes wishes he could keep. The boys are unkept by obligation and expectations, both of which appeal to Todd.

The skateboarders keep their helmets unbuckled. The illusion of safety is there, but actual safety is not. Similarly, the characters' relationships in "Little Children" seem stable, as they are all married with children in an idyllic town. However, actual stability is sparse, as the characters are bored and miserable in their lives.

Book club

The book club Sarah joins at the begging of Jean allows space for Sarah and Mary Ann to air their true feelings without mentioning exactly what they're talking about. Many characters in "Little Children" do not speak what they mean to the person they truly wish to speak it. This is the case in the book club, however, it is a safe space where Sarah and Mary Ann can say what they mean under the guise of discussing a novel, therefore limiting their vulnerability.



Settings

Bellington

Bellington is the small town where "Little Children" takes place. There are specific sites around the town that matter more than others, but the town is supposed to be a calm, idyllic location to raise a family. It has playgrounds, a town pool, and many families.

The streets of Bellington can be considered a setting because a handful of times, Larry and Todd drive through the streets of the town either hanging up anti-Ronnie flyers, heading toward Ronnie's house so Larry can do something mean to him or his house, or Larry is loudly warning people from the street to beware of Ronnie's presence in Bellington.

The playground

"Little Children" starts and ends at a school playground. It is the location of Sarah and Todd's first kiss, and it is the playground where the other mothers most often go with their children during the week. It is described as being an average playground, with typical playground equipment. The playground is where Sarah and Todd had plan to meet in order to run away together, but after Todd stands her up, it is where Sarah is with Lucy when Ronnie approaches and asks for someone to talk to.

The playground can be considered the most significant setting within Bellington, as some of the most important plot points occur at the playground.

The Town Pool

The Town Pool is where Sarah and Todd meet every day. The summer this story takes place is an exceptionally hot one, so it is packed every day. Todd and Sarah have a spot near a tree on a hill that leads down to the pool.

The pool may be presumed to be fairly large, as the narrator describes the mass exodus from the pool when Ronnie enters and the subsequent mass entering once Ronnie is banished. To fit as many people as is indicated, the pool must be quite large.

Sarah's house

Sarah's house is where Todd and Sarah have most of their rendezvouses; while Aaron and Lucy sleep upstairs, they have sex downstairs. The significance of Sarah's house is the fact that she is still married to Richard, and they and Lucy are still a family, while Sarah lives out a fantasy in her living room.



The football field

The football field is where Todd comes to feel passion for the first time in a long time. He isn't sure about playing at first, but ultimately feels grateful for the opportunity to revisit a time in his life when he felt healthy and whole.

The football field is also where Todd and Sarah plan to run away together. Though their plans are foiled, the field will always hold that memory.

The Berkshires

Todd and Kathy take a weekend getaway to the Berkshires, which is also where they took their honeymoon. Though it is briefly mentioned, it is significant, as it is the setting for where Kathy fights for Todd to stay with her instead of running away with Sarah.



Themes and Motifs

Unmet expectations

The theme of unmet expectations can be considered one of the most predominant themes of "Little Children." The main characters of the novel are all adults in the Northeastern suburban town of Bellington, Massachusetts. Each grown-up reminisces about a time in their life when they were sure about where their life was headed. They had certain expectations for who they would become, what they would become, what their spouses would be like, and what their lives would look like.

For each main character and some of the supporting characters, expectations for what their lives would entail are wholly unmet. For Todd, he wasn't always sure what he would be doing, but he thought he would be contributing more to the world than being a stay-at-home father.

Kathy and Sarah both had romantic expectations for their lives, especially when they were dating people with whom they were madly in love. However, when each woman had her heart broken, those expectations were shattered and never really rebuilt. Sarah settled for Richard because he was the first one in a long time who was kind to her. Kathy seems to have married Todd for love, but nothing like the unbridled passion she held for the great love of her life, Jay, who broke up with her because she was taller than him.

Larry's unmet expectations come in the form of trauma, as his experience of fatally shooting a 13-year-old child changed Larry's expectation that he would be a cop for his entire adult life. When that dream died, so did a part of Larry, and he was never able to recover. Instead, he let his anger build and ultimately took it out on Ronnie, whose expectation for a fairly nondescript reentry into mainstream society was null with Larry's continual attempts to run him out of town.

The fact that much of "Little Children" is centered on the characters' unmet expectations for their lives speaks to the underlying anger, frustration, and misery the characters deal with. Such emotions lead to each character's actions of desperation; whether an affair, a fight with their spouse, or holding high expectations for her children, the unmet expectations of the adults of the novel undercut the entire novel.

Unexpressed desires

Unexpressed desires is a theme throughout "Little Children," as the adults of the novel experience inner turmoil from either repressed or suppressed desires, the details of which are different for each character. Most unexpressed desires in this novel stem from a void the character experiences, and therefore when the desire is no longer hidden, the void is filled.



Most of the unexpressed desires in "Little Children" are ultimately expressed in a sexual manner. For Richard, Sarah, and Todd, three of the main characters, their sexual desires are kept under wraps from their significant other.

Richard's desires are kept from his wife, as he no longer finds her attractive as compared to his pornography addiction. Instead of expressing his dissatisfaction with her, he satisfies himself through Slutty Kay.

Sarah's void is to be desired, and so her sexual prowess goes unexpressed because, until Todd comes into the picture and is willing to have an affair with her, there is nowhere for her to express her desires. Similarly, Todd feels rejected from his wife and therefore his sexual desires and the sense of being valued go unexpressed until he begins his affair with Sarah.

For all three characters, their desire for sexual intimacy parallels their need for belonging, and therefore by expressing their desires with someone who wants the same thing, their suppressed desires are no longer hidden and their needs are fulfilled.

Another character whose sexual desires go somewhat unexpressed are Ronnie's. He expresses them once in an uncomfortable interaction on his date with Sheila, but other than that, he keeps his psychosexual disorder, which causes him to have strong sexual desires, to himself. Whether it's because he hasn't found a worthy target or he doesn't want to go back to prison is unclear. What is clear, however, is the fact that by not receiving professional help for his unexpressed sexual desires, he upsets Sheila as well as his mother.

Kathy's unexpressed desires are not sexual in nature. Rather, she longs for mutual understanding in her marriage, the chance to be a stay-at-home mom, and a stronger willed husband, all of which she desperately wants yet doesn't fully express to Todd. Kathy's unexpressed desires likely stem from unmet expectations, as she believed she and Todd were working toward the same kind of life when they got married. However, since she believes Todd has veered far off course, yet she doesn't want to disrespect or upset him, she has desires which are important to her yet she has trouble expressing.

Social expectations

Social expectations hold great significance in "Little Children," as they are the reason the characters hold up a certain facade for as long as they do.

For Richard, he hides his pornography addiction and his desire to leave Sarah because he feels pressured by societal expectations to be a good steward of his time and a good husband and father for his family, neither of which would include a consuming pornography addiction. The facade Richard keeps fades more and more, however, the deeper his addiction gets. Also, the deeper his addiction gets, the less guilt Richard feels for not meeting society's standards of a good and decent husband/man.



Sarah succumbs to societal expectations, but only for a short period of time. At the beginning of the novel Sarah is aware that she is not like the other mothers. Though she pretends to be like the others, Sarah does not like the other women nor does she like what their lives represent, which is an all-consuming family life that leaves no time for one's own personal interests. Sarah sees the typical mom life as dull and meaningless, but she feels as though she must not act that way in front of the others.

However, Sarah's inner desires get the best of her and she bucks social expectations. She has an affair with a married man, many times having sex in her very own living room while her and his children nap upstairs. Sarah also plans to run away with Todd, rejecting the tradition that says one must remain married to the same person until death do they part.

Sarah's rejection of social expectations in "Little Children" speaks to her desire to have a different life. If she weren't as bored or as miserable with her tedious life, she may not have such a strong desire to go against social mores. Her past also plays into her choices, as she's been intimate with a woman. The fact that she has been previously satisfied outside of the social expectation of heterosexual marriage likely drives her further into her affair with Todd, since she knows that what everyone else deems as the only acceptable way to be happy is not necessarily true for her.

The social expectations present in "Little Children" are typical American pressures, but the characters in the novel feel them heavily and consider the expectations to be great burdens.

Loneliness

Loneliness is one of the most-felt feelings of the adults in "Little Children." Though none come out and say it, the sentiment is clear in their actions. Each character is driven to deal with his or her loneliness differently.

For most of the women of Bellington, loneliness comes in the form of feeling unsatisfied with her current spouses. Mary Ann's husband isn't very interested in her, Sarah's husband is addicted to pornography and would rather look at that than at her, and Kathy feels alone in her life as she works hard and thinks Todd doesn't work hard enough. May is lonely because her only son is a reject in her town. She has a friend who keeps her company, but when Bertha isn't around, May is lonely.

Each woman deals with her loneliness in a different way. Mary Ann is hard on her children as a way of giving herself purpose. Sarah begins an affair in order to have a companion and feel desirable. Kathy's response is unique, in that at first she is angry with Todd, however she eventually takes responsibility for the rift in their marriage and seeks to rectify it. Kathy is not the only one who is lonely as a result of spousal dissatisfaction, yet she is the only one who seeks to fix the situation with her current spouse, the reason for which might lie in the fact that she's the only woman who is not a stay-at-home mom. Kathy's purpose in life does not revolve around the home, so she



may feel as though she has the option to fix her relationship, whereas since the other women depend on their husbands for full support, they may not feel the same.

The men in Bellington also experience loneliness, also mostly as a result of spousal dissatisfaction. Yet, their choices for dealing with loneliness are completely different than the women's, which also speaks to the theme of gender differences.

For example, Richard is lonely in his marriage because he doesn't love Sarah anymore. Rather, he is excited by Slutty Kay. He easily dismisses Sarah and seeks to rectify his loneliness with another woman, which he can do because he has the resources to do so. Also an example is Todd. He is lonely because he feels he'll never measure up to Kathy's standard. To fill his void, Todd has an affair but he also joins the football team, the men of which fill his void of loneliness by offering him kinship, brotherhood, and success on the field.

Larry is also lonely, especially after his wife leaves with the twins. Larry is someone who seems to need constant companionship in order to stay happy and to stay out of trouble. His loneliness leads him to alcohol, which leads to poor decisions.

Ronnie's sense of loneliness is less obvious, since he hides it with sarcasm. He already knows he is a town reject, and so his defense mechanism to keep his loneliness hidden is to be sarcastic with anyone who tries to insult him. He likely feels that if anyone got a hint of how lonely he was, he would be mocked instead of taken seriously, given how the town feels about him.

Boredom

The adult characters of "Little Children" experience boredom in their everyday lives, and use said boredom as a justification for their behavior. Though ultimately the choices made by those who are bored hurt others, the individual choices of the characters made as a result of boredom are not regretted, rather, they are romanticized.

For Todd and Sarah, the physical and emotional attraction they feel to one another is real, but it's also born out of each person's boredom in what they consider to be daily tedium. Neither minds being a parent, but the mundane tasks feel inconsequential to both Sarah and Todd, and so the passion that each ignites in the other is welcomed. Both are eager for excitement, and it just so happens they find each other to be that excitement.

The affair Todd and Sarah start relieves their boredom with their marriages and with their stay-at-home-parent lives. It hurts Kathy when she finds out, but Kathy isn't willing to give up; she fights for Todd and for their marriage, which ultimately convinces him to stay. It's not that his boredom has evaporated. Rather, it's that he sees that the affair was a way for him to escape failure and the overwhelming stress at home. Under a new light with Kathy, Todd knows he can stop the affair and his marriage will improve.



Richard's behavior is possibly the strongest case of actions born out of boredom, first with Sarah and then with intangible, digital pornography. The excitement he feels at first with Sluttykay.com fades, and what once aroused him now bores him, as the images on the screen are nothing he hasn't seen before. His decision to order Slutty Kay's used panties, and then to stay in California after he meets Slutty Kay in person, are because he is bored in his life back in Bellington. There are other factors, such as emotional entrapment, but being bored with a life he doesn't want seems to be Richard's biggest motivation for his decisions regarding Slutty Kay.

The reader might note that the children, Aaron and Lucy, are never bored. In every scene, they are busy playing or finding something to do, which is a testament to the fact that as children, they do not have unmet expectations and therefore are able to be entertained much easier than adults who have a specific picture of what they want their lives to look like.

Emotional entrapment

Emotional entrapment is one of the themes of "Little Children," and it is one of the ideas that leads the main characters to commit their illicit acts. Here, emotional entrapment can be defined as feeling stuck within one's conflicting emotions. The conflicting emotions present for three of the main characters renders them paralyzed for a time in regards to how to solve their problems.

Todd is trapped in a web of confusion, failure, frustration, and unmet expectations. He is tangled enough that the only way out he sees is to do something so drastic as have an affair or join a midnight football team. He can't confront his wife about his feelings because she is already disappointed in him. He doesn't let the Guardians know about his feelings because that's not characteristic of his relationship with them. He confesses some of his feelings to Sarah, but she herself is one of his solutions, and so she cannot also be his outlet without some repercussions.

Todd's repercussions for not sharing how tangled he feels in his emotions ends up being almost ending his marriage. While his outlet of playing on the football team is effective, it also alienates his wife, which further worsens the repercussions for not being honest with her in the first place about how trapped he felt in regards to being a stay-at-home dad and having to take the bar exam a third time.

Sarah's sense of emotional entrapment lies mostly in her marriage, and partly in her role as a mom. In her marriage, Sarah feels stuck because she knows she doesn't love Richard, but it takes a months-long affair to convince her that she has the courage to leave him. Sarah also feels stuck in her role as a mom because she seems to wonder, shouldn't she love being a mom? She may wonder, why does Lucy annoy her so much? Yet, she's stuck being Lucy's mom, especially because Richard isn't around much as a father.



Kathy's sense of emotional entrapment occurs when she realizes that she's been putting excess pressure on Todd to pass the bar exam. She puts the impetus on herself for Todd's affair. Soon after her realization, however, she maintains her wishes and her plan are simple, even though both her wishes and her plan require Todd to pass the bar exam. She is trapped in between what she wants and what she doesn't want to pressure Todd for.

Sex

Sex is one of the themes throughout "Little Children," as it is a major motivation for much of the adults' behavior.

For Todd and Sarah, sex with each other is two-fold: it is an escape from their boring lives, and it is an avenue for each party to feel wanted, since they don't feel desired by their own spouses. Not only is sex with each other fulfilling a physical need for both Todd and Sarah, but also the psychological need of being wanted and the emotional need for intimacy.

A second source of sex for Todd is his own wife, Kathy. They sparsely engage in the activity, but Todd remains turned on by her on a daily basis. Sex for Kathy seems to be more of an afterthought. It isn't until her marriage is threatened that she readies herself to be the sexual prowess she believes her husband needs. Todd still enjoys sex with Kathy, which is an indication that having sex with Sarah is not a permanent solution to his misery.

For Richard and Ronnie, sex is more of an addiction, though Richard's expression of addiction is legal whereas Ronnie's is not. Richard's addiction draws him further and further away from his wife, emotionally and geographically as he decides to move out to California where the subject of his pornography addiction lives. Ronnie's addiction gets him into trouble. Even though the reader does not read of his illegal behavior, it is briefly described. Also, other characters put great energy into making sure Ronnie's illegalities don't happen upon their own children.

Secrecy

Secrecy is a theme throughout "Little Children" that is present for only some of the characters, and it causes problems for each one to whom it pertains.

The most obvious example of secrecy belongs to Todd and Sarah, since they are having an affair and don't want anyone to find out. The hug and kiss they initially shared at the playground is on display for the other mothers to see, but after that, the romantic aspect of their relationship is kept a secret.

The impacts of Todd and Sarah's secrecy are not as grave as one might think. Once Kathy finds out what Todd is hiding, instead of an extreme emotional reaction, she takes responsibility for her part and then fights for her husband. She works hard to keep her



emotions in check when she realizes Todd's secret, and afterward she forges ahead as though nobody is going to take her husband.

Another obvious source of secrecy is Richard, since his addiction to pornography keeps him holed up in his office for longer than Sarah thinks he should be in there. He tries to keep his addiction a secret, although that fails once Sarah catches him sniffing Slutty Kay's panties with his pants down around his ankles.

The impact of Richard's secrecy is slight. Since Sarah is already miserable in their relationship and is hoping for an easy way out, the fact that Richard is addicted to pornography doesn't seem to bother her. Her sense of being undesirable seems to have started before Richard's secret addiction began.

Parenting

Parenting is one of the lesser themes in "Little Children," since most of the novel is about the adults' relationships with one another. Nonetheless, since most of the adults in the novel are parents, the concept of parenting must be addressed.

Parenting as it is shown for Todd and Sarah is fairly straight-forward. They each have a close relationship with their children in the manner of being a stay-at-home parent; Aaron and Lucy have learned to rely on Todd and Sarah, respectively, for their daily needs. The toddlers have a reasonable expectation of constant care, since that is what they're used to.

Mary Ann's form of parenting represents parents who are judgmental about others' parenting styles, yet have difficulty with their own children. She is a mom who likes to make her children and others think she has it all together, when really, she is miserable and jealous of others' happiness. Mary Ann's parenting can also be seen as voyeuristic. The fact that she pressures her four-year-old about going to Harvard suggests that she is attempting to live out her unrealized dreams through her son.

Similar to Mary Ann's style of parenting is May's and Marjorie's. Though May and Marjorie are older, and therefore have grown children, their presence brings forth the idea that one's job of being a parent is not done simply because one's children have grown. Both May and Marjorie allow themselves into their children's lives, and they are both quite forthcoming about the decisions they think their children should make.

The reader might note that the children play a fairly small role in the novel, and seem largely unaffected by the behavior of their parents, the reason for which may lie in the fact that they're so young. Toddlers are unaware of the complex adult emotions and circumstances, rather, they care about playing and being cared for in the form of food and fun.



Marriage

The theme of marriage is similar to the theme of parenting, in that it is a lesser theme yet since most of the adult characters are married, the idea of marriage must be considered a motif. Each individual has a different view of his or her marriage, and each cares about it at varying levels.

For Sarah and Richard, they know their marriage is on its way to an end. Sarah deals with it by finding a man who finds her desirable, and Richard deals with it by feeding his pornography addiction. Both parties ignore the fact that their marriage is ending in that they don't talk to one another about it until Richard makes his choice to leave her. Nonetheless, their interactions throughout the novel suggest a mutual understanding of the fact that their marriage won't last much longer.

Todd and Kathy's relationship is different. They treat each other well, take care of one another, and still have passion for one another, yet their desire for one another is buried under their everyday tasks and their unmet expectations for one another. Though Todd and Kathy's marriage struggles through most of the novel, ironically theirs is the only one to survive.

Mary Ann's marriage is the only other one present in the novel. Mary Ann's first appearance in the novel indicates that she is snobby and expects everything in her life to be perfect. Her husband is only mentioned when she states they have sex once a week, on a scheduled Tuesday night. Her tone would indicate to the reader that Mary Ann and her husband aren't particularly close, that they are more like roommates than lovers.

Marriage is presented in "Little Children" as a miserable place where emotional entrapment takes place. This may not represent the author's views, but it seems meant for the novel. Bellington is a small town where things are supposed to look a certain way, including everything from front lawns to marriages. The relationships in "Little Children" show that marriages are not always as they seem to be, and that the ultimate decision of its participants may not be as predictable as one might think.

Justice

The theme of justice plays out between Larry and Ronnie, as Larry believes Ronnie has not served enough time for the injustices he has committed. Larry takes it upon himself to see that Ronnie is brought to justice.

Larry's violent words and actions against Ronnie are all, from Larry's perspective, in the name of justice. As a father of twins, Larry doesn't believe a child molester should ever be let out of prison, and therefore he remains ardent about Ronnie not only leaving Bellington, but being brought to justice for his crimes. Being a former cop also likely plays into Larry's call for justice, as he naturally wants criminals locked away.



Larry also spends much of his time trying to prove to others why Ronnie needs to be brought to justice. He is supported through most of the novel, until his cries for justice begin scaring children due to his excessiveness.

Larry's cries for justice are in the name of the town, but they are also a front for the way he may have felt robbed of his policing career. He takes full responsibility for shooting the 13-year-old, and he stands by his decision. However, for a man who wanted to be a cop and nothing else, it is likely that he felt his career was unjustly cut short. Therefore, as the result of a traumatic situation that can never be brought to justice, it is likely Larry is using his case against Ronnie to satisfy a deeper need for justice to be done on his behalf.

Self-discovery

Self-discovery is a theme throughout "Little Children" that must be inferred, as the characters do not know they are on a journey toward self-discovery. Rather, each character believes he or she is either on a journey to improve his or her life, or to rectify something that has gone terribly wrong.

The character who experiences self-discovery to the greatest extent may be Todd. At the beginning of the novel, he is lost. He feels pressured to take the bar exam even though he doesn't really want to be a lawyer, and he has a lackluster sex life with his wife because each night she is either tired or keeps their son in bed with them. He's lacking passion, and he attributes the lack of passion to the lack of sex with his wife.

However, as Todd's journey goes on, he discovers that it is a sense of accomplishment he's been missing, which football fulfills. Sarah fills a void of being valued and desired, but it's football that leaves a lasting impression on him, as he ultimately leaves Sarah and sticks with football. Moreover, Todd thinks about becoming a cop as a result of his time with the Guardians. The men have clearly made a distinct mark on Todd's life, and they have played an important role in helping him discover that there is more to him than failing the bar exam.

Sarah's journey of self-discovery is somewhat cut off, as her self-concept at the beginning of the novel is pretty much the same as it is at the conclusion. She begins miserable among a group of mothers, and ends miserable among a misfit group of Bellington citizens. What she does learn about herself, though, is that her future as a mother is not as depressing as she once thought. At the beginning, part of her misery seemed to be in being a mother, but at the conclusion of the novel, Sarah knows that life is now her and Lucy, and she welcomes it.

Kathy's journey to self-discovery revolves around her marriage as she slowly realizes the overwhelming pressure she has put on Todd and what it's done to her marriage. Though she maintains that her desire for a typical man-works-woman-stays-home lifestyle is noble and justified, she also realizes that his affair is partly her fault. To correct her mistakes, Kathy fights for Todd and for their marriage.



Alienation

Alienation is one of the strongest themes in "Little Children." Though it mostly pertains to just one character, Ronnie, it is Ronnie's presence and subsequent alienation that sets the town into upheaval in the first place.

From the moment Ronnie moves into Bellington - which happens before the reader has met the character - he is alienated from the rest of the town. Parents don't want him near their children, women don't want him near them, men don't want him near their women or their families. He begins his residency in Bellington in a negative light, alienated from any kind of positive interaction before he has a chance for anything else.

Further alienating Ronnie is Larry's work against him, namely the anti-Ronnie flyers as well as his going around town with a bullhorn, exclaiming the danger Ronnie is to the town. Ronnie's mother stands up to him, but Larry regrets none of his actions, as he believes Ronnie should not only be alienated from the town, but locked up for the rest of his life.

The alienation takes a toll on Ronnie, though the impact is not shown until the end of the novel. For most of the story, Ronnie's response to others' alienation of him is to either ignore or exude sarcasm, feigning indifference toward others' hatred. May, Ronnie's mother, takes the alienation harder than he does. At the end of the novel, however, the impact of the alienation on Ronnie is shown as he throws himself into Sarah's arms so he has someone to cry to after his mother dies. He is lonely and takes the alienation as a cue to confess the murder; he may think that going back to prison will provide more company than the town of Bellington, especially now that his mother has died.

Gender differences

Gender differences is a predominant theme throughout "Little Children." Though it is not directly addressed, the reader can note how men and women treat one another according to prescribed as well as non-traditional gender roles.

Kathy and Todd are the most distinct couple in regards to non-traditional gender roles, as Kathy is the breadwinner and Todd is the stay-at-home parent. The author sets Todd up as not minding - though not loving - his role as a stay-at-home father, as indicated by his genuine enjoyment of taking care of Aaron. Kathy, however, does not enjoy her non-traditional role as the breadwinner; she is tired and wants to stay home with her son.

The impact of the couple's non-traditional parental roles is that both are unhappy in their marriage. Todd's unhappiness comes in the form of feeling unappreciated, and Kathy's unhappiness comes in the form of feeling burned out from her career. Though at one time she found Todd's willingness to be the non-traditional husband an attractive quality, in her mind it has gone on for too long and she would prefer a switch back to traditional roles of him being the breadwinner and she being the stay-at-home parent.



Sarah and Richard fall into socially-expected gender roles, as he is the breadwinner and addicted to pornography - an addiction typically attributed to men - and she is a stay-at-home mom who feels unappreciated and undesired. Their traditional gender roles have the same effect on their relationship as Todd and Kathy's non-traditional gender roles, in that both Sarah and Richard are miserable. Richard is tired of working for a family he doesn't really love, and Sarah is tired of being an ignored wife.

Ronnie's presence can be seen as that of a traditional gender role, since child molesters are typically thought to be men. Though he doesn't act proud of his past, he also doesn't apologize for it. His brazenness in terms of being in public may also be attributed to a typically-male response to a situation like Ronnie's.

Larry's behavior may also be considered typically-male, as he is an alpha-male character who feels the need to dominate anyone or anywhere he can. His football playing, his drinking problem, and his violence toward Ronnie may all be seen as behavior that is generally attributed to men, especially men who are angry or prone to outbursts of violence.

Change

Hoping for change is a sentiment shared among many of the characters in "Little Children," both main and supporting. Some characters share an idea of what change they'd like to see happen, others are alone in their search for something different, yet each makes an effort toward changing one or more major aspects of their lives.

Sarah, Todd, and Kathy all have similar goals in their hope for change: they want a loving spouse who supports them and desires them. Sarah and Todd's desire to be desired is stronger than Kathy's, but Kathy's competition with Sarah once she finds out about the affair indicates that her need to feel desired is just as present as the others'. What is different is the way each character goes about working toward the change he or she hopes for.

Sarah initiates an affair with Todd and does not shy away from the possibility of the two of them running away together. Todd succumbs to the affair with Sarah, but he doesn't stop trying to be with his own wife. He also joins the football team, which fulfills his need to be supported. Kathy fights for her marriage once she realizes she's losing it, and she shifts her attitude and tone when interacting with Todd.

Ronnie's hope for change is more debatable than the other characters'. One interpretation of Ronnie's behavior is that he hopes the town of Bellington will eventually leave him alone, and that he'll be able to live a normal life free of harassment. Another interpretation of Ronnie's behavior, especially since he ultimately admits to killing the missing girl, is that he likes causing a stir and makes no apologies for who he is, especially knowing part of him can't help it.

Larry's hope for change is the most overtly dramatic of all the characters', as he is vocal and violent about what he thinks should change in his town. Larry's biggest want for



change is that Ronnie would leave. Not only does Larry seem to see Ronnie as a disgusting person and a threat to his children, but also a threat to the town's safety, which Larry takes quite seriously. Larry seems to have felt justified in recalling his ex-cop authority during his interactions with Ronnie.

Hoping for change for the characters of "Little Children" is something that keeps each character moving forward. They all know they want something different, and they all feel they've been complacent for far too long.



Styles

Point of View

"Little Children" is told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. The stories told are mainly those of Todd, Sarah, Larry, and Ronnie, though Kathy's, Richard's, May's, and Mary Ann's are also told throughout, just not as in-depth as the others. Each person's side of a situation is laid out by itself, meaning other characters' thoughts and feelings don't mingle in each scene. Rather, each character has his or her own scene told from the omniscient narrator's point of view.

The benefit for the reader of an omniscient narrator is that the reader can see the whole picture of the story as it unfolds. The emotions and thoughts of each character are known to the reader, if not to one another. This allows for the reader to possibly predict what will happen before the characters themselves know, since the reader has a more comprehensive view of a situation. For example, after Sarah laments about her relationship to Richard, the reader learns Richard's experience of his marriage, as well. The benefit is a more wholly-rounded story and a certain depth to each character, as well as the ability to possibly foreshadow where the story will lead.

Language and Meaning

The language of "Little Children" is typical of a middle-class, educated community in the Northeast. The language used by the narrator is similar in tone and vocabulary as when characters are conversing with one another. Adult language (curse words) is used, which is realistic to modern society. Most of the adult characters in "Little Children" went to college, and the vocabulary indicates as such. There are references to Catholicism, as well as a scene taking place in a Catholic church, which would be typical of a small Northeastern suburb, as Catholicism is prevalent in that part of the United States.

The meaning of the language used by the author is likely to convey a realistic picture of what life can be like in American suburbia. With dialogue and narration that readers can relate to, the story holds more meaning than if the overall tone of the novel were to veer far off the truth. With language and tone that is relatable, there is a better chance that readers will more fully comprehend the story.

The reader may note that the use of foul language present throughout the entire novel is likely to point toward the angry undertones of each character. In "Little Children," each grown-up is dealing with anger toward someone and/or something. The harsh language gives the reader the sense of anger citizens of Bellington are experiencing throughout the novel.

Structure

"Little Children" is broken up into four parts, with subsequent chapters in each part. Most chapters focus on one character, and each part has a theme to it. The story is told in neatly sectioned pieces, which may help the reader keep details in order. The novel takes place over the course of one summer, though the timeline does not seem to have a bearing on the structure of the four parts.

An exception to the structure is the last section, which is only one chapter that is longer than all the others. The last chapter concludes every character's narrative, and since some of the themes ring true for multiple characters, bringing them together and to an end in one chapter makes sense.



Quotes

Smiling politely to mask a familiar feeling of desperation, Sarah reminded herself to think like an anthropologist. 'I'm a researcher studying the behavior of boring suburban women. I am not a boring suburban woman myself.

-- Narrator (Part 1, chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: Sarah's characterization is shown immediately, as the reader learns that she is hiding her true self from whomever she is with. She clearly does not feel as though she belongs with the group of mothers with whom she is sitting, nor does it seem she wants to fit in with them. The reader learns immediately that Sarah is one of the main characters, and that her sense of desperation is paramount to the overall narrative.

And when Aaron called out for him just then, right on time, there was something beautiful about that, too, the way a little kid needed you for everything and wasn't afraid to say so.

-- Narrator (Part 1, chapter 2 paragraph 4)

Importance: The way Todd emotionally reacts to Aaron calling for him is opposite of how the women on the playground responded to their children. The reader learns that Todd is softer than the women, and that he enjoys being a father. The reader also learns that even though Todd is working toward another, more monetary identity, he is happy to have someone who needs him. The reader may note that since Todd is happy to be needed by his son, the author is indicating a strained connection between Todd and his wife.

It was never that nice,' Bertha told her. 'It just liked to pretend it was.

-- Bertha (Part 1, chapter 5 paragraph 5)

Importance: Bertha's characterization of Bellington is important to the story. The author is writing about the dark world of American suburbia, and so it is important for the reader to see that the innocent town where the novel takes place is not so innocent, because everyone has secrets and people aren't as perfect as they portray themselves to be. Bertha is pointing out the same about the town, that it's not what it seems to be based on first glances. The reader may note that Bertha is the only character who would likely point this out in a fairly unbiased way. She has no family in the town and, therefore, has nobody in the town who cares whether she is there or not. Since Bertha could take or leave Bellington, her opinion is unbiased and can be read as an observation from an outsider.

Larry didn't hurry, didn't act like a man on a furtive or illegal mission. He walked up to McGorvey's front stoop like a mail carrier making a delivery.

-- Narrator (Part 1, chapter 7 paragraph 5)

Importance: The narrator's description of Larry's demeanor as he left lighted dog poop



on Ronnie's doorstep indicates two things. First, Larry's actions indicate that Ronnie is highly unwelcome in Bellington. Second, Larry's calmness as he committed the act show the reader how little Larry thinks of hating another person. Though the reader and the town may feel Larry's hatred is for good reason, his sense of calm in harassing a fellow human being is strong enough for the reader to wonder if Larry was too far gone, emotionally and cognitively, to be thinking rationally about anything.

They didn't really have a choice; there was kind of raw sexual connection between them that she'd never experienced with anyone in her life.

-- Narrator (Part 2, chapter 9 paragraph 8)

Importance: The quote refers to Sarah and Todd and their desire to be physically intimate with one another. The description of their pending affair by the narrator taps into Sarah and Todd's psyches and their strong pull toward each other. The language suggests that neither one of them felt as though they had control over their desires, and that trying to resist their attraction to one another was futile.

I did that to him,' she thought. 'I sucked the life right out of him.

-- Kathy (Part 2, chapter 10 paragraph 2)

Importance: The quote is one of Kathy's thoughts as she lay in bed while Todd is playing his first football game with the Guardians. Here, she is taking responsibility for the weight of the pressure she apparently has put on Todd to become a lawyer and be the breadwinner of the family. Kathy blames herself for making Todd feel like he needed something extra in his life to enliven him. Kathy's feelings are essential to the narrative, as her actions speak toward complacency about her relationship with Todd, while her thoughts suggest otherwise. Later, she will fight for her marriage. The reader can see the build-up, even if Todd doesn't.

Spend the day with your daughter,' she snapped. 'It won't kill you.

-- Sarah (Part 2, chapter 11 paragraph 11)

Importance: Sarah's harsh words to Richard, in front of Lucy no less, were uncharacteristic. She had become fairly passive-aggressive with him, especially after catching him sniffing a pair of women's underwear. Her tone here suggests that her discontentment with him and their facade of a life is growing, and that she sees him as almost entirely responsible.

It was a relief to kiss her and Aaron goodbye and step out of the car, a relief to finally stop pretending. He stood in the parking lot, briefcase in hand, waving as they drove away.

-- Narrator (Part 3, chapter 13 paragraph 8)

Importance: This statement refers to Todd the morning Kathy thought he was taking the bar exam, when he was really going to meet Sarah for a secret rendezvous. The significance lies in the fact that Todd was relieved to be moments away from not having to pretend for the next several hours. Much of "Little Children" is about adults who feel



trapped in pretending to be someone they don't think they are, and living a life they pretend to enjoy. Here, Todd is about to be relieved of that burden for a short while.

'I'm not unemployed,' Larry pointed out. 'I'm retired.'

-- Larry (Part 3, chapter 14 paragraph 2)

Importance: Larry's characterization of himself as retired instead of unemployed says a lot about his character. His feelings of regret for the incident that caused him to retire from the police force remain strong, and he truly believes that there is no job for him in the modern workforce. (The reader may note that Larry's regret is that it ended his career, not in the act itself). All he wants to do is to be a cop, which he can't mentally or emotionally handle, and therefore, in his eyes, there is nothing for him to do or be. He retired from the only profession that suited him, and that's that. The reader might note that Larry's characterization lends itself to a self-righteous attitude that Larry infuses into his interactions with Ronnie. If Larry saw himself as unemployed, he might not see himself as so much higher than Ronnie. Yet, since he sees himself as a retired defender of the law, he places himself above Ronnie.

'I'd like to,' she wanted to tell him. 'I'm happy to switch places whenever you say the word.'

-- Kathy (Part 3, chapter 15 paragraph 2)

Importance: This statement points to the volume of unspoken words that are not shared between those who are closest. For example, Todd and Kathy have plenty that go unsaid, which likely contributes to Kathy's resentment for Todd and Todd's acting out by having an affair. However, each seems to think that speaking their true thoughts to one another would do no good and solve nothing. Thus, true feelings go untold throughout the entire novel.

Todd spiked the ball and waited for them, his arms stretched wide, his chest heaving as if he were trying to suck the whole night into his lungs.

-- Narrator (Part 3, chapter 16 paragraph 2)

Importance: One of the messages of "Little Children" seems to be finding passion in expected places. For Todd, that place was the football field. He routinely refers to his high school football days, which seems to be the last time Todd felt a great amount of passion for anything. His affair with Sarah is passionate, but it is under the radar and cannot be fully, openly expressed. On the football field, in the moment of victory, Todd can express his passion openly, proudly, and wholly.

The driver didn't respond, didn't say 'Too bad,' or 'I'm sorry,' or any of the crap people usually spouted when you told them something like this, but Ronnie kept talking anyway.

-- Narrator (Part 4, chapter 17 paragraph 1)

Importance: The tone of this statement is an example of how the author tailored the language and the flow of each scene to the person to whom the scene belongs. In this



case, Ronnie is an angry misfit who has no friends and while he acts like he doesn't care, also seems fairly lonely. He may have appreciated that the cab driver didn't make small talk, but the angry tone in which the author narrated the scene suggests that Ronnie likely thought it would have been nice if someone cared that he was scared.

Our son is four years old,' he said. 'You have to stop talking to him about Harvard.
-- Lewis (Part 4, chapter 17 paragraph 10)

Importance: Mary Ann's husband has a small role in "Little Children." Still, his statement here relates to the entire novel, as the sentiment rings true for more than just him and his wife. He is irritated that his wife is pushing their four-year-old son into a specific future, trapping him into a corner that he has no choice but to occupy. The adults in "Little Children" mirror the sentiment, as they feel trapped in a corner that they feel no choice but to occupy. Just as the title of the novel sounds like the story will be about children but is actually about adults, Lewis's statement is about his four-year-old son, but it is really about his wife and their relationship.

I just wanna talk to someone,' he said, his bottom lip quivering.
-- Ronnie (Part 4, chapter 17 paragraph 5)

Importance: There are few moments of vulnerability in "Little Children" between the sender of the message and the intended receiver. Here, Ronnie is openly vulnerable, as he is desperate for just a moment of friendship or companionship, since he's just lost his mother.

She was here because he said he's run away with her, and she believed him - believed, for a few brief, intensely sweet moments, that she was something special, one of the lucky ones, a character in a love story with a happy ending.
-- Narrator (Part 4, chapter 17 paragraph 10)

Importance: The narrator's last description of Sarah holds multiple meanings. First, Sarah understands that the period of time with Todd was just a moment in her history. Second, it reveals that Sarah believes she likely will never again experience love like she did with Todd. Third, the statement shows that Sarah believes she is an ordinary person who deserves nothing special. Lastly, the narrator's words show the reader that in the context of this novel and these characters, being a character in a love story is the be-all-end-all, and without that, one's life is not complete.