

Looking For Salvation at the Dairy Queen Study Guide

Looking For Salvation at the Dairy Queen by Susan Gregg Gilmore

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Plot Summary

"Looking for Salvation at the Dairy Queen" is a lighthearted, humorous novel that confronts some deep issues like faith, forgiveness, and judgment.

Catherine Grace Cline is a young girl growing up in small town Ringgold, Georgia, a real life town just south of Chattanooga, Tennessee and a few hours north of Atlanta. As the story opens, she is an adult, looking back on her childhood. The young girl's life is characterized by the loss of her mother at age six; she is raised with her sister by her fiery preacher father, Marshall Cline. The death of Lena Mae Cline leaves a hole in Catherine Grace, a hole she fills with a 'dream' of one day leaving the stifling, closed-minded confines of Ringgold making her way south to Atlanta, The Promised Land. She and her sister, Martha Ann, take a weekly trip to the town's Dairy Queen, where they eat a Dilly Bar and dream of a future away from Ringgold.

The early part of the story is told in flashbacks. Catherine Grace grows up feeling different from her neighbors because she doesn't have a mother, and this feeling of otherness fuels her tunnel vision to leave town. At age nine she begins to make and sell strawberry jam from the strawberry patch her grandfather started a generation ago; with the money she earns she dreams of her move to the city.

As she grows into her teen years she becomes closer to her neighbor, Gloria Jean Graves, who was a friend to the girls's mother and serves as a sort of mother to them herself. Their father does have a sort of beau in the form of Miss Raines, the local elementary school teacher, a lovely young woman who clearly loves the preacher. However, he repeatedly tells his girls that he and Miss Raines can ever only be good friends.

Catherine Grace's dream of leaving town on her eighteenth birthday is temporarily challenged by a short relationship with the best looking, most popular boy in town, Hank Blankenship. Her love for him surprises her, as does his love for her. They date for over a year, and he presents a real problem for Catherine. However, on the night of her senior prom, she finds a reason to break it off with him, feeling like she isn't right for him.

When Catherine turns 18 she leaves Ringgold on a Greyhound bus bound for Atlanta. Her father is willing to let her go only because he thinks she will be back once she gets it out of her system. The young girl leaves behind a host of people who love her dearly. When she reaches Atlanta she is both shocked and delighted at the differences the city presents. She temporarily lives with a cousin in the city, but eventually finds a room to let in a large mansion in Buckhead. The owner of the mansion is an older woman named Miss Mabie; she and her maid Flora become surrogate family for Catherine in the new city.

Her dream seems to be on track for a while. For six months she lives in Atlanta and saves money from her dream job at Davison's department store. Her employer lures her



in with half promises of promotions and manager training. She works in the gourmet foods department—a lovely irony to her childhood sale of strawberry jam—and hurts her family by staying to work during the holidays rather than returning home.

The dream comes to a halt when, just after Christmas, she receives word that her father has suddenly passed away. In a state of shock she goes home, driven by Miss Mabie and Flora, and finds the town itself in shock at their loss. The town is gripped in gossip and judgment as well, as Miss Raines has recently been found to be pregnant, and Reverend Cline was rumored to be the father. Catherine can't immediately deal with that rumor, as she is covered in grief when she arrives. The day after coming home she meets a strange woman at Gloria Jean's house, who says she is her mother, Lena Mae Cline.

Catherine spends a day steeped in rage and anger. She refuses to speak to her mother, who apparently ran away and allowed people to think she had drowned in the creek. Finding herself a young wife and mother of two, she wanted to follow her own dream of being a country singer, and Reverend Cline wouldn't stand for it, so she left.

After speaking to Miss Raines and learning that the rumors surrounding her pregnancy are true, Catherine confused about her mother and father, and takes out her rage on her family. Only when she finds herself at Dairy Queen do things finally start to make sense. The Dairy Queen's faithful attendant, Eddie Franklin, fixes Catherine Grace a Dilly Bar and eventually takes her to task, urging her to open her eyes and see the town and its people for the love and comfort to her that they are. Furthermore, he tells her to stop judging her parents for their mistakes; understand that they are just regular people, and all people are capable of making bad choices. It is up to the people of the world to extend kindness to help people through their blunders.

Catherine returns home and spends hours talking to her mother. The next morning, she gives the eulogy at her father's funeral, making no excuses for either her father's conduct with Miss Raines or her mother's conduct. Instead, she urges the townspeople to try to cover their neighbor's mistakes with kindness and forgiveness, rather than choke out the good in people with malice and gossip.

After the funeral, Miss Raines moves in with them. Catherine decides that her dream was always right in front of her, and makes her home in Ringgold with a bustling strawberry jam business.



Part I: Chapter 1

Summary

Catherine Grace Cline is a young girl looking back on her years growing up in small Ringgold, Georgia. She tells the reader up front that as a child, she hated living in Ringgold. She reminisces about her childhood, the town's residence, her sister Martha Ann, and her daddy, the town's fiery Baptist preacher. Nobody important ever came to visit Ringgold, except one time the governor, and that wasn't exciting because she had to get dressed up and was uncomfortable. When she did see him, she wished he'd take her with him. The one thing in town that was special to her was the Dairy Queen. Catherine Grace and Martha Ann spent one day a week there, dreaming of the future and planning to leave town one day. They recall that they'd been to Atlanta twice when they were young, and longed to visit again.

Their daddy disagrees with loving the world outside of Ringgold. The story takes place in the 1960s, where standard conventions were being challenged every day, and her conservative father wants everything to stay how it should be. Their daddy is the latest in a long line of preachers and tomato-lovers. Her great-great grandfather was a bootlegger before he found God.

Catherine Grace loved her daddy despite his narrow minded few of the world. He was a good preacher that helped people see the Lord, even Catherine Grace's nemesis, Emma Sue Huckstep, who had all the nice things in town because her mother spoiled her. And her daddy always promised Catherine Grace that there was a golden egg waiting for her somewhere in the world.

Analysis

The opening chapter sets the pastoral tone of this novel. Although the reader can see that the main character is looking back on her life and speaking in reverse, the author tells the story as if it's present-time and the story is moving chronologically. However, the flashback style of writing gives the author the freedom to move around in the narrative if need be.

The reader is mainly introduced to the time and place of Ringgold in the opening chapter. Although many major characters will be introduced in future parts of the story, these first pages are to acquaint the reader with a small, Southern town in the middle of the 20th century. Politics, religion, and small town life are all touched on. The feeling of being trapped is often expressed by the main character as an adult, looking back. There is already foreshadowing in this chapter, as the reader can see that one day Catherine Grace will leave Ringgold and experience something new and different. Another bit of foreshadowing the author uses is a scant mention of the mother. The fact that she is pointedly left out demonstrates that there is a story about the mother to be told.



Small town life always makes for a wonderfully ironic topic, and the author tells an excellent story about the famous 1920s era bootlegger turned preacher and tomato farmer, that spawned multiple generations of tough baptist preachers.

Discussion Question 1

Why doesn't Catherine Grace like Emma Sue Huckstep?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the importance of growing vegetables in the small town life of Ringgold.

Discussion Question 3

What is the importance of the Dairy Queen in this early portion of the story?

Vocabulary

prodigal, despairing, hostage, unison, deacons, refrain



Part I: Chapter 2

Summary

Catherine Grace begins this chapter telling about her mother's death, which happened when she was 6 years old. Her mother was picking blackberries near the river when the current swept her over; she hit her head and drowned. For a child Catherine Grace's age, steeped in the church culture as she was, her mother's death was directly related to Jesus and heaven, which causes a fair bit of confusion to the young girl. Why did Jesus take her mother? Why not leave her on earth?

There are many memories of her mother related: cooking tomatoes, taking walks with Catherine Grace's baby doll in a doll buggy, her mother singing country music while hanging the laundry. Catherine isn't positive she can keep her attachment to God, but she remembers that her father was always faithful and trusted God even after such a tragedy occurred. During these childhood years, Catherine finds herself impatient with God, and only going through the motions of church although much is expected from the preacher's child. And even if she doesn't think much of the Lord, she loves the stories of courage from the Bible.

With the mention of the Bible and Sunday school, Catherine introduces her Bible teacher, Miss Margaret Raines, who is amazing at portraying stories on the felt board. She is also young, pretty, and unmarried. She hints that Miss Raines and her father have a closer-than-friends-relationship.

Catherine Grace goes on to discuss how well her father trained her and her sister, Martha Ann, in the fine details of football. Specifically, University of Georgia football. They knew football and the Bible better than just about anyone, so much so that the local girls chided her for being unladylike. And as much as Catherine enjoys this aspect of closeness with her father, a part of her wishes for a ladylike influence in her life. For an example, she tried to iron a dress for her sister, and she ends up leaving a huge black mark on it.

At this point in their childhood, the girls start spending time with their next door neighbor, Gloria Jean Graves. Gloria Jean is a modern woman for her time and place. She is well dressed, always made up to perfection, and a divorcee, five times over. For a long time, she has a significant influence over the girls. She had been friends with the girls' mother, Lena Mae, when they were younger, and she was willing to talk about her, while their father never did. She would tell the girls that their mother could have been a country music star, if she hadn't married their father. And while she never spoke poorly of their father, she stopped attending church after Lena Mae died.



Analysis

Chapter 2 looks back on the largest event of Catherine Grace's young life- the death of her mother. Her mother's death was a tragic accident, but it had a large impact on the 6-year-old: it automatically erects a wall of grief between the girls and their father. He won't ever talk about their mother except to say that she'd gone to heaven. However, the rhetoric surrounding heaven causes even more problems for Catherine; for years after her mother's death, the girl has little to no trust in God for His selfishness.

Catherine's struggle with her father's trust in God in the face of this tragedy will become a defining part of her character, and a sticking point in their relationship. This is rooted in his quiet acceptance of his wife's death. Catherine develops an academic view of God through the Bible, rather than an emotional tie, as religion is supposed to be.

The author also introduces two new characters in this chapter. Margaret Raines will eventually become a foil for the girls, a competition for his attention. This is merely hinted at when Catherine mentions how young, pretty, and single she is, and how she has perfect attendance at church. Adult relationships are hard for children to understand anyway, much less when the child struggles with the loss of her mother.

The other new character is the next door neighbor, Gloria Jean Graves. Gloria Jean is like a surrogate mother to the girls, although she is far different. She will come to symbolize bravery and boldness for Catherine, for the woman is a complete anomaly in their small time. Feminist, irreligious to a point, and many times divorced, Gloria Jean is both a breath of fresh air and an uncomfortable reminder of the differences between people Catherine will both love her and fear her throughout her childhood. When she is young, she is attached to Gloria Jean because she knew her mother, and will talk about her freely.

Catherine goes on to mention football as a way that she and her daddy bond every fall, a way that she excels in knowledge and is unlike her peers. The author continually uses Catherine Grace's differences from others: she's an orphan and a tomboy, for example- as an opportunity for character development and growth.

Discussion Question 1

Does Gloria Jean dislike Catherine Grace's father? If so, what is her reason?

Discussion Question 2

What different roles does Gloria Jean fulfill for the girls?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Catherine Grace like the Bible, even she doesn't trust God?



Vocabulary

serenading, omnipotent, indignation, miraculous, exodus, accomplishment, conviction, prerogative, repentant



Part I: Chapter 3

Summary

In Chapter 3, it is summer, the 9th summer of Catherine Grace's life. Her father, the preacher at the local Baptist church, decides that summer is the best time for people to get saved so they can get baptized in the lake. Thus, his sermons run longer and the entire mood of the church shifts. Early in the June he asks her if she's ready to accept Jesus and be baptized herself. She's not sure, because of her poor relationship with God. However, the next Sunday at church, when her father is singing "The Old Rugged Cross," she feels like the words are for her and walks the aisle of the church, dragging her sister and her friend Lolly with her. Her father announces that they'll all be baptized in 2 weeks.

Two weeks later, the baptism celebration is on. The entire church body moves from the church to the lake, 30 miles away, toting what they all need for a lakeside lunch, worship, and baptism. Catherine Grace and her sister are waiting by the lake with her nemesis, Emma Sue. Martha Ann is scared to go in the water, due to their mother drowning, so when it's her turn she is hesitant. Emma Sue makes fun of Martha Ann's hesitation, and so Catherine shoves Emma Sue into the lake.

Her father the preacher covers the event well, making sure that Emma Sue receives the baptism as well as his daughters. Afterwards he punishes Catherine by telling her she can't go to the Dairy Queen all summer long. This is a heavy punishment because the Dairy Queen is her favorite place to reflect on her week. She complains to Gloria Jean, who suggests using the summer for something useful rather than complaining.

The girls, with Gloria Jean's help, take a daily trek to her grandfather's old strawberry patch, which had been relatively neglected. For days Catherine Grace and Martha Ann pick strawberries, which in turn Gloria Jean teaches them how to turn into jam. They make dozens of jars of jam and sell every jar to the people of the town.

Catherine Grace eventually gets a rash called "strawberry fever" so her father puts an end to the scheme and allows her a few weeks of returning to Dairy Queen.

Analysis

This chapter is the first that doesn't bounce around in the general area of "Catherine's childhood." Instead it focuses solely on the summer she is nine. This is helpful because after two such chapters, it draws the reader in to a specific time in her life when her character changes. In this case it changes because Catherine focuses on a goal and achieves it. The reader has heard Catherine say many times that she hates living in Ringgold and must get out. When her father punishes her by taking away her weekly Dairy Queen trip, she feels this sentiment even more keenly. However, with the help of



Gloria Jean, she sets a project before her and works hard for a month, saving \$140 in the process to put towards her eventual escape.

She calls the jam 'Preacher's Strawberry Jam' and says a prayer of thankfulness when she picks the berries. This is key because although Catherine doesn't always fit the bill of her father's brand of faith, in her way she understands pretty well.

As a whole, this chapter sees Catherine develop from a child to the beginnings of adolescence. She stands up for her sister. She stands up to her father. She communicates real frustrations to Gloria Jean. Once she is pointed in a positive direction, she handles the difficulties with maturity.

For foreshadowing, this chapter shows of Gloria Jean working in the background to help Catherine Grace become more of who she "really is." For a while this growth will work counter to what Catherine's father will want for her, and the earliest hints of that are planted in this chapter. What he means as a punishment, Gloria Jean turns into an opportunity for Catherine to grasp her freedom.

Discussion Question 1

What was it about the hymn that prompted Catherine Grace's heart?

Discussion Question 2

Why doesn't Martha Ann want to be baptized?

Discussion Question 3

Was Catherine's father right to punish her for her treatment of Emma Sue? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

damnation, redeeming, congregation, ceremonial, nourishment, preposition, coax, heathen, condemn, defiance



Part I: Chapter 4

Summary

In this chapter the reader is introduced to Preacher Cline's long standing love for Miss Raines, the local elementary teacher. Catherine Grace tells the story of how every Sunday saw a special Sunday pot roast lunch after church, just her daddy, her sister, and her. However, one Sunday their father tells them that Miss Raines will be joining them, and that throws the girls into confusion. They have never thought that their dad would have another lady in his life. Catherine Grace would like to blab to Miss Raines all of her father's faults and foibles. She notices through the years that their daddy is such an important man in town, and a widower at that, that the townspeople took extra care to love and impress Catherine and her sister. One time Gloria Jean gets out of a speeding ticket because she had Catherine and her sister in the car. Miss Raines is no exception to this.

Miss Raines will eat Sunday lunch with the Clines for five whole years. Catherine never saw them act in love, although sometimes her daddy took Miss Raines to a movie and kiss her on the mouth. He always told his daughters that she was just a good friend. The townspeople think it would be wonderful for the Cline girls to get "a new mama," but they disagree, as does Gloria Jean; she says that Catherine's daddy will always love her mother, Lena Mae. He'll never marry again, she says.

One morning in Sunday school, Miss Raines asks the class if they have a favorite Bible verse. Catherine Grace is ready, and quotes a verse in 1 Corinthians: "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried." Clearly, she had prepared this verse as a warning against her father's relationship with Miss Raines. However, when she says it, she feels bad. Miss Raines is clearly hurt by it. After church, Catherine's father asks her about it, teasing her that she must really love 1 Corinthians to memorize such an obscure verse. He then tells her that he loved her mother very much and that it's okay for him to spend time with another woman.

Instead of just leaving it at that, Catherine tells him that the entire town talks about them and expects them to marry. He acts surprised; then tells Catherine he doesn't see that happen. That day, Miss Raines did not come to Sunday lunch. However, she was back the next week.

Analysis

In this chapter, the author begins to reveal that Catherine Grace's father is not exactly perfect himself.

Miss Raines has Sunday dinner with the Clines for five years, Mr. Cline takes her on dates and kisses her, according to Catherine. However, at the end of the chapter he states that he has no plans to marry her. In this time in the story, it is the late 1960s in



small-town Georgia, and it is uncommon for people to casually date in this manner. Moreover, Catherine's father seems to carry authority in the town and have some influence over the actions of the residents, and yet he is seemingly toying with a young woman's emotions, not realizing that the entire town sees the relationship as more than he does. It is also suspect that a man supposedly so devoted to his dead wife's memory is easily picking up the affections of another young woman. These thoughts will drive Catherine Grace's opinion of her father for a long time.

This chapter also shows Catherine's tendency to think outside the box and speak her mind: first, she stuns Miss Raines with the pointed Bible verse. This move is bold and cheeky and unlike anything her peers would consider doing. Second, she stands up to her father and tells him about the town gossip, when a simple "Yes Sir" is what he was expecting.

One of the major themes in this story is small-town life, and many chapters contain excellent illustrations of an old-fashioned, Southern, small town. For one, Catherine mentions that everybody wants to eat with the preacher on Sundays, that it's a point of honor to feed him. However, he declines, calling it special family time with his girls. This is one reason his inviting Miss Raines to join them is such a shock. Second, Catherine mentions that everyone in town tended to cater to the girls or watch out for them, to the extent that Gloria Jean is released from a speeding ticket because she had the preacher's daughters with her. And third, the entire town is interested in the preacher's love life, and discusses its possibilities avidly with no shame.

Discussion Question 1

What does Gloria Jean mean when she calls Catherine's daddy's marriage to her mother "A haunting love?"

Discussion Question 2

Why is the town so infatuated with Preacher Cline?

Discussion Question 3

How are Catherine Grace's thought processes probably different from her peers?

Vocabulary

disruption, cooing, emphasis, stammered, linger, gossiping



Part I: Chapter 5

Summary

This chapter jumps a few years ahead, and takes place when Catherine has reached high school. In her home economics class, her teacher announces that instead of the girls simply making a gift for their mothers for Mother's Day, she would hold a Mother's Day tea party at the school. This news is obviously distressing to Catherine Grace, who has no mother. The other girls in the class titter at her discomfort, and the teacher, Mrs. Gulbenk, asks Catherine to be her "special helper," and make the tea and serve it. The other girls know that Mrs. Gulbenk is just trying to soften the blow for Catherine Grace, but they give Catherine fake sympathetic glances and giggle at her all the same.

Catherine's best friend Lolly is actually sympathetic; Lolly herself has a mother, but her mother is unkind and cruel. Their shared difficulties help their friendship. Lolly suggests to Catherine as a joke that her mother would rather attend the tea with Catherine than with her; and then, not joking, she suggests that Catherine ask Gloria Jean. It's a good idea; Gloria Jean has been a huge help in raising the girls and is a big part of their lives.

However, now that she is 15, Catherine has begun to notice how the rest of the townspeople view Gloria Jean. Where Gloria Jean is stylish, the rest of the town sees her as flamboyant or worse. Catherine knows how the town views her, with her many ex-husbands and her wild makeup and tight clothes. When she was younger she would hurt on Gloria Jean's behalf, but at this point in her life she is a little embarrassed by her, and doesn't want to take her to the tea. When Gloria Jean herself suggests it, Catherine says no, she'll be too busy serving to have a guest; she feels awful afterwards.

On the day of the tea, Catherine stands and serves the girls and their mothers the 'special tea' she got from Mrs. Gulbenk. It's not a wonderful experience, and Catherine feels like it's kind of silly, but she makes it through. Afterwards, Catherine feels bad for how she treated Gloria Jean. She recalls how Gloria Jean baked cookies for the event, even purchased Catherine a new outfit so she would look her best. She doesn't feel like she deserves Gloria Jean's love. As she's pondering the fact that a good mother, a real love, doesn't have a look a certain way, she decides to immediately rush home to Gloria Jean and make it right.

She arrives at Gloria Jean's house and finds her fiddling under the bed with a big box of old photographs. They talk, and while Catherine doesn't exactly confess and apologizes, she tells Gloria Jean that she was unhappy, and Gloria Jean says she understands- that Catherine is at an age when girls work hard to figure themselves out, and that's especially hard without a mother. Then she shows Catherine a picture of her mother Lena Mae, at 16 years old.



Analysis

The first four chapters give the reader a glimpse of Catherine Grace's life in her child years, and Chapter 5 jumps ahead to her high school years. She is in 10th grade, and the fact that as a motherless child she is 'different' weighs heavily on her. This fact is made more prominent when her home economics teacher suggests having a Mother's Day Tea for the girls in their class.

The events in the chapter are concerned with Catherine's feelings towards Gloria Jean, who has been her surrogate mother for years. She is the female authority in Catherine's life; however, Gloria Jean doesn't herself fit well into Ringgold society. As a many-time divorcee, a flamboyant dresser, and a modern sort of feminist, she truly sticks out. Catherine decides for a time that she is embarrassed by her. While this is a natural progression for a teenage girl, it is a glimpse into the main character's mind. To this point Catherine has been fairly unconventional, and it's as if she toys with the path of least resistance here. There is a choice to flout convention or not, and she chooses not to by not taking Gloria Jean to the tea.

However, she eventually realizes what a mistake that is and makes it right with her. There are two key issues in this exchange that tie in to the overall theme of the novel. The first is Gloria Jean's speech to Catherine about being brave. 'Being your own person' is an important aspect of Catherine's development, especially when it concerns going against the desires of her family and the town. Gloria Jean encourages Catherine to figure herself out and be that person, and Catherine is inspired by Gloria Jean's ability to live her own life. Gloria Jean holds Catherine's mother as an example of this as well.

Second, Catherine mentions twice that Gloria Jean loves her exactly how she is, with no expectations and no constraints. Gloria Jean is not technically family, but this statement seems to foreshadow a time when Catherine will feel like her family doesn't approve of her choices, and turns their back on her. She clings close to this notion of unconditional love, which is supposed to be represented by her father and God, but to this point in the story Catherine isn't convinced of that. However, she feels it with Gloria Jean.

Discussion Question 1

Did Gloria Jean know that Catherine meant to apologize?

Discussion Question 2

What did Gloria Jean mean about being 'brave?'



Discussion Question 3

Why was Catherine embarrassed by Gloria Jean before the tea?

Vocabulary

traumatic, harmonious, swarming, deciphered, whoreish, scolding, decoupage, gracious



Part I: Chapter 6

Summary

The next chapter finds Catherine Grace at age 16. Her father has promised her that she can leave Ringgold on her 18th birthday, and he gives her a set of powder blue vinyl luggage for her 16th birthday. He adds a card with a "if you love something set it free" poem, to communicate that he will allow her to go to the city, but expects her to get it out of her system and come home. Catherine feels like she is up to the move, but realizes that it will take courage. She feels prepared well in advance, right down to knowing the bus schedule and planning her goodbyes.

However, Catherine surprised to find that she has developed a crush on Hank Blankenship, a boy she has known all her life. Now juniors in high school, she realizes that she and Hank have competed at everything and she is tired of his perfection. He is the smartest, best looking, godliest boy in Ringgold and she doesn't like it, except that she does. The whole thing starts when Hank is chosen to play Joseph in the church's Christmas pageant. First, Catherine is impressed that Hank supports a more modern take on the Christmas story. And then, when another girl suggests that Catherine play Mary, the months of rehearsals bring Catherine and Hank closer together. By Valentine's Day they are going steady. Catherine likes Hank very much, loves him, in fact; however, she is still afraid that dating Hank will force her to stay in Ringgold. Hank is a boy that sees his entire life on his father's dairy farm, and doesn't need or want anything else.

Hank and Catherine Grace date almost until graduation. Most of the town is expecting them to become engaged soon after high school is over. Catherine Grace's father is hoping Hank will propose and give Catherine a reason to stay home and abandon her plan to go to Atlanta. She is very conflicted during these months; she loves him, but can't imagine living her life as his wife in Ringgold.

Prom approaches, and Catherine is going to go with Hank. Gloria Jean takes her and her sister shopping in Chattanooga for a dress. It is a wonderful, exciting day, and Gloria Jean treats Catherine to a dress, shoes, and jewelry. The day of prom Gloria Jean spends all day with Catherine getting her ready: her hair, her nails, her makeup. When she puts her dress on she feels like a beautiful girl, and her father tears up when he sees her. She and Hank have an excellent time at the prom. He is crowned Prom King, and another girl, a nice girl named Shelley, is Prom Queen. When Catherine sees Hank and Shelley together, she feels like she is an impostor and that Hank really belongs with a good hometown girl like Shelley, who doesn't want to leave Ringgold. She feels like he deserves better.

Catherine tells this to Hank, who disagrees, and they get into a fight. She leaves him at prom and they break up. Catherine is heartbroken, but she feels like she made the right choice so that she can leave for Atlanta with a clear head.



Analysis

During this chapter the reader sees Catherine's time in Ringgold coming to a close; she will actually have to decide soon if she is actually going to Atlanta or not. The reader sees that she has progressed in her plan-making, to the extent that she has memorized the bus schedule and planned her goodbyes even though she's two years ahead of schedule. The author continues to hint that Catherine Grace's choice to move to Atlanta will not be an easy one. Catherine's father buys her a set of luggage and foreshadows her journey with the poem, "If you love something, set it free."

A new conflict emerges in the form of Hank, a longstanding acquaintance from school that is suddenly interesting to her. Catherine's relationship with Hank demonstrates a change in her attitude: Hank is the perfect representation of life in Ringgold. He's the king of the high school, captain of the football team, the best in the church, and has absolutely no ambition beyond running his father's dairy farm. The fact that Catherine is able to overlook all of these things and fall in love with Hank will present further conflict as the date for her departure to Atlanta approaches.

Hank and Catherine date until their senior prom, where Catherine has an epiphany. Seeing Hank with a girl that is more like him gives Catherine the courage to let him go. It is also an excuse to find a way to separate herself from him so she can go to Atlanta without hindrance. The reader may expect that Hank's small view of the world is so much the opposite of Catherine that he's holding her back and she is happy to be rid of him; however, the breakup is loud and ugly and happens at prom, and it wears on Catherine deeply. Despite their perceived differences, she really loves Hank and suffers from their breakup.

By the end of the chapter, it is nearly graduation, and a few months later Catherine will be 18.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Catherine's father allowing her to plan her trip away if he doesn't really want her to go?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Catherine break up with Hank?

Discussion Question 3

What are some things about Hank that match Catherine well? Some things that don't?

Vocabulary

nitpicky, departure, blasphemy, advantage, epiphany,



Part I: Chapter 7

Summary

In Chapter 7, it is Catherine Grace's 18th birthday, the day of her determined departure for Atlanta. She wakes up looking at her room, basically stripped bare of her belongings, almost impersonal. The room itself hasn't been changed since she was a girl; though she is a tomboy, she kept the pink walls and curtains in homage to her mother. Although Catherine has been excited for this day as long as she can remember, she is nervous and scared. The normal Cline tradition is breakfast and a singalong, and when her father enters her room, his mood is somber. He tells her she'll always have a home there.

The day continues as normal, with a huge breakfast. Catherine ponders her job prospects in Atlanta. She is supposed to stay with a cousin, and hopefully find a retail job at the mall. They spend a long time at breakfast, then the girls go upstairs to clean up Catherine's room before paying a visit to Gloria Jean. While they are picking up her room, Martha Ann bursts into tears and says she'll miss her sister terribly. They dry up their tears and talk about normal things for a while, and then decide to see Gloria Jean and get a last Dilly Bar at the Dairy Queen.

Gloria Jean is excited and encourages Catherine Grace that she will easily find a job. Before she leaves she gives Catherine a gift: a hand-painted box that Catherine's own mother had given her years before. As they walk towards the Dairy Queen they say goodbye to old friends, and then they get their last Dilly Bar. Eddie Franklin is behind the counter; a boy who has been working at the DQ for a long time. As the girls eat their Dilly Bars they discussed the new development with Miss Raines, who apparently stopped spending time with the Clines because she needed to move on. The girls know their father misses her, but he found he couldn't commit to marrying her. Speaking of sad loves, Martha Ann brings up Hank, and asks Catherine how she will feel about leaving Hank behind.

The girls return home to gather Catherine Grace's things, then go back to the bus station. She exchanges a tearful goodbye with her father and sister, and just as the bus is pulling away, Hank's red truck roars into the parking lot. Catherine closes her eyes so she doesn't have to see him.

Analysis

This chapter closes the first part of the novel, in which Catherine Grace is looking back on her life in Ringgold. As the chapter ends she is actually on her way to Atlanta on the Greyhound Bus, her dream actually unfolding in front of her. The reader can see that this trip has become a journey she feels like she has to take. At this point it is as much about "making it happen" as it is about just leaving town and visiting Atlanta. Catherine



is wholly focused on taking that step, despite nerves and the sadness and the part of her that hangs back. The author leaves it to the reader to decide if Catherine should be going or not.

Moreover, the author leaves the reader with some hints of what life will be like without her in Ringgold: the deep sadness of her father and her sister, her father's allusions to her leaving "just like her mother." Hank is spending time with Ruthie Morgan, one of Catherine's chief enemies, yet he's also supposedly asking about her, and shows up at the bus station the second the bus pulls away. The reader can wonder if Catherine is actually over Hank. Miss Raines, the young Sunday School teacher who used to occasionally date the Reverend Cline, has moved on to a new boyfriend, one who can commit. Both girls know that their daddy loved Miss Cline, and remark on the sadness of her leaving. All of these issues, the author highlights in this last chapter of this section of Catherine Grace's life, and they will resurface in the coming months when she's off to Atlanta.

Discussion Question 1

Why does it sting for Catherine to hear that Ruthie Morgan is spending time with Hank?

Discussion Question 2

Does Martha Ann also want to leave Ringgold when she turns 18?

Discussion Question 3

What is Catherine Grace's attitude towards Eddie Franklin?

Vocabulary

apparently, necessary, cashmere, presentable, meticulously, smuggling, sufficient



Part II

Summary

Part II is a long section that serves as a bridge between the two principal parts of the novel. As it opens, Catherine Grace arrives in Atlanta and is retrieved from the bus station by her distant cousin Laura Lynn. Laura Lynn is a loan officer at a bank and dresses like a man; she encourages Catherine Grace to do the same. She is also engaged to Royce Randolph Duncan III and likes to display his family pedigree on a regular basis. Laura Lynn shares the details of the wedding, all the things one "must do" in Atlanta. Catherine is surprised to see that Laura Lynn isn't in Atlanta to pursue a dream; she's just there to find a man, which doesn't seem much different from the girls back home. Otherwise, Catherine Grace is enamored with Atlanta, especially the 24-hr McDonald's.

Catherine lives four blocks from Lenox Mall, where she visited as a child and is eager to see. She visits the mall to look for a job, and is shocked to see so many places where people can eat and spend money. She vows to buy a pair of fancy underwear as soon as she starts getting paid. Gloria Jean had given her the name of a friend that worked at JC Penney's, and when Catherine Grace visits her, the lady gives her the name of an older woman with a room to rent out. The next day Catherine receives a phone call from Davison's department store, from a man asking her to come interview the next day. The job is for a sales associate in a new gourmet-foods division. The manager had seen that Catherine spent her summers selling strawberry jam, and he was impressed. He also tempts her with mention of a "management-training program." Catherine is excited to start work right away, and Laura Lynn is excited to get her apartment back. Catherine sends up prayers of thanks to God, noting that it was easier to pray "now that He is finally listening."

She hadn't received any letters from her father, even though she'd written home a number of times. A letter from Martha Ann arrives: her sister reports that it's quiet and sad at home. Their father is quiet and joyless. She also reports that Emma Sue Huckstep had a cheerleading accident and cracked her tailbone, and that the new English teacher told her she had lots of promise as a writer or an English teacher.

Catherine goes to meet the lady with the open room: Miss Mabie, who lives in a huge house in Buckhead and has a servant named Flora. She takes to them instantly.

Another letter from Martha Ann informs her that Hank is dating Ruthie Morgan. Catherine cares much more than she would like to. Around the same time, her boss informs her that she really can't go home for Thanksgiving because the day after is such a huge day for retail. He sweetens the deal by telling her she's the best junior clerk he's had yet, and he would be choosing her for assistant manager if she played her cards right. Catherine writes her family to break the news to them and receives a cold



response from her father. The day after Thanksgiving, Catherine sells well and impresses her boss and goes out for hamburgers and fries after work with a co-worker.

In early December, another letter from Martha Ann announces that Miss Raines is pregnant. The father is a man from another town, and they plan to marry soon. Their father was afraid the townspeople would judge her, and he himself visited the local school to ask that they let her keep her job for as long as she could. The town is in an uproar and Reverend Cline is trying to keep everyone calm. Martha Ann says that Miss Raines comes to visit every day, finally confiding that she believes their father is the father of Miss Raines's baby. More letters come, in which Martha Ann chastises Catherine Grace for joking about Miss Raines condition, and also accusing Catherine of not caring about her home or her family.

Catherine doesn't believe that her father and Miss Raines produced a baby; she is sure he would never have sex before marriage. But her bigger problem is that her boss again tells her that going home for Christmas isn't the best idea for her career. He tells her that as long as she does well during the holiday season he will recommend her for the manager position. Catherine feels like the promotion is part of her dream come true, but wishes it didn't sacrifice her family.

The section ends with a cold letter from Martha Ann wishing her a Merry Christmas, followed by a telegram dated January 3 saying that their father has died.

Analysis

This section of the novel serves as a bridge between two sections. The first section, in which Catherine lives in Ringgold and is entirely focused on leaving to follow a dream, and the second section, in which she has lived the dream (if only for six months), only to return to a Ringgold that is much different- rife with gossip about her father's love-child, and also stunned by his sudden death.

This section is mainly concerned with the progression of Catherine Grace's life in Atlanta: how she finds a job, makes friends, and moves into a new apartment. For the most part, her "dream" is exactly as she'd hoped. There is lots of extra money and nice things, a house in Buckhead, and a job that she appears to be good at. Her boss at the department store is encouraging and dangles a management position over her head as often as he can. An irony here, that is pointed out by Martha Ann, is that Catherine Grace is hired to sell "gourmet" strawberry jam, which she has made herself every summer since she was 9 years old.

The conflict comes when Catherine realizes that her choice to stay in Atlanta for the holidays hurts her family. However, she feels powerless to make a different choice. As the section progresses, the letters from Martha Ann indicate that Catherine is growing out of touch with life in Ringgold, that she no longer understands or cares enough for her family. For the Clines, this is unforgivable, but the author simply presents it as a



question: is it reasonable for Catherine to live her own life, or must she stay tied to her hometown?

The author intensifies the question with the drama back home: Miss Raines is pregnant out of wedlock. What is ironic here is that the people of Ringgold fear Atlanta as a den of sin, but when the drama comes to the story, it arrives in the small town, not the big one. And then, Martha Ann insinuates that Miss Raines's baby was fathered not by her absentee boyfriend, but by their father the reverend. With this reveal, Martha Ann also insinuates that Catherine is so out of touch with their hometown that she is unqualified to weigh in on this possibility, and that is borne out when the reader sees Catherine's flat denial that it's even a possibility.

The conflict escalates until Christmas, during which Catherine Grace remains in Atlanta at her boss's strong suggestion, and then the notice that her father has passed away. This event sets up for the final section of the book, in which Catherine will go home and have to deal with the results of her absence.

Discussion Question 1

Is Catherine Grace being selfish, moving to Atlanta?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it so shocking for Miss Raines to be pregnant, and even more so if the father is Reverend Cline?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Catherine Grace jealous of Hank and Ruthie Morgan?

Vocabulary

solemn, crummy, omen, sophisticated, orthopedic, matrimonial, cosmopolitan, delicacy, nonsensical, pacifier, confidential, inventory, marmalades



Part III: Chapter 8

Summary

Catherine Grace reads the telegram, indicating that her father has passed away. She breaks down in Flora's arms, crying, knowing, as she did not at the age of six, how permanent the death of her father is. She asks Miss Mabie to get her to the bus station. However, the two women pack up Catherine Grace's things and cart her back to Ringgold in Miss Mabie's car. Flora tells Catherine Grace that sometimes God knows when it's someone's time to die, but Catherine disagrees. She feels personally responsible for her father's death.

They arrive at Catherine's house to a whole flood people, standing nearby to pay their respects to her father. Catherine and her friends fight through the crowd to the house, where Gloria Jean holds Catherine through her tears. Catherine tells Gloria Jean she feels responsible and Gloria Jean tells her not to talk like that anymore. It seems the entire town is gathered, even Catherine's friend Lolly, whom Catherine realizes she hasn't thought about in months. She also sees Miss Raines, and feels with renewed vehemence that there's no way her daddy fathered Miss Raines's baby. She ends up in Martha Ann's room, the two girls crying in Martha Ann's bed until morning.

The next morning, many of the townspeople had gone, leaving Gloria Jean, Miss Mabie, and Flora. Gloria Jean takes on the unpleasant but necessary task of arranging Reverend Cline's funeral. Gloria Jean and Catherine drive to the church to look at the best way to stage the funeral. She walks through the church, imagining her father at the pulpit and in the pew as she'd seen him so many times. They sit in her father's office, looking through hymns and the pages of his Bible. Catherine chooses a few hymns to sing, and proclaims that they should get a preacher from the neighboring town so that the church can just grieve.

Catherine sat for a while in her father's office, talking to him and hoping to feel his presence in that place. She apologized for leaving him and wondered if God had it right when He called her dad to heaven. She heard the door of the church slam and ran out to see who it was but didn't see anyone. Eventually she found Ida Belle in the kitchen, who had also heard the door slam and came from the kitchen to investigate. Catherine walks home, seeing the local cars line up near her house. As she passes Gloria Jean's house she thinks she sees the image of an old woman on the porch, but she disappears. Once back in her house, she tells Gloria Jean that she saw someone in her house, and sends her to investigate. She is left in the house to deal with the various guests, and does so unsuccessfully, until Gloria Jean returns. Except now Gloria Jean looks white and tense. Standing behind Gloria Jean is the woman Catherine thought she saw. She tells Catherine that she is her mother. Catherine yells and screams and protests, but Gloria Jean confirms that the woman is Lena Mae Cline, her mother.



Analysis

This chapter begins the long process of Catherine's development, where she will start looking outside of herself for possible answers and start to entertain the thoughts of opinions of others about her life choices. Miss Mabie and Flora show themselves to be true family, as they bundle the grieving girl into Miss Mabie's car and drive her straight from Buckhead to Ringgold. The town welcomes them. One of the author's main themes is the blessings and curses of small town life, and in the events following Reverend Cline's death the reader sees the blessings. Seemingly the entire town has turned out to mourn and grieve and pray for the Cline family. They all wish to cry and pray together. They offer their condolences and hugs and biscuits. It is a response tailor made for small town life. Other events in the novel have shown the downside of living in Ringgold, but as the community comes together to grieve, it is an inspiring sight.

Another theme in the novel is Faith and Religion, and while Catherine's thought processes haven't precisely followed what one thinks a Christian's might, as she sits in her father's office she experiences some hallmarks of Christian theology—Confession, as she says out loud to her father's presence that she's sorry she left him, Absolution, where she feels forgiven for leaving him, and Forgiveness, where she forgives him for dying. She does consider for a moment that God made a mistake in taking her father so soon, but the thought is interrupted by a sound in the church. Although the reader later finds out that the mystery noise is made by Lena Mae, the door slamming after Catherine's cleansing talk lends a finality to her time with her father, as if they've said what needed saying and cleared the air.

The big plot twist in this chapter is of course the knowledge that Catherine's mother is still alive. This information is also presented in a spooky manner, as Catherine had been feeling "watched" for a while, then sees a ghostly presence on Gloria Jean's front porch. Thus, Catherine already feels a degree of tension and expectation when the ghostly figure enters her home and proclaims herself to be her mother. Catherine's reaction is interesting; the reader may expect her to feel relief or joy that she's not childless, however Catherine is angry and thinks everyone is lying to her. When Lena Mae promises that she's always loved Catherine, the young woman expresses disbelief. The author has planted a few hints along the way that Lena Mae was still alive, and at this point in the story the reader sees why. Lena's plea that she always loved Catherine even though she was gone sets up a difficult conversation Catherine will need to have with herself: could Lena Mae have loved them even though she went away to follow her dreams?

Discussion Question 1

Why does Gloria Jean tell Catherine that her father would be proud of her?



Discussion Question 2

Why do they want to get a preacher from the next town to deliver her father's eulogy?

Discussion Question 3

What is Catherine's ruling emotion when she sees her mother again?

Vocabulary

insistent, skittish, unwavering, acknowledge, prematurely, miscalculated, socialite, speculated



Part III: Chapter 9

Summary

Catherine Grace shuts down after hearing the news of her mother, and in the beginning of Chapter 9 the others are trying to wake her up. She immediately asks if "that woman" had left, but Gloria Jean responds that "her mother" helped her into bed personally and was sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee. Catherine asks Gloria Jean to make her leave, but Martha Ann intervenes, saying that their mother is a gift and they would not kick her out. They tell Catherine that while her father was a good man, he didn't like that their mother wanted a bigger life outside of her marriage. Maybe, Martha Ann says, they should blame Reverend Cline as well.

Upset beyond reason, Catherine Grace accuses Gloria Jean of keeping Lena Mae's secret so they could be their stand in mother. She immediately apologizes, and Gloria Jean hugs her and says she understands; she didn't know for sure that Lena Mae was alive, but she hoped she was. She reminds Catherine that their mother was just a teenager herself when the girls were born.

Catherine decides she must see her father in his casket. She readies herself to go to the church herself, making a point not to speak to her mother on her way out. She arrives at the church just as the pallbearers are unloading the casket from the hearse. Catherine demands to see her father right there in the parking lot, and receives some resistance from the men, but Catherine pushes her way in and opens the casket to see her dad. She speaks to her father's body, telling him she's confused about him and her mother and why he would leave her. The men take the body inside and Catherine finds Miss Raines standing nearby. In no mood for banter, Catherine asks Miss Raines if her father is the father of the baby and Miss Raines confirms it. Miss Raines says nobody needs to know, but Catherine is upset because she felt her father had a double life and surely everyone in town knew.

Miss Raines promises she's leaving town, not wishing to remind the town of Reverend Cline's sin. She urges Catherine Grace not to judge their daddy too harshly, that he'd arranged for her to go away since he couldn't be married to two women. At this comment Catherine realizes that her father knew her mother was alive, and told Miss Raines at some point. She is angry and confused, and decides to leave town as soon as the funeral is over.

Analysis

In this chapter, Catherine begins the process of facing all of the demons left behind by her parents. She awakens from a faint and a long sleep to find her mother still in the house and the nightmare still true. Gloria Jean is there and makes some statements for Catherine to consider: possibly her father is one of the reasons her mother wanted to



leave? Lena Mae had a dream that was outside the realm of being a wife and mother, and Reverend Cline wouldn't allow for it, and it drove her away. Once again, Gloria Jean represents true unconditional love. She takes all of Catherine's misdirected abuse and returns it with understanding. Gloria Jean hints that she always thought something was off about Lena Mae's death, and, as they were best friends, she hoped that she was still alive.

Catherine goes to the church to see her father's body. She doesn't want to be surprised again. She causes a scene in the parking lot but is able to vent her frustration at him. The author is using this chapter and these scenes to build tension that will eventually break when she learns some humility and puts herself in her mother's shoes. Catherine speaks to her father's dead body, and Miss Raines overhears.

The reader has forgotten all about Miss Raines and her pregnancy in lieu of Reverend Cline's death and Lena Mae's appearance. However, the author uses Miss Raines to show the reader that Reverend Cline is just a human man that is capable of mistakes. Much of this story is centered on forgiveness and empathizing with mistakes. In this conversation Catherine not only learns that her father is the father of Miss Raines's baby, she also discovers that her father knew that her mother was alive the whole time. The chapter ends with Catherine Grace facing the fact that her father was not the man she thought he was. He kept deep, important secrets and he also impregnated Miss Raines outside of marriage. In the small town of Ringgold, in the 1970s, this was not normal behavior, especially for a highly visible, religious man. Catherine decides she doesn't have the strength to face the town with what she knows about her father.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Catherine want to see her father's body?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Catherine feel like she needs to leave town right away?

Discussion Question 3

What is confusing to Catherine about her father?

Vocabulary

abandoned, solemn, etiquette, mannequins, abruptly, fornication



Part III: Chapters 10 - 11

Summary

In Chapter 10, Catherine leaves Miss Raines, clouded with dark thoughts about her fornicating father, abandoning mother, and the pregnant Sunday school teacher. She is certain that she will go straight back to Atlanta as soon as the funeral is over. Unable to bear the scene at her house, she walks across town to the home of Lolly Dempsey, her friend from school. Lolly had been Catherine's friend for a long time, and while Catherine's home life was hard without a mother, Lolly had a mother, a mother who verbally and emotionally abused her.

Lolly pulls Catherine into the house and Catherine vents all of her problems to her friend. During the tirade she picks up a lovely crystal vase and, finding that it was a gift to Lolly from her mother on her 18th birthday, is overcome with emotion that even the mean Mrs. Dempsey can find some kindness to share. Lolly reminds her that she should understand how powerful a hold a dream can have on a person and that if she were in Lena Mae's position, she may have done the same thing. There is good in everyone, Lolly tells Catherine, and maybe she should give her mother a chance.

She goes on to mention that if Hank found good in Ruthie Morgan, surely it can be found anywhere. With the mention of Hank, Lolly slowly reveals that Hank had been asking after her constantly since her father died, hanging around her house and hoping to see her. Lolly further overheard an argument between Hank and Ruthie during which Ruthie said something ugly about Catherine, and Hank was so angry he took her home immediately. Catherine's friend ends the story with a solid assurance that Hank is still in love with Catherine.

As Chapter 11 opens, Catherine leaves Lolly, realizing as she leaves Mrs. Dempsey behind again that despite the older woman's poor treatment of her daughter, she really did love Lolly. Not always well, but she did, and perhaps she was just sad inside and didn't know how to handle it. She leaves the Dempsey's house and walks to the Dairy Queen, saying hey to Eddie Franklin behind the counter. Eddie begins by giving his sympathy for the Reverend's death. As he serves Catherine her Dilly Bar, she reflects that she hadn't been to a Dairy Queen since moving to Atlanta. After all, there was the Varsity, and a 24-hr McDonald's so close to her home. She ponders all the days that had passed since her move, and recalling her last good-bye with her father, starts crying.

She asks Eddie how business has been, and he kindly prattles about how many dip cones he's sold even in the cold weather. He continues, relaying every bit of gossip he can muster about Ringgold life. Catherine reflects that Eddie was perfectly content and confident in his life choice. He gives her a Dilly Bar and tells her that for years he's watched her stare in the direction of Atlanta so hard it was as if she was trying to take off and fly, but she was so busy looking off in the distance she hadn't paid attention to



the town she lived in enough to see the good in Ringgold. She protests, saying the minutiae of Ringgold doesn't matter, and he responds that her father's death, her mother's return, and Miss Raines's baby are the things that do matter. Catherine responds meanly, telling Eddie that he doesn't know anything and he should mind his own business. The argument ends with Eddie telling her she should stop judging everybody else for their mistakes and pay attention to herself, and how she can return the love that Gloria Jean and Martha Ann are lavishing on her.

Snow is starting to fall, and Catherine sits outside and eats her Dilly Bar, thinking about Eddie's words.

Analysis

Chapters 10-11 contain the final events leading up to Catherine's transformation, where her rage spends itself out and she is able to focus on empathy and forgiveness. The meeting with Lolly and her mother begins this process. First, because Lolly suggests that maybe Catherine's life isn't as bad as she thinks. It is Lolly that brings up the principle point—Catherine spent her childhood dreaming her way out of Ringgold, and her heart and desire was no different from her mother's. Therefore, if Catherine was a teenaged mother of two, she may have done the same thing her mother did. The author has been leading up to this revelation with mentions of the shared courage between Lena Mae and Catherine, the shared dream of something bigger than Ringgold. However, Lolly puts it bluntly, giving Catherine something to consider. As Catherine is leaving she sees Mrs. Dempsey alone, sad, watching TV. Catherine reflects that most people carry "the devil" (sadness) around inside of them, and in some people the sadness is too big to contain. Lolly's mother is too sad to love Lolly well, Catherine realizes. Chapter 10 ends with some foreshadowing regarding Hank, who is showing signs around town of still being in love with Catherine Grace.

Chapter 11 opens with Catherine visiting the Dairy Queen. It is here, at the place where she has dreamed away so many Saturdays, that Catherine comes face to face with her own "sins." The unlikely source of this revelation is Eddie Franklin. The conversation is short and heated, but Eddie mercilessly and with a huge grin informs Catherine that she has been very self-centered. Yes, her parents and Miss Raines are sinners and made mistakes, but if she would stop being so selfish, she could find ways to show forgiveness and help them make peace with their mistakes and receive the love and kindness we all need. He goes on to say that she's been so busy dreaming of Atlanta, she's missed the great things about her own town and missed the people that would do anything for her.

Catherine responds in anger and leaves the Dairy Queen to eat her Dilly Bar, but the stage is set for her to look outward at a community that loves her and begin the process of healing from the wound inflicted when her mother left her.



Discussion Question 1

What does Eddie mean when he says Catherine should take a good look at herself?

Discussion Question 2

What does Catherine think of Eddie Franklin?

Discussion Question 3

What suddenly convinces Catherine that Mrs. Dempsey loves her daughter?

Vocabulary

defiance, fertilize, maneuvering, pneumonia, debutant, combusted, scheming



Part IV: Chapters 12 - 13

Summary

In Chapter 12, Catherine leaves the Dairy Queen and makes for home, finding her mother, Lena Mae, on the porch when she arrives. Lena Mae tries to speak and fumbles. Catherine Grace is committed to trying to hear her out. She begins again, telling Catherine that her father made her choose between her family and her dream, assuring the girl that her father was never mean or unkind. They just wanted different things. He also didn't help her run away; she made that decision on her own. Catherine takes her mother's hands and asks if she loved her; she realized that her mother was brokenhearted. She recalls the parable of the lost sheep in the Bible, and Lena Mae is a lost sheep. That small admission starts the process of easing the hurt. They spend hours on the porch discussing the previous 12 years, catching up on what each of them had been doing. Lena Mae had been sending them annual birthday cards from an "aunt" in Willacoochee. Lena Mae still lives in Willacoochee, the musical career having never taken off. Catherine makes the transition from being angry at her mother to not understanding what she did, but simply being thankful that she's alive.

Gloria Jean comes out to remind the women that the funeral was early in the morning and they should head to bed. Catherine experiences a moment of love towards her real mother and her surrogate mother. She tells Gloria Jean to cancel the traveling preacher; she would deliver her father's eulogy. She climbs in bed with Martha Ann and realizes that though she ran away from Ringgold, she can't run away from home. As many times as she'd prayed to God and assumed he wasn't listening, she figured maybe she was the one who wasn't listening.

In Chapter 13, the entire town is getting ready for Reverend Cline's funeral. During the frantic search through a closet, Catherine Grace finds an old baby dress, and thinks about Miss Rainies but this time, with compassion. Who would help her have her baby? How would she live? She speaks to Martha Ann and they decide to invite Miss Raines to live with them. She rushes from the house in her daddy's car, driving to Miss Raines's house. The young woman is packing to move. Catherine tells her their offer, also apologizing for how she'd been treating her. They leave together for her father's funeral.

The whole town is gathered in the church, the hymns have started and they are waiting on Catherine Grace to arrive. She opens the front door and joins hands with her sister, her mother, and Miss Raines—her father's closest women—and they walk the aisle to the casket.

Analysis

During these chapters the reader gets to enjoy watching Catherine Grace come alive with joy and kindness. After her argument with Eddie Franklin, whom she blithely refers



to as "the Holy Spirit," she returns home to finally talk to her mother. The conversation is a good start, but what really touches Catherine's heart is seeing the sadness and brokenness in her mother's eyes. Like Mrs. Dempsey, and like the lost sheep of Jesus's parable, her mother didn't abandon her because she didn't love her, but because she was broken, and Catherine is moved with compassion. She decides to speak at her father's funeral: this element is key to wrapping up the plot and bringing it full circle.

At this point she also tells Martha Ann what she'd learned from Eddie Franklin. Maybe she was wasting her time looking to the future instead of focusing on her own friends and family. Because of her tunnel vision, she wasn't prepared to show compassion and grace to the people she'd left behind. Had she really appreciated them, as Eddie Franklin pointed out, it would have been easier to understand, if not agree with, her mother's and father's mistakes.

The day of the funeral comes in Chapter 13. In perhaps the most heart-warming plot development, Catherine and Martha Ann decide to invite Miss Raines to live with them so they can all raise the baby together. In part, this is due to the desire to have the last part of their daddy close to them. However, it is also due to the surge of compassion Catherine is experiencing towards those around her, and the resulting joy that comes from forgiving and moving on. She even goes as far as to apologize to Miss Raines for her ill treatment of her.

As the chapter ends, the reader is poised at the beginning of the funeral, where she has marched the aisle rather scandalously with Miss Raines and her mother.

Discussion Question 1

How does the conversation with Lena Mae help to heal Catherine's pain?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Catherine aim her hurt towards Miss Raines?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Catherine want to invite Miss Raines to live with them?

Vocabulary

reminiscing, smocking, embroidered, delicate, fiddling



Part IV: Chapter 14

Summary

Catherine Grace leads the other 3 ladies up the main aisle of the church at her father's funeral. A ripple of shock goes through the congregation as they see both Lena Mae and Miss Raines, and Gloria Jean makes a big show of hugging them both. Catherine takes her father's place at the pulpit, envisioning the many times she'd seen him there as a girl. She begins the eulogy with discussing the Parable of the Weeds, relating it to the strong amount of gardeners in her father's family. She tells a story from her Grandfather about a Cherokee Indian that came out of the mountains and gave her grandfather a purple tomato plant. He planted it in his garden, but soon it was covered in weeds that tried to strangle it.

She compares that garden to Ringgold. Some of them were trying to grow good tomatoes, and some of them were weeds, trying to choke the good out of everything. Her daddy was a good man, she says, and gives several examples involving personal troubles the congregation has experiences. Boldly, she points out Miss Raines as proof that her father wasn't perfect, but that he tried to do his best and made some mistakes, which is all that any of the townspeople could do. Was dying the only way Reverend Cline could avoid the judgment and censure of his congregation? She reminds them that if they, as a town, turn their back on Lena Mae and Miss Raines, they are no better than a patch of weeds.

The hymn starts and everyone in the room starts to sing. Lena Mae's voice is loudest of all, clear and beautiful. Catherine Grace feels the comfort and love of people who love her like family. She ponders how she'd wasted so much time trying to get away from the town; how her daddy told her you can't run away from your destiny.

The weeks following Reverend Cline's funeral are characterized by extreme kindness. The local ladies give Miss Raines a baby shower. But it's not long before Catherine sees some of the old behavior creep in. She tries to protect Miss Raines from the ugly talk, telling her that her father loved her and not to listen to gossip. Eventually Flora and Miss Mabie return to Atlanta, but they promise to come back and visit every month. Miss Raines moves in with Catherine and Martha Ann, and when the baby is born six months later, Flora helps bring her into the world. Miss Raines names the baby Flora Grace.

Martha Ann delays returning to high school for a few months, and spends the time with Lena Mae. Her English teacher wants her to apply to college at Vanderbilt. Lena Mae leaves after a few weeks. She enjoyed the time getting to know her girls again, but trying to start a new life together after so many years proved too hard for her. Catherine figures Lena Mae will never forgive herself for leaving. Lolly leaves town with Catherine's three blue suitcases. Catherine Grace plants a garden, praying over the dirt and seeds just like her ancestors did. She grows tons of strawberries and spends months making Preacher's Jam, which she sends down to Atlanta to sell in the fancy



stores. Hank comes by occasionally; after Reverend Cline's death he started preaching at the church, and he really took to it. Everybody figures they'll marry eventually, but for Catherine Grace, she is finally content in the place she's had all along.

Analysis

This final chapter of the novel wraps up the loose ends well. Catherine gives her father's eulogy, during which she urges the congregation to show grace and forgiveness to Lena Mae and Miss Raines. She reminds them that her father did his best and that all people make mistakes; she even insinuates that he died of a broken heart, disappointed in himself that he'd disappointed his people, and that that shouldn't be so. The eulogy ends with a hymn and her repeated call to promote good in the town, not try to choke the life out like a weed.

After the funeral ends, Catherine narrates what life looks like for her in the months and years following the upheaval. Miss Raines moves in and eventually has the baby. Flora and Miss Mabie visit regularly, and together all of the women form their own sort of tight knit family. Catherine even says that, "Flora and Miss Raines are the best mamas that baby could have." When the town gossip mill starts up again against Miss Raines, Catherine is there to encourage her that she was loved by her daddy.

Catherine sends her friend Lolly on a trip, with her three blue suitcases. She encourages Lolly to try the life outside of Ringgold, away from her mother, who loves her but doesn't love her right. And speaking of mother's, the author presents a bittersweet but realistic ending to the story of Lena Mae: after staying around for a while, she leaves for her home town again. Too many years had gone by, too many events missed, for her to try to start a new life with her daughters. Plus, Flora reasons, Lena Mae won't forgive herself for what she did, and the pain of what she missed prevents her from enjoying what she has in the now. With all of the talk of forgiveness, this is a true example of how not forgiving even oneself can affect one's relationships.

Catherine's own story ends with returning to her grandfather's roots. When the ground clears she plants a huge garden, especially tomatoes. The story comes full circle as Catherine does the very thing she proclaims in chapter one to be the worst fate ever. In addition to tomatoes, she also grows strawberries and makes jam, which is sold to the Atlanta department stores. These endings make a nicely rounded ending. However, at the end of the novel she has not patched up her relationship with Hank, who has become to new preacher at Cedar Grove. The narrative ends with Catherine realizing that her dream was shallow and that finding her place in her own town has her truly fulfilled.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the townfolk return to gossiping?



Discussion Question 2

What is special about the name Miss Raines chooses for her baby?

Discussion Question 3

What is ironic about Catherine's strawberry jam business?

Vocabulary

ominous, parables, squirm, testament, baritone, soprano



Characters

Catherine Grace Cline

Catherine Grace Cline is telling this story in retrospect, recalling her childhood in small town Ringgold, Georgia. She lost her mother at age six and is raised by her fiery preacher father with her younger sister Martha Ann. For as long as Catherine Grace can remember she is focused on leaving Ringgold and moving to Atlanta. The attitudes and ideas of Ringgold are narrow, and Catherine feels that moving to Atlanta is her dream. Much of her childhood is concerned with being brave and having courage to follow your dreams; however, when she is a young adult Catherine discovers that her life in Atlanta comes with a price. As a character, Catherine basically swims upstream, and while her ultimate destiny might be back in Ringgold, her life is enriched by her ability to consider different perspectives.

Reverend Marshall Cline

Reverend Cline is Catherine and Martha Ann's father. He is an energetic and personable Baptist preacher, the most recent in three generations. He is a pillar in the town of Ringgold, highly respected and very important. The author does a good job making Marshall complex. Like all humans, he is a mix of good and bad. He is a good father to the girls, spending Saturdays watching football with them and forsaking the town's invitations to spend Sunday lunch with them. He isn't as narrow minded as one might expect a preacher to be; he values kindness and the Spirit of the law as much as the letter. The reader expects him to refuse to let Catherine move to Atlanta, only to find that he buys her a new set of luggage for her sixteenth birthday. The ultimate reveal of Marshall's humanity is when he fathers the child of the local Sunday School teacher. It shocks the town and prompts the climax of Catherine's character development.

Gloria Jean Graves

Gloria Jean is the Cline's next-door neighbor. She is a many-times-divorced single woman who pours life and feminine influence into the lives of the Cline girls. Because she goes absolutely against the grain of the small, religious community, Gloria Jean is a bit of an outcast. Although she has friends in the town, behind closed doors people often judge her love life, her colorful makeup, and her provocative clothes. Gloria was friends with Lena Mae Cline, the girls's mother, who drowned when Catherine was 6; at that time she stopped attending church. Throughout the story she shows great love to both of the girls and is like a surrogate mother to them. She is a great character because she is patient throughout Catherine Grace's many phases; even more than Catherine's father, Gloria Jean is a sign of truly unconditional love.



Martha Ann Cline

Martha Ann is Catherine Grace's sister. As a character, she's not fully developed because the story is written from Catherine's point of view. The reader doesn't know exactly what is in Martha Ann's heart. She is not as passionate as her sister; she loves books and reading and sports a steadier, more dependable nature. One doesn't know if she wants to leave Ringgold as her sister does, or if she just wants to be with her sister. However, in the end of the story, when Catherine's entire concept of family and faith is reversed, Martha Ann is the one that is kind and gracious and the picture of the mercy they are taught as children.

Lena Mae Cline

Lena Mae is Catherine and Martha's mother. She was believed to have drowned when the girls were 6 and 4; however, it is revealed towards the end of the book that she actually just ran away from home. Burdened by the weight of being a young mother and feeling like her dream of being a singer had slipped away in the wake of being Reverend Cline's wife, she ran off to Nashville, allowing the town to think she had disappeared in the river. The author hints at this in the very beginning, as Catherine Grace can never recall anyone letting her see her mother's body. Lena Mae shows up at Reverend Cline's funeral, and her presence teaches Catherine an important lesson: her mother is the living embodiment of following one's dreams at the expense of others and the damage that can be part of it. Catherine must find herself in her mother's mistakes.

Eddie Franklin

Eddie makes a quick appearance in the story, but it has an important impact. He is the ice cream artist at the local Dairy Queen and has probably served 50% of Catherine's Dilly Bars over the years. In that role, he has listened to her dreams and vents and knows her motivations for wanting to leave Ringgold. At a crucial point in the story, he tells Catherine Grace that she's being narrow minded and selfish, which are her chief accusations against small town life. In that crucial scene, Eddie is a voice that breaks through her fog of confusion and pain and helps her see clearly.

Hank Blankenship

Hank is Catherine's one-time boyfriend and possible promise of eventual true love. They date in high school for 18 months, and then Catherine breaks it off because she finds herself tempted to delay or cancel her trip to Atlanta. Even after she moves to Atlanta, she is occupied by Hank's doings in Ringgold and is upset when he's dating another girl. For a while, he represents the path of least resistance in Ringgold, but by the time the novel is over he is a possibility for future happiness.



Miss Raines

Margaret Raines is Reverend Cline's undisclosed love. She is the Sunday School teacher, the Elementary School teacher, and a constant companion to Reverend Cline although he insists they are just friends. When the girls are young, they dislike her and are worried she is trying to fill their mother's shoes. Miss Raines has Sunday lunch with the Clines for years, and then stops, saying she needs to move on and find her own happiness. However, later in the story she turns out to be pregnant, and Reverend Cline is the father. Although by this point in the story he has died, Catherine extends mercy and grace to the young woman, inviting her to live with them to help raise the baby.

Miss Mabie

Miss Mabie is the older, single woman that Catherine meets in Atlanta. She lives in a large home in Buckhead; alone, except for her servant Flora, and Catherine rents her spare room. Miss Mabie is an important character because she provides an element of family while she is away. She takes most of her meals with the woman and spends her holidays with her. When Catherine's father dies, Miss Mabie packs up Catherine's things and drives her straight back home, even staying for a few weeks. An interesting note regarding Miss Mabie is that she tells Catherine she went off to New York City as a young woman, following her dream and living the big life. However, she plainly relates that living the dream had its downfalls, and as an older woman, she lives alone with no family. She provides family for Catherine while giving her some food for thought.

Ruthie Morgan

Ruthie Morgan is a classic example of a foil. She is everything Catherine Grace wants to be as a child: pretty, well dressed, popular, but most importantly, she has a mother that dotes on her and sees to all of her needs. As Catherine Grace grows to a teen, she has left behind the childish comparison to Ruthie, but the girls aren't friends. Catherine Grace doesn't follow the crowd, while Ruthie leads and determines the crowd. There is no hostility between them related in the story beyond normal teen girl interactions, but the key element Ruthie proves to the plot is that after Catherine moves to Atlanta, she starts dating Hank Blakenship, Catherine's former boyfriend. Catherine spends hours telling herself that she doesn't care, that Hank is ancient history, but then she finally relents and admits to herself that she is jealous. It is this relationship that keeps a door open in Catherine's heart, possibly saving a place for Hank down the road.



Symbols and Symbolism

Dairy Queen

Dairy Queen's power in Catherine Grace's life doesn't hold any rhyme or reason; it is simply her special place to have her own thoughts. When she is a young girl, it is where she dreams of moving away. As she grows, it is a place to visit with her boyfriend, Hank. In the end of the story, she is at the Dairy Queen when she cries out in grief and anger against her parents and receives some pointed but kind words from the Dairy Queen's proprietor about her own mistakes and blindness.

Preacher's Strawberry Jam

When Catherine's father grounds her from Dairy Queen for the summer, Catherine turns her hands to industry and spends the time making strawberry jam from her grandfather's crop. It is a task that teaches her to take a hand in her own life's plans. Later in the story, when Catherine has gone to Atlanta and returned, she goes back to the strawberry patch and again looks to her family roots and the things she knows best. When the novel ends, Catherine is busily making Preacher Jam and selling it to stores all over the country, a lovely ironic and pastoral end to the story.

Atlanta

Atlanta is the symbol for "otherness," all things outside of Ringgold. It is where some great things are located, such as the Varsity, Lenox Mall, college football. However, to Reverend Cline it is also the place where crime and civil rights and free love find their origin. To Catherine Grace, it is the Big City of her dreams, where she will be able to get out of her small existence and live large.

The Church

The church is the center of Catherine Grace's life, if not the center of all Ringgold life. It is the kingdom, and Catherine's father is the king. Even if Catherine doesn't always embrace all aspects of her father's faith, she accepts how town motives are fed through the lens of the Baptist faith. Several key scenes in the story take place at the church, many of them scenes of conflict until the end, where Catherine lays her father to rest with grace and forgiveness.

The Creek

The creek that runs through Ringgold symbolizes moments of clarity and decision. The Creek is where Lena Mae happened to be out picking berries when she realized she



could "drown", and disappear from the life she wasn't ready for. At two key moments in the story, Catherine Grace likewise stands on the edge of the creek and contemplates her life. In both instances, she leaves the banks with some clarity about a difficult decision.

Tomatoes

From the beginning of the story, Catherine Grace likens living in Ringgold to growing tomatoes. Everybody in town grows excellent tomatoes, even prays over them to produce a great crop. Her mother and her Home Economics teacher, even Gloria Jean spoke long on the benefit of being able to grow a good tomato. Whenever Catherine Grace thinks of a long life in Ringgold, she thinks, "I can't just sit around in that town and grow tomatoes forever..." And endless life of growing tomatoes; this is what Catherine Grace thinks life in Ringgold would be like.

Ringgold

Ringgold is the small town in which Catherine Grace lives, and it symbolizes a small, enclosed place; whether or not this is a benefit changes for Catherine throughout the story. In the first half she sees it as confining and narrow, but in the end she realizes that it is a comfort and a support.

Food

By the end of the novel, Catherine Grace realizes that Ringgold has always been a place of comfort and safety to her. One of the ways the town is always providing comfort and support is through food. Particularly because this story is set in the South, the characters use cooking as a means of supporting their neighbors and showing love in hard situations. There are literally dozens of mentions of food in the novel: the baptisms, the tea parties, the proms, the funeral, and even just spending the day in a friend's house is cause to fire up the oven or fry up some bacon. This delightful quirk of the characters adds to the pastoral feel of the story.

Singing

Many of the key moments in Catherine's development are brought through song, hymns in particular. The reader can surmise that when one can't find the right words to say, singing is a worthy substitute, and many truths in this story are communicated through hymns. At Reverend Cline's funeral, when Catherine urges them all to find kindness and grace in their hearts, the congregation turns to the hymn "Just As I Am" in response. Furthermore, many references are made to Lena Mae's uncanny ability to sing. For her, singing was her dream, and her part in the story ends with her beautiful voice rising above all of the others.



Parables

The theme of Religion—the Christian faith in particular—runs throughout this story. Not only because Catherine Grace's father is a preacher, but also because the main Christian tenets of grace and forgiveness lend a powerful end to the story. At two key places in the story, Catherine relates some of her father's favorite parables, stories that are told to illustrate a point. During his funeral, she likens the town to a weed choking out a fruitful tomato vine with gossip and judgment. When she sits with her mother, she recalls the parable in the Bible of the lost sheep and the shepherd that will leave his entire flock to find the one sheep that has strayed away. The author is an apparent believer in these allegories, and for the novel's purposes they help to explain what Catherine is feeling without using her own words.



Settings

The town of Ringgold, Georgia.

The book's plot is wrapped around its setting in a small, rural, Southern town. Because the story is mainly concerned with a young girl's desire to leave her hometown and follow her dream to somewhere more cosmopolitan, it's important that her hometown be quirky, perhaps narrow-minded and multi-generational, with little experience outside its own borders. Ringgold is depicted as all of these things, which give the main character something to strive against. However, the reader and the main character come to realize that Ringgold is also full of heart and love and patience.

Cedar Grove Baptist Church

Much of Ringgold's personality comes in its adherence to the Christian faith. And much of the Christian activity revolves around the town's Baptist Church, of which Catherine Grace's father was the main pastor. In fact, Catherine's father is the fourth generation of Baptist preachers. This fact directly affects how the Cline family operates. Many of the key scenes in the novel take place at the church; even if God is not directly involved, the growth to Catherine's heart and character tend to happen in his house.

Dairy Queen

As is noted in the title, Catherine's best soul-seeking is done at Ringgold's Dairy Queen. She visits weekly with her sister, except for the summer her father revoked that privilege as a punishment. It is the place where they discuss their future plans and dreams while eating their favorite treat. They visit Dairy Queen on Catherine's last day in Ringgold, and it's where Catherine goes when she returns in Ringgold for her father's funeral. At the climax of the story, where Catherine gets a look into her own heart and how she can change it, she is sitting at the Dairy Queen.

Miss Mabie's house in Buckhead.

Buckhead is a wealthy neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia. Catherine is able to find a room there in the home of an older woman, Miss Mabie. For the few months she lives there, Catherine experiences community and family with Miss Mabie and her maid, Flora.

Davison's Department Store

Davison's is the store in Lenox Square Mall in Atlanta, Georgia, that Catherine remembers visiting in her youth. For the next 14 years, Catherine Grace's memory of



Atlanta is wrapped up in that Christmas visit of the famous department store. Later, when Catherine moves to Atlanta at the age of 18, she is able to get a job working in Davison's, which is literally a dream come true.



Themes and Motifs

Religion

There is a pronounced focus on religion in this novel. Catherine Grace's father is a preacher, and the life of the town revolves around church activity. When he passes away, the whole town mourns. Gloria Jean, who is by all accounts a "good person" based on her treatment of the Cline girls and her involvement in the town. However, she is not seen as such because of her many divorces and departures from Christian "values."

Reverend Cline's adherence to the Christian faith also affects how he raises the girls and the expectations he sets for them; how well Catherine attaches to this faith is affected by her mother's death when she is 6 years old. The grief over her mother changes how she sees God and His will.

When Catherine moves to Atlanta, she sees herself as Moses, and her journey to the city as an Exodus. During this part of the novel her attitude towards God is more favorable, because she sees her life moving in the direction she likes.

Later in the novel, religion plays a part in Catherine's story because it requires a measure of grace and forgiveness towards her parents; towards her mother for faking her death and allowing them to think she was dead, and towards her father for carrying on an illicit affair with Miss Raines ending in her pregnancy. This change of the heart requires a deeper understanding and acceptance of Christianity's teachings on forgiveness.

Forgiveness

This novel is truly a book about forgiveness. While there are other important messages and themes, the main character must be willing to extend forgiveness before she can begin to move forward past her father's death.

When Catherine learns of her father's death, she blames herself. She figures that her absence caused him to be so sad the he died. Gloria Jean tells her that this isn't true and to stop feeling that way; but Catherine knows that even if she didn't cause his death, she caused him such sadness and she feels guilty for that. She has to first forgive herself for causing sadness to him and Martha Ann.

However, while at home for the funeral she learns two shocking things about her parents. Her mother, thought dead for 12 years, is actually alive. Instead of drowning, she had simply run from Ringgold and the staggering responsibility of being a wife and a mother. Catherine Grace is very angry at first, but eventually she sees her own mistakes and errors and forgives her mother. The healing and joy that result end up being worth it.



Catherine's father, she finds out, fathered a baby out of wedlock with Miss Raines, the Sunday School teacher. This is also a cause of anger, confusion, and disappointment. She feels like her father was living a lie his entire life. However, with the help of Eddie Franklin she realizes that people are people and they make mistakes. Her father wasn't a liar or a bad man; he was a human that made a mistake, just like Catherine is a human who made her own mistakes. She is able to understand her father better, forgive his mistakes, and open her heart and home to Miss Raines and what will be her new half-sister or half-brother. This extension of grace leaves all of the characters in a place of peace and joy at the end of the novel.

Following Dreams

Catherine Grace feels stifled by her small town and her motherless existence, but it is couched in a desire to get away from "small town life." Throughout the early part of the novel this feeling evolves into "following her dream" of getting out of Ringgold and moving to Atlanta. The plan in Atlanta is never truly fleshed out; it's not a dream of an occupation as much as a location. When Catherine moves away, she doesn't count the cost of how her absence will affect her family; her father's joy and health deteriorates, the gossip mill churns away, and her sister is unhappy, until her father passes away in the wake of rumors that he impregnated a woman outside of marriage.

This theme is brought full circle in the last phase of the novel, where the reader finds that Catherine Grace's mother, Lena Mae, who everybody thought drowned in the creek when Catherine was 6, had actually skipped town. She also felt stifled by Ringgold and the small existence of a preacher's wife. She wanted to be a country music singer, so she allowed everybody in town to think she was dead and moved away. There is a heartbreaking irony in Catherine's anger towards her mother; she wonders how someone could be so selfish as to "up and move away" without any thought for the people left behind, which is precisely what she did.

Family

Catherine Grace and Martha Ann have a good daddy that raises them well, but they are without a mother. Their motherless childhood affects both of them and leaves them craving an older woman to fill that spot in their lives. For a long time, the neighbor Gloria Jean Graves is their stand-in mother. Gloria Jean was friends with the girls's mother, and shows both girls lavish attention and unconditional love.

When Catherine Grace moves to Atlanta, she lives for a time with a cousin, Laura Lynn. Laura Lynn actually is technically family, but she is judgmental, unfriendly, and condescending. For a blood relative, she is not a welcoming presence. By contrast, Catherine Grace finds a room in the home of an older woman, Miss Mabie. For five months she lives with Miss Mabie and her maid, Flora. They take care of her and feed her, and when her father dies, they drive her straight to Ringgold and stay there through the funeral and then some, cooking and baking, and sharing comfort with the town.



Although they aren't Catherine's relatives, they treat her like family and she experiences love through them.

The author uses these examples to show that family is a term not based on blood, but on behavior.

Courage

This story holds many allusions to being brave. Gloria Jean tells Catherine on more than one occasion that some women need to carve out a space for being different, and then have the courage to stand in that space. On other occasions, bravery is tied to "following dreams," like Catherine and her mother leaving Ringgold to do something different. It requires courage for Miss Raines to have Reverend Cline's baby out of wedlock, in the town for all to see; furthermore, Catherine herself offers to let Miss Raines live with them because they are family. Gloria Jean is brave enough to be who she wants to be despite the disapproval of the town.

A lack of courage is also displayed in several characters. Reverend Cline isn't brave enough to own the fact that his wife is alive so he can divorce her and seek happiness with Miss Raines. Lena Mae isn't brave enough to seek a reconciliation with her family so she spends 10 years regretting what she'd lost. Catherine Grace isn't brave enough to ask for the holidays off at her job, and ends up hurting her sister and father. Hank isn't brave enough to try to stop Catherine even though he still loves her.

In many ways, the novel's themes work together—family with dreams, dreams with courage, family with faith. But the author effectively ties together these threads and is able to tell a deeper story through the novel's events.

Styles

Point of View

The Point of View in this novel is first-person from Catherine Grace's perspective. This POV is a good choice because the reader can only see things from her perspective, and since the novel is mainly concerned with her widening her gaze and taking a better look at the things around her, the reader is allowed to grow through that change with her.

Language and Meaning

This novel takes place in the deep south in the 1960s and 1970s, so there is a heavy use of southern lingo and dropped endings to remind the reader exactly where they are. This is effective particularly because the setting of the novel is so important. With the reminder of where the story is taking place, the reader can recall how the time and place is affecting the thoughts and attitudes of the characters.

Structure

With the heavy emphasis on religion, the novel follows three parts that are loosely based on the Bible. The time before Catherine leaves for Atlanta, Part I is "The Gospel (according to Catherine Grace Cline)"- this title is fitting because it deals with Catherine's tunnel vision about her town, her upbringing, and her life in general. Part II details her time in Atlanta- this section is titled "The Epistles" because the news from back home in Ringgold is told in Catherine Grace's letters from Martha Ann. Part III, when Catherine returns home after her father's death and learns her life lessons, is entitled "Revelations". These little section titles serve to divide the book as well as remind the reader where they are in Catherine Grace's journey.



Quotes

He just saw the best in everything and everybody, and I think people really felt like they were in the presence of God when they were with my daddy."

-- Catherine Grace (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: Much of the book chronicles Catherine Grace's love/hate relationship with her father and with God. This quote, said early in Chapter 1, illustrates that she understands, despite her beliefs, that her daddy really was adept at showing people the way to peace and wholeness.

He said God didn't take Mama away. It was an accident, and God doesn't cause accidents. He just helps us cope with them.

-- Catherine Grace (chapter 2 paragraph 3)

Importance: The difference between Catherine's and her father's faiths is a major theme in the story, and this quote demonstrates the different ways they see the world; most specifically, the different ways in which they view Catherine's mother's death.

Nothing about Gloria Jean was simple or plain.

-- Catherine Grace (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: Gloria Jean is an important character in the story, and although this quote is technically describing her appearance, it's also a good description of her personality. She is a complex person with simple loves, and she will impact Catherine greatly in her youth.

Leaving this town was not going to be something I needed his (her father's) permission to do. It was going to be my choice, and my journey had already begun.

-- Catherine Grace (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: Much of this novel focuses on Catherine growing into her own person, out from under her father's expectations, as well as physically leaving the town of Ringgold. This quote is an early realization for Catherine that she could be in control of that move in her life. She didn't have to move within the confines of her father's expectations.

Listen, some girls don't have the courage to be who they are truly meant to be. But you and me and your mama, we're just braver than most other folks, and don't you forget it.

-- Gloria Jean (chapter 5 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is a key part of the events in Chapter 5 and also ties to the arc of Catherine's development. Part of her struggle in the story is being who she wants to be vs. who her father, or the town, feels she should be. This quote foreshadows the need to stand firm.



Remember, hon, what's really important in life is never gonna fit in those three suitcases anyway.

-- Gloria Jean (chapter 7 paragraph 4)

Importance: As much of this book centers on Catherine Grace pondering this very question, this quote is important. It highlights one of the themes of the novel: family, dreams, home, and how each of these things are determined in a person's life.

I wanted to believe her, but forgiveness wasn't as simple a thing as the Bible or Gloria Jean would have you believe.

-- Catherine Grace (chapter 9 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is said just after Gloria Jean promises Catherine that she is not responsible for her father's death. Much of this novel is concerned with forgiveness—each of the main characters has something to forgive and something to be forgiven, and this quote demonstrates the fact that sometimes feeling that you are forgiven isn't as easy as it sounds.

Honey, sometimes people do things that they wish they hadn't. And sometimes people do things that they wish they hadn't but the thing is so big they just don't know how to make it right.

-- Gloria Jean (chapter 9 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote is said just before Catherine discovers that her mother is alive. Gloria Jean is preparing her to be empathetic to her mother before being angry. She is reminding the young girl that sometimes people make mistakes and don't know how to fix them.

Your daddy always said that the Lord plants a small seed of goodness in each and every one of us. Sometimes that seed grows into a mighty tree, and sometimes it struggles to take hold at all. It's up to us to help the Lord nurture the good in ourselves and the people around us.

-- Lolly (chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is said to Catherine as she is beginning to have her final revelation regarding the mistakes of her parents and how to cope with them. It is fitting that Lolly is actually quoting Catherine's father, whom Catherine has just discovered was having an out-of-wedlock affair with the Sunday School teacher. This quote reminds the reader that all people have the capacity for good and for bad, and as a community of people we should help each other along to keep the good growing, despite mistakes and difficulties.

But some things are just too big to hide, and Miss Raines's growing belly and my mama's sudden resurrection were two very big things.

-- Catherine Grace (chapter 11 paragraph 3)

Importance: Catherine says this to herself as Eddie Franklin tells her to stop being so



self-centered about other people's mistakes. She is angry because he knows these "secrets," although the reader should know that the town is small and everybody knows everything. The quote also reflects that Catherine's mind is completely overcome by these developments; at this point in the story there is no room for sympathy or empathy for others.

It's a funny thing, Martha Ann, how much time we spend planning our own lives. We so convince ourselves of what we want to do, that sometimes we don't see what we're meant to do.

-- Catherine Grace (chapter 12 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote illuminates the transition the main character undergoes in the end of the story, when she steps back from her tunnel vision to see the love and happiness that has always surrounded her.

Sometimes, Catherine Grace, you spend your life looking for the one thing you had all along.

-- Lena Mae (chapter 13 paragraph 3)

Importance: This quote from Lena Mae illustrates the similarities between the two women, and their difficulty with appreciating what they already have. It comes at a crucial point in the story, when Catherine has seen the error of her ways and is ready to extend grace towards her mother.