Lives of Girls and Women Study Guide

Lives of Girls and Women by Alice Munro

Contents

Plot Summary

This book, rather more a collection of would-be stand-alone stories with a common principal character, invites the reader to witness the life and world of Del, a young girl whose experiences and encounters in growing up form the basis of each "story" or section as she grows from a young girl into womanhood. The reader is compelled to experience the struggle and wonder of growing up that is common amongst all of us, in a story that is peppered with extraordinary circumstances and trials that, thankfully, relatively few of us ever have to experience.

Lives of Girls and Women is a coming-of-age story, full of the tumultuous times one goes through on the road to growing up, the universal truths about growing up and the tragedies that are suffered by far too many of us. More than that, it is the story of place and of the complex relationships that form between those with whom people live and experience life. It is about life itself, in all its beauty and ugliness.

In the first section, "The Flats Road," the reader is first introduced to Del, and her world is brought into intimate focus for the reader. She is a young girl living in the small Prairie town of Jubilee. She lives with her family in a humble home in a section of town called the Flats Road. Del's family, at this stage, consists of her younger brother, her parents and her Uncle Benny (who, she is quick to point out, is "not really [her] uncle.") Benny's marriage has failed, and it is Del's first encounter with a life turned upside down. She begins to question the world around her and looks at her life with a more sceptical eye.

In "Heirs of the Living Body," the second section, Del's world begins to widen. No longer does her universe consist only of her immediate family. In this chapter, Del's place in the world is place in the context of the line of relatives that have come before her, both in her family and in her town. She tries to make sense of her aunts' negative attitudes toward anything other than "daily life," while trying to find her own place within her family, the town and the world at large.

Del's mother, Addie, is the subject of the next section, entitled "Princess Ida." Addie is a door-to-door salesperson of encyclopedias, a job that, for her, is honorable because of the freedom it affords her and because it satisfies her need to explain and categorize the world in a rational fashion. Del and her mother now spend their summers in the town of Jubilee, a place that Del both loves and hates. Del learns of her mother's own humble childhood and is made peripherally aware that her mother is the victim of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of Del's uncle, Bill. Later in the section, Bill pays a visit to Del and Addie, a visit that forever changes the way Del views her town.

The oft-sensitive and complex question of religion is brought into focus in "Age of Faith." In small-town Canada (and indeed in many small towns), the practice of attending church becomes something of a social affair, one that draws the lines between the haves and have-nots. Jubilee is no different in this respect. As Del puts it, "for every person who lived there, the rest of the town was an audience." Anyone who has attended church can relate to this sentiment. All too often, the weekly ritual of attending

church focuses more on who is there and what they are wearing than the gathering together of believers in a common faith. Del tries to find her place once again, this time in terms of religion. She attends one church and then another, in search of something that fits and, as Munro writes, enjoying the "theatrical" aspects of religious practice.

In "Changes and Ceremonies," Del begins to experience, for the first time, sexual feelings when she develops a crush on a classmate, Frank Wales. The tragic death of her teacher, Miss Farris, and the events following it serve to underline the phrase that "still waters run deep." All is not what it seems in Jubilee, and even this seemingly mundane place has its dark secrets.

Del meets Art Chamberlain in "Lives of Girls and Women." Art works at the local radio station and is rumored to be having an affair with Fern Dogherty. Del is forever changed as a person in this section, experiencing her first glimpse into a sexual relationship, albeit an inappropriate one.

In "Baptism," Del meets Garnet French, with whom she starts a relationship. In this chapter, she undergoes several kinds of rebirth, or baptism. In the final chapter, "Epilogue: The Photographer," Del is now an adult and has become a writer.

"The Flats Road"

"The Flats Road" Summary

In the first section of the book, the reader is introduced to several of the characters, places and themes that will carry through the rest of the book. The story begins with Del Jordan's discussion of her Uncle Benny who, she is quick to point out, isn't really her uncle at all. His marriage has failed, and Del tries to fit this reality into her understanding of the world, an understanding that is caught somewhere in the crack between childhood and adolescence. Del recounts how they spend their days fishing along the Wawanash River, "helping" their Uncle Benny fish. The children's job is to catch the frogs that Benny needs. After fishing, Del, her brother and Benny return to Benny's house with the fish they have caught, trailed by Del's dog, Major.

Del describes Benny's house, the pens in which he holds a variety of animals from a ferret to a red fox "whose leg had been torn in a trap." When the children spot the turtles Benny keeps in a makeshift pen near his house, Benny explains that he is going to make them into soup. He would never touch the stuff, himself, he explains. The soup is for Americans. Del is quick to point out that, in retrospect, the turtle soup scheme never does come to fruition. "Either the American did not show up, or he would not pay what Uncle Benny wanted or he had been no more than a rumor in the first place," she explains.

Owen and Del head for home, trying desperately to recall as many items from inside Benny's house as they can. Benny is a collector of clutter. Inside his house is an enormous array of items, most of which anyone else would have discarded. To Benny, these items are treasures.

Del's favorite of Benny's possessions is the stack of newspapers on his porch. These are not the Jubilee newspaper or the paper that comes into Jubilee from the city. Benny's newspapers are tabloids, and Del loves them. Del spends countless hours sitting on Benny's porch reading these newspapers, which are so vastly different from the papers from which her parents get their news. She does not take them home, however, despite Benny's insistence that she may do so. She knows they would not be welcome in her home. Instead, she reads as much as she can and then starts on her way home.

Home, for Del, is a house at the end of the Flats Road, past Buckles' Store, a landmark that, she says, signifies the end of town and the beginning of Jubilee. As she walks the route from town along the Flats Road to her house, Del paints a picture that depicts the differences between the two worlds, the different types of houses, the landscape and the types of people. Everything is different, and more desirable, in town. As she walks, Del gradually invites us into her world as it approaches. Her family lives on nine acres of land, and they raise foxes.

One day, Benny asks Del if she can write. She says yes, and after seeing a sample of her writing, Benny asks her to write a letter for him. He explains to Del that he is answering a classified ad, in which a woman has requested a job as a housekeeper and possibly to marry the man for whom she works.

Several days later, Benny receives a reply to his letter. Arrangements are made, and Benny borrows Del's family's car to make the drive to Kitchener to pick up the woman. While he is gone, Del and her mother prepare Benny's house for the possible arrival of the woman. Eventually, though, they give up. The house is just too cluttered for them to make any real difference. Del's mother expresses sympathy for the woman, rather than for Benny. He has, after all, chosen to live that way. She, on the other hand, doesn't know what she is in for.

Late that night, Benny returns home with Miss Madeleine Howey and her baby. The Jordans don't get to meet Benny's friend right away, however. Upon his return, it is quite late, and Miss Howey has gone to Benny's house to put the child to bed. Benny announces that he and Madeleine have been married. He recounts the story of how, when he arrived to pick up Madeleine, her family had all the wedding preparations already made. Benny promises to bring his new wife around to meet them as soon as she is settled in after her trip.

Benny doesn't bring her around, though. In fact, his habit of coming to the Jordan home for dinner does not change. When prompted about how married life is treating him and about how his wife is managing, Benny responds with vague answers, confirming nothing.

One afternoon, Benny asks Del if she wants to see something. She and Owen follow Benny across the field, and Benny instructs them to wait at the edge of his yard, telling them to come no closer. Benny disappears into his house and soon returns carrying the child, a fact that disappoints Del since she was hoping for something more interesting. Suddenly, Benny's wife emerged from the house and calls to Benny and the girl. Benny scoops up the child and instructs Del and Owen to go back home.

Finally, Del's mother has the chance to meet Benny's wife. She encounters the woman at Buckles' Store and introduces herself. Del's mother tries to be pleasant to the woman, but she is met with a cold distance. When she invites Madeleine to come visit her, Madeleine's response is that she doesn't "walk nowhere on gravel roads" unless it is necessary. Mrs. Jordan concludes that this woman is just the type suited to life on the Flats Road.

Del is forbidden to go to Benny's, due to Benny's wife's reputation for having a violent temper. Nevertheless, she goes over anyway, intending only to ask permission to read the papers on the porch, as she always has in the past. Madeleine answers the door with a stove-lid lifter in her hand. Furious at the intrusion, she accuses Del of being a spy and starts chasing after her.

That spring, Benny's wife leaves him, taking with her the child and several of Benny's possessions. When Del's mother recalls seeing a panel truck heading toward town, Benny resolves to follow her. He phones her brother to track her down, explaining that she has left him. Unfortunately, her brother tells Benny that she hasn't come back to Kitchener. He does not seem to be too concerned with his sister's whereabouts.

Benny confirms what the Jordans have thought all along. Madeleine has been beating the child. It explains why the child is so skittish around others and so reluctant for physical contact.

Later that spring, a letter arrives for Benny from Madeleine. The content of the letter is simply a request to have her sweater, an umbrella and a blanket mailed to her at an address in Toronto. Now knowing where she is, Benny decides he is going to go see her. He borrows Mr. Jordan's car once again and heads off for Toronto, intending only to bring back the child.

Benny's trip lasts for two days, and on the evening of the second day he returns without the child. After coming into the house, Benny reveals that he never did make it to where his wife is now living. He could not find the place, he says. He recounts the story of his futile efforts to find the address by asking people on the street. Uncle Benny never hears from Madeleine again.

"The Flats Road" Analysis

Del is caught in between being a child and being and adult, just as the Flats Road is not quite in town and not quite in the country. She is just a young girl, trying to make sense of her world. The narrator, however, is much older, recalling for the reader a time in the quite distant past. In retelling her story to us, she is preoccupied with details and with getting the story right, not allowing either herself or the reader to fall victim to childish illusions. For example, she is very quick to point out that although she refers to Benny as her uncle, he really isn't her uncle at all. To her, it is important to get this detail correct in the retelling of the story, because it is not correct in the living of it. Similarly, Del notes that, despite what Benny says, the riverbank isn't his riverbank. She doesn't notice his error at the time, but in the retelling of the story, she is sure to get the details right.

Readers are also invited into Del's world of words. The first indication of her lifelong interest in the sound of words and the stories they form is indicated in her love of reading Benny's newspapers. For her, words are a portal into a world profoundly different from her own and much more real, in a sense. They are not full of stories of the recent outbreak of war, the weather or local events.

Reading is Del's way of categorizing and organizing her world. The printed word helps Del to discern what is true and real, as opposed to what is mere rumor, fantasy or gossip. She only reads the newspapers on Benny's porch, though. The news they contain is only relevant to her in the context of Benny's world. Their truth does not fit in with the reality of her home. In a similar way, when Benny asks Del to write a letter for

him and she chooses as a writing sample to write out his full name and address, including the planet, the solar system and the universe, she is using language to categorize and identify people, to place them in some sort of context.

Benny's desire for marriage is the only glimpse the reader will get of his living within the confines of what society would call normal or expected. For a brief moment, Benny's world and the "real" world collide. It becomes clear after his wife turns out to be violent and eventually leaves him that he is not cut out for regular life. He is better suited to his life of eccentric bachelorhood, a life that he never really gives up, as evidenced when he continues to have dinner with Del's family even after he is married. He cannot, or chooses not to, function within the structure of a traditional role as husband.

Additional evidence of Benny's social ineptitude is the fact that he is unable to find a map of Toronto. He says he does not know where to buy a map and decides to ask people on the street for directions. Not being successful in that endeavor, he gives up and comes home rather than getting a map and trying to find his own way. Again, Benny exhibits trouble in functioning in the real world.

The newspapers also symbolize Benny's eccentricity and the fact that he is closed off from the "real" world. He does not read the regular newspaper, choosing only to read his tabloid-style papers. It is a form of illiteracy, which is further compounded by his inability to write or read maps, two more ways in which Benny is illiterate.

Del also introduces us to many of her neighbors, including Mitch Plim, the Potter boys, Frankie Hall and Irene Pollox. In describing these people, Del includes descriptions of their families, their habits and their homes, as though these things are at the very essence of who the people are.

This section also introduces the reader to Del's mother, first through Del's observation that she does not favor living on the Flats Road. Del's mother believes she is above that and deserves to live in town. Her demeanor changes when she reaches town, "grateful for town shade after Flats Road sun." She does not like to be seen shopping at Buckles' Store, preferring to shop in town, where the better class of people do their shopping. Del's mother is so adamant that they are not known as being from the Flats Road that she insists that Del say they live *at the end* of the Flats Road, "as if that made all the difference." Having the benefit of narrating from a point well into the future, Del points out that her mother would come to discover that her mother doesn't belong in Jubilee, either. Del's mother's opinion that she is better than the other people living on the Flats Road makes the other residents think her a snob, an opinion that results in Del's mother being considerably unpopular.

Del also begins to give us a glimpse into the relationship with her mother. They are two different women, different in their views, their ambitions and their personalities. Del's father, on the other hand, is well liked by most everyone on the Flats Road. He fits in well with the other men on the Flats Road and is intimidated by the town men, having been raised on a farm himself. Del points out that her mother, too, was raised in the country, but she seems to have shed that former self in favor of a new persona that

disdains country folks. Her father considers the Flats Road a happy medium between the "proud poverty" of farm life and the relative affluence of townspeople.

On the whole, this section serves to define the characters and to evoke the places that will continue throughout the book. Del draws clear lines in this chapter between life on the Flats Road and life in Jubilee, between her parents' views on life in each of these places and between Benny's reality and the reality in which she lives.

"Heirs of the Living Body"

"Heirs of the Living Body" Summary

Del goes to stay with her aunts Elspeth and Grace in Jenkin's Bend for the summer. Del's aunts introduce her to the husband of the daughter of a nearby family, a visit for which Elspeth and Grace have done a great deal preparing. They have polished the silver, baked and gotten out their best tableware. The man's table manner is atrocious, and the aunts make fun of him after he leaves. As Del points out, "pretensions are everywhere" around that house. It is a very different place than either Benny's house or her parents' house. It is a world of double entendre, unkind jabs disguised as jokes and "intricate formality."

The aunts believe that ambition is something to be avoided, since it sets a person up for failure and to make one look like a fool. It would not do, according to these women, to have people laughing at you. It is better to be satisfied with what one has and with who one is rather than to strive for more and risk failure. Uncle Craig's decision not to run for election, for example, is seen as nobler than if he had run and lost, or even run and won. Choosing not to run eliminates the possibility of failure and to them, this is a virtue to be celebrated.

Frequently, Aunt Moira and Uncle Bob Oliphant visit with their daughter Mary Agnes, who is slightly mentally challenged. On one visit, Del is instructed to go outside and play with Mary Agnes. Del does not want to go, but she does anyway, regardless of her feelings towards Mary Agnes.

The two girls go for a walk along the bank of the river. Soon, they encounter a dead cow along the bank, its rear hooves in the water. Far from being disgusted or afraid of the dead animal, Del is curious enough to approach it. She takes a stick and taps the cow's hide, tracing the shapes made by the patches of brown and white. She dares Mary Agnes to touch it, and the girl approaches the dead animal. Mary Agnes lays the palm of her hand over the cow's eye and raises her outstretched hand to Del, threatening to chase after her and touch her with the hand that has just touched the dead cow's eye. Del walks away from the girl, mustering her courage.

Two days after Del returns home, Del's mother tells her that her Uncle Craig has passed away. He passed away while playing cards, she tells her daughter, of a heart attack. The family makes the preparations for the funeral, and the day arrives to lay Uncle Craig to rest. Del does not want to attend the service, but she is told that death is a part of life and that growing up means facing things we don't want to face. When Del and her mother arrive at the house, Del busies herself with the task of trying to avoid encountering Uncle Craig's body, which is lain out for the viewing. She decides the kitchen is the only safe place and follows her mother there.

Del finds her way into the storeroom, where she encounters Mary Agnes. Mary Agnes tries to force Del to go see Uncle Craig, and Del retaliates by biting Mary Agnes' arm, drawing blood. Upon seeing what she has done to her daughter, Moira calls Del a mad dog and insists that Mary Agnes is going to need stitches. Elspeth and Grace try their best to reason with Moira, and she is eventually appeased. Del is led into another room and laid on a sofa, where she is covered with a blanket and given cake and tea, in an effort to calm her down. Although segregated from the rest of the mourners, Del muses that she is, in a sense, still among them. They will forever remember that she bit Mary Agnes' arm at Uncle Craig's funeral. It will become part of the story of the day, for years to come.

Soon, Del can be corralled no longer. She gets up from the sofa and opens the door. The other funeral attendees are now moving toward Uncle Craig, for what one lady calls "the Last Look." Del pushes her way into the line. Soon she is standing at the corner of the casket, which is covered from shoulders to waist in a blanket of lilies sent over by Aunt Helen.

After Uncle Craig's death, Aunt Elspeth and Aunt Grace sell the house on Jenkin's Bend and move to Jubilee, in order to help Del's father and his family in any way they can. The two ladies care for Del's father by doing the preserving for him and his family, by baking and cooking and by darning his socks. Del visits them, although more and more infrequently as she gets older and enters high school.

One day, Del's aunts bring her a box containing a manuscript Uncle Craig started writing. They explain to her that the manuscript will be hers if they pass, and then in a moment of reconsideration, they ask her if she would like to have it now, in the hopes that she will pick up where Craig left off and finish writing it. Del agrees, and when she leaves her aunts' house that day, she takes the box with her. When she reaches her home, Del places the box under her bed, unwilling to discuss the gift with her mother.

Several days later, Del decides that the box in which the manuscript is packed will make a good place for her own writing. She takes the manuscript out of the box and replaces it with papers containing her own writing. Not wanting to put her uncle's work back in the same container as her own, she takes the manuscript down to the cellar and leaves it in a cardboard box.

The last spring that Del spends in Jubilee brings with it a flood. By the point, Del has forgotten all about the manuscript and what she finds in its place now is nothing but a "big wad of soaking paper." It is ruined. Rather, Del assumes it is ruined. She doesn't bother to check. She does, however, feel badly for her aunts, whose hopes of having the manuscript finished were washed away with the flood. By this point in the story, Auntie Grace is in the hospital recovering from a broken hip, and Aunt Elspeth spends her days by her sister's side.

"Heirs of the Living Body" Analysis

"Heirs of the Living Body" deals with two major themes: mortality and the need to know. For Del, her uncle's unfinished manuscript is not as important or real as her poetry and fiction. They cannot portray reality in the way that fiction can. It is for this reason that she all but discards his manuscript while placing in its protective box her own musings and poetry. To her, they are real and worthy of protection.

This chapter centers on Del's first encounters with mortality and death, first with the dead cow on the bank of the river and then at her uncle's funeral. In each case, she is curious about what has happened to the deceased, but she is still apprehensive about getting too close. She is willing to poke the cow with a stick, for example, but she does not want to touch the eye. Similarly, she initially does everything she can to avoid seeing her uncle's casket, but she is eventually overcome by curiosity and gets in line for the Last Look.

Del is growing up and is encountering in this chapter some of the hardships that growing up brings with it. She doesn't want to attend the funeral, but her refusal is met with a lecture by her mother about the nature of life and death. Her mother explains that sometimes adults have to do things they don't want to do. Being trusted with this secret, a revelation that is the territory of adults, is one of the first steps in becoming an adult for Del, although at this stage she is, chronologically, still only a child. After she bites Mary Agnes, Del is given a cup of tea. It is, the reader learns, the first taste of tea she has had. Traditionally, in many cultures tea is a drink only drunk by adults. Again, it is a symbol of her starting to be considered an adult. The tea forms a strange paradox, though. Although Del has been ushered into this interior room after adults decide that it is unfair to bring a child to a funeral, she is given her first taste of an adult drink. Her musing that it is an unfamiliar taste can also symbolize the unfamiliarity of the world of grown-ups, into which she is being thrust by being forced to attend a funeral.

The world in which Del's aunts live in is, once again, very different from Del's own reality. Theirs is a world concerned with propriety, appearances and the maintenance of the status quo. To them, ambition is not a noble thing. It is something that should be avoided. In contradiction to this, however, is their wish that Del finish Craig's manuscript. Their brother's pursuits, it seems, are worthy endeavors and should be respected.

Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace's attention to social protocol serves not only to underline this quality in them, but it also to draw attention to its absence in Del's mother. Del sees her mother as unrefined and inferior to her aunts, although at the same time she seems to respect her mother's rebellion against the norm. It is a quality that Del, too, possesses. Del's mother's method of teaching her daughter is direct, straightforward and unmistakable. Her aunts are subtler, preferring to gently jab and gossip rather than to straight-out let their feelings be known. Their subtle disapproval of Del's mother's ways gives Del yet another perspective on her family. They are a mirror held up to what she knows, offering another version of reality that Del couldn't otherwise see, partly

because of her youth and inexperience and partly, perhaps, because she is too close to the situation to see it for what it really is.

Del's preoccupation with words and her tendency to instantly translate words into the images they evoke is further evidenced in this section. When Del explains that Mary Agnes was deprived of oxygen "in the birth canal," Del cannot bear the sound of the word, for it conjures images too vivid and uncomfortable. In a similar way, when she is told of her uncle's passing, Del contemplates the meaning of the word. She does not contemplate the meaning of her uncle having passed or what death means, but the actual weight of the word itself. To her, the strangest thing about his death is that the word chosen to describe it is an active verb, as if a person can simply decide to die, just as one can decide to eat or sleep or drive. Her analysis of the *way* in which he died is equally focused on its linguistic merit. She surmises that a heart attack sounds like some kind of explosion.

As discussed in a previous section, Del feels that she must categorize and explain the world, and things that she cannot fit neatly into a category upset her. For example, the inexplicable nature of the cow's death prompts Del to declare that it "invited desecration." In other words, if it cannot be categorized, it doesn't warrant existence. It needed to be destroyed.

"Princess Ida"

"Princess Ida" Summary

"Princess Ida" focuses on Del's recollections of her mother. She has taken a job as a travelling encyclopedia salesperson, a practice that, of course, Del's aunts think is a waste of time. She drives all over the county, peddling her encyclopedias.

Del begins to absorb information from the books that her mother is selling, which gives Ada an idea. Soon, Del finds herself travelling around with her mother. She is a kind of live-action prop, evidence that the encyclopedias are something every child should have. She is asked to recall, on cue, such information as the names of all the American presidents or the capitals of South American countries. It is Ada's belief that no one could possibly turn down the possibility to afford his or her own children that kind of knowledge.

One day, Del decides she no longer wants to be her mother's trick pony. When she is asked to recount the names of presidents, something she has been able to sound off countless times before, she pretends to be on the verge of vomiting. After giving her usual sales pitch, Del's mother returns to the car, where Del is sitting, holding her stomach. Ada accuses Del of becoming self-conscious about her smarts. Far from coddling her daughter, Ada proclaims that she was never afforded the "luxury" of shyness.

That day marks a change in the way Del's mother treats her on these trips. From that point on, she asks if Del wants to answer some questions. After being answered by a fake illness several times, Del's mother gives up and simply allows her daughter to ride along in the car, silent, "free and useless cargo."

Del's mother rents a house in town, where she and the children live from September to June, only spending their summers on the Flats Road. Her father visits when the weather permits. They take in a boarder, Fern Dogherty, with whom Ada becomes friends.

One day, Ada decides to throw a ladies' party, inviting many of the women from town, as well as Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace. She hopes the party will encourage other ladies in the neighborhood to follow suit, but it does not. Eventually, Ada loses interest in social life and stops trying. Instead, she joins the Great Books discussion group and attends meetings in the Town Hall every second Thursday during the winter months. The following year, Ada signs up for a correspondence course in history and busies herself writing letters to the newspapers.

One day, Ada visits Del's school to present a prize for the best essay on the virtues of buying Victory Bonds. It is a proud day for her, having to go to all of the area schools to

present a prize. Del is in agony, having to endure her mother's school visit and her mother's career as a whole.

One day, during Del and Ada's second winter at the house in Jubilee, they receive visitors. While shovelling the sidewalk, Del notices a car coming up the road. It has American license plates, an indication to Del that the driver of the car must be lost. Someone Del does not recognize gets out of the car and holds open his arms to Del. Soon Del learns that this man is her Uncle Bill.

Del's mother comes out of the house to greet her brother, scolding him for not giving advanced notice of his visit but glad to see him nevertheless. Bill turns to the car and motions to someone inside it, gesturing a suggestion that the passenger should get out and come over to join them. Bill introduces Del to her Aunt Nile, Bill's second wife. He explains that they were married the previous September.

The party heads inside to get warm, and Bill asks for a cup of coffee. Unfortunately, Del's mother is a tea drinker and doesn't keep coffee in the house. Bill offers to go to the store to get some coffee, and suggests that Del should go with him. Bill and Del head to the Red Front Grocery Store to buy coffee. Bill, who is from the United States, is taken aback by the humble store, but he decides it is good enough since his sister shops there. They enter the store in search of what they need.

The store has just been converted into a self-serve store, and the aisles do not accommodate carts, a fact that annoys Bill but an inconvenience he soon overcomes. Bill proceeds to buy everything in sight, filling the arm basket to overflowing. For Del, this is a rare treat, but at the same time she feels a pang that her uncle's excess really might just be too much. Nevertheless, she feels she should show some gratitude, a sentiment that comes in the form of calling him a "fairy godfather."

When Del and Bill return, Addie (which is what Bill calls his sister) sets the table with a clean cloth, and the family sits down to a meal. Addie and Bill reminisce about their past. Nile and Bill stay the night, sleeping on the sofa bed in the front room.

The following morning, Bill and Nile leave Addie's house, never to be seen or heard from by them again. A few days later, Addie tells Del that Bill is dying. Del asks her mother if she still hates her brother for what he did to her when she was a child, and her mother responds that she does not hate her brother and that he has left her three hundred dollars in his will. Shortly thereafter, the snow melts, and it is spring. Del's mother once again sets out on the road.

"Princess Ida" Analysis

The narrator turns her attention, and the readers', to her mother. In the previous sections, Del's mother has been mentioned only peripherally, as she relates to the other characters in the story. Here, she is the central focus.

The title of this section is the pen name chosen by Del's mother when she decides to start writing letters to the local newspapers. The name is symbolic, too, of another stage in Addie's life, a stage in which she is now a different person. Quite apart from her life as a wife and mother, her life as a travelling encyclopedia salesperson signifies a new freedom and independence. The use of a pseudonym further completes this transformation. She is no longer Ada Jordan. In every way, she is now Princess Ida.

Readers learn a good deal more about Addie in this chapter than in the previous ones. For example, it comes clear from her interest in the encyclopedia that she values knowledge. More than that, she values knowledge that is contained, organized and explainable, not unlike Del herself. Addie's love of words, which is obvious from her penchant for crossword puzzles, is also reflected in her daughter. Just as Del enjoys devouring books and other forms of text, both written and verbal, so too does her mother enjoy the weight of words.

This chapter provides an acute sense of how one's parents can shape one's views about the world simply through their use of various words. When Del, Owen and their mother return to Jubilee after being on the road, Del's impression of the town is shaped by the words her mother uses. Del is quick to point out, though, as she recounts these journeys, that it isn't really that her mother can make the city change form through her use of words, but rather that Del merely believes her mother's words to have this power.

The painting that hung in the Flats Road house, painted by Del's mother, symbolizes their former life. It does not hang in the Jubilee home. Del asks her mother about it, hoping to extract some romantic story about its origin. Instead, she is disappointed to learn that her mother copied the image from an issue of *National Geographic*. In telling her this, Del's mother is shaping Del's perception of the past, something her mother will do several times in this section. Del believed, or fantasized, that the painting was created during a happier time in her mother's life and that in some symbolic way the girl in the painting *was* her mother. Addie crushes this fantasy through her revelation of the truth of the painting.

Addie's past is revealed more fully in this section, which makes her become more and more real and three-dimensional. She tells a story of her relationship with her mother, which serves to draw connections between Addie and her own daughter. The stories Addie tells about running away from home, from her life before marriage, do not seem to be about the same person who is telling the stories. In other words, it is difficult for Del to imagine her mother as the woman in these stories. As discussed before, Del believes fiction to have more value or truth than does reality. In hearing the stories about her mother's past, it is almost as though she believes that although there is a disconnect between that woman and the woman Del now knows, the disconnect itself, the fictitious air of the stories, makes them all the more real.

There is a section in this chapter to which most of us can relate. When Addie decides to start writing letters to the newspapers, expressing opinions on all manner of topics, Del feels ashamed and embarrassed about her. She is not embarrassed for her mother; she is embarrassed *of* her mother. This embarrassment is further reinforced when her

mother comes to Del's school to present an award for the best essay written about why people should buy Victory Bonds. While Del realizes she is not entirely different from her mother, she fights against the similarities tooth and nail. Del can see what her mother is oblivious of. Jubilee is making fun of her mother's eccentricities. Del does not want to follow the same path.

Uncle Bill's visit presents a myriad of unanswered questions for Del. To her, he is a warm, generous man who buys all manner of treats and snacks for her. She can see no sign of the cruelty her mother says she endured at his hand. Bill and Addie clearly remember very different aspects of their childhoods. Perhaps Bill's retelling of the story of the caterpillar is an attempt to either mend fences or to try to implant in Addie's memory a happier time. Addie does not, however, recall the story that Bill recounts. For her, it is not a real memory from her childhood. It is a story from someone else's childhood, not hers or her brother's.

The hurt suffered by Del's mother, a hurt that she continues to carry with her, is evident in her comment at the end of this chapter. Del asks her what she will do with the money she stands to inherit from her brother, and Addie responds that she might buy a box of Bibles, the very thing her own mother did when Addie was a child.

"Age of Faith"

"Age of Faith" Summary

Del is twelve years old in "Age of Faith," and in search of the answer to how religion does, or should, fit into her life. She sits in on mass first at the United Church in town and then at the Anglican Church, trying to find answers. She decides to broach the subject of religion with her brother Owen, who is three years younger than she is. She asks him if he believes in God, and when he doesn't answer, Del tells him about her prayer that she would not have to continue to suffer with learning to sew. Del believes that her prayer is answered when her Household Science teacher excuses her from her sewing lessons.

On Good Friday, Del announces to her mother that she is going to church. This declaration prompts Del's mother to denounce religion and the idea that Christ died on the cross for us. "God was made by a man!" she says, "Not the other way around!" To Addie, it makes no more sense to believe that an unseen being died for our sins than it would be to subscribe to the Aztec notion that the sun would not rise or set if they did not offer up in sacrifice live hearts. Despite her objections, Del's mother does not stop Del from attending church, believing instead that allowing her to go will soon prove to Del that her mother is right.

In the spring, Del and Owen go back to the house on Flats Road to visit their father and Uncle Benny. One day, the children learn that their family dog, Major, has killed a sheep. Not wanting to believe that the dog will kill again, Del's father is content to keep the animal tied up. However, the plan doesn't work, and the dog breaks away from captivity, killing another of the neighbor's sheep. Mr. Jordan was visiting his children in town the previous night, and after receiving a phone call from Benny telling him about the incident, Del's father announces to Owen that they have to "get rid of Major."

Del's mother tries to soothe her son by saying that Major is an old dog, and that old dogs are better off not being allowed to suffer. In an effort to somehow devise a plan to save Major, Owen suggests that the dog could come live with them in Jubilee. When his idea is refused, Owen gets up from the table in silence.

For Del, the troubling aspect of having to put Major down is the deliberateness. It is not the dog's impending death that bothers her, but rather that her father would deliberately aim a gun at their dog with the *intention* of killing him. It is the calculating nature of the act that troubles her. She goes upstairs to check on her brother. Remembering what Del told him about her Household Science class and her prayer having been answered, Owen asks Del whether a prayer for Major would mean he wouldn't be shot. It is at this moment that Del realizes the truth of things: that prayer and life do not always fit nicely together. Her feelings are summed up in he observation, "I saw with dismay the unavoidable collision coming, of religion and life."

Owen begs Del to tell him how to pray, in a desperate attempt to save his beloved pet. Knowing that no prayer can save the dog, Del can only sit back and watch her brother's last-ditch attempts to take matters into his own hands.

"Age of Faith" Analysis

This chapter centers on Del's exploration of matters of faith. She tries to find a place within several of the churches in Jubilee, a place wherein she can find some answers to her questions about religion and the nature of prayer.

Del tries desperately to see God at work in her everyday life. She *wants* to believe. When she concludes that she is just not cut out for sewing lessons, she would do anything to get out of it. When her teacher finally excuses her from her sewing torture, Del is willing to believe that is an act of God, an answered prayer. She finds the paradox in religion, however, when Owen asks her for help in praying for their dog Major, who is to be put down for killing sheep. Although she is a believer when the prayer is "answered" with regard to her sewing, she cannot in good conscience give her brother false hope. Perhaps she doesn't want to risk having her own faith shaken. As long as she chooses to pray for only those things that are likely to be changed, her faith has a good chance of being proven valid. Major's being put down is in her father's hands, not God's, Del realizes. She can do nothing to stop certain aspects of real life.

This chapter also depicts an aspect of life common to small-towns across North America, one can assume. The practice of attending church is as much about worshipping as it is about being *seen* worshipping. It is a social custom as much as a religious practice. Del is curious about and to some extent entertained by the posturing that goes on in the churches of Jubilee. There is the large United Church and the smaller, lower class Catholic and Baptist churches. The fact that Del categorizes the churches in terms of the social and economic classes of their congregations is indicative of her keen awareness that church, in a small town, is more than just a place to worship. She does not play into the drama of it all, but watches from the sidelines, taking it all in, as she does in many other aspects of her life.

Here again, Del is acutely interested in the sound and texture of words. She contrasts the words of the Anglican sermon against the humble church itself. For her, words are so much "richer" than possessions. The words spoken at the service create yet another reality for her. They are a fiction, of sorts, in which Del puts her faith. For now, she has reached a decision about God. She has a direction in which to point her faith.

Up until this chapter, Del is searching for something to believe in. She wants to believe that her mother is the woman in the painting. She wants to believe her Uncle Bill's version of their childhood. Her preferred version of the world is the world depicted in Benny's newspapers, not that which is reported in the "real" papers. In this chapter, Del finally finds something in which she can believe, through religion. She doesn't fully detach herself from the "real" world, however. She won't let Owen have a false sense of hope about Major, because she realizes that even the strongest prayers can do nothing

to stop him from meeting his inevitable fate. A devout believer would, presumably, pray for the dog's salvation and, if the prayers were met with opposition by the forces of real life, would assume that whatever happened was the work of God. Del is not willing to take that final leap of faith, however. In this one instance, she chooses reason over faith, even though her brother is clearly seeking comfort through hope of some kind, even if it is false hope.

"Changes and Ceremonies"

"Changes and Ceremonies" Summary

Every March, Del's school stages an operetta. Miss Farris, the third grade teacher, and Mr. Boyce, the organist at the United Church, are in charge of putting on the show, a fact that doesn't especially please the children.

One day, Mr. Boyce comes into Del's classroom and asks the children to sing, while he and Miss Farris quietly walk from desk to desk, listening. One by one, the teachers ask those students whose voices didn't pass muster to sit down. Del and Naomi are both asked to sit, a fact that gives Del a sense of relief. She would hate to have been separated from her friend on the basis of vocal talent.

Soon, casting for the operetta begins, and the school is buzzing with talk about the show. Frank Wales, the boy who sits behind Del, is chosen - much to Del's surprise, although she does admit he has a good singing voice, having heard him sing "God Save the King" every morning. Frank is to play the role of the Pied Piper. Knowing that her crush, Frank, is to be in the operetta, Del desperately wants to get a part, too. Naomi eventually gets picked for a small part, leaving Del out of the operetta altogether, at least for now.

Awhile after the initial casting, Miss Farris approaches Del's desk with another girl, June Gannett. She orders Del to stand back to back with June, and luckily, Del is a half-inch shorter than June. The height deficit makes Del just the right size for the costume that is intended for June. Finally, Del is in the operetta! Del is to be paired with Jerry Storey for the show, about which she is not pleased.

Del falls more and more in puppy love with Frank Wales as she watches him take on the persona of the Pied Piper. In general, the requisite cooperation between the boys and girls in the class replaces the customary hostility and mock hatred that usually exists between the sexes at this age.

Del and Naomi talk frankly about sex and other topics that are unacceptable in Jubilee. Their conversations challenge the idea of taboo, exploring topics that only girlfriends can discuss. When each reveals to the other the name of her crush, the two girls devise a system of secret codes for relaying to the other signals about her crush. It is an effort to form a special type of clique, complete with its own language that no one else understands.

Finally, performance night arrives. Despite a series of mishaps, the show goes ahead as planned and practiced. Afterwards, school life returns to normal for those who have been busy with the show. One thing remains, a remnant from before the show: Del's crush on Frank Wales. Frank, however, does not go on to high school as most of the

other students do. Instead, he gets a job, and Del's hopes of seeing him daily at the high school are dashed.

Three or four years after the operetta, when Del is in high school, news comes that Miss Farris has drowned in the Wawanash River. The story causes a flurry of speculation as to the cause of her drowning. Theories of Miss Farris having slipped and fallen, of her having been kidnapped and thrown into the river or of her having committed suicide swirl around Jubilee, although no definitive answer is ever found. Just as curiously, Mr. Boyce leaves Jubilee and moves to London to become an organist and music teacher.

"Changes and Ceremonies" Analysis

"Changes and Ceremonies," as the name suggests, deals with another social convention in Jubilee, the annual school operetta. It is so much a part of the rhythm that is has become as expected as the changing of the seasons. For the students, being chosen for the operetta is, as is much of grade-school life, a matter of life or death. For Del, though, not being chosen for the operetta would have been okay had Naomi, her best friend, also not been chosen. That is, until Frank Wales is chosen. As is so common in young people Del's age, creating opportunities in which she can find herself next to her crush is of crucial importance.

Once again, readers are taken into Del's world of words, this time in the literal form of the library, with its shelves upon shelves of books. These are physical representations of myriad different worlds into which Del can dive whenever she wants. Here, again, Munro depicts Del's preference for fiction over real life. Del describes the library in much detail, with the familiarity and fondness of one's favorite spot. It is almost as though the library is a place known only to her. Even though Naomi accompanies Del to the library, she does not relish being there as Del does, leaving Del to find something to keep Naomi's interest peaked.

More than just a description of the books, Del is describing companions with which she has had a long-lasting relationship. The books never change and never challenge their relationship. They are a constant. They are the only friendship that lasts throughout the entire book. Even Naomi, who starts out as being Del's best friend, cycles through periods of strangerhood and friendship.

The sign on the ladies' room at the public library, with its missing letters, conveys a dual symbolism. First, the fact that the missing letters are never replaced, since they never need to be, is indicative of the complacency of Jubilee. Everyone knows where the ladies' room is, for it is where it has always been. They do not need the superficiality of a perfect sign to assist them in the practical matter of finding where the washroom is. To the residents of Jubilee, it is only important that things do not change; it does not matter whether the sign is in perfect repair. Secondly, Del's observation of the sign both confirms and contrasts her interest in words up to this point. On the one hand, the very fact that she chooses to include this detail in her recollection of events that occurred many years prior to the retelling indicates the impact this sign has on her. To her, the

missing letters, the incomplete message, is worth remembering. Conversely, an imperfect message is something that *should* outrage Del. Up to this point in the novel, Del is someone heavily focused on explaining things and on analyzing the texture and meaning behind words. It seems an anomaly that she would so willingly accept the missing letters on the sign as not requiring replacement.

The librarian, Bella Phippen, is another character through which Munro conveys information about Jubilee itself. She is disabled and given the job as librarian for lack of other options for a person with her afflictions. This attitude may be as much a product of time as of place, but clearly the job of librarian isn't held in very high esteem, as Del points out. Bella is given the job not because she would be good at it or because it is something that someone with her limitations can do well, but because it *only* requires the skill of someone "deaf as a stone and lame in one leg from polio."

The operetta creates an alternate reality within this chapter. For the students chosen to be in it, the operetta offers a chance to be part of a club, an elite clique. For those not chosen, most of whom Del describes as being on an unspoken list of those unlikely to be chosen for such privileged membership, school carries on as usual. Those excused from class experience school in another way entirely. In this shifting of the universe, Del realizes her romantic and sexual feelings for Frank Wales, a classmate. As Del mentions, the requisite mocking that goes on between the sexes in a typical classroom setting is eliminated here. In order for the operetta to be a success, something they all want, boys and girls must necessarily get along.

Del illustrates the blurred line between the characters in the operetta and the actors behind them when she says that she loves the Pied Piper *and* Frank Wales. She mentions the Pied Piper, his character, first. She loves them both as if they are two different people, yet inextricably connected. She can love him in this context of the operetta because the fear of rejection is diminished. Even if she doesn't tell him of her feelings, she can feel freer to fantasize about him in this setting. Her mind is freed from the social constraints of classroom protocol.

Miss Farris' death and the mystery surrounding it are further examples of how of the inexplicable poses problems in Del's mind. Until the news of her former teacher's death reaches her, Del has a certain impression of her teacher, and a death such as this doesn't "fit" with the image. She cannot reconcile Miss Farris' life with her death. In the retelling of the story, however, she has resigned herself to the fact that those images will have to "stay together now." Perhaps Del, as the narrator, has now grown into an understanding that all is not always what it seems.

By the end of this section, Del is a changed person. She has matured from a child into an adolescent, with new concerns, unfamiliar feelings and an even greater stockpile of questions about the world.

"Lives of Girls and Women"

"Lives of Girls and Women" Summary

In "Lives of Girls and Women," Del is at the beginning of a sexual awakening. She and Naomi are in high school at this point in the story, and by Del's admission they hold daily discussions about sex. The girls find a book in Naomi's mother's old hope chest, "under her moth-balled best blankets." The information contained within this book is clinical, but for the girls it is their only source of information on the topic. They are, as of now, still virgins.

The audience is introduced in this chapter to Art Chamberlain, the news anchor on the local radio station. Rumored to be having an affair with Fern, Art spends a good deal of time at Del's house in Jubilee. He regales them with stories of his travels and his tour of duty. When he mentions that he has been to Florence, Del's mother seizes upon that bit of information and peppers Mr. Chamberlain with a barrage of questions about what he has seen over there. Ignoring his obvious reluctance to discuss matters of art and the other things for which Florence is famous, Addie continues to pressure Mr. Chamberlain for information. He does, however, offer up information about the young girls in Italy who were sold to men, often by their own fathers. He is quick to point out that these girls were "no older than Del," a statement that will launch a series of events throughout the rest of the chapter.

Del goes upstairs after being sent away by her mother, and she puts on her mother's dressing gown. Standing in front of the mirror, Del sees herself in another light for the first time. She sees herself as a potential object of desire for a man. She describes herself in physical, sexual terms for the first time in the book.

Del begins to ponder the nature of the sex act. More specifically, she is concerned with the transition to the act itself, how two people go from being clothed to being in the throes of intercourse. She wonders if a man would "unzip himself and point his thing at you?" Naomi's mother's book doesn't cover such nuances. These untold aspects of sex make Del curious. She speculates that had she been born in Italy, she would have already gotten the answers to these questions. It would be information she could categorize and relegate to the realm of the understood.

Following Mr. Chamberlain's comments about the young girls in Italy, Del uses him as a means through which she fantasizes about sex. Her sexual thoughts now have a name, a face, a body and a smell. Her daydreams only go as far as to allow him to see her naked, for her understanding of sex will allow no further imagery to form.

One day, the girls notice Mr. Chamberlain's car in Del's driveway, and they decide to go inside, in the hopes of catching him and Fern engaged in sex. Instead, they find Del's mother helping Fern make a dress for an upcoming wedding at which she is to perform and Mr. Chamberlain sitting at the table, drinking whiskey. Del asks for a taste of his

drink, and Mr. Chamberlain says he'll give her a taste if she does a trick for him. After performing a seal impression, Del is offered her reward, a taste of the drink. As he tipped the glass to Del's lips, he used his other hand to fondle her breast, out of sight of anyone else in the room.

From that moment, Del creates opportunities for Mr. Chamberlain to touch her, and on several occasions he responds with a touch of the breasts, the buttocks or her thigh. Del's previous ideas about love and passion are now replaced by lustier, more primal feelings about sex. She is quick, however, to state that she is content for the secret touching by Mr. Chamberlain to be her only foray into sexual conduct for now. "One stroke of lightning does not have to lead anywhere, except to the next stroke of lightning," she muses.

One day, as Del is walking home from school, Mr. Chamberlain pulls up in his car and honks the horn. Del gets in the car, full of nervous excitement and trepidation as to what is to happen in that car. He does not make an advance toward her but asks her for a favor. He wants her to go into Fern's room and search for letters from him. Del does not find the letters and conveys this to Mr. Chamberlain when he asks her if her homework is done, in their secret code.

The following Monday, Mr. Chamberlain meets Del after school once again. They drive away from town and eventually pull of the road. Mr. Chamberlain suggests that they get out of the car and take a walk down to the creek. Obediently and willingly, Del follows him. Mr. Chamberlain exposes himself to Del, and she assumes they will have sex. Instead, Mr. Chamberlain masturbates in front of her, and when it is over, Del marvels at how he could simply zip himself back up and walk back to the car "the way [they] had come." To her, their paths, symbolically, should have been changed.

Mr. Chamberlain is never seen again in Jubilee after that day. His performance in front of Del was, as she puts it, "valedictory." Del returns home one day to find Fern reading a farewell letter from Art Chamberlain.

Naomi, having been sick for a while, is now a different person according to Del. She is daintier and more ladylike. Her fire has burned out. Because of this, Del does not feel she can discuss with Naomi what happened with Mr. Chamberlain.

"Lives of Girls and Women" Analysis

The central theme of "Lives of Girls and Women" is that of sexual awakening and the ways in which sexual feeling and behavior affect our lives and development.

Naomi and Del do as most girls their age do. They begin to explore areas of discussion and inquiry that one can only discover with one's peers. They are not the topics one customarily discusses with parents or teachers. To them, sex is an undiscovered country that must be explored secretly and on their own.

Del allows herself to be seen by herself and others as a sexual being in this chapter. When Mr. Chamberlain tells the story of how, in Italy, girls Del's age are sold as whores by their fathers, Del begins to see herself in a different way. It is a new idea to her that a girl her age could be seen as something sexual, an object of desire. Her daydreams about having sex with Mr. Chamberlain only go as far as her experience will let her. She cannot go beyond the moment in the daydream when he sees her naked, because her experience and knowledge doesn't allow for the images to form. She realizes that, had she been born in Italy, she would likely already have the answers to her sexual questions. Del's preoccupation with the transition to sex, rather than the sexual act itself, indicates in her a curiosity more about how things happen rather than how they are. As readers have seen several times throughout this book, Del has a need to explain everything. To her, the answer to how a couple transitions to sex is a more burning issue than how sex feels or even why a couple would opt to have sex.

In contrast to Del's interest in sex is her underlying modesty. She cannot bear to wear a nightgown to bed because it leaves her pubic area exposed. She prefers to wear pajamas because they more adequately cover her body. This preference toward more juvenile pajamas over the more womanly nightgown reminds us that Del is still, in many ways, a child. Also interesting about the fact that Del prefers pajamas is her remark that her mother, too, wears pajamas to bed. Del spends so much of her time trying to distance herself from her mother, drawing contrasts over comparisons, that the sudden glimmer of recognition of her mother in herself stands out.

Another theme explored in this section is the quest for glory or recognition in a place where everyone seems to blend into a homogenous mass. Del says that she is taken aback when her mother mentions Del's future children. She says that she doesn't want to have children but that it is "glory [she] was after." In a place like Jubilee, it is easy to follow the prescribed life pattern. For girls, that pattern involves marriage, babies and keeping a house. Whether it is an act of real desire or of adolescent rebellion isn't totally clear, but Del decides that the normal life is not for her. She wants to leave a mark on earth, and she cannot do that through doing what everyone else does. This desire is evident in her statement that she and Naomi "hoped the world watched" from the windows and in Del's observation that they "hated [those girls in their class] just because they could never be imagined entering the Town Hall toilets." They are realizing that, in a small town, everyone has a roll to play, and in many cases that role is one into which we are born. Oftentimes, there is no escaping it. Del does not want this fate for herself.

Del's realization of her own vulnerabilities and inadequacies causes her, as it does many young people, to make fun of those worse off than she. The following statement, made by Del in this section, illuminates this tendency: "Making fun of poor, helpless, afflicted people. The bad taste, the heartlessness, the joy of it." She knows it is wrong to have a laugh at the expense of another, and yet there is an undeniable deliciousness about it, too.

When Mr. Chamberlain is entertained by Del's seal impression, she is overcome with the feelings of acceptance and attention, saying, "This marvelling laughter was so

comforting, so absolving, that I could have gone on being a seal forever." In this moment, for possibly the first time in her life, Del feels special and accepted, appreciated and interesting. It is possibly for this reason that Del allows herself to be taken in my Mr. Chamberlain's advances. The desire for acceptance and for a "special secret" combines with her sexual curiosity, permitting Del to allow her tryst with Mr. Chamberlain to occur, however benign it may turn out to be. Given her age, though, his actions are certainly inappropriate to most people, especially in a town such as Jubilee, where anything out of the ordinary is considered taboo. This may be another reason why Del goes with him willingly to the bushes where he eventually exposes himself to her and masturbates. It is, essentially, an act of rebellion.

At one point in this chapter, Del questions the nature of her true self, or rather whether Mr. Chamberlain has seen something in her that she previously hasn't seen. When Mr. Chamberlain asks Del to search in Fern's room for letters, she recounts the incident by saying that he "assumed without any trouble at all that there was treachery in me, as well as criminal sensuality, waiting to be used." In unleashing this "treacherous" side of Del, Mr. Chamberlain has opened up a second door to adulthood for Del. In conjunction with her sexual awakening at his hand, Del is experiencing the adult world of free will, too. She has to decide her herself whether to do as he asks.

Del's mother's assumptions about her daughter's life goals are as off base as her crazy predictions about the future weather patterns. The passage in this chapter in which Del's mother assumes that her daughter will follow the usual series of life events for girls in Jubilee is indicative of the disconnect between mother and daughter. Addie sees her daughter as a girl, destined for a certain kind of life. Del, the dreamer, sees herself as being outside of the constraints of life in Jubilee.

"Baptizing"

"Baptizing" Summary

Del is in her third year of high school. Naomi has switched to Commercial classes, while Del continues in her academic-level studies. Naomi has also gotten a job in the office of the creamery. This is the beginning of the final stages of their separation as friends. Their lives are now following two different paths.

Del goes to visit Naomi at work one day and is astonished and disgusted at the transformation in her. Seeing Naomi interact with her colleagues solidifies in Del's mind that they will never again be the kind of friends they once were. To her, Naomi is putting on a "charade," with her nail polish and fancy, adult clothes. Del's feelings toward Naomi's new persona are summed up in one phrase: "I was amazed and intimidated by her as her boring and preoccupied self."

Once again, Del's love of words plays a part in the retelling of her life story, this time in her discussion of the word "mistress." Del notes that the word had some "ceremony" about it.

One of the local boys, Bert Matthews, bets Naomi ten dollars that she will not be allowed to attend the dance at the Gay-la Dance Hall with him. Since her mother is out of town and her father never notices what she does anyway, Naomi takes on the bet. She wants Del to accompany her to the dance, and Del agrees out of a feeling of obligation.

At the dance, Del is introduced to Clive, and the two of them start to dance. It is a clumsy dance, with none of the elegance and etiquette of a more mature couple's courting ritual. Del describes a feeling of trying desperately to be the person the boy wants her to be, musing that she "had been afraid he might recognize how inadequate [she] was and just whirl on to somebody else." Nevertheless, Del is proud to be on the arm of a man.

The four friends meet up again and share a drink. Naomi is proud of Del for acting like an adult. The four friends leave the dance and head to the Brunswick Hotel. On the way, Del experiences her first French kiss, an experience she describes by saying, "He bent over and pressed his face against mine and stuffed his tongue, which seemed enormous, wet, cold, crumpled, like a dishrag, into my mouth."

The foursome gets a hotel room and continues drinking. The boys start telling jokes that Del doesn't understand, but she laughs anyway, for fear of being thought "too napve to understand the joke." For Del, the name of the game that night is to appear as mature and "together" as possible. After awhile, she excuses herself to go to the washroom. On the way back from the ladies' room, Del drunken haze leads her past the hotel room door and to the end of the corridor. Soon, she finds herself out on the fire escape, and

soon she is at the foot of the fire escape stairs, in an alley between the radio station building and the hotel. Del resolves to go to Naomi's house, and when she arrives she knocks on the locked front door. In her intoxicated state, Del forgets that she and Naomi left the back door unlocked so that they could slip back into bed undetected.

Del's knocking wakes Naomi's father, and when he answers the door "like a risen corpse," Del suddenly remembers that she should not be there. Turning to run down the stairs, Del heads to her house on River Street, and when she arrives there she falls asleep in the porch swing where she sleeps until morning.

Naomi's father, now aware that his daughter is not at home as he thought, decides to wait up for her return. When Naomi arrives home that night, her father is furious with her and beats her badly with his belt. Following the beating, Naomi's father forces her to pray to God for forgiveness and that she will never taste liquor again.

Early the next morning, Del awakes with her first hangover. She sneaks back into bed, claiming that she got sick at Naomi's house the previous night and had to come home. Later that day, Naomi comes to see Del, furious that she bailed out on the group the night before. She shows Del the bruises her father left on her and questions Del about how he knew she was not home. Del does not disclose that it was because of her drunken visit that Naomi's father was waiting for her when she got home. From that day forward, Naomi and Del quickly drift farther and farther apart.

Del befriends Jerry Storey, a boy in her class. She is attracted to his intelligence, a gift that makes Jerry as much of an outcast as she is. The pair quickly becomes known as the "Quiz Kids," and soon their friendship turns to dating. Their bond is one of commiseration, in a sense. Del explains that "Parody, self-mockery, were our salvation." Del and Jerry are two peas in a solitary pod. They spend their time together going to movies or drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes at Haines Restaurant, preferring this restaurant to The Blue Owl where their classmates go.

Sometimes Jerry comes to Del's house for dinner, despite her protests. She does not want to introduce Jerry to her mother, preferring instead to spend time at Jerry's house. Jerry's family consists only of his mother, who is a stark contrast to Del's own mother. During one visit, Jerry's mother takes Del aside and warns her against letting Jerry get her pregnant and having to have a shotgun wedding. Much to Del's horror, Jerry's mother takes it upon herself to ask Del whether she has a diaphragm. It is a conversation Del cannot fathom ever having with her own mother, and she prefers her mother's hands-off approach to her daughter's sex life.

Del and Jerry explore each other sexually without having intercourse. To Del, they are "the only avenue to discovery that the other had found." On one visit to Jerry's house, his mother is out attending a meeting. Jerry asks Del to take off her clothes so that he may see her body. Del agrees but stipulates that she will not undress in the front room. After some discussion, the pair decides to go up to Jerry's bedroom. Just as Jerry is readying the room for whatever is about to happen, he knocks over a lamp, giving Del a moment to reconsider. She decides to proceed, however.

Just then, Jerry's mother comes home. In a moment of panic, Jerry shoves Del, naked, down into the cellar. When the coast is clear, he shoves her clothes down the laundry chute. Del dresses except for her stockings, because Jerry didn't throw down her garter belt, and she walks home.

The following day, Jerry returns Del's garter belt to her in a brown paper bag. They are friends once again, but they never fully discuss what happened, or what might have happened, that day. They turn their attention to studying for their scholarship exams, putting "that day" behind them.

That spring, the town holds a revival meeting, which Del attends out of "scientific curiosity." The revival is held in the Town Hall, and people from both the town and the surrounding rural areas attend. Del stands at the back of the room, and as the meeting proceeds, she becomes aware of someone staring at her from across the room. Suddenly, the boy disappears, and a few moments later Del can feel him moving through the crowd to stand behind her.

Soon, Del and the boy find themselves with their hands resting on the back of the same chair. Their hands slowly move toward one another until their fingers are interlaced, just as the last hymn is being sung. When the revival ends, the boy releases Del's hand and is once again lost in the crowd. Del spends the rest of the weekend thinking about the boy. After school on the following Monday, Del is walking down John Street Hill with Jerry when she hears a horn honk at them. It is the boy from the revival. Del tells Jerry that he is a customer of her mother's and that she will catch up with Jerry later. Del climbs into the truck with the boy, and she learns that his name is Garnet French.

Garnet invites Del to attend a meeting of the Baptist Young People's Society, and it becomes a weekly ritual for them. Del muses that such a meeting is almost the last place in which she would have expected to find herself. After the service each week, the young people retire to the church basement for ping-pong and snacks. Del begins to feel as if she has, once and for all, turned into one of them. After the meeting one day, Del and Garnet drive off the road in search of a place to park. The couple still has not had sex, and yet they have touched each other intimately and engaged in oral sex. Del explains that they "felt an obligation...not to hurry."

One Sunday, Garnet invites Del to his home for dinner. When she arrives at his home, Del is not introduced to his family right away. Two of Garnet's sisters, however, do take Del down to the creek and tell Del stories about their childhoods and about growing up. They return to the house, and Del is given a tour of the home itself. Then, she is introduced to much of the family.

Garnet announces that he wants to show Del something. He takes her outside to the porch and asks her to look up. When she does, Del sees that Garnet has carved a list of girls' names on the underside of the roof, each name with an X after it. Garnet runs through the list of names, indicating for all to hear why he is better off for not having married each girl. Garnet's mother asks what the X is for, but Garnet will not reveal the secret. Instead, he jumps up on the porch railing and adds Del's name to the list,

announcing that he thinks he has reached the end of his list. At the prompting of his sisters, Garnet takes Del into his arms and kisses her.

After dinner, Garnet takes Del home. Along the way, his truck breaks down. Del offers to let him stay at her house, but he declines the offer, saying it would be better if he stayed with a friend. The couple walks the rest of the way to Del's house. When they get there, they sneak around to the side of the house and begin making out. Eventually, things progress, and the couple ends up engaging in sex for the first time. The following day is examination day for Del, but she is changed forever as a result of the previous night's events. She cannot concentrate on the task at hand.

Naomi is getting married. Despite their estrangement, Naomi phones Del to tell her about her engagement and asks her friend to come over to her house, where she asks Del to be her bridesmaid. After Naomi's mother leaves the room, she reveals to Del that she is pregnant, prompting Del to recount the story of how she, too, has lost her virginity and about the events that happened with Mr. Chamberlain.

Garnet and Del decide to get married. Garnet says that if they are to have a baby, Del must first be baptized into his church. Del doesn't want to get baptized, and the couple fights about the issue. In an effort to "baptize" her himself, Garnet nearly drowns Del. She is successful in getting away from him, and she gets dressed in the truck and proceeds to walk home, alone. It is the end of their relationship.

"Baptizing" Analysis

At the dance, Del's former confidence is gone. She is no longer the sexually curious adolescent, wanting to be touched by the older man. The dance is a level playing field. She is no longer in safe territory. Now she is in a world in which she doesn't know the rules, a world totally foreign to her. She does not know how to play the dating game or the sexual cat-and-mouse game of youth. Her only experience in sexual games was with Mr. Chamberlain, whose experience made her role easy. She was an observer, and now she will have to be a participant. During her dance with Clive, Del tries to figure out who the boy wants her to be. This is an indication of her immaturity and of her unfinished search for self. When the foursomes goes back to the hotel room, Del's shaken confidence is evident in her statement that she laughs at the boys' jokes so that she does not appear too napve to understand them.

Naomi, too, struggles with appearing mature, although the game seems much more effortless to her. Naomi's sights are set on catching a man, not a boy, and she cannot understand Del's ambivalence toward Clive or her actions in leaving the group at the hotel. Naomi's indignant question, "Who do you want to go out with? High-school boys?" further indicates that Naomi and Del are on two different paths. Del does, in fact, want to date boys her own age. They are her comfort zone.

Del's relationship with Jerry Story symbolizes her chosen path in life. For her, dating (or eventually marrying) a boy like Jerry would indicate a success that isn't just inherent in

being married. He is smart, with a bright academic future. Marrying him would mean intellectual success, symbolically. There is a divide between Del and Jerry, however. For Jerry, language is only useful and valid if it portrays truth and facts. Del finds more truth in fiction. In an ironic sense, words are a barrier between them.

The experience between Del and Jerry when he asks her to undress so that he might examine her body for "scientific discovery" is the last time Del can claim a passive role in her sexuality. From the time Mr. Chamberlain exposes himself to her up until now, Del has essentially played the role of a willing-but-distant participant. Even her recounting of her kiss with Clive is indicative of her view that *he* is doing the kissing, not that it is a mutual endeavor.

When Jerry's mother comes home and Del is forced into the cellar without her clothes, she exhibits a vulnerability and fear that serves to underline her naivety in sexual situations. This naivety is held in contrast to the image of Del walking home without her stockings. She is just a little less innocent now. She no longer wears the clothes, figuratively and literally, of the young girl she once was. Her bare legs are symbolic of the stain of experience that now appears on her innocence. She is not completely beyond redemption, however, as symbolized when Jerry returns her garter belt to her at school in a brown paper bag so as to conceal the contents, indicating inexperience of youth.

Del's passive role is exchanged for a much more active one in Del's relationship with Garnet French, to whom she loses her virginity. She describes the encounter as a "surrender," indicating a conscience decision on her part to be fully present in the act. She is no longer innocent. She is now, and shall forever after be, a sexual being.

When Del gets distracted from her studies by her relationship with Garnet French, which ultimately ends in Del's marks being insufficient for her to get a scholarship, Del's mother falls into a depression. Her hopes for her children, which clearly rested on Del's shoulders, are dashed. Del's mother wanted so badly for her to get out of Jubilee, and Del doesn't get her scholarship, which preludes her from attending university. Del's mother realizes that her family is destined to live in Jubilee and headed for a life of anonymity. Ada Jordan's last attempt, albeit a vicarious one, to escape Jubilee has failed.

One of the central themes of this, the longest section in the book, is baptism or rebirth. When Del meets Garnet, they are at a revival meeting at the Baptist church. Garnet says that he attends the church because he has been redeemed by a Baptist minister for his troubled past. When Del and Garnet talk about marriage and having children, Garnet insists that Del must be baptized into his religion before they can have children together. When Del refuses, Garnet loses his temper and attempts to "baptize" Del in the Wawanash River, an act that nearly ends up drowning her. This series of events is an awakening, or rebirth, for Del. She now sees that Garnet hasn't been saved and that he is the same person he once was. She no longer sees him in the way she wants to see him. Her renewed clarity is in itself a rebirth.

Also reborn in this chapter is Del's friendship to Naomi. When Naomi is about to be married, she calls upon Del to be her bridesmaid and reveals to her friend that she is pregnant. The girls' discovery that neither of them is a virgin anymore somehow brings a convergence to their paths, paths that were once travelling in very different directions. Suddenly their differences are gone, and their friendship is reborn.

"Epilogue: The Photographer"

"Epilogue: The Photographer" Summary

In the final section of the book, Del has outgrown all the books in the town library. She now wants her own book and has become a writer. She decides to write her life story. She keeps her project a secret from everyone. She feels no need to share it with anyone.

The epilogue tells the story of how Del creates her story. She outlines the details of her life that she includes, as well as those she adds, changes and modifies. She explores the process of writing itself, a departure from the previous sections' exploration of words and their meanings. Here, she is exploring the actual creative and mechanical process of creating a story.

Del's novel is about a fictional town much like Jubilee. In this town, a photographer comes to the school to take photographs, and the residents of the town are sceptical of how his photos make them seem. She decides to base her story on the events that happened to a local family, the Sherriffs, whose daughter committed suicide. Del changes some details of the story, such as the family name, which she changes to Halloway.

Del is unable to finish her story, feeling that writing it down would somehow mar the story and taint its beauty. Del says that writing down the story might "flaw the beauty and wholeness of the novel." Instead, she carries it around with her in her mind.

"Epilogue: The Photographer" Analysis

The final chapter brings into focus the inevitable truth that Del is a writer. In fact, she has always been a writer, creating the story of her life for us through her narration. The voice in this chapter is different, closer to the present. Perhaps it is because Del is now speaking of events happening closer to the present that makes her voice sound more mature and at the same time more removed from the story she is telling.

An important thing to point out in this chapter is the dramatic shift in terms of Del's relationship with words. Throughout the rest of the novel, Del is obsessed with explaining and getting details right. She finds friendship in words and comfort in their meaning and even in their appearance. In this section, however, she explains that she doesn't want to write down the words she is forming in her head into a story. To her, writing them down would lessen the story's meaning. Suddenly, Del is realizing the limitations of words in the scope of human experience. There are some feelings and experiences for which words are just inadequate.

This section both compliments and contrasts the traits in Del's character up to now. She is still interested in words and their meanings, but now she is just a little more jaded,

believing that words are not enough to portray meaning and that in fact, often times words muddy the waters of meaning just a little too much.

Characters

Del Jordan

Del is the central character in the story and its narrator. She is a girl with innumerable questions about the world, the answers to which she likes to learn through listening and observing people. Even when her observations are off base, she is glad to have something with which to fill the hole it question previously made.

Del Jordan is something of a rebel. She fights against the social norms of Jubilee and of her mother's oppressive attitude, which is in keeping, generally, with the social constraints of Jubilee, although Del's mother is also a social rebel in many ways. Del rebels against her mother's ways of thinking, too, although she comes to realize that she is not entirely different from her mother.

Del's fascination with words is a cornerstone of her personality. She explains the world through words, universes that Del prefers over the oppressive reality of Jubilee. Del's perception of the world is very visual, too. She sees her Uncle Benny's reality as residing "alongside" her parents' world, rather than each of these characters living together in part of the same world. To her, life only makes sense if Benny's world of tabloids, junk collecting and bachelorhood is somehow separate from her own world of propriety, two-parent households and the illusion of the perfect home.

Del is a typical adolescent in many ways. Her curiosity about sex, for example, is something that it can be safely assumed crosses the mind of teenagers worldwide, no matter their station in life or religious leanings. It is only the expression of these curiosities that differs amongst young people of various cultures. Perhaps the most graphic act of rebellion on Del's part is when she loses her virginity against the wall of her mother's house. The act is not planned and orchestrated, involving a hotel room and romantic music. It is urgent and almost animalistic. It occurs, metaphorically, just outside her mother's control. In performing an act of which mother would so clearly have disapproved, in the location in which it is performed, Del is essentially thumbing her nose at her mother's authority.

Del's relationship with Naomi illustrates many facets of Del's personality. Like many girls their age, there is a deliciousness in discussing sex and other taboo topics that one would not discuss with others. She and Naomi even form a secret code, a language in which they can openly discuss sex or their crushes in front of others without it being known. At least to them, their secret is safe. When Naomi's life takes a turn toward domesticity and the life that is expected of girls in Jubilee, Del feels almost betrayed. She no longer has someone with whom to dream of bigger things. Del can no longer relate to her friend, who now places importance on her job, her friendships with her colleagues and preparing for a household and marriage. Del sees these things as trivial and unimportant in the grand scheme of life, and she allows the friendship to fizzle out. She admits, earlier on, that their friendship is based only on proximity, anyway.

Del's Mother

Del's mother Ada is something of an anomaly in Jubilee, like her daughter. When she gets a job as a travelling encyclopedia salesperson, Ada, like her daughter, shrugs off the expectations placed on women in Jubilee and blazes her own trail, much to the chagrin and disapproval of Del's aunts Grace and Elspeth.

Ada is a private person, revealing little of her true self, even to Del. When Del asks her mother about the painting that hung in the Flats Road house, Del's mother is vague about its origins. Rather than reveal anything about herself, the painter, she simply tells her daughter it is a copy of something she saw in a magazine. Ada is private, too, about her past, her upbringing and her feelings towards her mother. Although Addie intimates an incestuous, abusive relationship during childhood with her brother, when he comes to visit Addie and Del in the house in Jubilee, it seems that all fences are mended. Del asks her mother if she hates her brother, and Addie responds, simply, that she does not.

Addie's willingness to forgive her brother for the abuses to which he subjected her indicates one of two personality traits, either compassion or complacency. Given the other aspects of Ada's personality, it is likely that she has not forgiven nor forgotten the injustices dealt her at her brother's hand, but rather that it is easier not to rock the boat. She can pretend that all is well if she doesn't address the issue or try to find forgiveness within herself. It is likely that she has decided to ignore her true feelings toward her brother rather than having to deal with them. This is a typical response for Jubilee, indicating that, in many ways, Ada Jordan truly conforms to the societal norms imposed upon her by her surroundings. In order to keep the illusion of equilibrium, it is better to ignore anything that doesn't quite fit rather than to come to terms with it.

From the start of the novel, Ada does not fit in on the Flats Road. At least in her own mind, she is better than that. She deserves better. In truth, her superior attitude segregates her from both the Flats Road community and the community in Jubilee, a crowd she so desperately wants to fit into. Ada does not go into Buckles' Store, for example, preferring to do her "real shopping" at the store in town. When they run out of something, Ada sends her daughter, not wanting to be seen in the country store. A similar quality can be seen in Ada's brother, Bill. When he comes to visit and takes Del to the store, he is appalled by the tiny country store that uses no carts. His demeanor, as described by Del, has the air of entitlement, of being better than the residents of Jubilee.

Ada desperately wants to fit in, but on her own terms. She is fiercely proud of her career and the freedom it affords. Most significantly, it can be argued, she values the freedom to live away from her husband, in Jubilee. Not one for making the best of a situation, she fights tooth and nail against fitting in on the Flats Road, or as she so vehemently points out, at the *end* of the Flats Road. Rather than finding happiness in her current situation, Ada insists that she is better suited to life in town and will stop at nothing to make that happen.

Ada's relationship with her husband is indicative of a woman who married for what some may call the wrong reasons. Del describes a distance between her parents, such as exists between people who are no longer, or perhaps who never were, in love. A conclusion can be drawn from this distance that Ada, too, might have followed the "accepted" path for girls in Jubilee. Now, at a later stage in her life, she is trying to make right the mistake she made.

Benny

Benny represents everything that Del's mother isn't. He lives in a world quite apart from that in which Del's "real" family resides, in a type of parallel universe constructed by Del's imagination. Even the newspapers he reads are full of alternate reality and escapism. He fills his mind with sensationalized stories of impossible events. Benny's world is one in which Del loves to spend time.

Benny is in many ways the stereotypical bachelor. He surrounds himself with material possessions, things that many people would consider junk, in an attempt to fill that void. Eventually, he responds to an ad in the back of the newspaper, written by the brother of someone ostensibly looking for a job as a housekeeper, with the added bonus of a husband "if suitable." He does not rid himself of his material possessions, however, when he brings home a wife. There is a part of him that can never be filled by the company of another.

Benny is a creature of habit, as evidenced by the fact that, even after he returns home with a wife and stepchild, he continues to frequent Del's family home for dinner instead of spending time with his wife, although it is not a happy marriage. This continuation of old habits also indicates a certain social ineptitude, of not knowing the proper way to act in certain situations. Quite likely, this is the result of years of bachelorhood and of being something of a hermit.

An extension of Benny's social ineptitude is his illiteracy, both in a literal sense and a social sense. Although he can read enough to read the ad in the paper, he is unable to write a response, requiring Del's help. It is significant that he asks for help from Del, a child. The fact that someone much younger than he assists Benny in finding a wife serves to illuminate his awkwardness. A further example of Benny's "illiteracy" is that he is unable to find his way to his wife after she leaves him. On his trip to Toronto, he is unable to navigate according to the map he is given. Further, he does not "know" enough to seek out a better map and find his own way. In essence, he is illiterate in the ways of the world. Here again, he asks for assistance from other people rather than fending for himself. When the directions he gets from others do not prove fruitful, Benny simply gives up and sleeps in the car until the next morning, when he heads for home, defeated.

Naomi

Naomi is the antithesis of Del. Although the two girls start out on the same road, soon their friendship comes to an end when their lives fork off in different directions. Naomi is the quintessential Jubilee girl. She believes it to be more sensible and practical to busy herself with a job and with preparing to be a wife and mother, rather than to try to find another path to fulfillment.

Del believes that Naomi is something of a traitor when she gets a job at the creamery office. Del tries to make the friendship work, visiting her friend at her job, but they are two different people now.

Naomi could be said to be more shallow than Del, with her preoccupation with "traditional" womanly concerns such as one's appearance and finding a husband with whom to make a home and a family. This tendency toward the more practical aspects of life, as opposed to Del's more academic, abstract pursuits, first shows up when the two girls visit the library. In order to keep Naomi interested in what she perceives to be a frivolous endeavor, Del has to find books with steamy scenes in it. Del busies herself reading more serious things.

Naomi "outgrows" adolescence before Del does when she opts to take "Commercial" courses in school rather than academic ones. While both girls are anxious to grow up, it is for different reasons. More specifically, each girl perceives growing up to mean different things.

In contrast to Del's upbringing, which, in many ways, happens in a fishbowl, Naomi is left to her own devices much of the time. Her mother often goes out of town for work, and Naomi's relationship with her father is at arm's length at best. When Naomi is challenged to meet her friends at the dance, for example, she gives no thought to whether her father will notice. Even if he did, it is doubtful Naomi would care.

Art Chamberlain

Mr. Chamberlain works at the local radio station, reading the news. Because of him, Fern Dogherty comes to live with Del's mother in her house in Jubilee. He lives in the same building where the radio station office resides because he doesn't want "the trouble of a house."

Rumored to be having an affair with Fern, Mr. Chamberlain is a man who likes women. His sexual appetite, however, doesn't extend only to women his own age. At his hand, Del has her first experience of sexual touching, and he is the first man whose penis she sees in person, when he masturbates in front of her. His actions indicate a lack of understanding of, or disregard for, the societal norms for acceptance sexual behavior.

The dark side of Mr. Chamberlain's personality and sexual proclivity is in stark contrast to his occupation. Del points out that Mr. Chamberlain "did all the more serious and

careful announcing" at the radio station and that he had a "fine professional voice," both characteristics that would indicate a man of education and fine character. Instead, he is someone who seeks arousal from performing a sexual act in front of a child. Mr. Chamberlain's eyes betray his true personality, though. Del describes his eyes as having no personality, just color. The attractive color of his eyes is superficial, as is his outward appearance and normalcy. Behind his personality, as symbolized by what isn't behind his eyes, is a flat void, a dark side that doesn't match the exterior. Mr. Chamberlain smokes "ready-made" cigarettes and has a tidy hair, both indicative of a man of refinement. Again, this appearance does not match his inner being.

Although Mr. Chamberlain is a travelled man, having been in the war and travelled to Italy, he is not worldly. When Ada asks him about the things he has seen, the art and the history, he responds that he didn't see them. '"That place is full of statues,' he says. 'Famous this and famous that. You can't turn around for them.'" Clearly, he is not a man interested in the finer aspects of life, despite what his appearance might indicate.

Miss Farris

A native resident of Jubilee, Miss Farris is a schoolteacher at the school that she once attended, and she is in charge of the annual school operetta. She is of humble means, as indicated by Del's observation that Miss Farris made her own skating costume because "she could never have bought it."

Although Miss Farris' age isn't given explicitly, since students don't generally know the ages of their teachers, Miss Farris "isn't young" according to Del, who explains that her teacher dyes her hair and wears it in an old-fashioned style. She is a conservative woman, wearing all homemade clothes that are modest in style and decoration. Although not in vogue or stylish, Miss Farris does fit in in Jubilee, as Del notes when she explains that although people laugh at her, they did not laugh "so much as if she had not been born in Jubilee." She has lived in Jubilee so long that she and the town have grown used to one another.

Miss Farris is, in every aspect of her life, a teacher. Del explains that Miss Farris' skating ability is "more of a schoolteacherish display of skill than of herself." She has no man in her life, despite the perennial rumors that float around each year about a romance between her and Mr. Boyce, with whom she directs the children in the operetta each year. So much of Miss Farris' life centers on the operetta that when it at last over for another year, she seems deflated, as though the show was the air that inflated her lungs and when it was over she needed something else to replace it, something she never found.

Owen

Owen is Del's younger brother, who plays only a minor role in the story. The only meaningful interaction between Del and Owen is when their dog, Major, is to be put down after escaping and killing sheep. Owen is at first, understandably, violently upset.

When Del goes up to his bedroom to check on him and to console him, Owen seeks refuge in his sister from what is about to happen to his dog. He begs Del to tell him how to pray so that his dog may be saved. He does not understand when Del tells him that prayer won't work in this case.

Auntie Grace and Aunt Elspeth

Grace and Elspeth are essentially one character. Together, they personify Jubilee society. They are more appearance than substance. When Del goes to stay with them during the summer, it is like entering another world, a world of matching table linens, good china and proper manners.

Del's aunts, who are related to her on her father's side, despise ambition. To them, it is despicable that Del's mother goes "on the road," with her own career. In contrast, however, they do everything they can to help their brother, Craig, in his writing of the town's history. They respect his pursuit of knowledge and his efforts to preserve the past, so much so that they want to pass on the project to Del, even though she is a girl and they consider it to be more suitable for a man to pursue academic projects.

Both Elspeth and Grace prefer to give their opinions about people in small jabs, rather than speaking their minds. They gossip about people, but on the surface they are full of their own propriety. Not the kind of people to bluntly and openly berate someone, these women prefer to dole out their insults in needling jabs.

Mr. Boyce

Mr. Boyce is a teacher at Del's school, although he is "unlike an ordinary teacher." This quality garners him both attention and disrespect, in Del's estimation. Mr. Boyce is an Englishman who came to Canada at the beginning of the war and who now, it is rumored, is having an affair with Miss Farris.

Mr. Boyce's methods of teaching are somewhat unorthodox compared to that to which the children at Del's school are accustomed. He asks them to listen to a piece of music, for example, and asks them to explain what it makes them think of and how it makes them feel. This is quite apart from the "factual, proper questions" they are used to.

For Mr. Boyce as for Miss Farris, the annual school operetta is of paramount importance. He takes the casting of the show quite seriously and wants only the best out of his students. On the day of the performance, Mr. Boyce makes his sense of seriousness and formality outwardly known, as manifest in his choice of wardrobe, a tuxedo with tails. Del points out that people may think his choice of clothing "ridiculous," but to Mr. Boyce, it is just the thing for such an occasion.

Around the time of Miss Farris' unfortunately death, Mr. Boyce moves to London, Ontario, where there are "some people like himself." Del doesn't elaborate on what she means by this, but one can assume that Mr. Boyce's opinion of Jubilee is similar to Ada

Jordan's. It is a place beneath him, and he deserves better. He, too, it seems, is more cut out for life in a place bigger (and perhaps more anonymous) than that in which he now lives.

Frank Wales

Frank Wales is Del's classmate, who goes from being just the boy who sits behind her to being her first crush when he is chosen for the lead in the operetta. In typical Del style, she notes right from her first description of him that he is a bad speller. To her, this is an important detail.

Frank is not a smart boy, in the traditional sense. In addition to being a poor speller, he does not continue on to high school with the rest of the group of grade school children. Instead, he opts to get a job at the lumberyard. In this way, Frank is like many boys in Jubilee. He has no intention of moving away from the town. On the contrary, to Frank, it is important to get on with the business of the rest of his life, since he doesn't have big dreams of leaving Jubilee in search of something bigger. Life does not exist, for Frank, outside of Jubilee's borders. The reader is lead to believe that Frank is going to be Del's first lover, but things never go further than, to put it in junior-high terms, third base.

Objects/Places

Jubilee

The town to which Del eventually moves and where she resides with her mother for much of the novel, Jubilee is one of the two key locations in the story. It is the place where Ada feels most at home and the place where, from the beginning of the novel, she aspires to live.

Flats Road

At the beginning of the novel, Del lives at the end of the Flats Road on the outskirts of town. Del's mother despises the Flats Road, its people, its lifestyle and its (in her opinion) backward ways. When Del and her mother and brother move to a rented house in Jubilee, Del's father continues to live in the Flats Road house, a house that Del eventually refers to as, simply, "that house."

The Library

The library is Del's safe place, where she finds comfort, knowledge and in a sense, her truest friends. Staffed by a woman who is disabled and who would, for other reasons entirely, be unqualified for the job in any other town, the library is not the hub for the quest for knowledge that many city libraries are. Naomi derives no satisfaction from the library until and unless Del shows her a book that has something racy or gory in it. She doesn't understand the allure of words that Del feels.

Town Hall

Del and Naomi write the names of their schoolroom rivals on the door of the Town Hall, in an act of defiance toward the type of girl who would never have been found there. This is also where, Del observes, the words on the door to the ladies' room have never been replaced because they wouldn't need to be. Both of these descriptions of the Town Hall are indicative of the types of people that reside in the town over which the Hall presides. Things are so unchanging that mere words are unimportant in conveying meaning, and there are certain people, certain categories of people, into which all communities, even a small town like Jubilee, can be divided.

Benny's House

At the beginning of the novel, Del describes Benny's house, or its contents, in detail. Benny's house is another world, with different rules and different priorities. It is a different house structurally and metaphorically from Del's family home.

Buckles' Store

Buckles' Store is the country general store near the Flats Road house, where Del's family does their "necessary shopping." Usually, Del is the one to shop there. Del's mother despises this store and refuses to be seen in it. She prefers instead to do her shopping in town where she can walk tall and where she feels entitled to be. Shopping at such a backward little store is beneath her.

House at Jenkin's Bend

Del's aunts Grace and Elspeth live in the house at Jenkin's Bend. It is a place wherein manners and propriety reign on the surface, but a catty jealousy lies underneath. After Craig's death, the aunts move closer to Del's family where they can help out her father.

Uncle Craig's Manuscript

Uncle Craig started writing a history of Jubilee before he died, and Grace and Elspeth give the manuscript to Del after Craig's death, in the hopes that she will finish it. Del does not finish the story, but rather removes the document from its protective box, into which she puts her own fiction writing. A while later, the cellar of the house gets flooded, and Craig's manuscript is ruined.

Ada's Encyclopaedias

Ada's encyclopaedias symbolize her freedom and independence. In addition, they symbolize for Del a collection of knowledge, a valuable thing. Like all books, Del finds comfort in them.

Gay-la Dance Hall

Del meets Garnet French at the Gay-la Dance Hall, and she has her first dance and her first drink there. Del and Naomi sneak out to attend a dance, an event that leads to Del wandering off by herself and Naomi's father finding out she has snuck out of the house under his nose.

Social Sensitivity

As she had done in such earlier stories as "Boys and Girls" and "The Office" (Dance of the Happy Shades, 1968), Munro continues in Lives of Girls and Women to explore how ideas of the feminine are defined and inscribed in the modern world, in this case as reflected in the small town .of Jubilee.

Through the experiences and insights of Del Jordan, readers come to recognize the matrix of ideologies and cultural forces that shape the lives of the girls and women in this rural town, notably the powerful influences of economics, history, language, religion, and sex. At times, these forces provide the means by which women can move beyond the traditional system of domestic labor in which they feel trapped, as when Del's mother leaves her kitchen to "go on the road" selling encyclopedias. More often, they are forces which are at once liberating and oppressive. The institutionalized contract of marriage, for instance, appears in various configurations: as a positive, albeit tentative union of equals; as a business arrangement which positions women as commodities to be "traded" through newspaper advertisements; as a promise which can be manipulated as a tool of seduction; and, most insidiously, as an "accepted" cultural ideal which such women as Del's friend Naomi strive to attain and by which women become categorized according to a hierarchy of marketability — the married, the affianced, the marriageable, and the unmarriageable.

As she matures, Del becomes an increasingly astute observer of the intricate patterns of social codes and subjectivities which constitute the lives of the people she knows. Deeply rooted in the reality of a rural small town, Del begins an insistent and at times unsettling exploration of what lies beneath the surface of lives that appear to be defined almost exclusively by church, family, friends, and work. What she finds are layers of often ambiguous experience which challenge the validity of any monologic or myopic world view. Indeed, this is a book that insists on revealing the flux and chaos of experience rather than authorizing any illusion of stability or fixed moral hierarchy.

Techniques

The question of the form of Lives of Girls and Women remains an ongoing critical concern. On the one hand, its structure exhibits a number of the centralizing elements of a novel: a single although never singularly authoritative narrative voice, a character who can be considered central to the events, a common setting and a relatively stable cast of characters, and an implied chronology that traces the growth of Del Jordan from childhood through adolescence. Critics who forward this formal distinction inevitably feel it necessary, however, to attach a modifier to their claim, describing the book variously as an autobiographical, episodic, "loose," or open-form novel.

On the other hand, many of the elements of the book suggest that it can be read as a story cycle, that is, eight linked stories which can be published or read separately but which also invite an attentive reader to construct and reconstruct interconnected patterns of recurring characters, images, motifs, and themes. The experience of reading Lives of Girls and Women, in this sense, reflects one of the book's central themes, for just as Del must modify her own story and understanding of the world with each new experience, our understanding of each section of the book is oriented, in part, by the sections that come before and those that follow.

Stylistically, there is a close connection between theme and Munro's skillful employment of startling and frequently paradoxical relationships between words, most often between coordinate adjectives and nouns. In these instances, Munro characteristically employs commas or the conjunction "and" in order to diffuse any tendency to construct easy binaries in search of a "true" (inevitably monologic) reading of a phrase, sentence, episode, or section of the book. Del's description of evil, for instance, puts equal grammatical emphasis on "its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness"; the final pairing in this series suggesting that evil is at once horrific and playful, not horrific or playful.

Other times, Munro's constructions emphasize the paradoxical, as in the suggestion that life in Jubilee is arranged according to a pattern that is "open and secret" at the same time.

Munro also has Del reveal an acute sensitivity to the relationship between individual words and complex experiences, underscoring Del's sense of the insufficiency of language for expressing the deep currents of experience flowing beneath the surface of life.

When she is told by Uncle Benny that there is a quicksand hole in the swamp, she thinks she is mistaken when her impression of the word "quicksand" overlaps with her image of quicksilver "shining, with a dry-liquid roll." Gradually she comes to recognize that she is not mistaken; words can do more than simply record, they can reveal and illuminate, however briefly, the plausibility of other ways of seeing and expressing oneself in the world.

Themes

Themes

The story of Del Jordan's growth from a schoolgirl in the opening "The Flats Road" to a young woman about to leave the small town of Jubilee for university in "Epilogue: The Photographer," is also the story of a young woman's struggle to establish "connections," a word Munro uses in the broadest sense throughout her fiction.

In large part, this search consists of Del's movement toward a sense of pluralism, an understanding of the complex patterns of existence linking her and the subjective experiences that she "knows" to be "true" and "real" with the mysteries and other possible realities structuring the lives of the individuals around her. It is an endless journey, but what Del comes to appreciate and even celebrate is the omnipresence of the ambiguous and mysterious in what she has long considered to be the knowable, the ordinary, and the everyday.

Del begins her life on a farm on the edge of town, where she lives with her parents and younger brother Owen, in an area cut off from the town proper by the curve of a river and a primordial swamp. It is an area that is also home to an odd assortment of subsistence farmers and mirror-image characters: two bootleggers with antithetical approaches to their business, two "idiots" posing different degrees of threat to passersby, and two bachelors whose unique attempts to find spouses are by turns comic and pathetic. Through her childhood contact with a family friend known as Uncle Benny, Del begins to sense that there are worlds and realities lying alongside the one she knows, "like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same."

Some of these worlds offer exotic alternatives to the reality of Del's life in Jubilee: the urban center to which Uncle Benny journeys in search of a wife, the "sealed-off country" that is the house of Del's Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace, and the worlds created in the books Del reads voraciously. Still other of these worlds appear to Del (and the reader) like objects viewed in a funhouse mirror, generally recognizable but marked by a mildly disturbing, almost surreal difference: the playhouselike home of Del's teacher, Miss Farris; the world of Pork Childs, driver of the town garbage truck who keeps a pure white peacock in the barn behind his unpainted house; and the world of Bobby Sherriff, a young man whose "madness" is part of town lore.

Eventually moving with her mother into a house nearer town, Del soon finds herself living in what appears at first to be a bifurcated world. At one extreme lies the world of the masculine, symbolized most obviously by the farm, where her brother, father, and Uncle Benny continue to live and work, and where Del feels increasingly out of place during her infrequent visits. At the other extreme is an ever-expanding community of women that begins to arrange itself around the town house; this community includes Del's mother, the boarder Fern Dougherty, Del's friend Naomi, and various aunts and townswomen.

Beneath the surface of this apparently "split" world, however, as beneath the surface of all the worlds Del comes in contact with, circulates a rich diversity of opinions and attitudes toward love and sex, faith and religion, wisdom, and knowledge, including divergent opinions about the changes occurring in the lives of women. Some critics suggest that Lives of Girls and Women is structured as a series of worldly questions which Del must face through her experiences with these parallel otherworlds — questions of love, power, mortality, sexuality, and spirituality, all of which culminate in her encounter with the world of art.

Other critics suggest that these worlds interweave throughout the book as both contrapuntal forces and themes which overlap, their proportion of mutual inclusion varying with each individual Del meets or experience she has. No experience or person exists in isolation or within the realm of a single reality; each, as Del concludes in an oft-quoted line, comes to reflect on lives at once "dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable." To Del, the ultimate insufficiency of any of these otherworlds is their inability to synthesize fully the complexities she comes to recognize as essential to her own sense of "real life." For her, each world becomes, to a varying degree, incomplete and rigidly exclusive rather than cumulative, fluid, and inclusive.

With each new experience, Del also gains understanding of the different strategies by which individuals attempt to organize their reality. In Del's case, it is her love of stories and story-telling which fills this role; she becomes both a "reader" of the stories of the worlds around her and a "writer" of her own story.

Del either participates in or observes a tremendous variety of ways of reading. Drawn as a child to the gothic headlines of Uncle Benny's tabloids, which leave her "bloated and giddy," she gradually reads her way through her mother's encyclopedias and the limited selection of books in the town library. Moving beyond this narrow definition of text, she also learns to read the pattern of life in Jubilee, the imbalances of power she discovers in her relationships with friends and her lover Garnet French, and the numerous "texts" of death she encounters early in her life, stories of mortality written variously on the body of a dead cow, in the rituals of her Uncle Craig's funeral, in the death sentence imposed on her brother's dog, and in the stigmatizing gossip surrounding the suicides of Miss Farris and Marion Sherriff.

Just as Del explores these otherworlds as a reader, she also begins to investigate them as a storyteller. The act of narrating becomes an increasingly significant strategy by which she attempts to order and understand the events of her life, not unlike her Uncle Craig's dedication to detailing local history or the religions that define the people of Jubilee. When Fern Dougherty's boyfriend Art Chamberlain exposes himself to Del, for instance, her first impulse is to find relief by making what he did "into a funny, though horrifying story." Unable to determine the appropriate audience for this specific tale, she remains silent, carrying the burden of this untold tale with her until finally confiding to Naomi long after the event. Indeed, Del comes to believe that the signal moment of her maturation occurs when she shifts from being primarily a reader to becoming a writer.

But Del soon learns that reading and writing are reciprocal acts and that each individual is not a reader or a writer but is always both at once. The book ends with her sensing, but not understanding fully, the "stylized meaning" recorded in an almost mystical dance step performed by Bobby Sherriff; the expression of an otherworld written in an alphabet she does not yet know. Del also comes to understand that each story she sets out to tell, like each life she comes in contact with, inevitably spirals outward to include other stories told by other people in search of their own sense of order. These other stories appear in various forms and stages of completion. They are allusive, documentary, literary, metaphoric, or nostalgic. At times, the storytelling impulse informing these other stories is less formal than Del's desire to novelize. Jokes and rumors flow freely in Jubilee. Moreover, these other stories are often contradictory, equally believable visions and revisions of a single event, as when Del's mother and uncle share different memories of Del's maternal grandmother. This multilayering of stories produces what Del herself recognizes at one point as "a conglomeration" of stories circulating within and around her own life story.

In this sense, Lives of Girls and Women is a self-reflexive text, a richly patterned fiction about the need and struggle to structure subjective experiences through the complex act of fiction making. Del's maturing corresponds with her accumulation and transcendence of storytelling forms, the gradual acquisition of a repertoire which will become her unique key to the world of adulthood and the worlds beyond Jubilee. Lives of Girls and Women is also a book in which the reader is implicated, made aware of the conventions and stereotypes (cultural, historical, ideological) that shape and constrict the way we read the people and worlds around us. How Del reads the various "texts" of her existence comes to reflect on how we read Del's life, a reminder of our ingrained need for clarity and order, and what it is to give form and meaning through reading.

Growing Up/ Fitting In

On the whole, *Lives of Girls and Women* is about finding one's place in life. Del Jordan is seeking, as do all young people, to find a place where she can fit in. She rebels against many of the social constraints imposed by small-town life and the assumed path that women will take in life. She wants it all, to be loved, accepted and famous all at the same time.

Del escapes into various other universes, such as Benny's house, the library, the fictitious worlds in the books she writes and the worlds she creates through her own writing. She differentiates between these worlds by imagining them to be residing alongside one another. When she goes over to Benny's house, she instantly feels transported to another world. His world isn't the neat, orderly world in which she lives, only minutes away. She will not bring the newspapers she reads at Benny's house home, preferring instead to keep the worlds separate.

Del begins to feel a separation between herself and Naomi. Naomi takes Commercial courses in school and gets a job in the office at the creamery. Soon, she begins to focus on acquiring the items she thinks she will need to make a good household for her future

husband. Del is not yet in that place, nor does she ever want to be. She wants to carve out a different path for herself.

In an attempt to remain friends with Naomi, however, Del pays her friend a visit at work. When she arrives there, Del feels very much the child in the company of adults. Naomi's coworkers are obsessed about things that she couldn't care less about. Del does not fit into her friend's world anymore. All that changes when, at the end of the novel, Naomi asks Del to be her bridesmaid and reveals to Del that she is pregnant. Suddenly their paths converge, and they are friends once again. Del finally finds a place into which she can fit nicely.

Del's mother, Addie, is another character in the book who doesn't quite know where she fits in the world. Addie spends much of the novel trying to separate herself from the people on the Flats Road, whom she views as being beneath her, even though she grew up in a rural setting herself. She even, as Del points out, finds it a crucial distinction to say that they live at the *end* of Flats Road, rather than on Flats Road. Ada doesn't feel she belongs amongst the people of her community. This feeling of being out of place (and in Ada's case, feeling superior) is manifest in Ada's refusal to shop at Buckles' Store.

Knowledge and Literacy

Throughout the story, Del searches for knowledge and truth about her world. Her explorations of the world usually take the form of words and their meanings. This is evident in her recollection of her life stories, when she insists upon getting the details of her story correct. In doing so, she is correcting the details as she experienced them, to ensure the retelling of the story is accurate. She ensures that the reader knows that Benny isn't really her uncle, for example.

Del's obsession with words brings her frequently to the library in Jubilee. Here, Del spends hours visiting her "friends," books of all kinds, on all topics. In contrast, Naomi doesn't have any desire to pass the time with books unless they have steamy passages in them. In order to keep Naomi's interest, Del pacifies her with such passages, while she reads books on every topic imaginable. Even the books she doesn't read hold a certain kind of knowledge for her. Their value is in their physical selves, the curve of the letters, the book cloth covers and the straightness of the spines.

Del learns to "read" in many ways in this story. Her love of books is an obvious manifestation of her literal ability to read, but more than that, Del becomes an astute observer (or reader) of people and their behavior. She is a student of humanity and spends a good deal of time trying to read people's faces, behavior, clothing and demeanor to extract meaning. She also reads things that one may not consider something that can be read, such as the hide on the dead cow she finds. To her, the hide is like a map, and the dead cow itself has meaning.

Benny exhibits various kinds of illiteracy, in contrast to Del's highly tuned awareness of words and their meanings. Although Benny can read (as evidenced by his endless collection of tabloids), he is unable to write a letter, requiring Del's assistance. He shows further signs of illiteracy of another kind in his inability to successfully read a map. He cannot read a map well enough to find where his wife is now living after she leaves him, and instead of trying to fend for himself, he heads for home. This "social illiteracy" can also be seen when Benny continues to eat dinner at Del's house even after he is married. It seems he is illiterate to the ways in which a married man should act.

Del's mother seeks a kind of knowledge in this book, too. By becoming a salesperson of encyclopedias, she is bringing what she considers to be valuable knowledge, a gift no one could refuse, to the public. In another way, her job also allows her to "know" another side of herself, separate from her responsibilities of mother and wife. As an employed person, and more specifically as a person whose job requires them to travel freely, Ada learns a new kind of freedom, coming to fully realize a different side of herself.

Rebirth and Awakening

The characters in *Lives of Girls and Women* experience many different kinds of awakening or rebirth. Del, for example, is awakened to sexual knowledge. She is first touched in a sexual way by Mr. Chamberlain, who also makes Del aware, through his stories, that young girls her age are perceived in a sexual way in other countries. Both of these occurrences lead Del to begin viewing herself in a sexual way, something she has not previously done. Her sexual awakening is taken further in her relationship with several boys, from Jerry Storey to Garnet French, to whom she finally loses her virginity late in the novel. In undergoing this transformation, Del is essentially reincarnated into a woman from her previous life as a child. She can no longer go back to her former self.

Naomi undergoes a transformation, or rebirth, as well. Del indicates that after recovering from a sickness, Naomi isn't the same person she once was. Further, she begins to change her perspective and direction in life, which results in a complete metamorphosis of her character. She is reborn into a woman focuses on getting a husband and building a home, out of the giggly schoolgirl she at one time was.

In a more literal sense, Del's search for religion results in a kind of awakening, not in the sense of a formal Baptism in a church, but in more of an abstract realization. After visiting several services at various local churches, Del realizes that much of the practice of going to church is theatrics and that many parishioners are simply creating the illusion of piety. When she attends the town revival meeting, Del claims she is doing it for "scientific discovery." Here, she meets Garnet French, a boy with whom she forms a relationship. When he talks about marrying her and having children with her, Del is surprised to find out that he insists upon her being baptized into his faith, a faith that he himself found when he was in jail after committing a crime. Del's refusal, and Garnet's subsequent loss of temper and attempt to drown her in the Wawanash River, are in themselves an awakening for Del. She sees him in a new light and is "reborn" into a resolve to carry on without a relationship in her life for the time being.

Growing up in small town in Southwestern Ontario can be rather a myopic experience. Del is made aware of various "other worlds," however, when she visits Benny and explores his world, his home and his newspapers. Her eyes are opened to another world that resides alongside her own. Similarly, Del realizes another world in the lives of her aunts Grace and Elspeth. She begins to assimilate these worlds into her worldview, creating a new picture of the truth.

Style

Point of View

Lives of Girls and Women is told in first-person perspective, narrated by Del Jordan, the central character in the "stories" that together make up the whole of the book. The voice changes, however, from the beginning of the book through the end. In some cases, the point of view loops back upon itself. For example, Del (like many young women) decides for herself that a life of marriage, children and domesticity is not for her. Later, she finds herself heading toward exactly that life and finding it to be precisely what she has wanted.

The omniscient point of view gives the reader a view of the larger reality of Del's life, too. Readers learn her views not only about her own world and the changes that occur to her own body and around her, but also about the wider world of religion, society, one's station in life and other issues. When Naomi quits school, gets a job and begins to plan for marriage, putting household items on layaway, Del gives us a commentary on the two roads a woman can take in life. She clearly delineates that which she intends to take. Only later does her point of view change slightly, after she falls in love with Garnet French.

At the beginning of the book, the reader sees the world through the eyes of a precocious child, struggling to make sense of her Uncle Benny's failed marriage, using only her limited knowledge of the world. As she gains experience (both sexual and worldly) she begins to make judgements about the world based on her own beliefs, or sometimes, the desire to believe the opposite of what seems to be the norm.

As the book progresses, the voice changes to both incorporate the fact that, in the narrative, Del is maturing and the fact that, from the vantage point of the narrator, who is telling the story in the future, one's perspective on life changes as one gains experience.

Also related to point of view in this book are Del's obsessions with how things are perceived. Her preoccupation with words and with how they convey meaning plays into her notice of the different ways in which people act and are treated in Jubilee. She notices, for example, that the disabled librarian was given the job because it *only* requires the skill of such a person to do the job well. It is an important distinction that Del is making. In Jubilee, the perception (or point of view) of the residents is that reading is frivolous and unimportant. As long as *someone* staffs the library, it matters little who it is.

Setting

The book takes place in a small county in Southwestern Ontario called Wawanash County. When the book opens, Del and her family live on the Flats Road (or, as her mother points out, "at the *end* of The Flats Road." For her, it is a crucial distinction.

Different kinds of people live in different areas of the county, and Del's mother would do anything to be seen as being from the right side of the tracks, so to speak.

The notion of place plays an important role in this story. The town itself shapes people's lives in Jubilee. For example, Naomi decides to take the road of least resistance, getting a job, finding a husband and becoming pregnant. This is what is expected of girls in this town, and so Naomi is likely to be respected for doing what she ought to. For Del, however, the town and its conventions are stifling and oppressive. She wants more for herself. While she wants to fall in love, she also wants to dream big and chase her dreams. This sentiment is outlined when, in "Baptizing," she muses that "I wanted men to love me, *and* I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon."

A recurring theme in the book is the idea of parallel worlds. In the beginning of the book, Del describes two such worlds in her mother and father's house and her Uncle Benny's house. Her parents' home is one of order and of pragmatism. Benny's house, with his tabloids and endless collection of junk, is one wherein reality takes a different form. Del will not allow the two settings to blend, however, clearly understanding even at a young age that her mother would not stand for Benny's reality to intrude upon her own. For this reason, Del sits on Benny's porch to read his papers rather than bringing them home as he suggests she might.

Another example of a contrast of settings is between the Flats Road house and the house in Jubilee. The move to the house in Jubilee signals a new start, both geographically and metaphorically. Del's father visits only on weekends and only when the weather is good. The Flats Road house symbolizes a time gone by, a reality that Del is now realizing she constructed in her imagination. When Del asks her mother about a painting that hung in that house (and that is not hung in the new house), her mother's ambivalence to it (revealing that it was copied from a photo in a magazine) shakes Del's version of the life she knew on Flats Road. The Jubilee house is her home now, and it contains the only reality she can count on, at least until it, sometime later, might too be altered by the revelation of some new truth.

Setting as a symbol runs through the novel in small ways, too. For example, Munro probably intentionally chose the side exterior wall of Del's mother's house for the location of Del's loss of virginity. It is an act of defiance. Del commits an act of rebellion just outside of her mother's domain of authority, but close enough for it to be a metaphorical snubbing of that same authority. If she had sex somewhere unrelated, neutral, the symbolism would have been diminished.

Language and Meaning

Language plays an enormous part in this novel, both in Munro's writing of it and from the point of view of the narrator herself. Words are animate to Del, having weight, texture and personality. Del constructs her reality through the careful use and analysis of words. One of her favorite places in Jubilee is the library. The irony of this is the fact that the residents of Jubilee place little to no importance upon the library and the books

therein. To Del, however, language *is* meaning, and the books in the library do far more than hold down the shelves. They are her friends, her alternate universes. Even the books she does not care for or hasn't read hold meaning for Del, in the curve of their spines, the color of their spines and the lilt of the letters in their covers. Del does not need to have actually read a book to extract meaning from it.

Munro's inclusion of this penchant for words into Del's character adds a layer to the meaning of the text of *Lives of Girls and Women* itself. The nature of life in Jubilee and of its residents is explained, often, through Del's observations of language. For example, the sign on the ladies' restroom door at the Town Hall is missing letters. The fact that they have never been replaced indicates complacency on the part of Jubilee residents. They know what they sign says because it has always said the same thing, and it doesn't need explanation. Even Del, who uses words to explain her world, understands that the letters don't need replacing. Like the library and the lack of importance placed on it, Jubilee residents don't see the letters on the sign as being worth the time it would take to get it right.

Munro's use of language undulates from subtlety and poetry to blunt observations and the use of abrasive words to address taboo concepts such as sex and anatomy. This undulation is often in cadence with Del's maturing and acquisition of the experience to express her thoughts in different ways. When Del and Naomi discuss sex and relationships, for example, they often use code words to express that which they can't, or won't, discuss openly. On the other hand, when they read from Naomi's mother's book on the topic, they do not shy away from the clinical terms used to describe the sex act. Again, language plays a key role in Del's life and, subsequently, in the novel itself.

Fiction is more real to Del than reality. She finds Benny's papers to be more real than the "real" papers her parents receive, as discussed above. In creating this layer of Del's character, Alice Munro is setting up the final chapter, in which readers discover that Del herself has become a writer. Del has spent her entire life focused on language and meaning. At the end of the retelling of her life story, or the important details as she sees them, and at the end of the book (a work of fiction), the reality of Del's life is revealed. She has become a writer.

Structure

Lives of Girls and Women is divided into eight chapters: "The Flats Road," "Heirs of the Living Body," "Princess Ida," "Age of Faith," "Changes and Ceremonies," "Lives of Girls and Women," "Baptizing" and "Epilogue: The Photographer." Each section could stand alone as a short story unto itself, but at the same time they meld into one another to form a cohesive narrative. The stories follow Del Jordan through the various stages of growing up, from childhood through adolescence and finally through to adulthood.

Although the book is comprised of several "stories" that could be taken separately, several common threads unite them into, in a sense, an inseparable whole. There is a common narrator across each of the stories, giving them the sense of continuity and

connection that forms them into a novel. Also forming a sense of cohesion is the chronology of the book. The stories do not jump back and forth in time, but rather continue from the most distant past and move closer and closer to the present in which the narrative voice resides. The stories also contain a relatively continuous group of characters and locations. If the stories were to shift drastically in terms of the main characters, places and timelines, it would be much more difficult to view each section as part of a greater whole. Munro utilizes these connecting forces to create a seamless transition from story to story, enabling the reader to view the stories together rather than separately.

Within the structure of each story, there are many other stories, told to us by the narrator. The telling of "mini stories" about the people around her often forms Del's narration of her life, the story. Rather than simply recounting events as in a news report, Del tells us the story in a more fictionalized way. Put another way, she describes feelings, reactions, impressions and other emotive responses to events rather than just the events themselves.

The sections themselves are only named, not given numbers as is customary in fiction that is divided into chapters. In doing this, Munro has created the sense that the sections are not merely broken up for ease of reading but also that each section forms a particular entity unto itself. The fact that each section is named as though it were a story rather than a section of a greater whole does, in a way, impart a greater importance on each section. The events in each section are somehow more compartmentalized this way and have a brighter light shone on them than they would have if they were delineated only by number.

Quotes

"Disgust did not rule out enjoyment, in my thoughts; indeed they were inseparable."

"It was glory I was after."

"Not that I was planning on sex. One stroke of lightning does not have to lead anywhere, but to the next stroke of lightning."

"...My body flowering with invisible bruises in those places were it had been touched."

"His moral character was of no importance to me; perhaps it was even necessary that it should be black."

"I saw that the whole of nature became maddeningly debased, maddeningly erotic."

"My mother inhabited a different layer of reality from the one I had gone into now."

"My mother's agnosticism and sociability were often in conflict in Jubilee."

"And women like my mother were in the minority. Moreover did I not want to be like my mother."

"I wanted men to love me, and I wanted to think of the universe when I looked at the moon."

"Greedy eating first appeased and then made me gloomy, like masturbating."

"I liked the word mistress, a full-skirted word with some ceremony about it; a mistress should not be too slim."

"[Books] were like people you saw on the street day after day, year after year, but never knew more than their faces; this could happen even in Jubilee."

"All foreign words were in themselves absurd."

"The missing letters were never replaced. Everybody had learned to read the words without them."

Adaptations

There have been a number of dramatic adaptations of Lives of Girls and Women, or sections thereof, for radio and television. A disappointing and very loose two-hour adaptation of the book appeared on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) television network on February 11, 1996. More successful was a sixty-minute dramatization of the section "Baptizing," which appeared on the CBC television series "Performance" on January 19, 1975. In the same year, the book was adapted for a thirty-part radio series broadcast on CBC Radio, September 29November 25; the book was (re)adapted in 1981 for another CBC Radio Program, "Booktime," and was broadcast June 8-26.

Key Questions

Although Munro's fiction continually refuses, as at least one critic has suggested, "to yield graciously to critical inquiry," it provokes stimulating discussions, in part because of its topical and sometimes controversial subject matter. Lives of Girls and Women is a book which reflects Munro's interest in what can be loosely defined as feminist concerns as well as the ongoing struggle to structure one's existence in a constantly shifting world of ambiguity and paradox. It is also a richly textured fiction. Discussion groups hoping to remain focused on a specific element of Munro's fiction (character, image, or theme, for examples) will soon find themselves caught in a rewarding and intricately patterned web of recurrences and contradictory instances.

1. How does the experience of reading Lives of Girls and Women relate to the question of regionalism in literature? Does Munro's fiction transcend the specifics of the place and time in which the stories are set to speak to readers from different cultures and different historical periods? If not, why not; if so, how?

2. Munro originally considered "Real Life" as the title for the book, drawing on Del's final words in the section "Baptizing": "Garnet French, Garnet French, Garnet French. Real life." How does the notion of "real life" resonate in the book?

3. Munro has commented that the final and shortest section of Lives of Girls and Women, "Epilogue: The Photographer," gave her the most trouble in writing, to the point that she changed her mind several times about including it at all. This also has been a troublesome section for critics writing about the book. How does Munro's epilogue function as a self-contained section of narrative and/or in relation to those sections that precede it?

4. Thinking back on her precoital sexual explorations with Garnet French, Del reflects on sex as an act of surrender, "not the woman's to the man but the person's to the body, an act of pure faith, freedom in humility."

How does this notion of "pure faith" relate to the presence of various churches and (non)religious individuals in Del's life?

5. When asked about the autobiographical nature of Lives of Girls and Women, Munro has answered that the book is autobiographical "in incident up to a point; in emotion — completely." As she emphasizes in a statement included as part of the book's copyright page: "This novel is autobiographical in form but not in fact."

Discuss these distinctions between incident-emotion and form-fact.

6. Discuss the significance, symbolic and otherwise, of the Wawanash River specifically or images of a river generally?

7. Is this a novel or a cycle of eight stories?

Topics for Discussion

Can you relate to Del's love of words? Do words have intrinsic value?

How does small-town life differ from life in a big city? Which do you prefer?

To which character can you most relate, Del or Naomi? Why?

Why do you suppose Del's mother feels she doesn't belong on the Flats Road?

Do you think this book is appropriate reading material for junior high school students? Why or why not?

Why do you think Del doesn't want to help Owen pray for Major? Would you do the same?

Have you ever, like Del, struggled to understand something that was out of your control, such as God?

Del's aunts seem to believe that men and women should have different roles in life. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Literary Precedents

Lives of Girls and Women is often considered the most important Canadian translation of the male tradition of the bildungsroman, or novel of formation, which overlaps in many instances with the kiinstlerroman, in which the process of personal maturation is almost synonymous with the process of becoming an artist. Indeed, a number of critics have discussed the book in terms of its many echoes and reworkings of European antecedents, notably James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). The book can also be considered a modernization of such nineteenth-century antecedents as Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847) and George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss (1860), which explore the complexities of human relationships and the lives of young women whose spirit and intelligence bring them into conflict with their respective societies. In the context of Canadian fiction, Lives of Girls and Women is a book which moves beyond the conventional treatment of a young woman's growth detailed in the first Canadian bildungsroman, Lucy Maud Montgomery's Emily of New Moon (1923), a novel Munro cites as a longtime favorite. Lives of Girls and Women must be considered alongside such works as Margaret Laurence's The Diviners (1974) and Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle (1976) as books which expand dramatically our understanding of the sexual politics informing modern society.

Lives of Girls and Women is also a book at once part of and outside the tradition of literary realism. Reflecting, in general terms, the rejection of any idealization or romanticization of experience, realism aims for accuracy of representation through a careful and verisimilar delineation of the knowable and probable events of everyday existence, positing, in the process, the existence of an "ordinary" language which is somehow natural and therefore truthful in its representation. Like traditional realists, Munro exhibits an especially keen sense of the accumulation of detail within the fictional worlds she creates. Descriptions of people, places, and things are never simple constructions in this book; they are rich stores of vivid details. The exterior of Uncle Benny's house, for instance, is "tall and silvery, old unpainted boards, bleached dry in the summer, and dark green blinds, cracked and torn, pulled down over all the windows." And the bush behind this house is not simply "black," but "hot, thick with thorny bushes, and dense with insects whirling in galaxies."

Although Munro incorporates this detail in her fiction, she also moves beyond the basic realist assumption that such documentation implies the existence and validity of a single knowable truth or reality, a world untouched by ambiguity or coincidence. Indeed, Munro is intrigued by landscapes and populations in which the flux and chaos of experience produce mysteries which can never be explained or even understood fully.

Related Titles

In Who Do You Think You Are? (1978) — a cycle of ten linked stories — Munro engages a structure similar to that of Lives of Girls and Women to explore the development of a female character, Rose, to personal maturity.

But whereas the story of Del Jordan ends at late adolescence, this later book continues well into Rose's middle age and into the complex and ambiguous world of adult relationships.

Copyright Information

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