

Lucky Study Guide

Lucky by Alice Sebold

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Plot Summary

Alice says she remembers the moments leading up to her rape, the rape, and the events after clearly. She is warned that he'll kill her if she screams, but she does so anyway. Her rapist knocks her down and tells her he has a knife. He uses her long hair to hold onto her. He knocks her down, bangs her head onto the ground, and she briefly loses consciousness. She says that she wakes staring into the eyes of the man who has the power to kill her and signs herself over to him, knowing she is about to die. She does everything he commands though she continues to tell him that she's a virgin and to beg for both her life and her virginity.

Over the coming months, Alice will have to defend herself against her father who believes she should never have allowed it to happen, against members of a grand jury, who ask if she didn't know she shouldn't be in the park alone at night, and against a legal system that eventually finds her rapist guilty as charged.

The rapist, Gregory Madison, is black, and Alice actually encounters him on a street near the university months after the rape. He has the self-confident look of a man who knows he got away with rape because Alice doesn't yell out to a nearby policeman. Instead, she walks on by, alerts the police and armed with the details of that nearby policeman, Madison is soon apprehended.

The prosecutors know that most rape victims can't deal with the strain of a trial, but Alice doesn't waver in her fight to see Gregory jailed. He is convicted in a court case, based largely on Alice's testimony and a match to a hair found on Alice the night of the rape. Alice takes the summer following the trial as an opportunity to reinvent herself with the help of her best friend, Lila. Then comes the night Alice returns home to find that Lila has been raped, and the attacker asked about Alice by name and committed the rape on Alice's bed. Lila doesn't follow through with the prosecution of her case, which is eventually put down to a revenge rape prompted by Madison from his jail cell. Lila cuts ties with Alice, seeming to blame her for not having had a broken window fixed.

Alice moves on, first to Houston where she drops out of school and develops a serious drug problem, then to New York where she continues to follow the destructive trends. She has a few successful articles and eventually sees her name touted in a book about post traumatic stress disorder and finally recognizes the signs of her own life for what they are. She next turns to California, seeking an escape from the harsh city life. There she eventually settles into her role as the survivor of a brutal rape and notes that "both hell and hope lie in the palm of my hand."



Chapters 1 through 3

Chapters 1 through 3 Summary and Analysis

Alice says she remembers the moments leading up to her rape, the rape, and the events after clearly. She is warned that he'll kill her if she screams, but she does so anyway. Her rapist knocks her down and tells her he has a knife. He uses her long hair to hold onto her. He knocks her down, bangs her head onto the ground, and she briefly loses consciousness. She says she wakes staring into the eyes of the man who has the power to kill her and signs herself over to him, knowing that she is about to die. She does everything he commands though she continues to tell him that she's a virgin and to beg for both her life and her virginity.

Her rapist forces her to kiss him, and she allows him whatever response she can manage. He has her strip and brutally twists her breasts. He tells her that she's "the worst" he's raped but continues the actions. He is unable to achieve erection, shoves his entire fist inside her which prompts blood, and finally forces her to perform oral sex. As she asks for directions and tries to comply, he urinates on her. When he pushes her back onto the ground, he orders her to talk to him. She tells him he's strong, powerful, and a good man. At that point, he's able to achieve erection and begins to rape her. She hears people outside the tunnel but they believe they are hearing a pair of willing participants and the rapist stops her from crying out for help.

Afterward, he tells her she can dress and even tries to help, holding her panties for her. Alice realizes that he still might kill her, fearing that she'll identify him. She begins to beg, pleading with him not to tell anyone what happened and making it sound as if she would be ashamed to tell. He apologizes, even crying at one point and telling her that she's a good girl. The rapist takes her cash and almost takes her identification card, but leaves it with her. As they part, he calls out, asking her name. She says she simply can't find a lie and so answers truthfully with her first name only. He says he'll "see you around sometime."

When Alice arrives at Marion Dorm on the Syracuse University campus, she tells the resident security assistant that she doesn't have her badge, goes upstairs only to discover that everyone who might help her is gone, and returns to the RSA, asking that he call the police. Alice says they arrive quickly, and she's taken by ambulance to the hospital. There is, by then, a crowd gathered and she says that the conversations, police questions and comments soon make it evident to everyone what happened to her.

At the hospital, Alice recalls a kindly nurse who praises her for "getting a piece of him" as she scraped Alice's fingernails. Then one of Alice's friends, Mary Alice, arrives. Mary Alice continues to hold Alice's hand as the physician, Dr. Husa, gives Alice a shot of Demerol to relax her for the examination. They find a hair from the rapist and the doctor comments on the amount of blood. After the exam, Alice is allowed to shower but is told



she has to have someone help her. She calls for a friend named Tree, and it's here that Alice realizes that she's no longer like her peers - she's different because she's the girl who was raped. Alice catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror and is fascinated, asks for the shower to be as hot as possible and wishes for a wire brush to help scrub herself. She asks Tree to help her wash but Tree is clearly uncomfortable. The rapist's words come back to her and Alice tells her to "forget it."

Alice recounts the fact that she'd spend the evening with Ken Childs, a boy who has a crush on her. Ken had taken her picture that evening in an array of poses, and Alice notes that they will be a sharp contrast to those taken by the police after the rape. Alice knows the police don't expect she'll return to make a statement or follow through with pressing charges. At the dorm, she calls her mother who is staying in a nearby hotel in preparation for picking Alice up later that day as school dismisses for the summer. Alice's mother is abrupt, saying that she's going to be there in a few hours anyway, and the conversation can wait until then. When Alice tells her that she's been raped, she finishes with the plea for her mom to come and get her.

Alice deals briefly with Tricia, a representative of the Rape Crisis Center, who is still in the room when Alice's mother arrives. They go to the police station where Alice is disappointed to learn that details such as the fact that the rapist shoved his fist inside her or that she was a virgin were considered by the detective as "inconsequential." She signs the affidavit and learns her mother has told her father who has told Alice's sister, Mary. Alice says she somehow believes news of the rape will be contained and that it's some time before she realizes otherwise.

Alice says her first impression that her family was different came from a childhood friend who had repeated her mother's impression that Alice's family was "weird." Alice's father is a professor, and the family is unlike the relaxed families of Alice's playmates. Alice says she doesn't want to envy other mothers and admits that the movie, "The Stepford Wives," frightened her in that she could imagine her mother as the only human left in a neighborhood of robots. It's here that Alice describes her mother's addiction to alcohol, told to Alice and Mary in detail by their mother who wanted the girls to avoid the same fate. Their father takes the family through several moves as he climbs the academic ladder to a professor's role at Penn State.

Alice describes herself as a "geek" in high school, participating in band and art and putting on the clothes of Janis Joplin long before it was popular to do so. Alice befriends three young men who are gay and assimilates their impressions of media and movie stars of the day. For her fifteenth birthday, her mother plans a trip to New York but has a panic attack before they reach the city, culminating on the steps of the Met and forcing their immediate return. Alice notes that school is not in session and so she'll have time to "make up a story" about her trip.

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Alice says that she passes out and is staring into his eyes when she wakes. She says she resigns herself to whatever fate he has in store for her and all her actions after that



are designed toward survival. She will later explain to her father why she allowed herself to be raped if the rapist didn't have the knife in his hands at the moment. She says that some women say they would rather die than be raped, but that she would face rape "a thousand times" rather than to die. As Alice says, "You do what you have to."

At the hospital, Alice says she requested that they not call her mother because she thought she might be able to keep the events from her parents. It's not until later, when she catches a glimpse of herself in the shower, that she realizes she won't be able to hide it.

Alice listens to the comments around her as she and her mother pack up to leave the dorm. She says that there were those - including her friends - who try to take care of her, but that no one understands the situation now, not even Alice herself.

Alice dresses in a skirt while waiting for her mother, noting that she was always required to dress up to some degree and that it's important for her to look as if she's the same for her mother's arrival. She says she allows her mother to hug her and that for that moment she didn't consider the toll the events were taking on her mother. It's here that Alice tells about her mother, who has episodes the family calls "flaps." These seem to be panic attacks that occur whenever she is faced with a new situation but also happen at ordinary moments, such as upon arrival at the supermarket. Alice's sister, as a teen, becomes hateful about them, and Alice invariably takes her mother's side, cossetting her mother as if the child were the adult.

Alice says that as a child, she discovered she could ease into her mother's lap if her mother were distracted by a book or television, and that her mother would sometimes stroke her hair before realizing Alice's presence. She says she played out the scene of divorce with her Barbie dolls, citing the fact that Ken "didn't touch" as a reason for the divorce. Alice says that she spent hours alone and would grow bored, sometimes hatching plots to bring her family together. One such plot was to allow one of the dogs to "find" a used Kotex pad, which would cause the family to erupt into a mad chase, described by Alice as a "lovely scene."

The issue of the race of the rapist is touched upon only briefly at this point. He is black and once back in the college dorm, Alice encounters a girl and her boyfriend who is black. The young man insists on hugging Alice and she says that it later seems to her that he wants to reinforce the fact that not all black men are bad. Alice says that her father becomes angry at all the black men they see on the way to pick up her sister at college, though he's never shown racist tendencies prior to that time.



Chapters 4 through 7

Chapters 4 through 7 Summary and Analysis

Alice arrives home and finds her father has lunch prepared. She says that she wants to "slam dunk the fact that no one needed to worry about this tough customer." She says that she is hungry, having had nothing in her mouth for the past twenty-four hours except "a cracker and a cock." She says she knows her parents will understand the meaning - that she's the same - though it shocks them. Alice goes with her parents the following day to pick up her sister from college. She has multiple bruises, including some on her neck that are just beginning to be evident and notes that people are staring at her.

At home, the family gathers for dinners - a rare event before the attack. While watching television together, the family worries that a scene of violence might be too much for Alice, and she reassures them that she's alright. She says that she still hasn't told anyone the details, that she desires the ability to tell, and that she later accepts that everyone is affected by her story. She says it takes time for her to realize the stark fact that no one can pull her back from the "wreckage" of the rape, and that she alone has the power to "save" herself.

Myra Narbonne is an "old lady" who attends St. Peter's Episcopal church where Alice's family are members and Father Breuninger preaches. While Alice is away at college, Myra and her husband are attacked and both seriously injured. The three young men, including one named Joey, warn Myra not to leave the house, but she immediately goes for help. When she flags down a car, it's one of her attackers - a young man named Joey. She recognizes his voice and has now seen his face without the mask. Myra visits Alice after the rape, and Alice says Myra seems to be the one person who "got it."

Alice's mother is the warden at their church and she confides Alice's attack to Father Breuninger, who has a son who was arrested for an assault and robbery while high on acid. Alice says Father Breuninger tells the congregation of Alice's attack and that most figure out the fact that she was raped. Alice is horrified that her family prays with Father Breuninger, and she wonders what right he has to pray for her soul and condemns him for refusing to admit that Paul, his son, was to blame for his actions. Her animosity toward the preacher isn't really fully explained. She says that Peggy O'Neil, called an "old maid," cracks jokes and tells Alice that it's dangerous to be a woman alone, and says that Alice is strong and will survive.

When Mary is visited by a boy who clearly likes her and is clearly uncomfortable around Alice, Alice is enraged, saying that there will never be a "nice boy" who will like her. Later, Jonathan Gullick visits, having heard that Alice was attacked and not understanding the fact she was raped. When she tells him, he becomes uncomfortable, though he tries not to show it and eventually leaves. He later returns and tells her that his mother had admitted to him that she had also been raped. Alice says she never



encountered Jonathan's mother but that it gave her the first glimpse of the fact that there were other survivors out there and that they had gone on with their lives. Alice says that she also realizes there's something positive to be gained by telling her story.

Alice's mother makes an appointment with a therapist. The therapist's first words were that Alice no longer has a reason to be sexually inhibited. Alice walks out. Alice reconnects with a former boyfriend, Steve, who sees Alice as the character in "Man of La Mancha," though there is little correlation. Their relationship doesn't endure the summer as Steve "found someone who would go all the way with him" and Alice prepared to go back to Syracuse.

Alice recalls that her parents were "desperate" for her to attend college, and she eventually settles on Syracuse because it's far enough away that she won't live at home. Her roommate is Nancy and the two don't hit it off. Alice meets Mary Alice over Mary Alice's trunk loaded with junk food from home and their mutual admission that they hate college. Alice soon learns that she and Mary Alice are the only two on the floor who claim to be virgins. Alice soon meets two young men, Casey Hartman and Ken Childs, both sophomores and both art majors. They form what Alice calls a "frustrated triangle" because she likes Casey; Ken likes her, and all three are uncomfortable in the party life common to the college. One night, there is a party in her dorm and she sleeps in the art building, curled up on a carpeted platform made for a model, with Casey watching over her. She says ten days after that, her world crashes around her with the rape.

Alice's parents want her to attend Immaculata College near the family home in Pennsylvania, but she refuses, saying she will not allow the rapist to take her life from her.

Alice finds a sympathetic but tough teacher in Tess Gallagher who starts Alice working on a poem that begins "If they caught you." The poem is harsh with Alice saying what punishment she would hand to her rapist if he were caught, and she says she is shaking when she finishes it. She calls the poem, "Conviction," and agrees to have the class workshop it. Alice is angry at one response - that she is too beautiful to hate. A week later, she knows that she no longer has to refer to her rapist as "him" and can call him Gregory Madison.

Alice is walking down a street just off campus when she sees the rapist. They recognize each other immediately but she doesn't say anything, and he thinks he's gotten away with it. She calls the police and gives the description, along with a description of the officer Alice saw just before she saw the rapist. The rapist had talked to the officer, who realizes from Alice's description that Alice is talking about Greg Madison. Alice is told his arrest is imminent and that she'll have to testify.

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Alice's role in the family is interesting. She is self-appointed "cheerleader" when her mother is having an anxiety attack. She is the person who is sent to talk to her sister who won't come out of the bathroom one night after Alice's rape. Alice is the victim but



remains the one who initially helps her sister through the crisis. Another point is that Mary won't let Alice touch her, accepting only her words of comfort but not allowing a hug. Alice is also the one who has to defend herself when her father asks how she could allow it to happen. With the pressure to "perform," it's really no wonder she eventually suffers a meltdown of her own, screaming at her sister for having a boyfriend. Alice's strength is accepted by the family as a given, and her father goes so far as to say that if one of the sisters had to endure the rape, it was a good thing it was Alice.

At college, Alice realizes she's something of a celebrity, and everyone seems to know who she is or to know the story about "that girl," even if they don't recognize Alice as "that girl." Alice says there are many things wrong - a policeman who says his own niece is "ruined" because she was raped; a policeman who roughs up some young black men while hunting for Alice's rapist; Ken who has something of an anxiety attack after Alice sees her rapist, and a policeman who leaves Alice in the police car to be stared at by onlookers.



Chapters 8 through 10

Chapters 8 through 10 Summary and Analysis

Mary Alice is rushing for a sorority which divides the two girls. Alice makes a new friend in a girl named Lila who lives in Haven Hall. Alice says she urges Lila to long study breaks so Alice won't have to think. On the day Alice is to appear in a preliminary court hearing, she asks Tess Gallagher to go with her, and the teacher says she's honored to do so. They're kept waiting a long time, and Alice says that after that time she always puts on her "trauma Zen" attitude to deal with the "inevitable hell" of waiting.

Alice says that some of the questions don't make sense and she's exhausted by the time she's finished testifying. Then comes the question of identification. Because Madison waived his right to appear, Alice has no way to identify him as her attacker. There's some legal discussions, ending with the judge holding the case over for a grand jury hearing.

The next court hearing is November 4. Madison's attorney refuses to allow Tricia from the Rape Crisis Center in the room while Alice is subjected to the reality of a lineup. Two of the men are very similar. Alice, feeling panicky, chooses one who is staring at her but knows by the time she's out of the room that it's the wrong man. Gail tells her that Madison has a friend who looks very much like him, and the two always demand that the other be part of any lineup. Though Alice hasn't identified Madison as her attacker, she learns that Madison's attorney has allowed a pubic hair be taken from Madison for comparison. Gail says that Madison's attorney is gambling that the hairs taken from Alice won't match that of Madison.

A girl in Alice's poetry class named Maria Flores refuses to comment on Alice's poem about rape and later tries to commit suicide. Alice learns that she is also a victim, though the rapists are family members and she'll never have the opportunity to testify against them. Alice soon learns that Madison is indicted by the grand jury, that he pleads not guilty to eight counts, that he is released on bond, and she mistakenly thinks he is behind bars.

Though she is struggling in some classes and accepts an incomplete in Italian, Alice "finds time" to have a crush on a twenty-six-year old student named Jamie Waller, who is friends with a gay student named Chris Davis. Alice notes that if he's friends with a gay man, Jamie might be secure enough to accept a rape victim. She says that she and Chris feel alone, waiting for Jamie to relieve their boring lives. The three of them drink together often and Alice says that she has a headache afterward but at least doesn't always remember all the details of her life. One night Jamie asks if she's had sex since the rape. She almost says "no," but changes it to, "No, don't be silly, of course I have." Jamie says that first guy would have a "big responsibility." Alice lies, saying she's had sex with three guys, knowing Jamie won't approve of knowing she hasn't. He says that's



enough to be normal. Jamie himself has been promiscuous, even telling of being caught with women by their husbands.

Just before Easter vacation, Jamie invites her home with him and she accepts. Once there, he is abrupt and she cries as they have sex. The next morning, he looks into her eyes and warns her not to fall in love with him. He tries to have her perform oral sex, but she gags. He takes her back to Haven Hall where she sleeps most of the day. Over the coming days, she admits she's in love with him but laughs it off with Chris and Lila.

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Alice and Tess Gallagher have lunch after the initial hearing and Alice says that she wonders whether Tess wondered why Alice's parents were not present. Alice says she's provided them every excuse she can think of but that the bottom line is that they could have come. She doesn't say whether she urged them not to come but does say that she was "nineteen and ornery."

As Alice sits before the grand jury, she realizes there are some truths she isn't expected to tell. For example, she's asked if she always walked in the park so late at night and if she didn't realize that she shouldn't. She says that she "takes the blame," allowing herself to say that she was stupid to have been in the park alone so late, and vowing to help educate young women about the danger. Alice says she understands how a nice girl is supposed to act, and that she is willing to do whatever it takes to win.

Alice says she wishes her sister were less "pristine," and says that it's because Alice somehow feels that Alice is "fallen" and wants not to be alone in that state. She manipulates the language, including virginity, so that she comes to the conclusion that her virginity was taken rather than given, meaning she is technically still a virgin and will give that gift at some point. Alice's attitude as she decides that seems to be borne of her desire to get over the rape. She notes that she doesn't think Jamie realizes that he's her first by choice but that he does realize the reason for her crying. She doesn't elaborate on the tears or her reason for them.



Chapters 11 through Aftermath

Chapters 11 through Aftermath Summary and Analysis

Alice's sister, Mary, is slated to graduate on the day Alice's trial is to begin. The family attends the graduation then Alice and her father fly to Syracuse for the trial. Her father is reassured by Gail who comes to prep Alice but won't be questioning her because of Gail's advanced state of pregnancy. The doctor who initially examined Alice is also pregnant. Alice talks candidly to Gail, willing herself to ignore her father. That night, Alice has a migraine headache that keeps her awake but begins to lift by morning. The defense requests a closed courtroom, meaning Alice's father can't be inside. Alice is told that it is a blessing of sorts because it might be more difficult for her to tell the details of the rape with her father listening. Alice says she's grateful her father has someone waiting with him, so that he won't accidentally bump into Greg Madison's father.

As she enters the courtroom, she allows her rage to come to the surface of her emotions. She says she has written in ink on her legs the words, "You will die," that morning, and that it would be visible through her stockings if she raised the hem of her skirt. She goes through the details of the rape and the later sighting of Greg Madison and the events that led to his arrest. She says that she has no doubt he was her attacker and explains the mistaken identity in the lineup by saying that it's not like on television, that she was frightened, narrowed the possibilities to two, and just picked in order to get out of the room.

During the cross examination, Alice is quizzed about details in an attempt to find inconsistencies. She has trouble keeping up at some points. When the defense attorney asks about the first time she saw Madison on the October afternoon when she identifies him, she counters, saying that it wasn't the first time she'd seen him, but the second - the first having been when he raped her. Alice says that Madison said, "Hey, don't I know you from somewhere" as they walked toward each other that afternoon. She says that it would be many years later that Alice discovers that Madison's attorney had tried to prove that Madison was actually talking to the policeman, Officer Clapper, when he said those words.

The questioning goes on for a long time but the prosecution returns to make several points, including that she had been certain of the identity of her attacker when she encountered him in October. It's later that day that they learn Madison has been found guilty. She says that Madison is remanded and that she doesn't yet realize it, but that she has been remanded as well. Alice is later contacted for a recommendation for Madison's sentence. She says that she writes back, pointing out that Madison won't help the city's reputation of being one of the best places to live. He's sentenced to twenty-five years with sentences to run concurrently.

Alice says she begins her makeover that summer. She and her mother diet, and she loses fifteen pounds. Alice, Lila, and a girl named Sue who lives near Alice make plans



to rent a house together that fall. Alice and Lila become soul mates and Alice says many of her classmates who are in London studying are barely missed. She has the idea she wants to study law and notes that it impresses people and so she says it often. She hears from Maria Flores, who wears a leg brace from her suicide attempt and quotes Kahlil Gibran who wrote that all are prisoners, but some have windows. Alice says it's years before she realizes that if either of them had a window, it was Maria. She says that Maria will "wear" her rape forever.

Alice's mother is trying some drugs to help her panic attacks and cites Alice's strength as the reason for her renewed courage. Alice is interested in a boy named Steve Sherman, who Alice tells about the rape and doesn't shy away. She notes that she has ways of getting through the sexual encounters, such as focusing on a patch of his white skin or reminding herself that Greg Madison is in Attica. Alice begins work on the literary magazine, "The Review," and gets second place for her poem, "Conviction," along with the advice that a topic such as rape would never cultivate large, general audiences.

Alice and Steve share an apartment over the coming summer and her mother accepts it because it means Alice has a "security guard" always on hand. Alice soon becomes less enamored with Steve. She says that when she tells a rape joke, Steve reminds her that it's not funny. Another boy she knows from her Ecstatic Religion course - Marc - laughs. He was raised by a mother who was dumped for a younger woman, has a sister who is a lawyer and another who is a lesbian. He admits that he was warned that Alice had been raped. She says that he's a "revelation" in his attitude, and it's Lila who soon asks how many "security guards" Alice needs.

One night, Alice takes photos of Lila - cheesy poses with lots of makeup. Alice says it will be the "before" photos, just like those taken of her the night before her rape. Alice attends a poetry reading the following night but leaves early, her stomach in knots, and finds police at the house she shares with Lila who has been raped. Lila doesn't want to see Alice at first, and Alice realizes that Lila can't separate Alice the friend from Alice the rape survivor. At the hospital, the process is plodding. At the police station, many officers remember Alice because she is the victim in one of the few successfully prosecuted rape cases.

The girls go to Marc's apartment. Lila asks Alice if she'd ever asked their landlord to fix her bedroom window - the window the attacker used to gain entrance. Alice feels the accusation and says that she asked, but that he never did. Once they are in bed, Alice asks if Lila wants to be held, but she says she doesn't want to be touched. When Lila's father arrives, he cries on Alice's shoulder. Later he is nasty, telling Alice's mother that Lila is nothing like Alice, and they don't want Alice around. Alice says the message becomes clear - that Alice has a contagious disease.

When Lila returns to campus for GREs, she is presented a photo lineup that includes Madison who remains in Attica. When Lila comes out of the room, she announces that she won't be following up on the case. Alice says the police believe Lila's rapist wanted revenge. He raped her on Alice's bed, knew Alice by name as well as her schedule and where she kept her tip money from her waitress job. Alice says that it seems clear



Madison had friends willing to take the revenge for him. Alice begins to have nightmares and says she believes everyone lives with threats.

As school starts back, Alice tries to get her waitress job back, but she isn't hired because of the police questions following Lila's rape. Lila and Alice room together briefly, but it doesn't work out. Lila's friends are cold toward Alice, and Lila refuses to speak to her until the day she tells Alice that Alice had been right, that sex is great, and she's been fitted for a diaphragm. Alice says she didn't realize until later that Lila had been doing what she herself had done after her own rape - proving she was tough.

Alice wanders after college, spending time in Houston, hates the town, drops out of school and spends too much time with heroin and other drugs. New York is much the same. She lands an adjunct teaching job and loses herself in the miserable lives of her students, some who have been raped. Then she reads a book about post traumatic stress that includes a quote from an article she wrote. She realizes that she's selecting dangerous neighborhoods as the places she feels most comfortable and goes to California, to a shabby ranch where she works as caretaker for awhile. After having had sex one night with a partner who was also a good friend, both note that it was "almost virginal." Alice says that, of course, was impossible as a physical matter, but that she now realizes that "both hell and hope lie in the palm of my hand."

Alice says that it seems she is constantly taking the spot light from her sister, even when she doesn't mean to. She also notes that her mother fears a panic attack during the trial and so doesn't want to come, and her father fears that the trial will interfere with his annual trip to Europe. Alice admits that they each have reasons, but she seems to feel that they are ultimately nothing more than excuses. She also seems disappointed in herself that she needs them. Years later, when Mary is working in a garden shop despite her masters degree in Arabic, she'll say that everything comes easily to Alice. Alice, who seems to have gained some strength of self by then, says that she cuts her sister out of her life at that moment.

Alice points out Madison to her father, who seems disappointed that he's not a toweringly large man. Alice says that he's wide, and a court officer named Murphy says that Madison is "all muscle." Murphy points out that by closing the courtroom, Madison's father also can't be allowed in the courtroom. Alice says this is the first time she's thought about the fact that Greg Madison has a father. She seems to have made him into an animal with no friends, family, and life outside the fact that he is her rapist.

Alice describes an argument with her family that summer over yard work that escalates to her screaming about Mary's opportunity to live in D.C. and to travel. She then says that she later refused to talk about it, and that she was "putting the rape and the trial behind" her. It seems that in Alice's mind, her entire life has been caught up in the rape and trial. Just as she once seemed incapable of realizing that her rapist was a real person, she seems to have lost her own identity to be anything other than the rape victim.



At a movie theater, Alice and Lila see "First Blood" and laugh hysterically at the exaggerations. When the movie ends, the manager is angry, saying that they have disrespected the soldiers who served in Vietnam. Alice says that they were laughing at the "machismo," but they are told never to return to the theater. As Lila tries to see his point, Alice takes it as just another situation in which she is confronted by a man and loses because she is female.



Characters

Alice Sebold

Alice is a college freshman when she is attacked and raped in a park near her dorm room on a May night as school is ending for the semester. The attack lasts for more than a hour and ends with her pleading for her life, begging her rapist not to kill her and promising that she won't tell. She reports the attack, vowing to follow through, though most rape victims don't. There is no action on the case throughout the summer months and it's actually Alice herself who encounters the man who raped her on a street near the college the following October. She and the rapist see each other and she says that he seems to believe himself powerful. Alice's determination to see her rapist brought to justice becomes clear when she calls the police again, renews her claim, and provides enough additional information to bring Gregory Madison to trial.

Alice continues to show her strength of character, though she also hides much of the trauma behind a façade of bravery. She tells jokes about rape, makes off-color comments and generally does her best to make sure everyone knows she remains the same person. When her best friend is raped, Alice feels betrayed by the fact that the friend not only shuts Alice out, but refuses to follow through with police prosecution. Alice says years pass before she realizes that she (Alice) was suffering from post traumatic stress.

Alice's Mother

Among Alice's most descriptive pieces of information about her mother is her tendency to have anxiety attacks. These attacks are called "flaps" by the family and are a major part of their lives. When the attacks occur, Alice's mother begins rubbing her breast bone, is short of breath, and depends on her daughters to literally lead her around. Alice's sister, Mary, comes to be angry about the attacks, leaving Alice to take her mother's side. Alice says she never wanted to admit that her mother was anything less than perfect. Alice's mother was strict and held her daughters to strict codes - wearing a dress to school at least one day each week, for example. As Alice takes the witness' seat in the trial, she notes that her mother had drilled into her the need to straighten her skirt as she sat.

After Alice is raped, she calls for her mother to come get her. When she arrives, Alice says that - for once - she didn't worry about the toll the events were taking on her mother. Later, Alice's mother begins taking medication for her attacks and says that she has the courage to do so because she's seen how strong Alice was throughout her ordeal.



Bud Sebold

Alice's father. He is a professor and not a highly-affectionate man. Alice notes that she never saw him kiss her mother except once when she demanded it, and that kiss was a chaste peck on the forehead. It's Bud who questions how Alice could have allowed the rapist to have his way when he no longer had the knife. Alice notes that it's also her father who comes to fear blacks because that was the race of the rapist. Bud attends court with Alice during the trial but isn't allowed into the courtroom. He seems an ineffectual man who loves his family but is unable to demonstrate his feelings.

Lila

Lila lives down the hall from Alice at Haven Hall. Lila is more reserved than Alice, and the two soon become fast friends, eventually rooming together in off-campus housing. When Lila is raped, she asks Alice if Alice had requested the landlord fix the bedroom window. Alice hears the blame in Lila's voice. Lila is soon presented with a police photo line-up. Alice says Gregory Madison's picture is among the mix, though he is in prison. Alice says she never knows whether Lila recognized her attacker and whether she told the police if she did. Lila refuses to help in the prosecution and her case is dropped. Lila later acts out, telling Alice how great sex is, and seems to be on the road to the same destructive behaviors that hold Alice.

Mary Alice

Alice's friend who arrives at the hospital and remains with her as the doctor performs the examination, gathers evidence, and stitches Alice's wounds. Mary Alice is pretty and popular and the two girls grow apart because of that.

Ken Childs

The boy who had a crush on Alice and who had spent the evening taking her picture on the night of the rape. Ken remains Alice's friend following the rape, though he tells her that he's coping by equating it to a broken leg that will heal. When Alice calls on him for help after her October encounter with the rapist, she finds him unable to cope.

Father Breuninger

The priest of the church Alice and her family attends, St. Peter's Episcopal Church. Alice calls him a "amiable" man who has around him a "devoted congregation." His son, Paul, falls from his father's teachings and winds up in serious trouble. It's Father Breuninger who announces to the congregation that Alice had been attacked. Though he doesn't detail the fact that she's been raped, it takes little imagination for them to figure out what happened to her.



Tess Gallagher

Alice's literature teacher at Syracuse. On the first morning of the early class, Gallagher sings an Irish ballad, telling the class that if she can sing at eight-thirty in the morning, they can be on time. Tess goes with Alice for a preliminary hearing on the rape and takes her to lunch later. It's Tess who tells Alice that the key to writing about the rape is to narrow her scope, and gives her the opening line of "Conviction."

Gregory Madison

The man who rapes Alice. Madison is a black man who maintains his innocence. He calls on a friend who looks very much like him to stand with him in the police lineup, which effectively causes Alice to fail to identify Madison. Madison has two brothers, also both in trouble, and has been raised by his father. When Madison meets Alice on the streets, he's confident, certain that he got away with rape and that Alice won't tell.

Gail Uebelhoer

The assistant district attorney who helps prosecute Greg Madison. Alice notes that this woman - one among a staff comprised mainly of men - becomes her hope of success and survival as she enters the tangled legal system. She's tall, about five foot ten, has short black hair and is obviously intelligent. By the time Alice's case comes to trial, Gail is pregnant and delivers a healthy boy about the same time as the trial wraps up.

Maria Flores

A girl in Alice's poetry class, Maria refuses to comment on Alice's poem about her attacker and later jumps out of a window but survives. It's reported as an accident, then as an attempted suicide. In the hospital, Maria attempts it again. Tess tells Alice to visit Maria, which she does. There, Maria says that Alice's poem had awakened her own rage at the repeated rapes from men of her family. Maria says that her mother doesn't want to hear it. She says that she will never have Alice's opportunity to confront her attackers, and that she hopes Alice wins. Alice says the two immediately connect and that they even joke that jumping out a window is an extreme comment to Alice's poem.



Objects/Places

The Pink Hair Tie

An object Alice sees in the tunnel where she's raped. She comes to view this as a symbol of the atrocity against her and a young woman who was murdered there.

Syracuse University

Where Alice is attending college as a freshman when she is raped.

Marion Dorm

The dorm where Alice lives during her freshman year prior to her rape.

Thornden Park

Where Alice is raped.

Spring Mill Farms

The housing development where Alice and her family lives.

Haven Hall

The dorm where Alice lives when she returns to Syracuse as a sophomore.

Hotel Syracuse

Where Alice and her father stay during the rape trial.

Attica

Where Gregory Madison begins serving his sentence for rape.

Houston

Where Alice attends - and drops out of - graduate school.

New York

Where Alice lives after Houston.



Themes

Survival

Alice herself says that she looks her attacker in the eyes and knows she's looking into the eyes of the man who will kill her. She pleads for her life but realizes that isn't going to save her. She then turns attention to doing everything the attacker demands to save her life. When her father later asks how she could have allowed herself to be raped when the attacker no longer had a knife inside the tunnel, Alice tries to explain to him that she would have done anything to assure her survival. She also says that some women say they would rather die than be raped. Alice's will to survive makes that an impossible situation. She says that she would absolutely rather be raped repeatedly than to die.

Alice shares that will to live with others, including a woman named Myra. Myra and her husband, both elderly, were attacked by some young men who left Myra tied and believing that her husband was dead. They warned Myra not to leave her house, but she does so as soon as she can. She and another woman, an "old maid" named Peggy, each tell Alice that she's strong, and encourage her to face her fears and to do what Alice has already determined she must do - survive.

Coming of Age

Alice ages physically over the course of the story, but that's arguably not the most important aging that occurs. She also ages in regard to understanding her family, herself, and her reactions to the rape that changed all their lives.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of this maturing is that Alice spends most of her young childhood placating someone. One evening after the rape, Alice is sent upstairs to talk to her sister, Mary, who has locked herself in the bathroom. Alice says this isn't an uncommon occurrence and notes that her sister needs Alice to talk to her now. It's a clear picture of the family dynamics that Alice was raped and is still sent to settle her sister's tantrum. Later, Mary is living at home with a masters degree in Arabic that hasn't produced a wonderful job - she's working at a garden center. She says Alice won't understand because things have always come easy for Alice. Alice says that at that moment, she washes her hands of her sister's hysterics.

Coping

The ability to cope with her rape is what most people believe makes Alice strong. What she will discover many years later is that she wasn't really coping, but was covering up the real issues and problems that were facing her. For example, Alice makes jokes about rape, which anger her boyfriend who says they aren't funny. Alice herself can't possibly think it's funny, but wants to put on a tough exterior for the world to see. That



same mechanism is seen when Alice tells her father that she's had nothing in her mouth for the past twenty-four hours except "a cracker and a cock." She says she knows it will shock them but says it's important that they know she is still the same tough daughter they raised. Alice does eventually lash out about the unfairness of the rape.

Alice isn't alone in her coping mechanisms. Her mother seems to cope by having panic attacks, making herself unable to go forward with whatever situation she is facing. Her father hides behind his teaching, travel schedule and education. It seems that Alice's sister, Mary, seeks a foreign language degree for exactly the same reasons.

Style

Perspective

The book is presented in first person with a limited view. Because the book is the story of a woman's rape and the impact of that event on her life, family and friends, the first person limited view is the only possible option. The reader's perspective is reliable in that the events happened to her and she seems to relate those without holding back. The book is divided with exposition and dialog. Both are relevant and seem consistent with the time and situation. It seems likely that there are some sections that are taken from court transcripts and police records, though there is additional narrative included in those sections.

Tone

The book is written in an easy-to-read style that flows well. It seems that the overall tone is hopeful though there are periods of despair. While the author obviously endured many trials and rough times, she seems to focus on the survival. It's noteworthy that she doesn't dwell on the stares and cruelty of others, though she mentions it briefly in several places. It seems reasonable that the taboo of being the rape victim during this time period would have made those jabs more cruel than portrayed by the author. It's left to the reader to decide the significance of this.

The writing is fluid, moving easily from scene to scene with little ponderous explanation or description. While there are descriptions of the rape itself, the terminology and wording is not likely to offend most readers.

Structure

The book is written in thirteen chapters with an extensive "Aftermath." The book does not flow in chronological order but includes a number of flashbacks to Alice's childhood. Through these flashbacks - presented in the form of memories - Alice explains much of her family dynamics and the events of her childhood that shaped her life prior to the rape.

The chapters flow well, seldom slowing in the action for anything other than Alice's memories. The Afterward seems to flip through years and events Alice would prefer to forget. She briefly explains drugs and men as she struggles to cope with the aftermath of the rape and her failure to deal adequately with it after it happened.



Quotes

"When I came to, I knew I was staring up into the eyes of the man who would kill me. At that moment I signed myself over to him. I was convinced that I would not live." Chapter one, Page 6

"They were watching my life as if it were a movie. In their version of the story, where did they fit? I would find out over the years that in a few versions, I was their best friend. Knowing a victim is like knowing a celebrity. Particularly when the crime is clouded in taboo." Chapter One, Page 25

"I was trying to prove to them and to myself that I was still who I had always been. I was beautiful, if fat. I was smart, if loud. I was good, if ruined." - Alice on her reason for dressing up the morning after the rape, Chapter Two, Page 29

"Your sister has a dorm room for you to see. Your mother has a panic attack to attend. Your father, well, he's being ignorant, and you can shoulder the burden of educating him." Chapter Four, Page 55

"I knew exactly what had happened. But can you speak those sentences to the people you love? Tell them you were urinated on or that you kissed back because you did not want to die?" Chapter Four, Page 61

"What Dr. Graham had said came from a feminist in her thirties. Someone, I thought, who should have known better. But I was learning that no one - females included - knew what to do with a rape victim." Chapter Five, Page 78

"In my mind, the rapist had murdered me on the day of the rape. Now I was going to murder him back. Make my hate large and whole." Chapter Seven, Page 113

"His friend gives you a look that's scary. He can tell when you're standing in front of the mirror and he psyches you out. Meanwhile, the suspect looks down like he doesn't even know where or why he's there. Like he got lost on the way to the circus." - On Alice's failure to identify her attacker in a lineup, Chapter Nine, Page 140

"My mother still has an enlargement framed and mounted from that day. I used to wish that she would take it down. But it commemorates an important day in our family: my sister's graduation, my rape trial." Chapter Ten, Page 163



"Gregory Madison had a father. It was a simple fact but it stayed with me. Two fathers, both of them helpless to control their children's lives, would sit out the trial in their separate hallways." Chapter Eleven, Page 172

"I was guilty for the race of my rapist, guilty for the lack of representation of them in the legal profession in the City of Syracuse, guilty that he was the only black man in the room." Chapter Eleven, Page 195

"'I've been in this business for thirty years,' he said. 'You are the best rape witness I've ever seen on the stand.' I would hold on to that moment for years." Chapter Eleven, Page 198

"The trial seemed to have provided a very solid and heavy back door to the whole thing. Anyone who had actually entered that house with me, looked or walked into the rooms there, was very happy to finally leave the place." Chapter Twelve, Page 203

"Morally, my mother was able to adjust to the idea of my living with a man because, as she said, 'it's nice to think you have a built-in security guard.'" Chapter Twelve, Page 209

"Because I was white. Because I grew up in the suburbs. Because without a name attached to my story, it remains fiction, not fact." Aftermath, Page 235

"Cocaine made me sick. I went into paralytic cramps once on the floor of a club called the Pyramid. Rastas and white girls danced around my curled-up body. I did it a few more times just to double-check." Aftermath, Page 235

Topics for Discussion

What does Alice believe about the number of people who will know about her rape?
What does she come to learn about the number of people who know?

What is it that seems to drive Alice forward as the prosecution of Gregory Madison continues?

How does Alice discover the name of her attacker? How does she handle that encounter and what parts will later come under fire?

What is Alice's role in her family? How does that evolve and change after the rape?

Compare Alice's response to her rape to that of Lila. What is Alice's role or potential role in Lila's rape? How does that impact the relationship between the girls?

What does Alice write on her legs above the hem of her skirt on the day she appears in court to testify against Madison? What do these words mean?

Describe Alice's attack. What pieces of information make an impact on her at the time?

Who is Mary? Bud? Mary Alice? Tree? Marc? Steve? Tess?