

The Last of the Menu Girls Study Guide

The Last of the Menu Girls by Denise Chavez

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Plot Summary

In a semi-autobiographical series of short vignettes, author Denise Chavez captures the life of a typical Hispanic-American teen, searching, as are all adolescents, for purpose, self-identity, and adulthood. Rocio Esquibel is an ordinary girl, living on an ordinary street, in an ordinary town in southern New Mexico. She has, however, extraordinary dreams, both literally and figuratively. Her dreams of the "blue room," from which she can fly into the universe, capture her desire to become something other than her mother, a school teacher whose husband has left the family and who does not find much joy and enthusiasm in life. Each short story allows the reader to follow Rocio from early adolescence into adulthood, her relationships with her mother, sister, absent father, others in her neighborhood, and a number of interesting personalities as she pursues her college degree. She observes her world of other Hispanic teen girls, attempting at times to emulate them, but finding herself disappointed and uncomfortable in their worlds. She experiences solid growth through a position as a "menu girl" at a local hospital, experiencing the emotional pain of others, and then continues onto college as a drama major, where she is involved in an unfulfilled love relationship with a graduate student, becomes an assistant teacher in the department's drama program for young children, and experiences the successes and failures that most college students do as they attempt to live on their own. At one point, a mysterious illness, perhaps psychosomatic, renders her almost dysfunctional and requires a two-week leave from classes in order to heal. Returning home after college graduation, Rocio discovers that life with her mother and sister will cause stagnation, and, ultimately, that she must move away from her childhood home to northern New Mexico in order to pursue her self-identified vocation as a writer. While it is not revealed to the reader whether Rocio experiences ultimate success in her profession, one cannot help but understand that she has found herself, that she has become the woman she wishes to have become, and that she has a contentment that all people find when they love what they do. Against the backdrop of the rich cultural traditions and values of Hispanic-Americans, author Chavez has painted a beautiful portrait of the southwestern Hispanic life and culture and the universal struggles faced by all who pass through adolescence into adulthood.

Willow Game

Willow Game Summary

Rocio and other children on the block have divided their street into "up" and "down" by the marking-off tree that stands in a vacant lot. "Down" is the location of Rocio's home and familiar neighbors. "Up" is in the direction of town and houses of families with which Rocio is not too familiar. There is an apricot tree, in another vacant lot, which marks the beginning of the "up" section and is a favorite of all the neighborhood children. The third tree, a willow, is in the "down" part, a tree with the most character and that provides the backdrop for childhood gatherings and family photos.

As the children grow, the trees remain; Rocio's cousin moves away; two other boys grow up and become wealthy; and the Athertons continue to live next door. This family is a bit intimidating to Rocio and her sister, Mercy, as Mr. Atherton, looking lean and mean, works on his lawn with every spare moment and as Ricky, the older son, seems to have an "animal meanness", with no remorse. Ricky begins to systematically destroy the willow tree, small branches at first, then larger one, until the tree is dead. Later, Ricky is sent to a home for disturbed boys. Rocio, her sister, and their mother Nieves grieve for the tree, perhaps more than for the father and husband who has moved to the northern part of New Mexico quite some time ago. Rocio's mother plants a new baby willow.

Willow Game Analysis

The reader is introduced to a family of three - Rocio, the narrator, her sister, Mercy, and their mother Nieves. The family is clearly Hispanic, living in southern New Mexico, with an absent father, and the girls appear to have a rather normal childhood, playing with neighborhood children and attending school. The trees are perhaps symbolic, marking the street to divide the wealthier people with finer homes past the "up" tree by the "marking off" tree, and the willow tree, which represents both the less wealthy section of the block but also that part of the street with the most "character". On this section of the block, it appears that both Latino and Anglo families live together, and the cultural mix may be richer. The destruction of the willow by a disturbed neighbor boy, though painful, may symbolize the end to Rocio's childhood and the beginning of her adolescence to young adulthood period, a time of change, choices, and new beginnings with the planting of a new young willow.

The Closet

The Closet Summary

Nieves Esquibel's closet holds many treasures, among them a luminescent, sliding picture of Jesus, one side as a man and one as a shadow in a shroud, a wedding photograph, and the numerous shoes she wears as a teacher. Nieves had originally been married to a fine "catch", Juan Luz Contreras, but he died when their first child was just three days old by drinking acid, under suspicious circumstances, perhaps the mistake of the local druggist. He was the father of Ronelia, Rocio's eldest sister, who is grown and has moved away. The wedding photo is of Nieves and him. Shelves in this closet contain old records, teaching mementos, and home movies of the children in front of the willow tree.

It is August, and Rocio and Mercy are supposed to be taking an imposed nap. Instead, they are exploring mother's closet and contemplating family pictures on the wall. Rocio's sleep, when it finally comes, involves recurring trips to the "gray room", an imaginary room below the house. From there, Rocio is often transported up into the "blue room" and then into the sky, flying into the universe. Here, she sees animals and hears formless spirits of dead relatives. Rocio tells Mercy about her two "rooms", but also explains that Mercy will have to find her own "rooms".

The bathroom closet is quite another matter - less fear-producing and filled with a large assortment of medicines, ointments, and towels, one set for guests only. Here, at sixteen, Rocio smokes and exhales out of the small window. The bathroom closet holds all the smells Rocio determines not to have in her adult life, for she will not be like her mother.

Rocio's own closet is an array of odors as well, including the sweatshirt of a boy named Johnny, who left it in the living room one Christmas. Rocio obviously has a crush on him and enjoys smelling his odor. There are two other closets in the home. The television room closet belongs to Ronelia and Nieves and is filled with history - prom dresses, mother's wedding gown, which Ronelia wore for her own wedding, and a variety of fur items and costumes. Two brides are encapsulized here. The living room closet houses a large umbrella but is primarily the "guest" closet, housing coats of visitors. Included here are boxes for birthday and Christmas gifts to be hidden, and bags of rummage to be donated to the poor in Mexico. The odors of this closet remind Rocio of the seasons - summer rains, winter cold, perfumes from holiday visitors, etc.

The Closet Analysis

Odors and item descriptions begin to complete the pictures of those who live in this household. Nieves is probably a religious person, but also one who has recorded her life by photos and mementos of importance. The information that her first husband died

horrifically, that her current husband has left the family, and that she is a teacher supporting her two daughters provides some insight into the apparent lack of joy and emotional "highs" in her personality. As the odors stimulate Rocio's contemplation of her current life, she vows to grow into adulthood differently, not becoming her mother, but rather finding joy and excitement.

Rocio's dreams appear to be symbolic of her current and future life as well. Her "gray room" connects to her current life - dull, standard, unfulfilling, and rather lacking in enthusiasm. Her "blue room", however, allows her to fly into the universe, a place of her future, where she may be free to be herself. It is important that, as she describes her rooms to Mercy, Rocio tells her younger sister that she must find her own rooms, her own path, as she moves toward adulthood.

Evening in Paris

Evening in Paris Summary

It is Christmas, 1960, and Rocio is at Woolworth's, shopping for her mother's gift. She has three dollars and spends the bulk on an "Evening in Paris" cologne set, which she is excited to be presenting to Nieves. As she looks at herself in the mirror at the cosmetics counter, she wishes she could be rich and beautiful and be spending an evening in Paris herself.

Like all Christmases, most of the packages under the tree are for Mother, from her students. These shall be carefully boxed up so that the girls may pick presents for their own teachers next year. The Christmas meal is a large roasted chicken, surrounded by typical Hispanic vegetables and empanadas. The kitchen holds many of mother's memories as well, on a shelf close to the table. Each item represents an incident or experience, including an ashtray of cigarette butts from their father's last visit.

As excited as Rocio is about her gift to mother, Nieves places the cologne set among the gifts from her students, and it later earns a place on the kitchen shelf, never to be used. The girls' gifts are not purchased, but, rather, unused gifts from previous years that have been packed away, and their mother can never remember which gifts she has given to which daughter in previous years. And so it goes on, year after year.

Evening in Paris Analysis

Again, the family dynamic plays out as the holiday of Christmas is celebrated. Nieves's idea of gift-giving means a complete recycling from the year before, never considering the possibility of purchasing something new for her daughters. Her practicality, frugality and stoicism is evident, as she packs away all gifts to be reused the following year, forgetting those that she has given her own daughters from year to year. Christmas is obviously a lackluster event in this household, and Rocio seems to resent it.

As Rocio purchases a "new" gift for her mother, she is obviously excited about the prospect of giving the cologne set - surely something her mother will use. Again, she contemplates a future far different from her mother's adult life, dreaming of being wealthy, carefree and spending an evening in Paris, enjoying new sounds, sights, and lifestyles. How disappointing for her when her mother simply places the cologne set on the kitchen shelf where it shall remain with other mementos of her life rather than taking it to her room to use.

Interestingly, there is no mention of the religious nature of the holiday, given that this is an obvious Catholic family. Though Mother appears to be religious in her lifestyle and actions, there is no mention of having gone to church or the fact that the holiday is the most important in the world of Christianity. Even the Christmas meal is un-festive - a

roasted chicken with Latino vegetables. The celebratory nature of the entire holiday is missing, and Rocio clearly speaks to this throughout the chapter.

Shooting Stars

Shooting Stars Summary

Growing up, Rocio spends summers in Texas with her mother's relatives, an aunt, two cousins, and her grandmother. Here, Rocio meets Eloisa, a distant relative who is sixteen and with whom she is able to move about the small town freely, for long walks and conversations. Rocio idolizes Eloisa, until, one evening, in the movie theatre with little sister Mercy, she sees Eloisa with other friends, smoking and allowing a man to paw at her shoulders. The illusion of Eloisa as the perfect beautiful virgin is shattered.

Back home in New Mexico, Rocio encounters Diana, a more pure Eloisa, an older "sister" who Rocio can easily idolize. She is kind, beautiful, and a virgin, a wonderful mentor who is full of happiness and zest for life. Diana's one fault is her inability to speak well, and Rocio's other friends are dismissive and critical for this fault. Diana eventually marries her boyfriend Ruben, and they begin a cleaning service, having two boys as well. Diana loses her beauty, and Rocio is dismayed.

On another street in her town lives the Marquez family, obviously wealthy. A beautiful mother with two daughters, Mary Alice and Josie live there with Mr. Marquez. Josie is of particular interest to Rocio, being closer in age, and Rocio is impressed with Josie's ability to accentuate all of her physical features and beautiful figure. Rocio longs to be like Josie or Josie's best friend, Barbara, who is not as attractive but who, nevertheless, is able to present herself handsomely enough to eventually marry well. Rocio contemplates these women - Eloisa, Diana, Josie and Barbara, wondering whom she should emulate. In this contemplation, however, Rocio comes to realize that she is a valuable, beautiful person on her own, one who needs no other after which to model herself.

Shooting Stars Analysis

Rocio is attempting to find her identity, and begins by analyzing the physical beauty of other girls her age. As an adolescent, she obviously sees this as the most important aspect of a female, the single most important factor that determines their futures. She becomes disenchanted, however, as these girls do not live up to Rocio's other values, the internal ones, that truly define who a person is. In the end, Rocio realizes that her own inner beauty is as significant as the outer beauty of other girls she knows and comes to an understanding that she has worth and value just as she is. Rocio is obviously maturing in significant ways and realizes that her own individuality sets her apart from others in good ways.

The last of the Menu Girls

The last of the Menu Girls Summary

When Rocio's great aunt died in her home several years before, Rocio had decided not to go into the field of medicine. She remembers the horrible experience—the terrible odors of death and the loss of Great Aunt Eutilio's mind as she played an imaginary piano and returned to a childhood state. She wonders why, now, she has taken this job in the hospital, as a food worker. Mr. Smith, the dietitian at Altavista Memorial Hospital, is a "gnome-looking" man who takes great pride in his menus. Rocio, who will be working for the summer before going off to college, will be a "menu girl", a position that involves distributing menus to all patients on regular diets so that they may select their choices for each of their meals.

Arlene Rutschman, a girl Rocio has known from school, is the trainer, and although Rocio has never liked her much, she begins to see Arlene in a new light. The job, however, is clearly "dumb". Because camaraderie is now developing between the two girls, Rocio decides that she will stick it out as a menu girl and moves easily into the tasks involved. When Arlene takes a one-week vacation, Rocio is fully in charge of the menu duties and clearly grows in her position. She becomes much more familiar with the patients, each of whom presents unique needs and challenges as well as emotional issues related to their physical conditions. Another former high school classmate begins to teach Rocio some simple medical procedures, and soon she is able to take blood pressures and temperatures, keeping charts up to date.

When Arlene returns to announce that she has found a new position, Rocio's hours are immediately increased; however, as Mr. Smith decides that regular aides can assume the menu duties, Rocio, the last of the "menu girls", is moved to the surgical ward where she assists patients following surgeries. As the summer progresses, she becomes more and more caught up in the patients' personal lives, especially an illegal by the name of Juan, who, caught up in a barroom brawl, has had his nose bitten off. Rocio is distressed to hear two nurses, Rosario and Erminia, discuss the fact that he has gotten what he deserves and should not be receiving free medical care in America.

With fall, Rocio leaves this job to begin college, only to return as a patient following a serious car accident. She is the most popular patient, of course, but is able to see hospitalization from the patient's view and longs only to go home to her own bedroom.

The last of the Menu Girls Analysis

This vignette develops Rocio's personality as a young adult and certainly her movement toward self-discovery. At first, she sees her summer job as "dumb" and is not particularly thrilled to be working with a former classmate whom she does not particularly like. As the first weeks move forward, however, she comes to know Arlene and, outside of the

school setting, they are able to develop a friendship as more mature young ladies. The high school "culture" has disappeared for her.

Up until this point, the reader has not seen much emotion from Rocio, and one wonders if she is to be rather more like her mother after all. The experiences with sick and dying people, however, have clearly "moved" her, as she cares for a beautiful woman who has suffered a miscarriage or an elderly patient who is clearly dying. As she gets to know patients individually, she begins to understand some basic truths about human nature. Individuals have a variety of emotional responses to serious events and crises in their lives, ranging from extreme sadness to horrible anger, and the empathetic side of her personality is exposed. She realizes, in fact, that it is not the odors or blood or illness itself that prohibits her from pursuing a medical career. It is her own emotional responses to the pain and suffering of others that distresses and weighs upon her. She is particularly upset with the response of nurses and aides to Juan, the illegal, a man with a devastating injury for whom no one but her has sympathy. Rocio has experienced, perhaps for the first time, the prejudice that "legal" Hispanics hold for those who have come to this country illegally.

Space is a Solid

Space is a Solid Summary

Rocio is studying drama and working as an assistant in the department, teaching in a children's drama class and caring for the costume room. In the class is Karie Lee Threadgill, a sweet young girl who is conflicted about her mother's strict sense of racial separation and unsympathetic attitude toward those less fortunate. In the class as well is Arlin, a young boy with no arm, and Ginita, a timid child who is clearly withdrawn. They are directed to become molecules, a task at which Arlin is particularly good, rolling around the floor and bumping into other students. The next task is to pretend that space is a solid and that they must slice through it with their entire bodies. As the students continue with the class, Rocio proceeds to the wardrobe room.

Rocio hates her weekly task of folding, laundering, and mending costumes, but it is part of her assistantship, and she needs the money. As well, this semester she is struggling through a speech class with an "evil" professor, Lorna Preston. One bright spot in her life is boyfriend Loudon Reily, a graduate student working on his thesis. She and Loudon attend the cast party following a production of the *Crucible*, a gala affair at the lavish home of Lorna Preston. Rocio is somewhat concerned that she is not feeling well and that her hands are intermittently turning blue; Loudon seems unconcerned about the condition. Rocio is currently living with Loudon but looking for a place she can afford on her own.

During her search for living space, Rocio stops at a garage sale and encounters the mother of Kari Lee, Nita Wembley. Nita is managing apartments in buildings owned by her and her husband, and is selling items that have been left by departing tenants. She is a rather self-absorbed woman who spends an inordinate amount of time bemoaning the fact that she has to work to maintain the apartments, has had a child so late in life, and has suffered through breast cancer, but also brags about her husband's lucrative plumbing business. When both Rocio and Nita realize that Rocio teaches Kari Lee, the common interest results in Nita renting an apartment to Rocio, which the latter can hardly afford.

Rocio is not particularly content with her current life and fancies herself in love with another friend of Loudon's, Joseph Pappas, who lives in one of Wembley's apartments in the same building. Recently, Loudon has been working hard on his thesis and has had little time for Rocio, who is feeling tired most of the time and whose hands continue to sporadically turn blue. She does have a cat, however, whom she adores and who is currently having kittens, though this is against her landlord's rules. Often late with the rent, Rocio must hand deliver it to Mrs. Wembley and then suffer the lengthy diatribes of self-pity that Nita continually verbalizes. Further, when Nita discovers the cats, she launches a verbal attack on Rocio, calling her "trash" and threatening to call Mr. Trevor, head of the drama department and inform him that Rocio is unfit to be a student or a teacher.

Mrs. Wembley, indeed, has a great deal of influence within the drama department, it is revealed, as she and her husband contribute a substantial amount to its maintenance. Fearful that her status may be in jeopardy, Rocio is assisted by Loudon in locating a cheaper, rather depressing smaller apartment. She has also found homes for the kittens, and that relieves her stress somewhat, though her illness is not improving. Rocio's mother believes that she has had a nervous breakdown. Whatever the cause, Rocio takes sick leave from school for two weeks in an effort to heal.

Space is a Solid Analysis

Rocio is getting a healthy dose of selfish and self-absorbed people, namely Nita Wembley and Loudon. Mrs. Wembley can speak of nothing but her difficulties in managing apartments, caring for a young child during middle age and having lost her breasts to cancer. Despite her obvious wealth, she is the sort of woman who is unable to see the positive aspects of her life and appears to be unable to muster even the least bit of gratitude that she is alive, healthy, and able to enjoy a lovely lifestyle.

For his part, Loudon is focused solely on his thesis, and, as Rocio's physical condition appears to worsen, he appears to be more inconvenienced than concerned. One evening, in fact, when Rocio is simply too tired to go home and spends the night at Loudon's, he is unwilling to go check on her cats. Rocio, as a result, must do it herself before struggling just to get to her classes.

Rocio's illness is certainly mysterious, and it is surprising that she has not sought medical attention of any sort. While her mother believes that she has had a nervous breakdown, this diagnosis does not explain the blue hands, certainly a possible sign of circulatory difficulties.

Compadre

Compadre Summary

Rocio has moved back home, following her completion of college, and is rather continually arguing with her mother over the conditions of the home. There is clutter everywhere and no room in the freezer for even a tray of ice. Regino Suarez, the perennial handyman, called "compadre" by Nieves, continues to maintain the yard. It is hot and tempers are short as Rocio argues with her mother and sister and takes lukewarm glasses of water out to Regino.

Regino, born in Mexico, has been in town as long as Rocio can remember and has a large family. He lives in the shoddier north part of town which residents like to call "Little Oklahoma"; however, Regino has a large home that he has beautified by his own labor. North and east of the Suarez home is a worse section of town, primarily African-American in population.

In the fall of each year, Nieves, Rocio and Mercy drive to Regino's home to deliver used clothing and other items. They are always happily welcomed by the girls and their mother. On this occasion, however, Mrs. Suarez reveals that Regino has left the family and is living in town with another woman across town. Nieves believes she can speak to this other woman and convince her to give up Regino, but her trip to the woman's apartment is fruitless - she will not open the door. Eventually, Regino returns to his family, when his lover contracts cancer, and he continues his work for Rocio's mother. The current project is the installation of a tiled fountain in the yard, a project that consumes the entire spring, with a finished product that is not perfect but is certainly enjoyed by the birds.

Occasionally, Rocio's father comes for a visit. This time, he catches up on the family, learning that Rocio is a teacher and that Nieves is giving much of his clothing away to Regino. He is angry, although the clothing is old and unused for years. Rocio and her father spend some time together, but most of it is spent with her father complaining about his clothes being given away and that fact that Regino lives in such a large house.

By fall, the tables have turned on Regino, as his wife and children have moved to Montana, home of their eldest daughter, who has married a serviceman. Their situation is not particularly pleasant, as one daughter is now pregnant and the son is drinking and divorcing his wife. Regino has moved into a duplex, with government rent assistance, and is clearly aging and unable to complete all of the work Nieves assigns to him. Still, he arrives and does what he can, using a younger cousin to help when necessary. Nieves keeps him on, knowing that he needs the money.

Rocio and Mercy have both moved to the northern part of the state. Mercy is married, with children of her own, and Rocio has become a writer. Nieves encourages Rocio to

write about her own life, specifically her family, for there are so many stories to tell. Nieves believes that a novel like this could be another *Gone With the Wind*, a favorite of Rocio's. Rocio changes the subject.

Compadre Analysis

This final chapter completes Rocio's sojourn into adulthood. The chapters in the lives of her other family members are closing as well. The reader is finally introduced to Rocio's father through his brief visit, and he appears to be another self-centered individual in her life. That his greater concern is for his clothing, rather than his daughter's life or his dying uncle, says a great deal about his character. Further, he appears to be a bit jealous of the relationship between Nieves and Regino, who have obviously developed a closeness that revolves around care and concern for one another as opposed to a love relationship. This is perhaps a relationship that he does not have as he also ages. Mercy has married, as is probably expected, and Rocio is moving toward her true mission - writing.

Characters

Rocio Esquibel

The Last of the Menu Girls is the story of Rocio Esquibel, as she grows up in southern New Mexico, living with her mother, Nieves, and her sister, Mercy. Rocio's father has left the family quite some time ago, and she has an older stepsister from her mother's first marriage, whom she rarely sees. Rocio's tale begins as a young adolescent, growing up in a small town, clearly divided into sections based upon socioeconomic status. She has a rather lackluster and stern upbringing and dreams of becoming someone extraordinary, an adult who can accomplish great things and become someone other than those she sees all around her. She observes other girls her age and, at times, attempts to emulate their styles, ultimately realizing that she is destined for a different future. During the summer between high school and college, she works in a local hospital and gains solid perspective into the lives and emotions of a variety of co-workers and patients. As she moves onto college as a drama major, additional experiences shape her development, including a love relationship with a rather self-absorbed and inconsiderate young man and a negative, self-indulgent landlord. She emerges from college to return home, only to find that she can no longer remain in the physical or emotional place of her childhood. She must move on, in order to pursue her identity, and ultimately moves to the northern part of the state, becoming a writer.

Nieves Esquibel

One of the few developed characters, Nieves is perhaps the most tragic of the novel's characters. As a young woman, she met and married her true love, only to lose him to death three days following the birth of their daughter. She re-married and had two other daughters, Rocio and Mercy, but that husband left the family, returning only for an occasional visit. Nieves is a school teacher and lives a life of stoicism, frugality, and lack of any zest for life. Her one great quality is a sense of mission to help those less fortunate. Thus, she bags up clothing and items to send to the poor in Mexico, donates large amounts of clothing and other household items to the large family of her handyman, and provides for her own children as best she can. As the girls grow up and leave home, Nieves is left to herself. She has, however, developed a unique relationship with Regino Suarez, her handyman, whose family has left him, and one has the sense that they shall grow old taking care for one another in a purely platonic way.

Regino Suarez

Having lived in the town as long as Rocio can remember, Regino is probably an illegal alien who makes a living as a handyman throughout the small town. He has a wife and several children, all girls and one boy, and they live in a large government-subsidized home which he has worked hard to maintain and beautify. He is a hard worker who



ultimately finishes projects, though they are never quite perfect. During a mid-life crisis, Regino leaves his family and moves in with a younger woman in town, returning once she is diagnosed with cancer. In a karmic twist, his wife and children then leave him and move to Montana, forcing him to move into a small duplex and continue his handyman work to survive. As Regino ages, he and Nieves come to a bit of an understanding. Though he is too old to complete serious complicated projects, Nieves will keep him on, paying him for small jobs and providing him with other necessities for his survival.

Nita Wembley

Mother of a student in the children's drama class at the college, Nita and Rocio meet at Nita's garage sale, and Rocio ultimately rents an apartment from this woman. Nita obsesses on the negative aspects of her life - the hard work of managing her husband's properties, having a child to raise in middle-age, and her past breast cancer. She is the universal "complainer", despite her obvious opulent lifestyle that most would envy. She becomes furious when Rocio takes in a pregnant cat that has kittens and threatens to ruin Rocio's reputation in the drama department. Rocio quickly finds another, cheaper apartment.

Loudon Reily

Loudon is a graduate student, working on his thesis, when he and Rocio meet and become a couple. This is not a lasting relationship; first, because Rocio is continually developing crushes on his friends; and second, because he shows himself to be a rather self-absorbed individual. When Rocio becomes ill, Loudon sees her condition as rather an inconvenience to himself, as he focuses on his thesis. Once Rocio graduates, Loudon is no longer in her life.

Ricky Atherton

A boy in Rocio's neighborhood, Ricky is singularly responsible for destroying the willow tree that Rocio and her family love. As a youngster, Rocio sees him as simply mean; however, as a teenager, he is sent away to a home for disturbed youth.

Eloisa

Rocio meets Eloisa, a distant cousin, when she visits her mother's relatives in Texas during the summer. At first, Rocio idolizes Eloisa, who is more sophisticated, and is happy to traverse the town with her. Eloisa disappoints Rocio, however, as she is seen in the local movie theatre, smoking with her friends and allowing an older man to "paw" at her.

Mr. Smith

When Rocio takes a summer job at the local hospital, Mr. Smith, a small but kind man, becomes her boss. He is the head dietitian at the hospital, planning the daily menus that Rocio delivers to patients, who choose their meal components. Mr. Smith is proud of his work; ultimately, he determines that the regular aides can actually pass out the menus, and Rocio moves on to other work in the hospital. Mr. Smith loves tea and continually offers it to his workers.

Mercy

A largely undeveloped character, Mercy is Rocio's younger sister. Growing up, they obviously spend a great deal of time together, although one wonders how close they truly are. When Rocio returns home after college graduation, she and Mercy argue a great deal over the condition of the family home, but Mercy is not inclined to clean it up. Mercy eventually marries, has children, and moves to northern New Mexico.

Juan Luz Contrera

Though not a living character in the novel, Juan's presence is clearly felt. He was the first husband of Nieves and her obvious one true love. In Nieves's closet, there is a wedding picture that will remain there forever, showing Juan, who was considered a great "catch". He died about one year after marriage, having drunk acid, probably the result of the local druggist's mistake.

Objects/Places

The

The tree in a vacant lot that divides Rocio's street between the "up" and "down" sections.

The Willow Tree

Rocio's favorite tree that is destroyed by an emotionally-disturbed neighborhood boy. Nieves plants a new one.

Evening in Paris

A cologne set that Rocio buys her mother for Christmas. Rather than put it in her room for use, Nieves sets it on the kitchen shelf to gather dust.

Altavista Memorial Hospital

The hospital where Rocio works as a menu girl during the summer before college.

Little Oklahoma

An area in Rocio's town that is a bit shoddy and in which Regino Suarez and his family live.

Put a

The Spanish term for prostitute and the name used to refer to the woman with whom Regino is living for a time.

The Closets

Important features of the Esquibel home, each closet speaks to various family members, as it holds memories, odors, and reminders of important events.

The Gray Room

A room under the house to which Rocio travels in her dreams.

The Blue Room

A room above the house to which Rocio travels in her dreams. From here she is able to fly up into the universe.

Woolworths

A "five-and-dime" store in Rocio's town where she goes to purchase a Christmas present for her mother.

Themes

Self-Identity

Everyone is a compilation of identities, and Rocio Esquibel is no different. These identities wax and wane and, indeed, change as one moves from childhood into adulthood. What one eventually becomes as a person and as a productive member of society is the compilation of all of the identities that one has had throughout his or her lifetime. As a child, Rocio is a typical Hispanic-American girl, living in a small town in southern New Mexico, a neighborhood populated in large part by other Hispanics, but spattered with Anglos and African-Americans as well. Her identity is steeped in her familial relationships, her mother's character, and her interactions with those on her street. As she matures in her adolescence, she attempts to incorporate the identities of other teens whom she idolizes, but these are unfulfilling as well. Throughout these years, Rocio is searching for who she really is, understanding that she is destined for a life far different from those she has thus far encountered. As a college student, Rocio is introduced to the world of fellow drama students, yet even these experiences and relationships fail to define her. In fact, she develops a mysterious illness, perhaps her rebellion against the lives and values of those with whom she associates. Returning home after college, Rocio realizes that her former life is no longer meaningful and that she must physically leave her familial surrounding and pursue her identity further. Ultimately, she finds an identity that is compatible with the basic roots of her inner spirit, that of a writer. One is left with the truth that self-identity is truly a journey that may never actually end.

Making Choices

Ultimately, everyone becomes defined by the choices made throughout lifetimes. Throughout this novel, author Chavez demonstrates how individual lives become rather permanently formed by the choices they have made. Nieves chose to settle for a husband who eventually left the family and is now faced with raising two daughters on her own, teaching school, and living a rather unhappy and unfulfilled life. She is controlled by the responsibilities she now has as a result of her choices, and must teach school and be frugal and hard-working in order to survive. Her choice to maintain a relationship with Regino is perhaps the one bright spot in the life of a woman who has known little joy. Rocio's friend Diana makes the choice to marry her high school boyfriend, establishing a cleaning business with him and bearing children in the process. Her choices have made her old and haggard before her time. Rocio's own choices have moved her into new experiences and relationships, pushing her along, primarily by demonstrating what she does not want in her life. She chooses to desert the life of her mother and sister, seeking new experiences of college life and living on her own. She makes the choice to reject the life of her childhood and even the life of those with whom she shares college experiences, in order to become who she really wants to be. Everyone is the product of choices, from childhood forward, and these

choices determine, in the end, what individuals do, the values to which they adhere, and the contribution they make to society as a whole.

Family Relationships

Woven into the fabric of Rocio's story are a number of comments on the inter-relationships of family members that are rather universal in nature. Rocio's relationship with her mother appears to be rather unemotional. Nieves is a typical hard-working woman who has determined that life is serious business and must be lived seriously and with determination. Thus, she teaches school, raises her daughters to be frugal and responsible, and appears unable to demonstrate emotional nurturing and affection toward her girls. Further, the girls do not have a close relationship with their father, as he visits only periodically. This is often the case with broken families, especially when the mother becomes fully responsible for the upbringing of the children.

The relationships among the Suarez family members is a bit different. Initially, the family is intact, and Regino appears to be dominated by his emotional wife and daughters. In a move of mid-life crisis, Regino seeks independence from what he believes to be a crushing situation and moves in with another childless woman. Ultimately returning, he is then deserted by his family, as they move to Montana. He is unwilling to leave his "roots" and accompany them. There is more emotional support in this family, particularly among the mother and daughters, but, again, the unit is quite dysfunctional.

The relationships between Rocio and Mercy are not portrayed as emotionally close. They do not seem to collaborate on gifts for their mother and certainly do not agree upon the upkeep of the house. It appears that, early on, Rocio attempts to give her sister advice, telling her that she must find her own dreams and "rooms", but their relationship is not further developed. Mercy and Rocio move onto separate paths - Mercy to marriage and children and Rocio to a career. It is unclear whether their adult relationship is close, but one concludes that it is probably not.

Family members are related by blood, and, often, the relationships among those members are not what society often portrays as the ideal ones. Conflicting values, unique personalities, circumstances, and events often define these relationships, rather than physical co-habitation and proximity. The additional factors of separation and/or divorce of parents affect roles and relationships as well.

Style

Point of View

This is a novel that encompasses the first person narrative for the most part, through the story of Rocio Esquibel, whose life is portrayed through a series of short vignettes of specific portions of her life. Occasionally, other characters emerge to engage in first-person narratives (e.g., Kari Lee); however, for the most part, the reader is given complete insight into the thoughts and feelings of Rocio, the narrator, with only partial understanding of the other characters who pass through Rocio's life. One learns of the personalities, character and values of other characters as outside observers through their words and actions and interactions with Rocio. Rocio's inner thoughts, however, are completely revealed, as she passes through each stage of her growth and development into adulthood, and, through these inner thoughts, one can learn about other individuals as well. Nieves, Regino, Loudon, Mercy, Nita Wembley, and even Rocio's father, come to life only as Rocio describes them and engages in conversations with them or describes their actions. The descriptions of interactions between other characters are largely third person objective narrations on which Rocio often does not comment specifically. Still, the reader gains insights into their basic characters and values. For the most part, one may see this as a first-person, partially omniscient work, which provides the reader with both complete understanding of Rocio and significant insight into the thoughts, values, and character traits of others who move in and out of Rocio's life.

Setting

Southern New Mexico is the perfect setting for author Chavez's work. Dotted throughout this area are numerous small towns, overwhelmingly populated by Hispanic-Americans, both legal and illegal, who live and work and preserve their rich culture and heritage. As well, it is probably the geographic background of the author herself. The details of life in this small town, its vegetation, its streets and its neighborhoods, paint a vivid picture for the reader, as Rocio moves through her childhood and adolescence. Specific years are not given, though there are certainly hints that the time frame is within the 1960s. The fact that Rocio shops at Woolworth's dime-store and purchases "Evening in Paris" cologne as a Christmas gift for her mother, suggests this time period, as does the fact that "illegals" are not considered the major issue that they might be in current American society. Further, the socialization of teenagers is described in terms of walking about town, smoking cigarettes in rebellion, and meeting up with boys and men at the local movie theatre. Except for Regino's son, no teen appears to have a car, and a simpler life without the mention of television, drugs, computers, etc. appears to be the norm.



Language and Meaning

Authenticity is the first word that comes to the reader's mind as s/he reads this work. Each character speaks with a level of English that relates to his or her educational level. In the Esquivel household, for example, proper English is spoken, because the mother is a teacher, and the girls are raised in an English-speaking environment at home and at school. The Suarez household, on the other hand, is typical of a household which continues to speak a combination of English and Spanish and is reflective of perhaps a less "assimilated" family. Many other minor characters, moreover, speak primarily Spanish and, for the reader who does not possess a cursory understanding of the language, some of the conversation will be difficult to decipher. Author Chavez does a fine job of summarizing what has been said in English, however, so that the essential meanings are not lost.

The second term that comes to mind is vividness. Chavez has a clearly superior ability to portray people, scenery and even thoughts in creative and unique ways, through the use of wonderful imagery. It becomes an easy task for the reader to picture the dry cracked earth of summer, to visualize Rocio flying from her blue room up into the universe, and to see the detail of the luminescent picture of Jesus in Nieves's closet. Overall, the descriptive language is rich in texture and meaning.

Structure

Because the work is a series of short stories, the typical chronological pattern of one's life story is not present. Each story represents a chapter in Rocio's life, and there are plenty of "holes" in her story in between these chapters. At first, it is a bit disturbing to jump to a new period. One story covers Rocio's summer job at the hospital, for example, and the next vignette has her in the middle of her college career, leaving one to wonder what college she actually attends, where the college is, and exactly what year she is in. None of these details are given, however, because they are not critical to the overall picture that Chavez attempts to paint of Rocio's growth and development. The structure then becomes the selection of very specific periods in Rocio's life that have meaning and significance in her journey toward adulthood and self-identity, and, while these periods are chronological, they are not sequential. By the tale's end, however, the reader is not left with the feeling that the whole story has not been told, for Rocio has become the self she has longed to become and the reader understands exactly how and why she has arrived at this place in her being.

Quotes

"They are the shoes of a woman with big feet, tired legs, bitter hopes. They are the shoes of someone who has stood all her life in line waiting for better things to come."
The Closet, p. 17

"The closet was but another valve leading to the many chambers of the house's heart, where I lived my other life, with its own separate heartbeat."
The Closet, p. 32

"The dishes were token of inaccessible and indecipherable emotions known only to my Mother. As I stared into those crystalline plates embossed with streams of invisible words, how little I understood the sublime fluctuations of my Mother's heart."
Evening in Paris, p. 44

"Going back is going forward. It is better to give than to receive. All the familiar boring lessons are, after all, true."
Evening in Paris, p. 45

"I caught a glimpse of someone strong, full of great beauty, power, clear words and acts. The woman's white face was reflected in the fierce midday sun, with the bright intensity of loving eyes...Who was that woman? Myself. "
Shooting Stars, p. 59

"Sharp patterns on the walls and ceilings, faces in the plastered waves, all those women, all of the, they rise, then fall. girls, girls, the bright beautiful girls, with white faces and white voices, they call out. They are shooting stars, spitting seeds."
Shooting Stars, p. 63

"She was pale, sick, near death, but somehow I knew - not really having imagined death without the dying, not having felt the outrage and the loathing - I knew and saw her outbursts for what they really were: deep hurt, profound distress."
The Last of the Menu Girls, p. 87

"We rolled up the pain assigned it to a shelf, left it there, with a certain self-congratulatory sense of relief at our own good fortune as we looked the other way at the world's unfortunates, like Mrs. Daniels. For a while we were embarrassed to be alive. And soon, we forgot we had ever felt any discomfort."
The Last of the Menu Girls, p. 88

"Nobody would understand my line, except maybe Miss E, 'cause she understands things like how a person feels when she walks a line alone - twisting and turning and hopping yourself down to the end and stopping - and then beginning again."
Space is Solid, p. 116



"Cloyd Wembley bowed and walked to the back of the house. He had a quiet dignity that had survived his marriage of thirty-six years to the shrill, long-suffering Nita Wembley, nee Humphries."

Space is a Solid, p. 135

"Regino bent over and vigorously pulled an unusually large specimen of plant life from the ground. It looked prehistoric, invincible, the ancestress of countless weeds, accursed mother of our present shame."

Compadre, p. 157

"Regino appeared when he was needed. He was the only one who ever emerged from the darkness to fill my father's place."

Compadre, p. 163

"When it's autumn, it should be winter, and when it's winter, we wonder about spring. We think we remember the seasons, but we don't remember the temperature, the way the air moved, how the moon looked, and how we carried our sorrows with us, bundled up in what passed for pleasures, activities, plans."

Compadre, p. 202

"Peace is sitting out there watching the trees move and feeling the wind. And it's not feeling sad anymore, because you want people to be this or that way, and you want this or than thing and the flesh is okay, but there's nothing, vieja, like the quiet afternoons when I sit in my chair."

Compadre, p. 205

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the relationship between Rocio and her mother. Do you think it is typical or not? Why?

Discuss the symbolism of the gray room and the blue room in Rocio's dreams. In which room did she ultimately end?

How would you describe the relationship between Rocio and Loudon? Why, in your opinion, was this not a lasting relationship?

In what ways did Rocio grow during her summer job at the hospital? Be specific with examples from the work.

What do you believe to be the cause of Rocio's mysterious illness when she was in college? Why do you think the author did not resolve this issue in the work?

Rocio's father comes for a visit toward the end of the work. Describe the interaction between the two of them. Why do you think the father is unwilling to visit his dying uncle and why do you believe he is so upset that Regino is getting his old clothing and living in a big house?

The relationship between Nieves and Regino is rather unique. How does each of these individuals satisfy their emotional needs through their relationship?