

Looking for Mr. Goodbar Study Guide

Looking for Mr. Goodbar by Judith Rossner

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Plot Summary

Looking for Mr. Goodbar by Judith Rossner is a highly erotic novel about the dangers that lurk for young women in singles bars. The story begins with the confession of Theresa Dunn's killer. Theresa was a young schoolteacher who had a habit of picking up men in the bars near her home. Gary White is a small-time criminal on the run from a warrant in his home state of Florida. Gary comes to New York to hook up with an old Vietnam buddy; however, his buddy is no longer at the address he gave Gary. Gary ends up staying with a homosexual man he met in a gay bar.

Humiliated from his experiences with the gay gentleman Gary is ready to get out of his current situation. Gary meets Theresa in a bar called Mr. Goodbar. When Theresa invites Gary to her apartment Gary goes not for the sex since he is not really attracted to Theresa but for the idea of a good night's sleep away from his gay friend. Things go wrong when Theresa insists he leave immediately after sex and Gary loses his temper. Gary restrains Theresa on the bed, but when she begins to scream, he hits her on the head with a lamp. To make sure she is dead he stabs her several times with his knife.

Theresa is the third in a family of four children. Theresa had polio when she was four and later suffers scoliosis from a weakness in the muscles of her back. Theresa is forced to spend a year in the hospital to undergo spinal surgery. When Theresa is older she attends City College in Harlem. While there she meets an English professor who takes a special interest in her. Theresa goes to work for this professor and they begin an affair that lasts the full four years she is at college and ends on her graduation. The end of this affair devastates Theresa and it will later shape her sexual behaviors.

Theresa gets a job teaching and moves to Manhattan. Katherine, Theresa's sister introduces her to the world of drugs and uncommitted sex. Theresa has a one-night stand with a man who is a work colleague of Katherine's husband and later picks up a man in a bar Katherine takes her to.

Soon Theresa is cruising bars on her own and picking up men on a regular basis. Theresa meets two men who are complete opposites but keep her interest just the same. Tony is a violent, erotic man that excites her. James is a young lawyer who is more interested in marriage and children than a carefree sexual relationship. Theresa is trapped between these two men aware that James is what her family and friends expect of her and Tony is what she wants in her bed.

Theresa is cruel to James in the hope he will go away and leave her alone. James sticks around until he becomes a habit to Theresa. If only he would stop talking about marriage. Tony on the other hand disappears on his own only to reappear on the same day James gives Theresa a ring. Theresa seizes the opportunity to chase James off only to realize she does not want Tony anymore either. James gives Theresa an ultimatum, marry him now or lose him forever. While trying to decide what it is she wants Theresa falls back into her old habits. Theresa goes to Mr. Goodbar to pick up a

man for the night. Except this night Theresa picks up the wrong man. Gary White kills Theresa in her own bed.



About the Confession

About the Confession Summary

Gary Cooper White has been arrested in Ohio and brought back to New York to be charged with the murder of Theresa Dunn. Gary has just come to New York from Florida where he left behind a sixteen-year-old pregnant wife. Gary has a warrant out for his arrest in Florida and is attempting to out run the police while making a little bit of money for his wife along the way. Gary hitches a ride and steals the driver's wallet in order to get a job with his identification. In New York the friend Gary has come to stay with is no longer at the address he gave him and Gary is left with no money and no place to stay. Gary eventually finds himself in a gay bar where a man offers him a place to stay in exchange for sexual favors.

The man, George takes care of Gary until Gary starts to become belligerent especially after George brings another man into the bedroom. George even goes so far as to force Gary to wear a woman's dress to a New Year's Eve party. When questioned by the police Gary is outraged by the way George treated him however, he does not seem to grasp how horrific a crime he has committed against Theresa. In Gary's mind he is the victim. Gary confesses to the murder of Theresa Dunn two weeks after her murder. When he is searched in Ohio before being transferred to New York the police find one hundred dollars stuffed into the lining of his jacket.

About the Confession Analysis

There are two examples of irony in this section. The first is Gary's attitude toward Theresa. As far as Gary is concerned he is the victim not Theresa. Gary only wanted a place to sleep to get away from the gay man who has tormented him. Theresa should have been that escape to Gary and she was not which makes Gary the victim in his own mind. The second example is the fact that Gary is tormented by George because he has no money and nowhere else to go. When the police find one hundred dollars in the lining of his coat Gary seems surprised when they ask why he did not use that money to get away from George. It is for his wife is all he will say in explanation.



The Confession

The Confession Summary

Gary admits to going to Mr. Goodbar with George though he cannot remember the name. While George is distracted by friends Gary notices a woman sitting at the far end of the bar reading a book. Gary might not have noticed the woman if not for the book. No one reads in a bar. George teases him about the woman telling him he can have her if he wants. Then George invites the woman to move closer. The first thing the woman does is tease Gary about his southern accent which irritates him.

Eventually the woman asks Gary up to her place. Gary agrees even though the woman does not turn him on but he figures it's a way to get away from George and get a good night's sleep. When they get to her apartment he tells her he has been in jail and that seems to turn her on. They drink some wine and talk some about his crime, all the while he wishes he were home with his wife. Gary asks the woman about her limp and she says she has an ingrown toenail.

The woman begins to tease him about being with George accusing him of being gay too. She threatens to go back to the bar to find someone a little more straight. Gary becomes angry and tells her she is not leaving. She sighs and says she's tired and starts to undress right in front of him like he is not there. She tells him to slam the door when he leaves. Gary becomes enraged and pushes her down on the bed and they have sex. When the sex is over she asks him to leave.

Gary does not want to leave he only wants a good night's sleep. The woman keeps telling him to leave explaining that she does not know him so she does not want him there when she wakes in the morning. When he will not leave she threatens to call the police. The woman reaches back for the phone and Gary tears the phone out of the wall. The woman jumps out of bed and runs for the door. Gary chases her and throws her back on the bed.

Gary swears all he wanted was for her to shut up so he could leave. The woman is screaming and he is afraid the neighbors will come. Gary decides he has to tie her up and gag her. Gary attempts to tie her hand but she bites him so he shoves a pillow over her face. Being sexually aroused he decides to have sex with her again except the woman has pushed the pillow off her face and begins to scream again. Gary grabs the lamp on her bedside table and smashes it against her head.

A bell begins to ring. At first Gary thought it might be the phone but then realizes it must be the doorbell. Gary paces the room afraid to leave. Gary's not sure the woman is dead so he pulls out his knife and stabs her over and over to make sure. Finally Gary grows tired and climbs into bed beside her. When he wakes Gary is inside the woman in the middle of an orgasm. Gary tells the cops he thought maybe he was trying to warm her up. Gary dresses and runs to George who quickly gives him all the money he has.



The Confession Analysis

There is irony in the idea that Gary went home with this woman to have sex with her and yet he is not attracted to her. Gary swears to the police he only went to her apartment to get away from George and to maybe get a decent night's sleep. However, Gary does not hesitate to have sex with the woman when the opportunity presents itself. There is also an example of a theme that is represented heavily throughout the novel, fear. Not only the woman's fear as she is attacked but also Gary's fears. Gary is afraid, not of being caught but of being labeled a homosexual. Gary is so afraid of this label that he has sex with a woman he is not attracted to in order to prove his own manliness.



Theresa (pages 13-24)

Theresa (pages 13-24) Summary

Theresa is the third in a family of four children. People often joke that her mother decided to have two separate families since there is a significant age difference between the two older children and the two younger girls. Theresa is a studious child who prefers reading to playing outside with the other children. Her sister Brigid is the one who likes the ball games and getting dirty out in the yard.

Theresa's brother, Thomas dies when Theresa is only nine. Theresa's family takes the death hard especially her mother and father. Theresa's father no longer comes home at an early hour from work and her mother often sits alone in the dark and cries. Neither parent notices the pain Theresa has in her back or the funny tilt to her hips until it's too late. Theresa who had polio when she was four is now suffering from scoliosis as a result of weakened muscles on her left side. Theresa is placed in the hospital for a year in order to undergo spinal surgery.

Katherine, Theresa's older sister stops coming to see her halfway through her stay in the hospital and is not home when Theresa is finally released. It turns out Katherine married the young cousin of her fiancy and quickly managed to get an annulment. Afterward Katherine moves to Manhattan and becomes a flight attendant. Theresa is okay with her older sister's absence. Theresa had always felt uncomfortable around Katherine because of her beauty and her easy charm.

Once when Katherine comes home for a visit she confronts Theresa in her bedroom and accuses her of not liking Katherine anymore. Theresa accuses Katherine of not loving her anymore and of living her own life in detriment to everyone else. This conversation leads to a confession from Katherine that reveals her own self-doubts. Katherine also reveals to Theresa how difficult her annulment was and the fact that she has become pregnant by one of two men she lives with. Katherine has gotten an abortion that is against their Catholic upbringing. All of these revelations make Theresa feel somewhat better but do nothing to make her feel more comfortable around her sister.

Katherine marries a Jewish doctor a short time later and convinces their parents that Theresa should attend City College. The night before Theresa starts college she takes a mirror and inspects the scar her surgery left on her back. Theresa believes she is beautiful when viewed from the front but the scar makes her feel different and disfigured.

Theresa (pages 13-24) Analysis

In this section grief is symbolic of a loss of interest in Theresa's view. Since her parents are so wrapped up in Thomas's death they do not see what is right under their noses.



Theresa does not feel responsible for their mistake even though she never told them about her own pain. Theresa sees this mistake as a test of their love a test her parents, her sisters, and everyone around her has failed.

This section also touches on the themes of fear and self-image. Fear is touched upon only briefly when Theresa tells the reader about the death of her brother. There is almost no grief in Theresa herself however, the reader can see just below the surface a fear beginning to grow in her reaction to the way Katherine comforts her father. Theresa is afraid of being invisible and not being loved. Theresa is afraid of loss. There is also a glaring sample of Theresa's poor self-image every time she discusses her sister Katherine. Katherine is beautiful but Theresa feels fat and unattractive. Katherine is charming but Theresa feels awkward and clumsy. Finally there is the scar that Theresa is left with after surgery. It is only mentioned once and is immediately followed by a nightmare in which everyone at college runs from Theresa. The scar becomes a defect that becomes the symbol of Theresa's poor self-image.



Theresa (pages 25-68)

Theresa (pages 25-68) Summary

Professor Martin Engle is Theresa's English professor. Martin is the type of professor all the girls in class fall in love with and all the boys want to be. Martin is aware of this adoration and is annoyed by it. The first assignment Martin gives to the class is an essay that is supposed to be based on a true-life experience. Martin is harsh to one writer who creates a work of fiction and very kind to Theresa's essay. Theresa is scared to death he will figure out her essay is a work of fiction as well.

On the second assignment Martin again praises Theresa's work. Theresa feels singled out but is not upset about it. After class she often joins a half dozen other students who walk with Martin to the other side of campus. One day it is just the two of them. Martin gives her an appointment to come to his office acting very silly and secretive. However, when she goes to his office at the appointed time Martin is in a bad mood and demands to know why she is there. Theresa runs from his office. Theresa skips Martin's class that day. The next time class meets Martin requests that Theresa stay after. Martin tells her she is much too sensitive and warns her not to play coy with him. Martin then dares her to write an essay about the experience of losing her virginity. Theresa refuses to write about that choosing instead to write an essay called "The Fan Club" for her final assignment, a small joke for Martin in regards to the girls he constantly has following him around.

Martin invites Theresa to have coffee with him after the last class. Martin asks about her hopes for the future and is intrigued with her perceived innocence. The coffee date becomes a habit for the rest of the semester until Martin begins encouraging her to schedule all her classes for the afternoon in effect ending their lunches. Martin then offers her a job working with him before classes at his apartment.

The first time Theresa goes to Martin's apartment she nearly goes into his wife's office. Martin's wife is a pediatrician whose office is in the front part of their apartment. Theresa is put off by this idea. However, Martin for the first time is very gentle with her and encourages her to stay. Martin explains that her responsibilities will be grading his class papers and what her pay scale will be. Theresa is not there for money.

Toward the end of May, Theresa began getting headaches and her back would hurt. One day she could take the pain no longer and lay down on a studio bed Martin kept in his office. Martin began to quiz her about her pain. Theresa is hesitant to tell him anything but he seemed gentler to her when she did. Theresa told him about her back surgery and the scar that is still there. Martin asks to see the scar. Instead of simply lifting her dress Theresa removes it hoping to look more attractive to Martin's experienced eye. Martin unfastens her bra and begins to kiss the scar. Quickly he begins to caress her body and then making love to her. When it is over Martin rushes her out the door because they are both late for their next class.



The following week Theresa tells Martin about her polio. They are interrupted by his wife on the intercom asking him to pick up their son after school. Martin becomes all business again until Theresa aggressively seduces him. The moment it is over Martin marches out of the room telling her to slam the door on her way out.

Theresa's sister, Brigid marries her high school boyfriend and Katherine and her husband, Brooks attempt to have a baby of their own. Martin goes out of town for the summer but when he returns Theresa is back at her old job. Martin has changed though. He has lost interest in his work and is smoking marijuana. Martin coaxes Theresa into trying some, which she does and then falls asleep.

Theresa works for and is a lover to Martin through her four years at school. Toward the end of her final year their lovemaking becomes more frequent despite Martin's loss of interest in other areas of his life. When Theresa asks what will happen when she graduates he flippantly tells her it will be over between them. Theresa becomes so depressed she cannot eat and she sleeps constantly. Theresa's parents are concerned about her and Katherine comes to talk to her. No one in her family knows about Martin.

Theresa eventually comes out of her depression enough to go to Fire Island to help Katherine with Brooks' children over the summer. While there when she is not hoping to run into Martin Theresa spends the majority of her time reading. One morning after a party the night before she wakes and finds her sister, Brooks, and their two housemates naked in each other's arms.

Theresa (pages 25-68) Analysis

To Theresa Martin is a symbol of romance. Despite the fact he is married Martin is the first man to show Theresa the type of love she has craved her entire life. Martin is often caustic and hurtful; however, in light of the lack of attention Theresa received in her childhood Martin's attention is a welcome experience no matter how painful. Martin has his own problems. Martin hates women. This is ironic considering how adoring Theresa is toward him and how desperate she is to have his love. Theresa is looking for something she needs, in the wrong place but she is too innocent to realize it.

When Martin breaks up with Theresa the fear of loss becomes a theme that will characterize the rest of her life. It is this first heartbreak that will underscore the pain of loving someone for Theresa and will create a fear to love because she is convinced from the beginning he will leave her. Finding Brooks and Katherine in the middle of an orgy only emphasizes this more for her. Brooks and Katherine are the perfect married couple to her. If they can cheat on each other what hope is there for anyone else?



Theresa (pages 68-106)

Theresa (pages 68-106) Summary

Theresa teaches near her parent's home in the Bronx for nearly two years before she allows her sister to talk her into moving to Manhattan and renting a room in her house. Theresa loves the apartment and has fun decorating it. Theresa takes another teaching job in the Lower East Side. Teaching is something she really enjoys and where she finally feels happy and fulfilled.

The November after Theresa moves in Katherine calls her up to her apartment saying she needs to talk. Katherine tells Theresa she is pregnant. Once again she is not sure who the father is. Theresa tries to console her in her own awkward way but Katherine is beyond consoling. Katherine has gone back to school and her marriage is strained. The pregnancy has been tough and she is not sure she wants the baby. Before Theresa can make any suggestions Brooks comes home with an associate.

There is hardly any food in the house so Theresa sits out a plate of crackers and a plate of cookies. Someone has brought some wine and some marijuana. Theresa tries the drug again even though she fell asleep the last time. This time she enjoys the experience and becomes giddy. Carter, the man Brooks brought home to help him with a brief begins to flirt with her. Before much time has passed Theresa invites him down to her apartment and they make love. The next morning Carter is gone. When Theresa asks about Carter later Brooks tells her to forget about him.

Katherine comes to Theresa a few days later and tells Theresa she is getting another abortion. Katherine goes to Puerto Rico over the Thanksgiving holiday and comes back happier and healthier. Two months later Katherine comes to Theresa and tells her she is leaving Brooks to move in with her psychology professor. Theresa is upset and wants to walk so Katherine takes her to a local bar, Corners. At Corners Theresa meets Ali and agrees to go on a walk with him.

Theresa and Ali, or Eli as she later learns his real name walk around Manhattan for a long time discussing Ali's wife. Ali tells Theresa how his marriage was arranged because he told the rabbi of his sexual urges and how his wife does not enjoy sex despite having four children. Ali tells Theresa how he discovered marijuana, casual sex, and how happy it made him. Ali says he wanted to help his wife learn to enjoy sex but she was not interested. Ali eventually left his wife because he was afraid he would die if he didn't. Now his wife will not allow him to see his kids. Theresa and Ali end up at a loft where Ali is staying. They have sex and then Ali takes her home although it's the middle of the night. He doesn't want her to run into the woman he lives with, in the morning. Theresa hopes Ali will call her but he never does.

Theresa becomes obsessed with the idea of Brooks heartbreak. One day she hears him moving around in his apartment upstairs. Theresa runs up there to tell him he will



always be a part of her family and that she cares about him despite Katherine's coldness. However, when Theresa is finished with her speech she discovers that Brooks has a very young woman waiting in the bathroom for him.

Immediately after leaving Brooks, unwilling to sleep in her bed below his apartment knowing he was having sex with a strange woman Theresa goes to Corner's and picks up a strange man. They drink for a while and then she takes him to her apartment. After sex she asks him to leave. The man does although he is not happy about it. Theresa decides then to move.

Theresa (pages 68-106) Analysis

Theresa's new home symbolizes freedom to her. This is the first time she has been totally out on her own and even though she is living in the apartment below her sister she is very excited to spread her wings. However, unpleasantness intrudes when Katherine has her second abortion and leaves Brooks. Theresa is hurt on two levels here. The first is the blow of the destruction of a marriage she thought was solid. The second is Brooks' behavior. Once more a man she thought she could trust has let her down. This touches on the theme of fear, Theresa's fear of loss and her fear of a loss of control. Theresa could not control what was happening around her so she chose to act out. The men she picks up at Corner's are a symbol of her desire to control what happens around her and symbolic of her fear of commitment.

There is also irony in Theresa's hope that Carter will come to see her again and her hope that Ali will call her. Neither encounter gave her any indication of a long-term situation, however she still hopes for a second meeting anyway. This is not only irony it is symbolic of the innocence that is slowly being torn away from Theresa.



Theresa (pages 106-145)

Theresa (pages 106-145) Summary

In the fall there is a union strike at Theresa's school that pits the older teachers against the younger ones. During the strike Theresa becomes friendly with one of the male teachers only to spur his attraction to protect their working relationship. When the strike is over she hears that he has a new girlfriend.

Theresa's father has surgery to remove a tumor in his intestine later that same year. Theresa goes to the hospital the day of the surgery and visits several times during his lengthy recovery. Theresa feels obliged to be there but she is surprised when her father teases her about not visiting more often.

Rose, a teacher at her school invites Theresa to dinner at her house upon hearing about Theresa's father. While there Rose introduces Theresa to a young lawyer at her husband's law firm, James Morrissey. Theresa is not interested in James but she does agree to go to dinner with him. That same night Theresa is too restless to go to sleep and ends up at a local bar, Luther's. There she meets Tony, a Vietnam vet. Theresa takes Tony home and they make love.

Tony calls again on Monday and wants to see her Wednesday. Theresa is so excited to see him she can hardly concentrate. When he arrives Tony is agitated. He had a crazy day parking cars and does not want to do anything but listen to the radio. Theresa gets out a bottle of wine and slowly gains his attention. Tony then begins to give Theresa oral sex and she does the same for him, an experience she has never had and does not like. Theresa feels shame and anger and wants him to leave. To distract him from wanting to have sex again Theresa asks to see his switchblade. Tony turns off the light to show her that it glows in the dark. Theresa becomes very frightened and asks him to put it away. After they make love again it is nearly dawn before Theresa finally falls asleep. When she wakes again it is late Thursday night. Theresa has missed work. Theresa calls Rose and apologizes for worrying her and tells her that she took a tranquilizer and overslept. On Friday everyone teases her but no one seems terribly upset about the episode. On Saturday James comes for their date.

Theresa does not dress up for the date and is embarrassed when James shows up in a shirt and tie. Theresa changes her clothes and they go to a nice restaurant that Theresa has heard is not favored by the more sophisticated crowd. Theresa is mean to James, almost cruel, teasing him trying to make him mad so he would leave but he never does.

Theresa continues to see James but only on the weekends because Tony works on the weekends. During the week she spends many evenings with Tony who becomes angry whenever James calls while he is there. One night Tony tells Theresa about his drug habit and how he lost his horse-training license. Tony also tells her about his mother and how her boyfriend does not like him so she kicked him out. Theresa in turn tells him



about what she does for a living. After this Theresa becomes convinced she will never see Tony again but he calls her a few days later and tells her to keep the Sunday after next open.

Theresa becomes restless when she thinks Tony will leave her. Theresa goes to Mr. Goodbar and meets a man named Victor. Victor is in advertising and is only in New York for a few days. Theresa goes to his hotel with him and stays there until Friday morning, calling in sick both Wednesday and Thursday. When Theresa returns to work Rose confronts her. Rose knows Theresa was not home all week because James had called on her and could not get an answer. Theresa lies and tells her she was at her parents because her mother was ill. Rose tells Theresa she should be nicer to James because he has been caring for his paralyzed mother since his father died.

Tony is waiting for Theresa outside when school lets out. Theresa is frightened to see him there, more because she is with Evelyn, another teacher rather than Tony's anger. Tony demands to know where she has been. Tony tells her he is taking her to his mother's birthday party on Sunday and that she should be ready. Theresa does not want to go because she is afraid of how he will introduce her to his family. Tony announces she is his girlfriend and that is what he will tell everyone.

Theresa (pages 106-145) Analysis

Theresa meets James and suddenly she is faced with this symbol of everything she is afraid of. James is a good and gentle man, the kind of man her parents want her to marry. However, if she marries him she will be afraid of losing him almost constantly. If she marries him she will lose control over her own life. If she marries him she will have to accept the reality of herself as someone capable of being loved. This touches on two of the themes of the novel, fear and self-image. It is also somewhat ironic that she continues to date James despite her own perceived dislike of him. Theresa continually tells herself that James is boring and stupid. James is nothing like the men she desires. However, Theresa never considers not dating James.

Tony is the total opposite of James. Tony is here today and gone tomorrow kind of guy. The fact that he gets jealous of James is erotic to Theresa. Tony's jealousy is something she can control just like his attentions in bed and her allowing him to return to her bed over and again. This touches on one of the themes of the novel: Theresa's fear of losing control.



Theresa (pages 145-182)

Theresa (pages 145-182) Summary

When Theresa returns home from talking to Tony, James is on the phone. Theresa invites him over for dinner feeling a little contrite after Rose told her about his mother. Theresa makes a nice dinner and is very kind in her conversation with him though she bursts into tears twice during the evening and blames it on him. Theresa finally becomes frustrated with herself and angry with James when he suggests he is in love with her and she reverts to her normal, spiteful self.

Theresa asks James about his mother and about his beliefs. Theresa then accuses him of being perfect and of being a virgin. James admits that he has not made love to a woman; however, he did have a homosexual relationship with a Jesuit priest who was his adviser at Fordham. James then tells her how he wants to wait until he marries to make love to a woman. He wants to be in love when he has his first experience. Theresa balks at the idea of marriage.

James is surprised by Theresa's reaction since she is a teacher. Theresa explains she likes kids okay except when they are sick. This leads to a discussion of her various hospitalizations when she was young. This discussion again upsets Theresa. James tries to console her by holding her in his arms. Theresa tells him not to fall in love with her and asks that he only be her friend. After a while she falls asleep. When she wakes she is aroused and begins to caress James until she realizes who he is. Theresa quickly jumps away from him. James makes a date with Theresa for Saturday before he leaves. Tony calls a few days later and insists on coming over on Saturday. Theresa breaks her date with James and allows Tony to come over. They spend the night making love and then Tony leaves early the next morning to get ready for his mother's party. Theresa is unsure what to wear so she goes out and buys a sexy black dress. Then Theresa decides the dress is too sexy. When Tony arrives she is wearing a simple jersey dress. Tony does not like it and makes her put on the black dress.

The party is nice. Theresa has a good time dancing with Tony and his mother's boyfriend. Everything goes well until a drunk Tony makes a rude remark about Theresa and his mother. The mother's boyfriend throws him out. After a hesitation Theresa goes too. When Theresa finds Tony out in the hall he slaps her across the face. Tony is immediately apologetic; however, Theresa cannot forget about it and when they are back in her apartment making love and Tony loses his erection Theresa cannot help but laugh. Tony leaves and Theresa is convinced it is the last time she will see him.

Over the next few weeks Theresa sees only James and enjoys it more than before. In June she goes with him to his cousins wedding wearing the same black dress she wore to the party for Tony's mother. They travel to the wedding in James's sister, Patricia's van. James's mother, two nieces, brother-in-law, and sister are all there. At first Theresa is unsure about the situation but relaxes after a while.



While dancing at the wedding James teases Theresa about wanting to marry her. Theresa becomes upset and runs out into the parking lot. James follows and they climb into Patricia's van when it begins to rain. At first they talk and then Theresa suggests they read the paper until it stops raining. They climb into the back of the van and Theresa lays down encouraging James to lay with her. However, James knows what she is trying to do and insists they return to the wedding.

The following Friday Theresa insists that James take her to a rock concert that neither of them enjoy. Afterward they go back to her apartment and curl up together on the bed. James lays his head in Theresa's lap and she sings to him a song her children had sung to her. James is afraid this is not masculine but Theresa assures him it is. After a while they begin to kiss and James fumbles to undress her. When they begin to make love Theresa realizes James is wearing a condom and she is offended by it.

Theresa goes home to visit her parents that weekend. When Katherine arrives Theresa finds out her father has cancer. Theresa does not understand why no one told her. They tell her it is because she did not ask. All of Theresa's friends leave town for the summer. Theresa spends the summer with James. James's mother makes Theresa uncomfortable. Theresa wants to assure her that she will not steal her son away but she continues to date him.

Theresa (pages 145-182) Analysis

It is symbolic of the two relationships in her life that Theresa attended two parties and each unfolded in such different ways. Tony is belligerent and abusive and James is kind and gentle. It is ironic that it is Tony that Theresa would rather spend her time with.

James's mother's illness is symbolic to Theresa. While it symbolizes James's sense of responsibility and his kindness it also symbolizes one of Theresa's biggest fears: A loss of control. Theresa looks at this woman and is terrified by the idea of being trapped inside one's own mind. Theresa had control over her own body taken from her once before. She does not want it to happen again. Perhaps this is what James symbolizes to her as well, beyond the loss of her independence should she marry him.

Theresa's own father has cancer. Theresa is never told because her family decided she did not want to know because she did not ask but to Theresa this lack of knowledge stems from her family's lack of concern for her. Theresa has always been convinced that she is only an afterthought to her family and this episode underscores that opinion. This is symbolic of her childhood and another loss she must suffer thus touching on the theme of fear of loss.

Finally Theresa begins having intimate relations with James. It is ironic that she has sex with a man she is convinced she does not love and is not attracted to. It is also symbolic of the theme love vs. sex. Theresa confuses sex with love. She is not attracted to James because she is convinced she does not love him. Theresa is attracted to Tony; however, she is pretty sure she does not love him either.



Theresa (pages 182-217)

Theresa (pages 182-217) Summary

In the fall Theresa meets with Evelyn for lunch. Evelyn tells Theresa about a woman's group she and a bunch of friends are forming. Theresa is hesitant to join until she speaks to James and he supports the idea. This makes Theresa want to join out of defiance. At the meeting the women talk about their relationships with their mothers and the scars on their bodies that make them self-conscious. Theresa never goes back.

At Thanksgiving James and Theresa agree to go to Theresa's parents house for dinner and Patricia's for drinks. However, at dinner Theresa becomes so depressed by the domesticity of it all she insists on going home and James insists on going with her. At the apartment Theresa and James argue. Theresa pushes him and expects him to leave when she tells him that she has slept with other men. James will not go until she sends him out for food.

Theresa becomes obsessed with the idea that James will not return. After a while she gets dressed and is intent on going to a bar to pick up someone. In the lobby she runs into James who is coming back from getting the food. Theresa decides to smoke a joint before they make love. Maybe it will make it better.

At Christmas James gives Theresa a nice ruby ring. When she puts it on she puts it on the right hand and Patricia tells her it's the wrong hand. Suddenly Theresa feels trapped. Back at her apartment Tony calls almost as soon as they walk in the door. James becomes jealous when Theresa tells him she has been sleeping with Tony all through their relationship although she has not heard from Tony since the day of his mother's party. James leaves after telling her he needs to think about things for a while.

Theresa spends the next week alone thinking about all the people in her life and about the ones she let down. Rose crosses her mind a lot. Rose stopped being so friendly with her after the few days she spent with Victor and Theresa is ashamed of herself for allowing it to happen. Theresa thinks about fate and about being able to control one's own destiny. Theresa thinks about James and Tony. Theresa decides she needs to move and make a fresh start. Theresa even makes the decision to go to a psychiatrist. Tony calls and Theresa becomes enraged when he cracks a joke about James. Theresa is lonely and cannot wait till the end of Christmas break.

James finally calls two days before the New Year. James tells Theresa he has thought a lot about what she told him and about their relationship. James is not happy with the idea that Theresa has been with other men but he is willing to overlook it if she agrees to marry him immediately. Theresa tells him she will call him back with an answer.

Theresa spends the next few days cleaning her apartment despite her desire to move, and trying to reach her sister to borrow some tranquilizers to help her through the rest of



the vacation. When Katherine finally answers the phone it is too late for the pills. Theresa tells her Happy New Year and hangs up. When Katherine calls her back Theresa refuses to pick up.

On New Year's Day just hours before Christmas break is over Theresa is restless. Theresa climbs out of bed and dresses, taking a book and goes to Mr. Goodbar. Theresa takes her normal stool, reads *The Godfather* and keeps an eye out for any interesting men. When Gary and George come in Theresa cannot help but admire Gary's good looks. Theresa asks the bartender to check him out since she knows George is gay and wonders if Gary is too. Theresa and Gary talk for a few minutes and she asks him up to her apartment for a quiet drink.

Theresa sits on the bed and tries to get Gary to talk to her. Gary tells her he has a criminal record and that turns her on until he asks about her limp. Theresa is beginning to not like Gary; however, she does not want to ask him to leave because she is afraid she will not be able to sleep if she does not have sex. Theresa asks him if he is gay and this makes Gary angry.

Theresa asks Gary to leave and begins to prepare for bed. Gary pushes her onto the bed and begins to have sex with her. They make love for a long time before Gary rolls off of her without reaching his climax. Theresa climbs under the covers and tells Gary not to fall asleep. When he does not respond she realizes he is masturbating. Theresa is repulsed by the idea of this man spoiling her quilt.

When Gary is finished, Theresa insists he must leave. When he will not go, Theresa threatens to call the police. Theresa reaches behind her to turn on the overhead light and Gary grabs the phone mistakenly thinking this is what she is reaching for and tears it out of the wall. Theresa jumps out of bed and runs for the door. Gary grabs her and drags her back to the bed. Theresa fights, screaming when she can. Gary throws her onto the bed and covers her mouth when she screams. As Gary puts the pillow over her face he is trying to rape her. Theresa manages to get the pillow off of her face and then sees the lamp in his hand. Theresa prays it will be quick.

Theresa (pages 182-217) Analysis

The idea of domesticity terrifies Theresa. At Thanksgiving and again at Christmas Theresa sees her future in her parents and in James's mother. Theresa does not like what she sees. To her marriage is a symbol for loss of control of her own life. Besides the idea of losing the people she loves, loss of control is her biggest fear and the main theme of the novel. When James gives her a ring this is the ultimate symbol of the loss of control over her own life. Theresa tells him the one thing she knows will make him go away and she is not surprised when he does not let her down this time.

Theresa's time alone is a turning point in her attitudes. The writer foreshadows here some changes that Theresa might have been capable of if she had not been murdered. The idea of seeing a psychiatrist, the fact that she did not turn James down

immediately, and the fact that she sent Tony away all prove that she might have changed if not for one man who took away her right to change.

Gary is symbolic of all the predators in the world who are a danger to women who live in the style that Theresa lived. His quick, out-of-control behavior is symbolic of the ultimate loss of control over one's life. Theresa's worst fear comes alive in Gary and ends her life in one quick movement.



Characters

Theresa "Terry" Dunn

Theresa is a public school teacher in New York City. Theresa teaches first grade because she can remember how wonderful it felt to finally understand words on a piece of paper. School is the only place where Theresa feels completely safe and completely in control of her own destiny. Outside of school however, Theresa is a totally different person. Theresa is a frightened woman who cannot feel comfortable in her own skin. There are people around Theresa who care about her but Theresa is so afraid of being loved that she pushes away the very people who want nothing more than to love her.

As a child Theresa suffers from polio and is hospitalized for a very long time. Later because the polio weakened the muscles on one side of her spine Theresa suffers from scoliosis. The condition has progressed so far that Theresa is forced to have spinal surgery, which results in a year-long stay in the hospital. This experience shapes Theresa's life in ways she will never fully understand. Theresa claims she cannot remember much about her time in the hospital but the scar that disfigures her back and the slight limp that remains from her condition are constant reminders of the imperfections in her own body. Theresa is ashamed of these imperfections.

Theresa becomes involved with a professor while she attends college. This professor has psychological problems of his own and his attitudes toward women and sexual intimacy color Theresa's own self-awareness in a negative way. To top that the sexual freedom of the culture of the 60's leads Theresa into a downward spiral of self-hatred and dangerous behavior. The damage to Theresa's self-esteem is so complete that even when a good man falls in love with her and wants to marry her Theresa convinces herself that she cannot possibly marry a man like him. If she were to marry him she fears he will eventually leave her.

James Morrisey

James Morrisey is a lawyer who works in the same law firm as Rose's husband. James is a good man who cares for his invalid mother. James was once a good Catholic; however, he has become jaded by the experience of losing his father and then his mother almost immediately suffering a stroke. James is very gentle with Theresa willing to accept nearly anything she wants to throw at him including the new ideas of the women's movement and her desire for independence rather than marriage. However, when she tells him about the men she often spends the night with, especially Tony he insists that she marry him rather than continue her self-destructive behavior.

James has also had a few experiences in his life that have colored his own view of the world. Not only did he suffer through the loss of his father and the illness of his mother but he was also the victim of a mentor who used him for his own pleasure. This



experience though an unpleasant one did not destroy his self-esteem, as Theresa's own experience did. However, it has made James weary of jumping too quickly into a relationship with a woman. Theresa is the first woman James has cared enough about to even consider sharing intimacy with. James is honest with Theresa about his feelings throughout their relationship and when they become intimate he is shocked and hurt when Theresa admits there have been other men in her bed. James gives Theresa an ultimatum that she never answers.

Katherine

Katherine is Theresa's older sister. Katherine is six years older than Theresa. Katherine is a very beautiful woman who is charming and flirtatious. While Theresa is in the hospital for her spinal surgery Katherine was engaged to a friend of her father's, runs off and marries a cousin of her fiancé's. This marriage fails almost immediately and Katherine's parents arrange for Katherine to receive an annulment. Katherine then goes to Manhattan and studies to be a stewardess. While traveling on a regular basis from New York to Los Angeles Katherine maintains two relationships with two different men and finds herself pregnant. Katherine goes to Puerto Rico for an abortion. Later Katherine marries a lawyer named Brooks. Katherine and Brooks throw themselves into the new sexual freedom of the decade with enthusiasm. Eventually Katherine finds herself pregnant again and chooses to have another abortion. Shortly after this she leaves Brooks for her college professor.

Katherine's behaviors and attitudes toward sex and relationships have a strong impact on Theresa. Theresa sees her sister as perfection. Everything has always come easy to Katherine and no matter what she does there is always someone waiting in the wings to rescue her. Theresa loves her sister but she hates her too. Katherine makes Theresa more aware of her own failings, which makes her own self-hatred more pronounced. Katherine's failed relationships also underscore for Theresa that nothing lasts forever and that risking to love is also risking to experience loss, a situation Theresa is profoundly afraid of finding herself in. It is also Katherine's attitudes toward sex and men that lead Theresa into the destructive world of drugs and non-committed sex.

Tony

Tony is a man Theresa picks up in a bar and the only one of her bar conquests who continually comes back to see her. Tony is a Vietnam Vet. Tony came home from the war with a drug habit that caused him to lose his horse-training license and ruined his relationship with his mother. Tony is often violent and verbally abusive with Theresa; however, Tony is extremely passionate in their intimate moments a passion that Theresa often craves like someone might crave food and water. For a time Theresa dates both Tony and James at the same time.



Rose

Rose is a teacher at the same school where Theresa works. Rose is a kind, Jewish woman who never had children of her own. Rose takes Theresa under her wings as though she is a motherless child and is the one who introduces Theresa to James. After Theresa disappears for a few days and misses school and does not tell James where she has gone Rose begins to distance herself from Theresa, a loss Theresa takes with difficulty. Rose's concern for Theresa annoyed Theresa quite often but she misses it when it is gone.

Martin Engle

Martin Engle is a sarcastic and caustic English professor who dislikes any woman who shows her affections for him. Martin goes out of his way to ridicule and hurt the students in his classes who clearly admire him and he enjoys confusing those he finds desirable. Martin finds himself fascinated by Theresa; however, he can never tell if she is truly innocent or playing games with him. His moods often shift from kind and relaxed to angry and spiteful in less than a minute. Theresa can never tell what he is thinking from one second to the next and often finds him angry after their more intimate moments.

Martin is married to a wealthy pediatrician but that does not stop him from having an affair with Theresa. Martin hires Theresa to work for him and then takes advantage of their relationship to enjoy an intimate liaison. Theresa wrongly believes this will continue far into her future but it ends when she graduates. Theresa falls into a deep depression after the end of the relationship.

Mr. and Mrs. Dunn

Mr. and Mrs. Dunn are Theresa's parents. Mr. Dunn often suggested to his wife in front of the children when they were young that she had had a second family after the first was half-grown. Thomas was eleven years older and Katherine six years older than Theresa, and her younger sister Brigid was a year younger. After the death of her brother, Thomas, both of Theresa's parents fall into a deep depression, so deep in fact that they fail to notice the twisting of Theresa's spine caused by the scoliosis. As a result of these two facts Theresa grows up to believe her parents do not love her. The relationship is further damaged by Theresa's mother, who is constantly concerned about Theresa's weight and is always picking at her in a way that damages her self-esteem.

When Theresa is older and out on her own her father falls ill with cancer. Theresa is deeply hurt because they waited to tell her he had cancer despite the fact she never asked and is surprised when her father admits his love for her. Theresa has believed for so long that her parents did not love her that she becomes angry at her father's admission and refuses to be alone with him again. However, his illness does create a situation in which Theresa finds herself going home more than she ever has before.



Brigid

Brigid, Theresa's sister, is one year younger than Theresa. Brigid is the total opposite of Theresa, athletic where Theresa is a bookworm, outgoing where Theresa is subdued, and healthy where Theresa falls ill early in her life and struggles with scoliosis later. Brigid and Theresa are not close; in fact they are nearly strangers until Brigid marries and begins having children. Theresa adores other people's children and is thrilled to be able to baby-sit for her sister. Brigid lives the life everyone expects of Theresa and seems happy in it. Theresa again a complete opposite of her sister rebels against this life of domesticity.

Brooks

Brooks is Katherine's second husband. Theresa likes Brooks from the moment she meets him because he is kind and secure in his outgoing nature. Theresa spends a summer with Brooks and Katherine at Fire Island. The highlight of her vacation was the time she spends alone with Brooks when she travels to the island with him each weekend. Later when Katherine leaves Brooks Theresa gets it into her head that she must support him and help him through this painful time. However, she finds him in his apartment with another woman one night and her image of him is shattered. Once more Theresa feels the loss of someone she cared for and she falls into the dangerous trap of picking up men in bars.

Gary

Gary is a career criminal who is on the run from the police in Florida. Gary comes to New York to stay with a friend. Gary hopes this friend will help him send money back to his pregnant wife in Florida. This friend however, is no longer living at the address he gave Gary. Gary goes to a bar in desperation not sure where to go next. Gary does not know it is a gay bar until one of the customers hits on him. Gary agrees to an intimate relationship with the man in exchange for a place to live. Gary goes with his new friend to Goodbar and meets Theresa. The two go to Theresa's and Gary believes he can finally get a good night's sleep until Theresa asks him to leave. Gary becomes enraged and hits Theresa over the head with a lamp. Later Gary confesses to Theresa's murder.



Objects/Places

Mr. Goodbar

Mr. Goodbar is a bar in Theresa's neighborhood where she often goes to meet men.

Scar

Theresa has a scar on her back from the spinal surgery that is a symbol of imperfection to her and a few of her lovers, but a symbol of pity and desire to others.

Limp

Several of Theresa's lovers tell her she has a limp but Theresa is not aware of it and is embarrassed when they point it out.

St. Mark's Place

St. Mark's Place is the location of Theresa's first apartment. The apartment is located in the basement of a home owned by Katherine and Brooks.

School

Theresa teaches first grade at an unnamed school. The school is the only place where Theresa feels safe and in control of her own life.

Fire Island

Fire Island is where Katherine finally convinces Theresa to spend the summer with herself and Brooks. It is also in the house Katherine rents where Theresa sees Katherine and Brooks engaged in unusual sexual behavior. Fire Island is also where Martin vacations every summer with his stepchildren.

Marijuana

Marijuana is an illegal drug that Theresa first uses with Martin and later with Katherine and Brooks. Marijuana leads Theresa to her first one-night stand with a friend of Brooks and also her drug of choice when she decides she needs chemical help becoming aroused when she is with James.



Corner's

Corner's is the first bar Theresa goes to and the first place where she allows a man to pick her up.

Clownfish Poster

A poster that hangs in Theresa's apartment and is the object of quite a few exchanges of small talk between Theresa and her male companions. On the poster is a short paragraph about the relationship between clownfish and the normally fatal anemone.

Blue Bandana-Printed Quilt

This blue quilt is one Theresa bought and placed on her bed. It is the act of soiling this quilt that causes Theresa to ask Gary to leave, which in turn angers him and leads to her death.



Social Sensitivity

Looking for Mr. Goodbar is a novel of its times. It was based on an actual event, the 1973 murder of a school teacher named Roseann Quinn by a man she met in a Manhattan singles bar and took back to her apartment. On one level it deals with the modern singles lifestyle and its dangers, a focus picked up by a reviewer in Ms. who called the book "a haunting, compelling thriller, guaranteed to make any woman terrified of the next strange man she meets."

Its relevance is far broader than that, however. When Rossner says the book "struck a nerve," she is referring to its concern with the sexual revolution, the women's movement, the widespread lack of self-esteem, and the difficulties in today's society of getting to know others, resulting in overwhelming loneliness.

Feminists took up the heroine as a victim in the male-oriented world, but the blame is not so easily assigned. The men in the book are victims, too, especially Terry's would-be fiance James and even her murderer, who is only exhausted and kills her out of frustration and then panic. Martha Duffy, in Time, declared Theresa "a giant step forward in the long-term interests of sexual detente." The book deals frankly with sex and with the difficulties of women in learning to like their bodies and admit openly their need for sex.

Through a vignette describing the marriage of one of Terry's casual bed partners, Ali (Eli), a Hassidic Jew, Rossner depicts the tragedy of women conditioned to hate sex and distrust pleasure. Yet sensual satisfaction and a relationship with a man are hardly enough to fulfill a woman. "Why is it that if you ask a woman how she is, the first thing she tells you is about her husband or boyfriend?" one of Theresa's friends from school laments. A major concern in this book is the need for women to have an identity deeper than their relationship to a man, to have "real lives of their own." Yet Theresa is hesitant to join Evelyn's discussion groups, lacking the selfconfidence she needs to become the independent woman she would like to be.

This lack of self-esteem, which is a major theme of the book, relates not to women only but to everyone. Theresa clearly does not like herself and feels what is inside her is best kept hidden there. An idle comment by her father during her childhood about "opening a can of worms" has stayed with her, and she always imagines people that way — "bright, neat-looking on the outside, but ... pink and slimy and ...

more like intestines ... if you turned yourself inside out." She associates the wormlike scar on her back with these worms and shudders when she sees it.

Permanently marked by her childhood scoliosis and year-long hospitalization, she is overly sensitive about her scar, her limp, her weight, and her overall appearance. Her would-be fiance James defines — correctly — her sleeping around as a "lack of self



regard." This phenomenon of the person who does not like herself and treats herself carelessly, even to the point of committing suicide through this passivity toward life, abounds in the present high-pressured society. Another byproduct of this society is a difficulty in getting to know others, resulting in overwhelming loneliness. Theresa, with her inability to really listen to others and her reticence in initiating friendships, substitutes casual sex partners for real friends and is eventually destroyed by that choice.

Techniques

Looking for Mr. Goodbar begins with the end, the aftermath of the murder.

Rossner introduces the murderer, Gary Cooper White, and develops some sympathy for him before launching into the narrative about Theresa's life.

The effect of this is to know Theresa is doomed from the start; the only suspense that remains is what will precipitate the murder and how much of her life will precede her death. Still, ignoring Rossner's warning, the reader gets involved with Theresa in spite of himself and hopes she will free herself from the trap she has set. The proportions are just right, with the murderer getting the first word, although brief, and Theresa getting the balance of the book. Readers may find themselves rereading the first section when they reach the end to bring the story full circle.

The novel is a psychological one, and Rossner gives a clear look into Theresa's mind through dreams, which highlight and reveal her subconscious desires and fears. The other technique for getting into Theresa's mind is the use of italicized statements for imagined conversations or thoughts she cannot express. These often contradict the words she speaks aloud, highlighting her reluctance to let her real self out.



Themes

Themes

The major theme of this book is the need for love and companionship.

Paradoxically, this need is often accompanied by a reluctance to form a permanent attachment, to truly love someone and accept his love in return. The book suggests that Theresa's refusal stems from the lack of self-regard (no one could really love me once he knows me) and the fear of loss. The result is a painful loneliness, which Theresa fills indiscriminately by having sex with the nearest available warm body.

Theresa's first and best companion was her brother Thomas, who visited and read to her throughout her illness, but he was killed in a training-camp gun accident at the age of eighteen, devastating her entire family. She spends her life, unconsciously, trying to replace him and realizes, only at the very end but is unable to express the thought, that James could and does fill that role. "I love you so much, James," she thinks to herself in their last conversation. "I wish you were my brother. I wish Thomas were alive." But she cannot express that love aloud and rejects James, only to go to Mr. Goodbar and be murdered the next day.

Her life has been a series of rejections and rebuffs, many of her own making. She does not believe her parents love her, but only her beautiful sister Katherine. She knows her grandmother loved her, but she died while Theresa was in the hospital, and her parents told Theresa only that Grandmother Theresa Maria had gone to live in California, so for years afterward she would strain for a glimpse of her grandmother on every live TV broadcast from California. She told Martin Engle, her college English professor, "I love you so much, Martin," but he replied with irony and cynicism, "Ah, yes . . . Love." But he fulfilled the one criterion most important to Theresa in a relationship — he talked to her.

Brooks, one of her sister Katherine's husbands, and James Morrissey, her would-be fiance, also talk to her. To James she can confess her love for teaching, something she has never said to anyone outside of school. "She was more herself, the real Theresa, . . . with James, than she'd ever been with anyone." Yet she has no sexual attraction for him even though, when they eventually make love, she admits to herself that he makes her feel beautiful, "languorous and graceful, as though she were in an underwater ballet." But he is too decent, he takes precautions so she will not become pregnant, and their lovemaking is dry and painful.

Disillusioned by "love," Theresa turns to sex. She invites casual onenight flings with an assortment of men: Brooks's friend Carter; Ali, the Hassidic Jew who sleeps in a warehouse; Victor, a businessman she met in a bar and spent a hotel weekend with; and several whose names she never bothered to ask, including one who had been castrated. The most satisfying and most durable of these sex partners is Tony Lopanto,



whom she regards as a "delightful, tender, and energetic lover." Their relationship is one of pure sensual pleasure. They never talk, they never go out, they only strip and leap into bed to the blare of rock music on the radio. The one time they do go out, to a birthday party for Tony's mother, he insults both his mother and Theresa, and he is thrown out of the party.

Theresa's coldness toward him later that night angers him, and the relationship is essentially over. Once Tony is gone and James and she become closer, she is reluctant to return to the bars, even though she longs for the momentary pleasure offered by such encounters.

Theresa is unable to commit herself to James because she feels he sees her as a princess and she could never live up to his image of her. He assures her that his view of her is much closer to reality than her own. He admits his love helps him see her virtues more readily, but insists the virtues are truly there.

When he gives her a ring as a Christmas present, she has difficulty breathing, "as though she were putting something around her neck instead of her finger," and slips it on her right hand instead of her left. She resents the ring as a token of ownership and rebels against it, yet once when she thinks James has left for good, she becomes distraught and admits to herself that "if James disappeared from her life he would leave an enormous gap that couldn't easily be filled, something she could not honestly say about any of the others."

That realization still does not make it possible to accept his love, though, and at the end she returns to Mr. Goodbar in search of a good lay, of someone who will give her pleasure, keep her warm for a time, and leave when she asks. Her loneliness the night of her murder is tremendous. It is Christmas vacation, so she is not seeing the children she loves or her friends from school; James has decided not to see her until she makes up her mind; Tony is gone; and even Katherine is away. She resolves to begin a diary, hoping words will help make order out of her life. "She felt as though she were walking a tightrope and certain moves would send her plunging, but she had no way of knowing exactly what they were." In the end she makes the wrong choice and loses her life just as she seemed about to take charge of her own destiny, to treat herself as a person of some worth. Her temporary relapse into her old ways as a cure for the loneliness takes a permanent recovery totally out of her reach. In those last moments she calls out to James, to Mommy and Daddy, but none of them can reach her.

Fear

Fear is a major theme of the novel *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. Theresa suffers from many fears throughout her life. At a young age she is hospitalized with polio. Since she is only four at the time Theresa has very few memories of this time. However, one memory she does have is of her grandmother no longer coming to the hospital to visit her. Theresa's grandmother has died during this time but Theresa's parents tell the girl that she has only gone to California. This is Theresa's first experience with loss, however; it will not



be her last. Later Theresa's older brother dies in a training accident. Theresa's parents take this death so hard they do nothing to help Theresa deal with her own feelings. Theresa sees how painful loss is to them and learns to fear it. The loss of Martin, her first love when she graduates from college only underscores this confusion and inability to deal, only compounded by the fact that no one in her family knew about her relationship with Martin so there is no one she can discuss her heartbreak with.

For Theresa fear of loss is also compounded by her sister's relationships. Theresa learns from Katherine to run from love. Katherine has two abortions and marries three times. Theresa can only learn from what she sees and what she sees with Katherine is that it is easier to run than to risk losing. This also gives Theresa an overwhelming fear of commitment.

Theresa's fear of commitment not only stems from Katherine's cavalier attitudes regarding marriage it also comes from the men in her life. Martin, her first lover is a married man. To Theresa marriage means faithful for life commitment. Yet here is this man she greatly admires who is not only unfaithful to his wife but he is not faithful to Theresa. Then there is Brooks, Katherine's second husband who Theresa adores. When Katherine leaves Brooks not only does he end his marriage he destroys the image Theresa held of him. Finally there are the many lovers that Theresa takes. Many of them are married, many committed to their marriages in a way only the culture of the sixties could allow. All these images and attitudes confuse Theresa until she is afraid of more than a casual one-night stand.

Control is another fear Theresa suffers from. When she was eleven Theresa is forced to spend a year in the hospital for corrective spinal surgery. Theresa remembers very little from this time except the feeling of not being able to control even her own body. This fear has remained with her on an unconscious level making it impossible for Theresa to rely on anyone other than herself for her own needs and safety.

Finally Theresa is afraid of herself. Theresa is afraid that someday someone will see what is really going on inside her head and will not like what they see. Theresa is also afraid of being loved for who she is. How could someone possibly know who she is deep inside and still love her? Theresa does not like herself how could she love someone who loves her? Fear rules Theresa's emotions coloring her every action. Fear is the major theme of the novel.

Love vs. Sex

Theresa understands what love is. It is something she has never experienced. Theresa is convinced her parents never loved her. She was a sickly child, a burden. Theresa is not an athlete like Brigid or a beauty like Katherine. Theresa could never compare herself to Thomas. So how could her parents have loved her? Martin seems to love her in the beginning but Theresa is too naive to see that he is simply using her for his own amusements. Then there is Carter and Ari and Ted...Theresa wants to know what it



feels like to be loved but the more men she meets the more she begins to confuse love with sex.

Tony is the only man she meets in the bars who calls her after their one night. Theresa does not think he loves her but again he does come back and he does make her feel things no one else has ever made her feel. However, she continues to date James through her entire relationship with Tony telling herself that Tony is for fun and James is for appearances. Slowly she comes to realize she might actually care about James. However, sex with James is nothing like it is with Tony and the other men she has known. Theresa cannot make herself marry a man she is not sexually attracted to but she continues to answer his calls and go out with him and she begins to miss him when he is not around.

Tony pleases Theresa but he abuses her and makes her feel bad about herself. James is kind and gentle the opposite of Tony; however, he does not please her the way Tony does. In this way, Theresa has confused sex with love. If she loved James sex would be great. Sex is more important to her than love. Tony will always come back as long as the sex is good and if not he is replaceable. In this way love vs. sex becomes a major theme in the latter half of the novel.

Self-Esteem/ Self-Image

An underlying reason for Theresa's fear of commitment is her own self-image. Theresa is convinced that her back surgery has left her with a scar and a limp that will leave her undesirable and alone for the rest of her life. Although none of the men she is with ever commit on the scar other than to ask what it is it becomes such a large focus in Theresa's mind that sometimes she cannot relax and enjoy sex for fear of what her partner is thinking about it. When Martin comments on her walk she refuses to walk in front of him for weeks. This also happens with Gary and she nearly throws him out before they can engage in any sexual activities.

Theresa also believes she is unlovable, which stems from her belief that her parents do not care about her. This idea underlines her fear of loss especially when it comes to James. Every time James leaves the apartment Theresa convinces herself that he will not come back. Theresa says she would not come back if she were him. Theresa sees herself as ugly and flawed where James sees her as beautiful and gentle and kind. Theresa believes James has created this image of her in his mind and that this is all he sees when he looks at her and not the truth. This also stems from her lack of a good self-image. It is this hatred of herself that causes Theresa to push James away and before James, to go to the bars and bring home strangers. It is her anger with James for giving her an ultimatum that ultimately leads to her death.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* is a third person narrative limited to the character of Theresa Dunn. Through the majority of the novel the reader is allowed into the mind of Theresa Dunn, her thoughts and feelings, her actions and those of the people around her; however, the reader is not allowed into the thoughts of the supporting characters. The exception is the beginning of the novel where the writer has presented the confession of Theresa's killer Gary. This section of the novel is written in first person where the narrator is not a part of the action.

Much of the novel is told through Theresa's thoughts and feelings and through her impressions of the events around her. In this way the reader can see how Theresa grows less innocent and becomes more and more enveloped in this lifestyle of uncommitted sexual relationships. At the beginning the reader knows that Theresa will eventually be murdered and may form his or her own opinions about how this may come about. However, through the course of the story thanks to insight in Theresa's confused and naive emotions the reader is allowed to feel sympathy for her character and almost root for her survival and grieve when survival fails to transform the novel.

The narrow view of the novel then must be employed to allow the reader to understand and sympathize with a character who might otherwise have been viewed with contempt. Without this narrow view of Theresa and the distance with which the author holds the other characters the reader might not have felt the impact of the various relationships portrayed throughout the novel on Theresa or understood how the young woman found herself in the situation that ultimately led to her death.

Setting

The novel *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* takes place in the various burrows of New York City. Theresa is born in the Bronx and continues to live there until several years after she graduates from City College. Theresa's first apartment is located in Manhattan, her second in the West Village. Despite the geographical location of the novel, the majority of the scenes take place inside Theresa's two tiny economy apartments especially on or around her bed. Theresa often invites strange men to her apartment without fear of physical harm. In fact there are several times when Theresa makes a special point of locking her front door once she is inside with these strange men, locking out the danger outside but not concerned about the trouble she has welcomed inside. There also seems to be no difference in Theresa's mind about the different men she invites inside.

The apartments where Theresa lives are her security and other that when she's at school the only place where she feels safe. Here she is in charge and can be as mean to James, as seductive to Tony, or as impolite to Gary as she likes. Theresa has a



strong need to be in control of her life, which resulted from the year she spent in the hospital undergoing spinal surgery; however, it is this control that ends up causing her untimely death in the setting that has become her only sanctuary.

Language and Meaning

The language Ms. Rossner uses throughout her novel is simple and easy to understand for most readers. Many of the passages throughout the book are highly descriptive with dialogue kept to a minimum. Ms. Rossner also uses the slang of the 60's that enhances the feel of the decade in which the novel takes place.

The novel does include many scenes that could only be described as X-rated. Ms. Rossner describes in detail several of Theresa's sexual encounters with the various men she meets including one extremely well written and highly erotic scene between Theresa and Tony. In writing the scene this way Ms. Rossner sets Tony apart from the other men in the novel and shows a deep innocence in Theresa's character that the reader might not at this point have realized still existed. Throughout the novel the reader is presented with a woman though innocent in her first intimate relationship, which appears experienced and somewhat emotionless when it comes to sexual encounters. This scene with Tony reminds the reader that though she is sexually aware Theresa is still an innocent when it comes to certain acts that may be committed in the course of a sexual encounter.

Structure

Looking for Mr. Goodbar is written in three sections: About the confession, the confession, and Theresa. There are only occasional section breaks in the last two hundred or so pages in which the writer tells Theresa's life story with no chapters at all. The novel flows like one very long short story moving from Theresa's childhood to her death without pausing for breath as though to underline to brevity of her life and the suddenness of her death.

The novel is linear without flashbacks to interrupt the narration. However, there are many places when Theresa has flashes of memories from her childhood events surrounding her two hospitalizations that she has failed to remember before. Usually these events are handled in dialogue without a scene being written about them keeping the narration in the present.

Most of the novel is told in descriptive passages with occasional spates of dialogue to break up the monotony. The reader spends the majority of the time in Theresa's head listening to the confusion of her thoughts as she argues with herself over the poor morality of going to the bars and bringing home men and the boredom and risks involved in loving one man and committing her life to him.



Quotes

"For me, as a matter of fact, this was the most notable quality of his confession--that Gary White, who had brutally assaulted and murdered Theresa Dunn a few hours after meeting her in a Manhattan singles spot called Mr. Goodbar, had a very clear sense of himself as the victim of the woman he had murdered." About the Confession, pg. 1

"She's sitting on the last stool, you know, against the wall. I wouldn't've even noticed her except she's reading a book." The Confession, pg. 5

"They didn't look at her for almost two years and then it was too late. Besides, once they understood what had happened there was nothing but guilt in their eyes so that when she saw them looking at her she had to turn away in shame and confusion. If it hadn't been for her brother's death they might have realized sooner that she needed help. She was willing to forgive them but they couldn't forgive themselves." Theresa, pg. 13

"Sometimes Theresa's back hurt, particularly if she tried to sit straight and still for a long time. It wasn't the kind of thing you bothered your parents with, even in normal times. It wasn't bad enough. Besides, it might be something you were doing that was causing you the pain, and then to tell them would just bring anger and recriminations down on your head." Theresa, pg. 16

"She'd taken a teaching job near home in preference to one not far from Martin's, even before she knew--or knew that she knew, as she now thought of it. What had been in her mind at the time was to show Martin that she was making no demands on him. That if she had thought she could go to him directly after school, that didn't mean he had to be thinking the same thing."

Theresa, pg. 61

"Corners, an Old-Fashioned Bar, was like frozen orange juice--the real thing, only more so."

Theresa, pg. 85

"'What a shame,' her father said to her, smiling, in a moment when he was settled in his room and no one else was there with them, 'I had to get sick for my daughter Theresa to get so friendly.'

She stared at him. 'I always thought,' she said, 'you didn't care that much. I always knew Katherine was your favorite.'

He looked at her as though he didn't know whether to be more grieved or puzzled. She ran out of the room and wasn't alone with him again for the rest of the visit." Theresa, pg. 108



"He got interested in her for the first time. He turned to look at her. She felt shy; she had no idea of how she looked to him. He sat up, rolled up her sweater. But in a strange way. Not as though he was excited and wanted to touch her but as though he were considering whether to become excited." Theresa, pg. 121

"She went out with him six times before he kissed her goodnight. She became almost eager for him to do it, not because she wanted to kiss him but to get it over with. His kiss was light on her lips, as she would have expected. She was unmoved by it. As she would have expected."

Theresa, pg. 134

"She wished James were there right now. She would love to talk to him. Or just sit and hold his hand. She wouldn't even mind if he talked about the office. Very often what he talked about was interesting, actually. It was just some rotten crazy quirk in her that wouldn't allow her to listen and be interested." Theresa, pg. 165

"She went into the bathroom and looked searchingly at her face--as though trying to see in it the answer to whether James would come back to her. She looked ghastly. If it were she coming back, she wouldn't. That wouldn't really help to find out what James would do, though, since he thought she was beautiful. The idiot. The crazy idiot." Theresa, pg. 193

"The phrase "controlling your own destiny," which Evelyn had used more than once, had a delightful ring to it, but there were huge limits, after all. You couldn't control which men you met, or which ones liked you. You could make sure you didn't have a baby, if you worried about that sort of thing, but you couldn't make sure you did. (How many years had Katherine been trying, on and off, to get pregnant, and she could never do it at the right time?) If you drove a car you could make fairly sure that you wouldn't smash into something else, but you could never control whether someone smashed into you." Theresa, pg. 198

"Damn you, James! He had made her uncomfortable with her old life, and then he'd left her. Of course he hadn't exactly left her, but it amounted to the same thing. If she married him she would have to be faithful to him, there was no doubt about it, and how could she be faithful to a man for whom she had no sexual feeling?" Theresa, pg. 209

Adaptations

Looking for Mr. Goodbar was sold to the movies for \$225,000, and the 1977 film starred Diane Keaton and Richard Gere. The screenplay was based only loosely on the book. Rossner, who said she "counted three lines of dialogue from the book in the movie," did not approve of the production and believed Hollywood had "cheapened" the story.

An unabridged tape of the book, read by Susan Adams, has also been issued by Recorded Books.



Key Questions

Looking for Mr. Goodbar, clearly the product of the sexual revolution and burgeoning women's movement of the 1970s, should provoke much discussion of feminist issues. Women, especially, will find Theresa Dunn's difficulties with men, sex, and self-image to be worth further exploration. Discussion groups might also consider the extent to which women's sense of themselves has changed since the 1970s and the degree to which Theresa Dunn continues to speak for women today.

1. What is the book's view of sex and the sexual revolution?
2. What distinctions does the book make between sex and love? Why does Theresa have such difficulty with love?
3. Which of Terry's partners did you find most attractive? Why? Should she have married James? Would he have made a good husband for her?
4. Is Theresa a "liberated woman"?

In what ways is she free? By what is she still enslaved?

5. To what extent are Theresa's childhood traumas and her parents to blame for her insecurities as an adult?
6. Why do people fear being alone?

Is Theresa's intolerance for loneliness a defect in her character or a universal condition brought on by modern society?

7. Theresa "didn't really feel she had a life, one life, that is, belonging to a person, Theresa Dunn," but that she was a split personality whose two halves had nothing in common with each other. Do you see any links between Miss Dunn, the teacher, and Terry, the sexual being who hangs out in bars? What might have helped Theresa fuse the two?

8. Was Theresa's death inevitable? Is there any way she could have saved herself?
9. Examine the opening chapter of the book in light of the whole story. Is it good to know at the outset how the book will end? What does the chapter reveal about the murderer on second reading that went unnoticed the first time through?
10. What are the implications of the title? What might "Goodbar" suggest?

What are we "looking" for?

11. Is Looking for Mr. Goodbar a period piece? What does it reveal about the status of women's liberation and the sexual revolution in the 1970s?

How does the situation compare with today?



Topics for Discussion

Research the sexual revolution of the 1960s. How did the attitudes and atmosphere of this decade affect Theresa's behaviors? Would she have behaved in the manner she did if she had been born twenty years earlier? Twenty years later? Is the atmosphere she lived in totally to blame for her behaviors?

How did the experience of polio and then scoliosis affect Theresa? Would she have behaved the same had she had a more normal childhood?

Discuss the moral issues of Theresa's habit of picking up men in bars. At the time the novel was written, was this acceptable behavior for a woman? Is it in today's society? Compare and contrast the attitudes of young adults in Theresa's time and today. How would Theresa be regarded now? Would she have met the same fate if she were living in today's society?

Discuss clinical depression. Was Theresa clinically depressed? Would her life have been different had she managed to get to the psychiatrist she decided to see? Depression was not treated the same in the sixties as it is now. Would this fact have made a difference?

Discuss the unusual structure of this novel. How would chapter breaks change the flow of the plot line? Would they make the novel easier or harder to read?

Imagine the novel written through the eyes of another character. How would the character of Theresa change had the novel been written through the eyes of James? Of Katherine? Of Gary?

Discuss the confession at the beginning of the novel. Why do you think Ms. Rossner chose to begin the novel with the confession? How would the plot have been different if she had started with Theresa's story?

Literary Precedents

Looking for Mr. Goodbar, according to Carol Eisen Rinzler in the New York Times Book Review, might be placed in a number of literary genres. It might be considered a modern passion play, or perhaps a feminist treatise, with Theresa a political victim of rape. Theresa Dunn, according to Rinzler, "takes her place beside Henry James's Isabel Archer and Scott Fitzgerald's Nicole Diver as another victim of the American Dream, a woman who never roused herself enough to wake up from the nightmare."

Among modern writers, Rossner is most often compared with Joyce Carol Oates. In Looking for Mr. Goodbar, according to Roger Sale, "Rossner is good the way Oates can be, and is more efficient too, so that without resorting to a pressurized cabin atmosphere she can locate the tangles of her heroine's Bronx family and the gradual wastedness of her obvious intelligence."



Related Titles

Looking for Mr. Goodbar, like all of Rossner's novels, deals with the theme of attachments, which was to become the title of the novel to follow. In an interview with Liz Driven of CBS News in 1977, Rossner stated her belief that the fear of being attached and not being attached are the same, and not opposites as some people would believe. She says Terry is afraid to be attached because of her fear of loss.

She considers her major theme to be "people coming together and coming apart, sometimes from houses, sometimes from other people."

The books prior to Looking for Mr. Goodbar each dealt with this theme of attachments. Ruth Kossoff, the bright Jewish heroine of *To the Precipice* (1966), has a number of relationships with men during her life. The attachment between two sisters is the focus in *Nine Months in the Life of an Old Maid* (1969). *Any Minute I Can Split* (1972) deals with the painful attachment and separation of Margaret McDonough Adams from her father and husband, one of whom rejected her and the other of whom abused her. Prior to writing Looking for Mr. Goodbar, Rossner became interested in Siamese twins as an obvious case of nonseparation, and she began *Attachments* (1977) quite a bit before Looking for Mr. Goodbar, then set it aside. In *Attachments*, Rossner continues Looking for Mr. Goodbar's concern with the women's movement, especially its support of a woman's need to have a life of her own, with loneliness, and with the inability of people to accept love.



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