

# **The Lovely Bones Study Guide**

## **The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold**

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# Introduction

In her first novel, *The Lovely Bones* (2002), Alice Sebold delves into the horror and trauma resulting from the rape and murder of a young girl. The novel arose from Sebold's own experience with violence—her rape as an eighteen-year-old college freshman. Similar to her 1999 memoir, *Lucky*, which details her own rape, its psychological aftermath, and the arrest, trial, and conviction of the rapist, *The Lovely Bones* refuses to sanitize sexual violence. Yet the novel does not sensationalize violence either; instead, it offers the ordinariness of it. Both the setting in suburban Philadelphia, and the time period of the early 1970s, underscore Sebold's belief that no one is immune from violence; it touches everyone. More importantly, the story of Susie Salmon and her family exposes the way in which society marginalizes the victims of violence. *The Lovely Bones* becomes a study of the effects of violence, in this case rape and murder, not only on the victim, but on her family, friends, and community.

*The Lovely Bones* does not focus on evil; it does not attempt to make sense of bad people or bad acts. Instead the novel investigates issues of loss and grief, life and death, identity and self, remembrance and forgetting, womanhood and motherhood, coming of age and rites of passage, and heaven and earth. The readers watch with Susie as her father, mother, sister, brother, and grandmother, as well as her middle school friends, her killer, and the lead detective on the case, confront similar issues in their attempts to understand their grief. While the novel raises many questions, it does not, in fact, answer all of them. Sebold examines traditional views, such as those about heaven, sexuality, and the place of women in American society, while simultaneously challenging those views.

## Author Biography

Alice Sebold was born in 1963 and grew up in the suburbs surrounding Philadelphia. In her essay "The Oddity of Suburbia," she confesses that she despised suburbia, but after living in both Manhattan and Southern California, she "realiz[ed] ... that within the suburban world of [her] upbringing there were as many strange stories as there were in the more romanticized parts of the world." Her novel, *The Lovely Bones* (2002), reflects her realization that suburbia can and does contain "a bottomless well of narrative ideas." However, that realization did not occur until Sebold left Philadelphia.

In 1981, as an eighteen-year-old freshman at Syracuse University in New York, Sebold was severely beaten and raped. Rather than remain quiet about the incident, she was instrumental in the arrest, trial, and conviction of her assailant. While at Syracuse University, Sebold took writing classes with poet Tess Gallagher and fiction writer Tobias Wolff, both of whom encouraged her to remember and write about her rape. Sebold graduated from Syracuse in 1984 and entered, but did not complete, a master of fine arts degree program at the University of Houston. Instead, she moved to New York City, and as she details in the epilogue to her 1999 memoir, *Lucky*, she turned to alcohol and heroin as she struggled to come to terms with her rape. During these years, Sebold taught writing classes at Hunter College and Bucknell College in New York, worked odd jobs, and wrote. She left New York for California in 1995 and entered the M.F.A. program at the University of California, Irvine, earning her degree in 1998.

Sebold began *The Lovely Bones* during her graduate writing studies, but recognized that until she confronted and narrated her own story, she could not write the story of Susie, the main character and narrator of *The Lovely Bones*. As many critics rightly note, the two books, *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones*, seem to be companion pieces. *The Lovely Bones* garnered two major awards, the Bram Stoker Award for best first novel and the American Booksellers Association's "Book of the Year Award." While at UC Irvine, Sebold met Glen David Gold, a fellow master's student. They married in 2001, the same year his novel *Carter Beats the Devil* was published. As of 2005, Sebold and Gold lived in California.



# Plot Summary

Susie Salmon, a fourteen-year-old girl, is murdered by her next-door neighbor in suburban Pennsylvania. She tells the story of her family's reaction and subsequent disintegration after her own murder.

Susie's father Jack suspects the neighbor, Mr. Harvey, but the police do not have evidence to hold him as a suspect. Jack becomes obsessed with the neighbor, while his wife and Susie's mother Abigail has a short affair with the lead detective, Len Fenerman. Susie's sister Lindsey finds out about her mother's affair.

In her heaven, Susie does not let her family and friends go. She follows them through the years, watching Lindsey doing everything that she would have done had she remained alive. Susie can't let her family go, and they see her everywhere.

Mr. Harvey finally leaves the neighborhood for good, but not before Lindsey breaks into his house to search for evidence. Mr. Harvey sees the number five on the back of Lindsey's soccer jersey. He becomes obsessed by the vision of her running from his house. His past begins to haunt him, driving him out of hiding.

Ruth, a girl who barely knows Susie in life, is obsessed with Susie and death. Ruth sees places where people have died and feels Susie as she was being wrenched from the earth. Ruth and Ray Singh, a boy Susie loved, become friends and develop a relationship based on their love of Susie.

Abigail leaves the family. She ends up in California after she promises Lindsey that she will not to leave. Grandma Lynn takes Abigail's place, watching over Buckley and Lindsey. Lindsey and her boyfriend Samuel go to college together.

Jack can't move on from his daughter's death, and in a moment of anger he has a heart attack. While Jack is in the hospital, Abigail returns from California to be with her family. She sees her Susie everywhere, as do Jack and Buckley.

Susie can't pull away from Ray or her family. Her killer also can't let go of the neighborhood and of seeing Lindsey's number as she escaped his house.

Susie falls back to Earth into Ruth Connors' body. In Ruth's body, Susie fulfills her earthly desires with Ray. Soon Susie fades away to a different heaven, a wider heaven where her grandfather lives.

Abigail and Jack come home from the hospital, and the anger the children feel toward their mother begins to fade. Abigail says she will stay, but she does not make any promises to Lindsey.

Over time, Susie watches, and she begins to let go of her family so they can move on. Susie sees her killer die, and Lindsey's baby is born.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

*The Lovely Bones* opens with the narrator, Susie Salmon, introducing herself as a recently murdered fourteen-year-old girl. Susie is in her heaven, and she describes the accidental meeting with her neighbor, Mr. Harvey, on a dark, snowy evening while walking home through a cornfield.

Mr. Harvey convinces Susie to enter an underground room he has built. Susie has reservations about being cold and the late hour, but she is curious to see the room. As she tells her story, Susie thinks of her father and how he loves to tell embarrassing stories about his two daughters and son.

Mr. Harvey leads Susie to the room that is made almost entirely of earth. Susie has to search to find it. She finds the door by stomping on the ground. It is made of wood. She enters the small room, and she is amazed by his work. Mr. Harvey offers her a soda, and she accepts.

Mr. Harvey's tone changes as he compliments Susie on her looks and asks if she has a boyfriend. Susie says she has to go home, but Mr. Harvey tells her to take off her clothes. After tiring of hearing her pleas, he gags Susie with her cap. As Mr. Harvey rapes her she is powerless to fight back. She weeps as he rips open her pants.

Susie is aware that Mr. Harvey is going to kill her. He reaches for a razor, and after insisting that Susie say she loves him, Mr. Harvey kills Susie.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Susie's narration goes from telling of the horrors of her rape and murder to recalling the intimacy of life in the Salmon family. Susie recalls her father embarrassing her and the details of the time Susie urinated on her sister Lindsey when Lindsey was a newborn baby and Susie was a jealous toddler.

Susie refers to Franny, her counselor in her heaven, who observes with a critical eye the event leading up to Susie's murder. Franny remarks on the ease in which the killer lures a naive Susie to the underground room. The fact that Franny and Susie are observing from heaven is not portrayed as remarkable. Susie is simply telling her story.

Mr. Harvey is an odd man in a suburban area inhabited primarily by families. He is an eccentric bachelor who quietly shows up at block parties but doesn't say much. His neighbors are quietly suspicious of Mr. Harvey because he does not participate.



The reader is struck immediately by the style of the narration. A first-person account by a dead character is a unique perspective. The style lends itself to insight that no other character could possess.





# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Susie describes her heaven as filled with people who are all experiencing their own version of heaven. Residents of heaven live in their distinct world. Susie's roommate is Holly, a Vietnamese girl Susie meets on her third day there.

Susie's heaven has school without teachers, and she has only art and music class to attend with no rude boys and only magazines to read. Susie and Holly find that their heavens have everything they loved from Earth, including ice cream shops with their favorite flavors and a newspaper with their pictures in it.

Susie wants to be part of the lives of those she left behind, but Franny admonishes that there are limits to this. Susie watches as Detective Len Fenerman tells her father that a dog has found Susie's elbow. Susie's father and mother hold onto a slim hope that their daughter will be found alive, but hearing about the body part leaves them needing each other.

Susie's father holds a tearful Abigail, and the next day Jack tells Lindsey about Susie's elbow being found by the neighbor's dog. Lindsey throws up when she hears this. The search for Susie's body continues when the police find a book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in the cornfield where Susie was killed. The police ask a mother at the scene, Mrs. Stead, if the children at Susie's school read the book and if they do, in which grade. Mrs. Stead answers that children in Susie's grade read that book.

Days later, the police find more schoolbooks in the cornfield near Susie's house that they think belong to Susie. They find a note written to Susie from Ray Singh, a boy who kissed Susie a few days before she was killed. Ray becomes an immediate suspect, even though the Salmon family does not believe a young boy could have been so brutal.

Twelve days after Susie's murder, Fenerman comes to the Salmons' house to inform them that police have found Susie's wool hat. Susie's mother and father realize that they are powerless and are uncomprehending. Fenerman tells Jack that even though the police haven't found Susie's body, they are treating her case as a murder investigation.

The Salmons decide to call Abigail's mother, Grandma Lynn, to help them. Lindsey goes back to school, and the awkward way people treat her angers her. Susie wishes that she could be with Lindsey to make her laugh. The principal calls Lindsey into his office and apologizes for the Salmon family's loss. Lindsey reacts with mocking scorn. "I wasn't aware I had lost anything," Lindsey says, and in a Herculean effort she makes the motions of patting her shirt and checking her pockets" (page 31). Not expecting such a reaction, Principal Caden fumbles with his words.



Principal Caden continues talking to Lindsey, who Susie tells the reader is a gifted student. He informs Lindsey that a girls' soccer team will be created especially for her to play on, but Lindsey responds that it will be too difficult to play on a field so near her sister's murder. Lindsey decides to focus on being physically stronger and proper breathing.

In her heaven, Susie has a gazebo because she was jealous of a neighbor's gazebo growing up. She thinks of her brother Buckley's drawing of Earth with a blue line separating "an in between, where heaven's horizon met Earth's" (page 34). In Susie's heaven there are many dogs of all shapes and sizes playing happily. The people in her heaven make music and dance, and when the house sleeps Susie calls the time her Evensong.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Susie wants most of all to be a part of the lives of the living. Except for scant moments, however, she cannot. Susie wants to watch lives unfold from beginning to end, but she cannot. This longing keeps Susie from moving on, and many in her family will experience the same feeling as the days and years pass.

The Salmons hold out hope that Susie will be found alive, even as the evidence of her death mounts. Lindsey, who is fourteen, inserts herself into scenes to hear the truth of how the investigation. Hearing the news that a dog has found her sister's elbow sickens her.

The Salmons break down after Fenerman shows them Susie's hat. It is their moment of realization but not of acceptance. The detective attempts to keep a hopeful tone, but all hope seems to be disappearing.

Lindsey returns to school, but she does not seem ready for the reactions of the adults, with the sad faces of the school secretaries and Principal Caden's futile attempts to console and cheer her. Lindsey's sarcasm is cutting, and she is angry at being treated as someone with a dead sister. She is not ready to face this fate.

Susie gives a more vivid description of her heaven, which has frolicking dogs and a pleasant gazebo for Susie and Holly to sit and watch the Salmon family cope with Susie's loss. Susie had always wanted a gazebo for her family's house. Now she has it in her heaven, which seems like a perfect place to live.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Holly and Susie watch Earth from their heavens, and they see souls coming into contact with the living. After Susie was murdered she recalls touching a girl named Ruth Connors, a student at her junior high. Ruth tells her mother about the encounter with the ghost, which she describes as a girl with hollow eyes. Ruth's mother chastises her for her overly active imagination.

To express herself after her experience, Ruth begins writing poetry. She becomes very interested in Susie's life, seeking out Susie's photos in school yearbooks. Ruth approaches Susie's friends, Clarissa and Brian, as they hold one another in the hallway. They do not notice, and Ruth does not speak to them. Ruth returns later to steal a bag of marijuana and photos out of Clarissa's locker. Ruth smokes the marijuana in her family's tool shed while looking at photos of Susie.

In her heaven, Susie misses her mother, and even though she loves her surroundings she thinks often of Abigail. Susie recalls receiving a camera for Christmas when she was eleven and the picture she took of her mother. The picture looked like a picture of a woman, not a mother. This was the only time Susie ever saw her mother that way.

Lindsey strokes her sister's clothes when she enters Susie's room for the first time. Lindsey examines Susie's belongings, and she finds the picture of Abigail that Susie took. The picture shows their mother in a different light, and Lindsey is stunned to see it. She sits down, open-mouthed.

Susie has a flashback of helping her father assemble his ships in a bottle, a task that no other member of the family is interested in. As he cleans the den, Jack talks to Susie. His emotions bubble to the surface. As Susie watches from heaven, Jack smashes his bottles, one by one. After breaking his boats, Jack goes to Susie's room where he collapses on her bed, sobbing. Buckley comes in, and father and son hold each other.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

In this chapter, the reader meets Ruth, who Susie touches as her soul is leaving Earth. Ruth becomes obsessed with Susie and even steals from Susie's friends to have pictures and any belongings that will make her feel closer to Susie.

Clarissa and Brian are Susie's friends who seem older than their age because of their sexual advances toward one another. Ruth steals Brian's marijuana from Clarissa's locker, and she gets high in her family's tool shed. Ruth's mother mistakenly thinks Ruth is smoking with friends, and she is pleased Ruth has made friends.



Susie misses her mother, and she shivers at the thought of not being able to touch or kiss her. She recalls receiving her first camera and the happiness of taking her first pictures. In a photograph, she sees her mother like a real person, and it stuns her. Lindsey finds the same photo and is stunned as well. Children rarely see their parents as people, and doing so leaves Lindsey thinking of her mother as mysterious. This is another dimension of Abigail that the reader could be exposed to as the story progresses.

Later, the family attempts to get back to normal, but emotional outbursts are still the norm. Reminders of Susie still haunt Jack. He destroys the ships in a bottle that he and Susie built together. Susie was the only member of the family who took an interest in his hobby, but now he smashes them all. Susie cringes as she watches her father from heaven.

The ships in a bottle symbolize a perfect world, unfettered by people who would hurt one another. The perfect world, however, will not withstand the Salmon family's grief.

Buckley casually mentions how he sees Susie all the time. Others in the family seem to ignore this. Do others see Susie? This foreshadows the possibility of Susie somehow returning to the living.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

In her heaven, Susie recounts how in the moments and hours after he killed her, Mr. Harvey toted her body parts in bags past her house while her parents frantically made phone calls. Susie reveals how she is not the first girl her neighbor has murdered. Mr. Harvey is calm as he scrubs himself down after the killing.

Mr. Harvey brings Susie's remains, which are now packed into a safe, to a local sinkhole. He pays the property owner twenty dollars and sinks the safe with Susie's body inside.

As he leaves the sinkhole, Mr. Harvey fingers a silver charm bracelet that belonged to Susie. He drives away into the night with the bracelet in his pocket. He finds a construction site, and at a man-made pond he throws Susie's engraved Pennsylvania keystone charm away.

Days later, Mr. Harvey erects a tent in his yard. Jack is curious about what his neighbor is doing, and he comes out to help. They begin talking, and Mr. Harvey apologizes for the loss of Susie.

Jack helps Mr. Harvey for an hour, after which Mr. Harvey walks into his house. Mr. Harvey returns shortly with white cotton sheets to use as a tarp for the tent. Susie's father has a realization that this man must have been involved in what happened to his daughter. "'You know something,' my father said. He met my father's eyes, held them, but did not speak" (page 56).

The men continue to work in the snow. Mr. Harvey tells Jack that he should go home. Neighbors will have the impression that they are friends because they are working together on the tent. Susie's father restates his accusation while the neighbor tells him to go home.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

The reader is privy to seeing the body parts disposed of in the safe and buried in the sinkhole. Then Mr. Harvey discards the charm. The items represent a little girl, the symbols of youth, happiness, and memories. Susie's killer not only took her life, but he nearly erased all physical memory of Susie.

Susie further describes her heaven as a place where dogs roam happily and freely. A neighbor dog has discovered Susie's elbow, which it dug up in the cornfield. This is the most difficult moment for the family, as they see the sheer brutality of what Susie's killer did to her. He did not merely kill Susie. He destroyed her body.



Jack becomes suspicious of Mr. Harvey. What prompted this feeling? Perhaps the solitary way in which Mr. Harvey goes about his work, or the feeling Jack receives from staring at his neighbor's house. Jack knows this man is involved, and he tells Mr. Harvey so.

It is a moment of truth and tension, and Mr. Harvey does not recoil as if the accusation is out of the blue. He simply tells Jack to go home. Mr. Harvey does not deny committing the crime. There is foreboding in Jack's tone, and Jack knows he is on to something.

Jack desperately tries to communicate with Susie. He wants a sign to point him in the direction of her killer. In her heaven, Susie tries to help her father, and perhaps at this point Jack begins to receive her message. She can monitor her family, but she cannot directly communicate with them.

Susie's sinkhole is symbolic of the deep emotional hole into which her family is falling. They are descending emotionally. Will they ever find their way out?



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

In her heaven, Susie rejoices that her father is suspicious of Mr. Harvey. Based on Mr. Harvey's reaction, Jack is sure that the neighbor is Susie's murderer. Her father begins thinking about how to get more information out of him.

Lindsey is angry at the way she is treated at school, and when she comes home she slams the doors of the house and her room. Jack tries to pry her feelings out, but Lindsey prefers to handle her anger on her own.

Jack calls Fenerman to tell him about his suspicions of Mr. Harvey. Fenerman asks Jack what evidence he has for his feelings, and Jack tells the detective about Mr. Harvey's strange behavior while they installed the tent. He tells Fenerman about the neighborhood feeling toward Mr. Harvey, that he has no wife or children and seemingly no job.

Abigail sits eating cookies by herself in the bathroom. Five-year-old Buckley intrudes on her and a moment later asks his parents as to the whereabouts of his sister. They ignore his question and instead ask Buckley if he wanted to go to the zoo.

After his conversation with Jack, Fenerman visits Mr. Harvey's house. The detective finds the neighbor strange but does not ask to see the basement of Mr. Harvey's house. Fenerman thinks the man is sincere and is not suspicious.

Later, when talking to Jack, Fenerman refers to Mr. Harvey's late wife as Leah. But Jack remembers that he heard the woman's name was Sophie, not Leah.

On Christmas Day the Salmon family plays Monopoly. Buckley plays with his toys, and the family receives a visit from Lindsey's friend Samuel Heckler. Samuel is a gifted student at school, as is Lindsey. Samuel joins the family during their Christmas celebration.

Jack wants Buckley join in the Monopoly game. As Buckley sits down to learn the game, Jack begins to explain what happened to Susie. Susie played with the shoe piece when the family played the game. The shoe piece is no longer in play, however, and Jack asks Buckley why this might be. Buckley does not know, and he asks why the piece is no longer in the game.

Jack realizes that Monopoly will not explain what happened to Susie, so finally he tells Buckley that Susie is dead. In the kitchen, Samuel gives Lindsey her Christmas present. It is half a heart. Lindsey's face is red, as is Susie's in heaven, and Samuel kisses Lindsey.



## Chapter 5 Analysis

The Salmon family is caught between wanting life to go on as normal and wanting to find Susie's killer. The idea that Mr. Harvey killed Susie is growing in Jack's mind. He calls Fenerman with the theory but does not have any evidence to back it up.

Fenerman follows up on Jack's phone call and pays a visit to Mr. Harvey. He comes away thinking that the neighbor is strange, but he doesn't see him as a murder suspect. Fenerman acts like a lonely widower, not a psychotic who would garner suspicion.

Buckley is the only member of the living who dares mention Susie. He is confused and wants to know where his sister went. Jack changes the subject, offering to take Buckley to the zoo. Jack knows the thought of monkeys will distract his young son. The rest of the family craves distraction as well.

Jack invites Buckley to sit down and learn how to play Monopoly on Christmas Day. Buckley has never been asked to play the game. Instead of explaining the game's rules, however, Jack attempts to explain Susie's death using the Monopoly game pieces. When Buckley is still confused, Jack tells him that Susie is dead and nobody will ever see her again. Jack cries, and Buckley is still confused.

Buckley is the one member of the family who desperately wants to connect to the loss of Susie. Jack wants to find the killer, while Abigail is yearning to forget and Lindsey is groping for her emotions. Being an adolescent, Lindsey is experiencing as much confusion as to be expected from the loss of her sister. Lindsey is jealous of the attention flowing toward Susie and angry at her parents' odd reaction.





# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Susie recalls being late for school and deciding to sneak out by the back of the stage. As she creeps out, she looks up to see a boy who likes her, Ray Singh. Ray tells Susie she is beautiful. She joins Ray on the scaffold above the stage, and Ray nearly kisses her. They are interrupted by sounds below them.

Teachers are disciplining Ruth Connors for a drawing she has done of a model showing her breasts. The teachers continue to charge that Ruth deliberately ignored the instruction of the class to draw the model without additions. After the teachers leave, Susie climbs down from the scaffold and comforts Ruth.

After seeing the drawing in question, Susie assures Ruth that she is a good artist. Ruth's drawings of nude men and women are not acceptable in junior high, but Susie recognizes them as subversive.

After recalling the incident in the auditorium, Susie follows Ruth through her day. Ruth's father drops her off at school, and he offers his daughter a sip of bourbon before she leaves. Ruth pretends to sip the whiskey, and she tries not to drink any.

Ruth cuts many of her classes to walk through the cornfields where Susie was killed. Susie starts to feel a kinship toward Ruth. Ray notices Ruth coming to the cornfield, and the two talk about Susie. Ray's lips are chapped from the cold, so Ruth gives him her ChapStick. They sit together that day and many times after. They read poems and talk about their life in Norristown. They know they are oddballs.

Ruth remembers Susie as someone who she never really got to know, even though they were in school together for many years. Ray and Ruth think about Susie daily, and Ruth says Susie is lucky because she doesn't have to live in Norristown any more. Ray decides that Susie must be in heaven and happier to be out of their town.

Jack goes to Ray's house. He wants to apologize to Ray for how the police treated him. Ray was questioned about Susie's murder. Ray's mother Ruana answers the door. Jack is overwhelmed by her appearance. She invites him in, and they begin talking. Jack tells her that he did not mean for Ray to be questioned, but she rejects his sympathy. She is firm that because he lost Susie, Jack should not offer the Singh family pity. At this point Jack speaks his mind, telling Ruana that he knows who killed Susie.

Ruana asks Jack why he has come to her house. Jack reveals that he is investigating, and she understands. Ruana asks the name of the man he suspects, and he tells her about Mr. Harvey. Ruana tells him that he should devise a quiet way to kill him.

At the Salmon home, Abigail waits for her husband with Fenerman. Fenerman is an optimist and maintains that Susie's killer will be caught because he cannot control



himself and will make a mistake. Fenerman says is not too busy to wait for Jack. Fenerman tells Abigail that she reminds him of his late wife, who died soon after they were married.

Abigail stares at the detective, and in her heaven Susie urges Abigail to move away and remember her, waiting for Abigail in heaven. Jack comes home, and they begin talking about why he has been investigating Susie's case.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Susie has a flashback to nearly kissing Ray in the auditorium at school before the two teachers scolding Ruth for her risquy drawings of nude women interrupt them.

Ray is mismatched for his surroundings. He is sophisticated and urbane in a town that is not. Ray longs to be out of the town and perhaps back in England, but through family obligations and like most young people, he has no choice. He seems older than his young age would indicate. He and Ruth bond over their mutual love for Susie. They begin sharing a lot of time together in the cornfield. The reader learns more about Ruth's father and his drinking and how he makes his daughter drink alcohol as she leaves the car for school every day.

Jack visits the Singhs' and is taken aback by Ruana's beauty. She is friendly but firm on certain matters of sympathy. They often misunderstand each other because they are from different worlds. Jack fears offending the beautiful Ruana, and she tries to encourage his feelings of mourning.

Jack reveals his suspicions of Mr. Harvey, and Ruana decides that he must find a "quiet way" to kill him (page 88). Jack comes away from their discussion buoyed by the suggestion, perhaps excited by the opportunity to end his own suffering. He has received validation from her not only for his feelings, but also for his dark suspicions of Mr. Harvey.

Fenerman may be interested in Abigail. Abigail stares at Feneran as Susie yells from her heaven for Abigail to stop. Susie is trying to keep her family from disintegrating, even though she may be powerless to do so. Abigail's feelings seems to be seeking a way to explode through someone else besides her grieving family. She will need an outlet for her grief and regret.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Buckley and his friend Nate are playing when Buckley asks Nate if he sees Susie. Buckley mentions that Susie has been "gone for a while, but now she's back" (page 91). Buckley tells Nate that the last time he saw Susie she kissed him on the cheek. Nate does not believe him, and Buckley says it is a secret.

Buckley and Nate head to Susie's room, where they find the twig that lodged in Buckley's throat when he was three. The doctor told the Salmons that Susie saved Buckley's life when she drove him to the hospital while he was choking. It is an unpleasant memory for Buckley and Nate.

In her heaven, Susie wonders if her brother has actually seen her.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Buckley repeats to Nate his notion of having seen Susie, like she has returned from a trip to another country. Susie is unsure if Buckley is "merely a little boy telling beautiful lies" (page 95).

Buckley sees Susie, but Nate has a hard time believing his friend. Is Buckley the only one to see his sister and the only one to admit it? He is an unabashed little boy, and he sees nothing unusual about saying he sees Susie and even that she kissed him on the cheek.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Mr. Harvey dreams of exotic buildings in Norway that have wood carved by Viking boat builders. The boats sport dragons and heroes of sagas. Mr. Harvey's favorite dream is the one about the Church of Transfiguration. These dreams are then replaced by a dream of vulnerable people, women and children.

Susie is looking at Mr. Harvey, and he is remembering growing up. His father was a jeweler, and he was fascinated by his mother's amber necklace. His father lectured him on constructing buildings to last. When his dreams will not let him sleep, George Harvey opens his father's sketchbooks.

This memory draws Mr. Harvey to when last saw his mother, as she was running away from his father. Mr. Harvey watched from the back seat of the car, and his father assured him that his mother was gone and would not return.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

In this short chapter, the reader is put further into the mind and dreams of Mr. Harvey. Mr. Harvey dreams of grand buildings carved by people hundreds of years ago, and he then dreams of children and women. The children and women represent the lives he has stolen. Were these people his victims? This dream keeps Mr. Harvey up at night. He turns to his father's sketchbooks. The books show more buildings. He dreams of building great structures that symbolize the denial and fantasy he has constructed in his mind.

Mr. Harvey pictures the moment when his father threw his mother out of the family car. She ran for her life while Mr. Harvey looked on. What kind of influence did this experience have on young George Harvey? His father was a critical, brutal man, and his mother was a criminal. Now their son is a killer.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Grandma Lynn, Abigail's mother, decides to live with the Salmons. Susie's mother tells her that she does not have to, but Grandma Lynn insists. Grandma Lynn arrives in a rented limousine and second-hand furs. She is worried about Jack and Abigail's state of mind. Grandma Lynn asks Abigail if Jack still thinks "that man" killed Susie (page 99). Lindsey overhears the conversation.

Grandma Lynn teaches Lindsey how to put on makeup. Lindsey begins to see herself as growing up, and she stares at the image in the mirror with her makeup applied and eyelashes lengthened.

The family attends Susie's memorial with Grandma Lynn helping Lindsey to apply makeup and to remind Lindsey and Susie of when they were children. Lindsey asks Grandma Lynn who she was referring to when she said "that man." Grandma Lynn avoids the question.

Lindsey's friend Samuel Heckler and his brother Hal attend the memorial. Lindsey is relieved that her father does not have to try to get "back to normal - whatever normal was" (page 109).

Ruth arrives with her father. She notices Hal Heckler as she and her father sit down.

Susie's friend Clarissa greets Abigail, and while Abigail stares at the girl she is reminded that her Susie is dead and Clarissa is alive. Ray Singh does not attend the memorial service.

As the service for Susie ends, Grandma Lynn quietly points out that in the back of the church the man Lindsey had wondered about. Mr. Harvey's eyes meet Lindsey's, and she faints.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Grandma Lynn comes to the Salmons', and even though she has a habit of embarrassing and annoying family members, she brings life back into the house. Grandma Lynn drinks and lures Jack into joining her, even though he has said that he will not drink during the mourning period.

Ruth's father does not understand the connection his daughter has with Susie. Ruth will not let Susie's death go. Ruth writes to Susie in her notebook. She has connected with Susie in a way that most people would never believe. Ruth seems to have an idea about death that is extraordinary. She understands the process of people leaving Earth that most people would idealize and spiritualize beyond all realms of believability.



Many people from the Salmons' neighborhood attend Susie's memorial service, including Mr. Harvey. He locks eyes with Lindsey the moment after Grandma Lynn has whispered the identity of whom her father thinks killed Susie, and Lindsey passes out. How will Lindsey handle knowing that her sister's killer may be their quiet and strange neighbor?

The moment of Lindsey's visual connection with Mr. Harvey is a foreboding moment, and it is a warning that there will be more to come between them.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Lindsey attends Pennsylvania's Gifted Symposium with her classmates. Her classmates are unsure of how to treat Lindsey. Ruth is also at the symposium. She does not know Lindsey and introduces herself, but Lindsey quickly rejects Ruth.

Lindsey and Samuel start their courtship at the Gifted Symposium, and their classmates tease them. They find secret places where they can kiss. Ruth observes Lindsey and Samuel's relationship in her diary.

At night, Ruth sneaks into Lindsey's dorm and talk to her, and then Ruth crawls into bed with Lindsey. They talk about Susie and their dreams and nightmares about her. Ruth asks Lindsey if she misses her sister, and Lindsey responds, "More than anyone will ever know" (page 121).

The final project of the symposium traditionally is for the students to develop a plan to build a better mousetrap. This year the teachers altered the project for students to plan the perfect murder.

Artie, a boy from Susie's grade, notices Lindsey, and he quickly warns her about the subject of the project before she sees the flyer. Artie and Samuel tell Lindsey, and she flinches. Only Samuel and Susie, who is watching from her heaven, notice. Lindsey tells the boys that she's okay with the change.

Artie and Ruth discuss Susie's death and how they learned about it. Ruth tells him about her father informing her and how she knew Susie was dead. Ruth says softly that she thinks Susie listens to them. Lindsey and Susie become the topic of conversation at the symposium.

Meanwhile, Samuel and Lindsey are lying together under a rowboat. She reaches out for him, and they make love under the boat.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

The symposium is an opportunity for Lindsey to get away from Susie's death, but she cannot escape it because her peers whisper and point. Lindsey is famous, but she doesn't want to be. Ruth annoys her by asking if her name is Salmon. Lindsey knows that Ruth knows who she is.

Later, Ruth lies with Lindsey and the girls quietly talk about Susie. Ruth is buried in her dream, and she calls out to Susie but she can't hear Ruth because Ruth's mouth is filled with dirt. Lindsey's dreams do not involve her sister, just rats biting her hair. Ruth feels buried, perhaps by the knowledge and ability to see what others cannot. Ruth is

different, and the dream represents her being an outcast, while Lindsey has a conventional nightmare. Another symbol of this dream is the barrier that does not allow the dead and the living to communicate with each another.

Samuel and Lindsey make love under a boat at the end of the symposium. Lindsey says she is ready as she reaches over for Samuel. After her experiences with Susie's murder and now with Samuel, Lindsey is no longer a little girl. Lindsey has experienced two events that bring opposite reactions. A moment of pure joy and happiness is set against a moment of horrible sadness and grief.

Even though Lindsey is very young for the experience of sexual intercourse, Susie does not seem to judge her sister. Instead, Susie celebrates for Lindsey in her heaven.

In her heaven, Susie says that "how to commit a perfect murder" is her favorite game to play in heaven and that the perfect weapon is an ice pick, which melts. This is symbolic of the way death is treated cavalierly in her heaven without the reverence the living have for dying.





# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Jack is frustrated at the lack of progress in his daughter's case. He walks by Mr. Harvey's house on his daily dog walk. Susie describes Mr. Harvey's house and his routines. He does not vary his day-to-day comings and goings. The police drive by once in a while. He keeps many clocks in his house, and the alarms alert him to his routines.

Late at night, Mr. Harvey likes to look at the things he has collected from people. He has a heel from a shoe that belonged to a girl named Claire. He assaulted Claire but let her go when some passersby heard her crying. Claire saw the look that Susie saw, but Mr. Harvey explained to Claire that he was trying to repair her shoe.

Susie explores Mr. Harvey's house. She finds the bones of animals that he has killed. The deaths of the animals were been blamed on Joe Ellis, a boy in the neighborhood. Mr. Harvey tried to stop himself from killing, but he could not. He killed animals to keep himself from killing children.

Fenerman decides to stop Jack from calling the police station with his theory that Mr. Harvey is Susie's murderer. Fenerman comes to the Salmon's house to speak to Jack. He tells Jack to stop calling the station. There is no evidence to connect Mr. Harvey to Susie.

Lindsey is listening to the conversation between Fenerman and her father. Lindsey tells the detective that he is giving up. She tells her mother that the police are stopping their investigation. Jack thinks that Abigail believes Fenerman, leaving him and Lindsey as the only two who believe that Mr. Harvey killed Susie.

That night Jack sits stretching in his den. He looks outside and sees a penlight going across the lawns of the neighborhood. Jack watches as, he assumes, Mr. Harvey walks through the grass to the cornfield. Jack thinks about missing Susie and the fact that he believes this man is her killer. Jack rushes outside, baseball bat in hand, to the cornfield.

The wind is strong, and it hides the sounds of Jack's rushing and knocking over stalks of corn. He comes to where he thinks Mr. Harvey is in the pitch dark and yells, "Nobody's awake.... I'm here to finish it" (page 138). It is not Mr. Harvey, however. It is Clarissa waiting for her boyfriend Brian.

Jack discovers that Clarissa is hiding in the field. She is whimpering and crying for Brian. For a moment, Jack thinks that Clarissa is Susie and rushes forward, yelling his dead daughter's name and knocking Clarissa down. Brian runs up and drags Jack away from Clarissa, hitting Jack over and over with his large flashlight. Susie watches, helpless in her heaven, and she also sees Mr. Harvey listening in the dark field.



## Chapter 11 Analysis

In this chapter, Lindsey is angry because she feels the police are giving up, or "punting" on George Harvey as a suspect (page 135). Jack is feeling alone, and his wife seems inappropriately excited to see Fenerman.

Fenerman wants to put an end to the phone calls that have become a joke among the police officers. Jack reported the family dog's reaction to walking by Mr. Harvey's house. The dog had stood on the sidewalk, howling at the house. The police had laughed when Jack phoned in the report, but Jack does not seem embarrassed by his suspicion.

Susie is not just looking into the memories of her family. She is plumbing the depths of Mr. Harvey's memory as well. He loves to touch and hold his victims' possessions late at night. He has the heel of a shoe from one near-victim, and he flashes back to a little girl he nearly killed but was saved when some people nearby heard her cries. Mr. Harvey escaped.

Jack is put over the edge by his obsession with Mr. Harvey late one night when he thinks the neighbor is walking to the cornfield. He follows only to scare Susie's friend Clarissa. He calls Susie's name after hearing Clarissa whimper. Brian, who is there to meet Clarissa, attacks Jack. In the darkness, Brian thinks that Jack is the killer, and he beats Jack hard with his flashlight.

In her heaven, Susie sees Mr. Harvey listening nearby. What had he been planning, or does he merely lurk in the cornfield at night? Did Jack see a light from Mr. Harvey as well as the light shining from Clarissa's flashlight? Mr. Harvey is lurking, but like always, he does not confront others unless he has the advantage.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Susie watches as Jack lies still after the beating. Susie watches as the surgeon sews her father back together. In the Salmon house, the family wakes up to the sound of police sirens. They search for Jack, but then they realize that he is not in the house and the police presence must involve him.

Lindsey tells her mother that she must go out to find Jack, but Abigail refuses to let her. Lindsey is very frustrated by her mother's decision. After Brian beats Jack with the baseball bat, Jack is in the hospital. The family attends to Jack at the hospital. Lindsey sits with her father and sings a song that Jack had always sung to her and Susie. Jack is under medication and does not wake to Lindsey's singing.

In Susie's heaven, Franny reminds Susie that her family can move on when Susie lets them go. Fenerman visits the family at the hospital. He greets Jack and tells Abigail that Jack thought Clarissa was Mr. Harvey. Abigail learns that Clarissa is hysterical but not hurt.

In the hallway, Hal is waiting for his brother. He notices Fenerman and Abigail talking. They walk out together looking for a place to smoke. Susie is watching and notices that her mother acts differently around Fenerman. They talk about Fenerman's wife, who committed suicide. Then they talk about Susie, and Abigail wants Fenerman to state that Susie was murdered.

Abigail and Fenerman kiss, his body at first tenses but he relents. They press themselves against each other on the hospital balcony.

In her heaven, Susie is watching, and she recalls her mother when Susie was young. Jack would come home from work, and on special days the parents would have "Mommy and Daddy time" (page 148). Lindsey and Susie would play quietly on the other side of the house.

At the hospital, Fenerman and Abigail fumble with each other's clothes. Fenerman stops Abigail and reminds her of Jack, but they kiss again. Moments later, Abigail enters the hospital hallway, and Hal sees her and calls out that Lindsey is in the room with Jack. Hal tells her that he is Samuel's brother and that he brought Lindsey to the hospital.

In her heaven, Susie watches as souls rise out of the hospital and senior citizen homes. She realizes that her heaven may not be the only one.



## Chapter 12 Analysis

In this chapter, Jack suffers because of his obsession with Mr. Harvey. He lies in the hospital, and the family arrives to visit. Abigail reacts strangely by forbidding Lindsey to go outside when the police arrive. Abigail may be embarrassed or simply rejecting her husband because she does not want to accept what Jack believes. Jack's suspicions seem to keep him thinking about Susie's death, but Abigail never offers any alternative or theories of her own of who killed their daughter.

Fenerman arrives at the hospital. Abigail and Fenerman greet each other, not as acquaintances, but as friends. They exit the hallway, which Hal Heckler notices. On the balcony, they share cigarettes and kiss. Fenerman at first objects, but Abigail wants to be close to him. She does not want to think about her husband or the family that waits inside.

After Fenerman and Abigail reenter the hospital hall, Hal makes a point of saying that Lindsey is with Jack. He reminds Abigail that her husband is there. She is disheveled and distracted. Hal brings Abigail back to the moment, and he seems angry at having to remind her of the obvious. A foreboding moment occurs in the hospital, as it is clear that Abigail will likely have an affair or leave the family at some point.

Susie recalls her mother tucking Lindsey and her into bed at naptime. She remembers all the moments of being young, the hugs and kisses of being a small child. Now she is seeing her mother change. Abigail is going through something, and Susie can only watch helplessly.

Susie sees other souls exiting Earth from the hospital and coming to heaven. She realizes that she does not know who controls the souls. Are there more heavens beyond her and her knowledge? She feels helpless knowing that she is stuck where she may not leave.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Lindsey returns to school, where the students whisper about Jack and his exploits. Buckley enters kindergarten, and his teacher treats him gingerly. Jack has a knee replacement and is learning to walk again. He spends much more time at home after taking sick leave from work. He tries to stop thinking about Mr. Harvey.

Jack marks Dec. 2, the anniversary of Susie's murder, as the day he will return to work. Lindsey decides she will shave her legs for the first time. Jack helps her but wonders why his wife is not helping. They talk about Susie and how the family is adjusting to life without her. Lindsey asks her father if he thinks that Mr. Harvey was involved with the murder. Jack answers that he is sure the neighbor killed Susie.

Lindsey and Jack discuss how the police do not believe Jack's feeling about Mr. Harvey. Jack tells Lindsey although Mr. Harvey is odd, there is no evidence to arrest their neighbor.

Grandma Lynn arrives for Thanksgiving and immediately notices that Abigail is acting strangely. Lynn tries to help Abigail wash dishes after dinner, but Abigail does not want her help. They instead go for a walk together. On their walk, Lynn tells her daughter about an affair Lynn's husband had, which she has never told Abigail about before.

Awkwardly, Lynn takes Abigail's hand as they walk. Abigail tells Lynn that she felt alone growing up after her father's death. Lynn tries to repair their relationship by talking together. Abigail intimates that something is "all over now" (page 170). Lynn is unsure of what her daughter means. Lynn tries to get Abigail to say that she will stop the affair, but Lynn denies having an extra-marital affair.

Abigail becomes distracted by the smell of foreign cigarettes. Ruana Singh is standing outside of her house while a party goes on inside. She is the hostess of the party but does not want to be part of the festivities. Grandma Lynn walks on without her daughter, past Mr. Harvey's house. Standing in front of Mr. Harvey's house, Lynn feels that Jack is right about the man who lives near the Salmons.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Lindsey learns that her father is certain beyond a doubt that Mr. Harvey killed Susie. What will Lindsey do with this information? Getting back to normal is difficult for the family because of Jack's actions and injuries. What will Lindsey do now that she shares her father's belief about Mr. Harvey? The temptation to do something must be difficult to withstand, because Mr. Harvey lives within shouting distance of the Salmons.



Jack pays special attention to Buckley, who has just started kindergarten. His teacher watches out for Buckley carefully, and he needs her. Abigail is beginning to vacate her role in the house, and Buckley reaches out for a substitute mother. Slowly but surely, Abigail is subsiding from the family.

Grandma Lynn arrives for Thanksgiving and immediately suspects her daughter is having an affair. Abigail and Lynn have never been close, so Abigail is suspicious of her mother's attempts to talk about what is happening to her and the family. Lynn tells Abigail about the affair Abigail's father had many years ago to draw Abigail out.

Abigail admits that her life will never be the same. She feels disconnected from her situation, and Lynn tells her she must end any affair she is having. Abigail denies an affair altogether. She smells cigarettes and heads toward Ruana Singh, who is sitting outside of her own dinner party. Ruana and Abigail sit together, two women who feel detached from their own relationships.

Meanwhile, Lynn finishes the walk alone. She stands outside Mr. Harvey's house and feels an evil presence. She now believes her son-in-law. The family, except Abigail, now believes that Mr. Harvey is the killer. Abigail's family is unraveling, and she is the main reason for it.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

Lindsey watches Mr. Harvey's house every day. She has been training to play alongside her boyfriend Samuel and the other boys from boys' soccer team. She runs through the neighborhood and plans how to get into Mr. Harvey's house. She has become familiar with Mr. Harvey's routine, when he leaves and returns. Mr. Harvey drives to parks and other public places where school children usually congregate.

One day Lindsey decides to fall away from the pack of running boys. She pretends to have cramps and secretly heads over to her neighbor's property. As the boys finish their run, Lindsey sneaks over to the side of Mr. Harvey's house. She breaks the window to his basement with her fist.

Lindsey eases herself into Mr. Harvey's basement. Susie watches from her heaven and wants to guide her sister. She whispers to Lindsey, but Lindsey does not hear Susie. Susie thinks, however, that Lindsey feels her presence in the air. Lindsey calms herself and thinks about leaving the basement, but she decides to stay and look for evidence. She knows what she is doing is against the law, but she goes on anyway.

The morning paper lands on the porch, and Lindsey counts the minutes until Mr. Harvey is supposed to return. His house is identical to the Salmons', and memories of Lindsey's life come flooding to her. She remembers growing up with Susie. She remembers the holidays and getting ready for school photos. She remembers being dressed identically as Susie for Easter.

Lindsey pictures Susie running through the house, and she runs after her, but she is still in Mr. Harvey's house. She stops to focus, but it is difficult in this man's house. In her heaven, Susie summons the girls who died before her, all killed by Mr. Harvey. Five children, one eight-years-old and another six-years-old, as well as an adult, join Susie to watch Lindsey.

Lindsey tries to focus on what she is doing, but she is trance-like as she moves through the house. She enters Mr. Harvey's bedroom. She notices his sketchbook by his bedside, and she searches through it. As she does, a car pulls up in Mr. Harvey's driveway. Lindsey does notice that Mr. Harvey has returned home.

Lindsey finds a picture of the cornfield where Susie died, the picture that Susie wanted her to find. She rips the picture out of the sketchbook as Mr. Harvey hears a board creak and realizes that his house has been invaded. He runs upstairs as Lindsey opens his window to the roof. Holding onto a rain gutter, she jumps safely into the bushes.

Lindsey dashes away, and all Mr. Harvey sees is the number five on her back. Lindsey returns home muddy with cuts and scrapes from her jump. Her mother is frightened



upon her return, as Lindsey was momentarily missing. Lindsey tells Jack what she has done, and Abigail is incredulous.

Lindsey wants to show her mother the picture she pulled out of Mr. Harvey's sketchbook but Abigail refuses to look at it, saying: "No one seems to realize that we have a family. We have a family, a family and a son, and I'm going" (page 184-185). After Abigail leaves for the market, Jack asks Lindsey if now she believes him. Lindsey then tells Jack that Mr. Harvey saw her escape.

Susie meets a little girl, Flora Hernandez, who was also killed by Mr. Harvey. They cry and comfort each other and look up to see others joining them in Flora's heaven.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

In this chapter, Lindsey decides she must enter the house of her sister's killer. Jack is sure that Mr. Harvey is the one, and Lindsey takes on her father's obsession with their neighbor. Lindsey begins by "casing" his house, observing his comings and goings. Mr. Harvey spends much of his time in public places.

After a week of watching the house, Lindsey breaks the window of Mr. Harvey's basement and enters the house. Susie watches from her heaven. Susie tries to guide Lindsey, and Lindsey feels Susie's presence. The suspense builds as Mr. Harvey returns home while Lindsey looks through his sketchbook.

Mr. Harvey does not hear Lindsey at first, and she does not realize he is home. He is in the kitchen making a sandwich when he hears a creak from upstairs. He runs up to his room, and Lindsey finally hears him and opens the window to the roof. She jumps to the rain gutter, dangles over the bushes, and drops into them. Mr. Harvey sees the number five on the back of Lindsey's soccer uniform as she flees his house.

The five is clear in Mr. Harvey's mind. Will Lindsey now have to face the police for breaking and entering his house? Or would making a police case out of it and pressing charges against Lindsey result in an investigation that Mr. Harvey cannot afford to be involved in?

Back at the Salmons' house, Abigail reacts with horror at Lindsey's deed. But Lindsey feels the picture of the cornfield confirms that Mr. Harvey is Susie's killer. Abigail does not understand her husband and daughter's obsession with the neighbor, but she does not give any alternatives. She is trying to move on quickly, but there is no way Jack and Lindsey will do that.





# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

When Mr. Harvey was young, he and his mother would steal from stores and scavenge together. They were caught a few times. Mr. Harvey still feels sick to his stomach when he thinks about being caught by a store employee. His mother used him as a child to steal from stores, and when they were successful, his mother would love him.

Mr. Harvey recalls stealing flowers from memorials and graves with his mother. They slept in their truck while three drunken men from a bar attempted to get his mother. Silently, she woke and had Mr. Harvey turn the ignition. The men were slow to react as she jammed down the gas pedal, hitting one of them, then reversing and hitting him again.

As a child, Mr. Harvey could stay calm, just as he did when he spotted Lindsey running away from his house. He calls the police to report his home being broken into. Jack calls Fenerman to tell him about the drawing Lindsey tore out of the sketchbook.

The officers arrive to take the report from Mr. Harvey, and he acts sincere and worried for the Salmon family. They mention the drawing, showing that they already know about the picture of the cornfield. Mr. Harvey remains calm, and the police accept his explanations.

Mr. Harvey gives the officers his theory about Susie's murder. He says he does want to interfere with the investigation, but he thinks that there could have been an underground structure in the cornfield where she might have been killed. Susie watches as any chance that Mr. Harvey will be suspected as her killer slip away.

Abigail calls Fenerman and arranges to meet him. She brings Buckley to the mall, where he plays at the playground. After leaving Buckley's name with a monitor, Abigail heads to meet Fenerman. She follows Fenerman to the inside of the mall, past the noisy air conditioners to where the air filters operate. There, in the darkness of the room, they make love. Abigail shuts out the sounds and thoughts in her mind.

At the same time, Mr. Harvey gets into his car and drives away from his house for the last time.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

In this chapter the reader enters George Harvey's flashback of memories. He and his mother were thieves and scavengers. They stole food from stores and flowers from memorials and cemeteries. Mr. Harvey helps them escape from three drunken men one night. He turned the ignition, and his mother hits the gas. They run over the men and kill



one of them before he can attack them. Mr. Harvey's mother made him act calm and controlled, a skill that helps him as an adult killer.

Mr. Harvey's mother forces him into a calm he summons as an adult. Whenever he is questioned or comes across a difficult situation, he brings calm upon himself and escapes suspicion. His is the face of a thief who dreads being confronted and caught. This flashback is key to the feelings that Mr. Harvey must bring forth when he is confronted as adult.

Mr. Harvey is calm when the police arrive. He shows sympathy for the Salmon family and regrets that he cannot help more. He even offers a theory that Susie was killed underneath the cornfield in a structure. But he says he does not want to interfere, and the police leave and remind him that Fenerman will be back the next day to explore his theory further.

At the same time Abigail brings Buckley to the mall and drops him off at the children's playground. She meets Fenerman in a store and follows him to the inner core of the mall, where they make love. It is a seedy affair, and there is no love involved. It is merely a release of pent-up emotions for Fenerman and Abigail. Susie watches from her heaven as life continues for the rest of her family.

Later, Mr. Harvey leaves his house forever. It appears that he cannot have the conversation with Fenerman that the officers promised. Mr. Harvey's dread he experienced as a thief with his mother has never left. Mr. Harvey is unwilling to be confronted, and he is unwilling to be caught. He will now have to live life on the run, but his calm exterior never breaks.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

Ruth comes to Ray's house, and she wants to see Ray and talk about Susie. Ruth asks Ray what it was like to kiss Susie. They decide to kiss each other to see what it is like, but nothing special happens.

On the anniversary of Susie's death, Ruth comes to Ray again. She has candles to make a memorial for Susie and asks Ray to come to the cornfield. They arrive at the cornfield, and Samuel and Hal Heckler are already there. Soon more and more neighbors notice people at the field and begin to join them.

Lindsey notices what is happening in the cornfield and tells her mother. Abigail tells Lindsey that she's not interested, but she is sure that Jack will be. The neighborhood now gossips about the possible guilt of Mr. Harvey, but they do not ask the Salmons about the theory.

Later, while the memorial is still in progress, Lindsey looks outside and notices that the people of the neighborhood are having a ceremony for Susie. Abigail is still not interested in attending. She tells Lindsey that a ceremony does not honor Susie and that there are other ways to remember her.

Abigail tells Lindsey that being a mother is not enough for her, and Lindsey asks her if she's going to leave the family. Abigail promises not to leave. They hug, and Abigail tells Lindsey that she is the one keeping Jack alive. Abigail relents and tells Lindsey to get her father to walk outside with Buckley to the ongoing memorial. Buckley tells Lindsey that he sees Susie when she is not around.

The Salmons join the memorial, where their neighbors are singing songs for Susie. Jack asks Mr. O'Dwyer to sing because Susie always listened to him. Susie recalls listening to Mr. O'Dwyer sing Irish ballads on hot summer nights.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

In this chapter, the friendship between Ruth and Ray grows. They kiss to experiment with the feeling of what it was like for Ray to kiss Susie. They forget about Susie, however, and start to enjoy kissing one another.

Ruth arrives at Ray's with candles ready to head to the cornfield on the year anniversary of Susie's murder. At first Ray balks, but then he decides to join Ruth. Eventually the whole neighborhood joins them. The memorial lasts for hours, and as men return home from work, more and more families join the growing group in the cornfield.



Conspicuous in their absence is Susie's family. Abigail does not want to go, but Lindsey does. Lindsey is sent to her room or to play with Buckley. Abigail tells Lindsey that she is done with memorials and that there are other ways to honor Susie. Abigail wants to be more than a mother. Lindsey fears that she is losing her mother, but Abigail promises that she will not leave.

Finally Lindsey convinces her mother and father to go outside. Jack asks his neighbor to sing an Irish ballad as the Salmons and neighbors join in. The neighbors are experiencing normal grieving for people who have not lost a direct relative. They have grieved, but many are letting Susie go and are united while the family splits apart.

The Salmons are having a much more difficult time grieving. Abigail runs from her grief while Jack is tormented by it. Lindsey is still trying to deal with losing her sister and having Samuel around helps this process. Abigail and Jack do not sleep together anymore. Jack sleeps in his office, and Abigail sleeps in their bed. They essentially are separated while still living in the same house. The sleeping arrangements are a symbol of the wedge that Susie's death has driven into their marriage.



# Snapshots

## Snapshots Summary

Susie recalls taking snapshots with her first camera. She felt good about the picture, a moment she owned.

Abigail leaves the family for her father's cabin in New Hampshire. The neighbors send the family food in her absence. Grandma Lynn calls to say that she is coming to stay. She promises she will not drink until after five in the afternoon, and Jack allows her to come.

Two years after her death, Susie watches Lindsey and Samuel become closer. Mr. Harvey has been gone for a year, and they still look for him. Lindsey visits the police to ask whether they have a lead. She meets with Fenerman, and when Lindsey enters the station she sees a red cloth on his desk. It is a red scarf that belonged to Abigail.

Lindsey confronts Fenerman and asks why he has her mother's scarf. Fenerman stumbles for an excuse, but Lindsey asks him again. Fenerman does not answer, and Hal and Lindsey leave the station.

Life continues for the Salmon family and the people in their neighborhood. A family with children moves into Mr. Harvey's house. Buckley is now interested in making a fort where he can read comic books. He writes a story about a little boy who digs a hole, crawls into it, and never comes out.

Fenerman does not forget Susie's murder, and he visits the evidence container to sift through the case. He had no lead on Mr. Harvey and feels he has failed. He takes out the snapshots of his unsolved murders, including a picture of his wife, whose case is unsolved as well.

On September 10, 1976, a hunter spots something glittering on the ground. It is Susie's Pennsylvania keystone charm.

Abigail leaves New Hampshire for California. She drives to the beach and touches the water when she arrives. She spots a baby on the sand and wanting to save the baby, she heads for it. She realizes a moment later that a film crew is filming the baby on the beach for a television commercial. Later, she settles in the wine-making areas of northern California, and she gets a job at a winery.

The years go by, and Susie's murder is left unsolved. In 1977, Ruth moves to New York City to make a living as an artist. She works at a bar and rents a closet. Abigail lives in California and does not want to come back to her family. At college, Ray studies medicine and reads about elderly people who report seeing an angel of death while experiencing small strokes and delusions.



Mr. Harvey lives in the wilderness. He likes to drive to the neighborhood near the Salmons early in the morning to see his old house. He survives on wild mushrooms and berries. He scavenges where he can.

Hal receives a call from a biker contact whose mother was murdered by a man who made dollhouses. Hal calls Fenerman to tell him the information.

More years pass, and from her heaven Susie wonders what she would be doing if she were alive. She pictures all these events as if they are snapshots in an album.

## Snapshots Analysis

In this chapter, Susie describes short events in the lives of her family and everyone who cares about her. Lindsey and Hal spot the red scarf on Fenerman's desk. Lindsey sees his silence as evidence of guilt, and she storms out of the station.

Abigail leaves the family, even though she promised Lindsey she wouldn't. She heads for New Hampshire and later for northern California. Abigail longs to see and touch the ocean. The water of the Pacific Ocean shows her that she is far away from the horror of what happened to her and to Susie.

Susie's killer lives in the wild, but he visits the neighborhood where he lived and killed her. He comes only when it is safe, late at night or early in the morning. Hal Heckler hears information that could connect Mr. Harvey to another murder. Will Mr. Harvey ever get caught? Will the police focus on Mr. Harvey as a suspect with the additional information that came to light?

Susie watches her sister and Ruth grow up, and she wonders what her life would have been like if she had lived. These are the snapshots she pores through in her heaven. Susie will not let go of her family, and they have difficulty letting her go as well.

Having been taken from Earth so early, Susie lives with a regret shared by her family. She wants to grow up and experience sex and life like Lindsey has. She wants to go to college, get married, and have a baby. Her killer denied her all of this.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Lindsey is twenty-one, and Susie still follows her. Lindsey and Samuel graduate from Temple University on the same day and afterward begin to travel home. Their trip is stopped when the motorcycle they are riding breaks down in the rain. Samuel wheels the bike into the forest, and they run through the woods to find shelter.

Thunder claps as Lindsey and Samuel make their way through the underbrush. They come across a vacant house and enter it to get dry. They decide to explore the house, and Samuel immediately loves it. He is interested in every element of the house, and Lindsey shares his enthusiasm for the structure and details of the house. The house symbolizes a shaky, yet new beginning.

Jack, Grandma Lynn, and Buckley wait for Lindsey and Samuel to come home. In the vacant house, Samuel proposes marriage to Lindsey. She accepts, and in her heaven Susie celebrates. Lindsey and Samuel decide they must run miles home through the rain.

Lindsey and Samuel arrive home soaked and tell the family the news of the proposal. The family and Hal open champagne and celebrate as Susie watches closely. When Susie is tired of watching her family she rides the trains in the city. She takes in the sites and sounds of Philadelphia and remembers riding the trains with her father when she was a young girl.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Lindsey and Samuel are growing up and doing everything that Susie cannot. After graduation, they run into the house of their dreams. Samuel proposes to Lindsey there, and they run miles home to be with their family. Samuel is fascinated by the woodwork and the intricacies of the house. He vows that he and Lindsey will buy and restore the house after they are married. The house symbolizes a new life together, separate and literally far away from the tragedy of Susie's death.

Every person in heaven has a part of Earth that they watch, and Susie spends a lot of time riding the trains in Philadelphia. She follows life as much as she can. She has fond memories of riding the train with her father and refuses to let the memories fade.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Ruth decides to come home from New York to see the sinkhole before developers fill it in. She is fascinated with sinkhole and feels that it is connected with Susie. It is a secret that she keeps and writes about in her diary.

Ruth has formed a connection with the dead. She is a celebrity in Susie's heaven because she feels she sees where death has occurred. Ruth feels she is a bridge between the living and the dead, and she writes prayers for the dead in her journal. She is anonymous in Manhattan, dressed as art student in all black.

As she walks, Ruth thinks about Ray and the kisses they shared. She thinks about seeing Ray when she goes home. At the Salmon house, Buckley is growing up, and he is beginning to question his father. When Jack refuses to let Buckley use Susie's old clothes for tomato stakes in his garden, Buckley explodes at his father.

Buckley says what his father is unable to admit. Jack cannot control his feelings in the face of Buckley. Buckley tells Jack that he cannot let Susie go, and that is why Abigail left. Jack drops to his knees and feels pins and needles running up his arms. He is having a heart attack.

As Jack lies in the hospital with tubes running through him and machines keeping him alive, Buckley asks Susie not to let their father die. In her heaven, Susie sees a man in the distance. As he comes forward she sees that it is her grandfather. They listen to the music they loved in life. When the music stops, her grandfather walks away.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

In this chapter, Susie watches Ruth closely. Ruth is a celebrity in Susie's heaven because Ruth sees the places where people have died. Ruth studies these places and writes poetry about them. Ruth will be coming home to see the sinkhole before it is filled in and also to see Ray. Their relationship is built around a love for and a fascination with Susie and her death.

Buckley is getting older and feels that his father needs to move on from Susie's death. Jack cannot do that, however, and every remark Buckley makes is like a punch in the stomach. The pain becomes real after their argument as Jack falls to his knees and has a heart attack. His obsession with and unwillingness to accept Susie's death has led to a dangerous condition.

Buckley watches as Jack falls to the ground. Buckley had pleaded with his father to let him use Susie's clothing, but Jack cannot, even years after her death.





Susie glimpses another heaven when her grandfather visits her. He tells her that she is close. Possibly close to another heaven? It is a hint that there is something beyond her heaven. What will she have to do to get there?



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

At the winery, Abigail learns of an emergency in Pennsylvania. She calls the one person who she knows will be home, Ruana Singh. Ruana tells her that they say an ambulance has come to the Salmons' house. Later Abigail learns that Jack has had a heart attack. Abigail begins her journey home.

Abigail speaks to Lynn, and Lynn tells her that Jack is asking for Abigail and Susie. Abigail arrives, and Lindsey greets her unhappily. Samuel speaks for Lindsey, telling Abigail that Jack is doing badly. While Abigail has been gone, her children have grown up.

Buckley is angry with his mother too. He cusses at her under his breath and refuses to look at her. Samuel attempts to repair the damage. They see Jack, and he is weak but recognizes his wife and family. "Look what it took to get you home," Jack says as he sees his wife (page 270).

Lynn leaves Jack and Abigail in the room. They receive a note stating that Fenerman will visit and wishes Jack well. A moment of foreboding occurs as the reader anticipates the reaction Fenerman will receive from the Salmon family.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

In this chapter, Abigail journeys home to see Jack and her children. When she arrives, Lindsey and Buckley are angry and the scene is tense. Buckley, who now wants to be called Buck, cusses at his mother and will not look at her. Their tension and anger has built because of Abigail's long absence. Abigail left them at the worst time of their lives, when they were mourning Susie. She broke her promise to Lindsey and left.

Jack and Abigail embrace in the hospital a little at a time. Abigail receives a note from Fenerman. He promises he will visit the already tense family.

Fenerman was an intricate part of the disintegration of the Salmon family. The man who is responsible for Susie's case not being solved also had an affair with Abigail. He will visit at a vulnerable moment, when Abigail is once again with her family.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

Susie follows her killer in his life on the run. Mr. Harvey visits the places where he killed previous victims. Susie also keeps track of the living rather than noting the dead. Fenerman has the same habit as well. He is now determined to visit Jack. Fenerman also has Susie's charm that was found in the Pennsylvania woods.

Abigail settles in to the hospital and sleeps in her husband's room. As her parents sleep, Susie whispers the poem her father liked to recite to her when she was young. At the same time George Harvey began dreaming of Lindsey's number five soccer shirt. He has this dream when he feels threatened.

As Jack and Abigail sleep, Susie comes into Jack's room. Jack is lucid, and he begins talking with Abigail about the effect of her return on the family and the children's reactions to her. They talk about how she introduced herself to people in California and that she would say she has two children while thinking she has three.

Jack mentions that when Abigail was sleeping he heard someone come into the hospital room and that it was probably Susie. At first Abigail is surprised but then tells Jack that she also sees Susie everywhere, even in California. She says that to think Susie was in the room is an insane thought but probably true.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

In this chapter, George Harvey is being haunted, not by the girl he murdered, but by Lindsey's number five as she fled from his roof. He feels compelled to visit and stay at the places where he murdered his victims. His victims are haunting him, visiting him unnoticed. Susie can see them, wearing bloodied clothing. Mr. Harvey is driven out of hiding because of the haunting dreams. He is disobeying his instincts his mother taught him that tell him to run.

Abigail and Jack are becoming acquainted again. Jack does not seem angry with his wife. Susie enters the room, and Jack sees her. Later, he asks Abigail if she saw Susie, and at first Abigail blanches, but she then admits that she sees her dead daughter everywhere as well.

The family does not seem disturbed by the fact that they have seen Susie. There is no discussion about it, just acceptance. It is a remarkable event, but the Salmon family has all shared it. Abigail sees Susie at quick moments, such as getting on a bus or in the street. Does Abigail mean she is seeing a ghost? The reader is left to wonder.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

Susie visits Ray and admits that she cannot leave him as much as she will not leave her family. Ray is still special to her because he was her first love. Susie recalls the conversation between her and Grandma Lynn about Susie's first kiss. Abigail had picked up the line, but then let her mother finish the conversation. Lynn told Susie that the man she first kissed was a friend of her father's.

Ruth, who is now home, visits Ray, where they discuss the filling in of the sinkhole for the building of a new subdivision. Ruth's father feels that a new subdivision may crowd out the family's house. The sinkhole will be filled with four blocks thrown into the hole with concrete and grout to fill the cracks. A newspaper article compares the hole to a throat.

Ruth and Ray drive out to explore the hole. Fenerman heads to the hospital to visit Jack. When Fenerman arrives he tells Jack that the police have not caught "him." Fenerman presents the charm bracelet to Jack and Abigail and tells them that it was found next to a grave in Connecticut. The grave is not Susie's.

Jack looks anxious, wishing for Susie's case to be open once again, but Abigail is feeling the opposite. Jack opens the bag with the charm and touches it. Abigail asks Fenerman if he is certain that Mr. Harvey killed the other girls, and Fenerman repeats what he said to her years before, that nothing is certain. She then asks Fenerman to leave because she has no desire to hear about the murder any more.

Susie follows Ruth and Ray as they head to the sinkhole. Susie spots Mr. Harvey on her way. Her killer arrives at his street in a dilapidated truck because he cannot get the five on Lindsey's uniform out of his mind. The memories of the other women and girls he killed are flooding back to him.

Ray and Ruth arrive at the sinkhole. The company building the subdivision has given the residents of the nearby house a settlement, and they have left. Ray and Ruth get out and walk to the sinkhole, and Ruth tiptoes to the edge of the opening. Ruth wonders if Susie is buried in the hole. Nearby Susie watches, and she wants to yell that Ruth has solved the mystery.

Ruth feels Susie's presence as she stands at Susie's grave. Ruth tells Susie that she has written poems for her, and she asks Susie if she wants anything.

Mr. Harvey drives through the neighborhood and spies Lindsey in the upstairs bedroom of the Salmon house. Children play in yards as he stops his truck and watches. As he sits in the truck a policeman asks him if he is lost. Mr. Harvey explains that he used to live in the neighborhood, and the officer suggests he move along.



As Ruth walks back to the car at the sinkhole, Susie falls to Earth. Ruth blacks out.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

Fenerman brings Susie's charm to Abigail and Jack in the hospital. It is a symbol of young Susie and difficult for Abigail to see. She seems to have mixed feelings upon seeing the man she had a brief affair with, but Abigail cannot handle the emotions of Susie's case. She does not want it reopened, and she asks Fenerman to leave the room. Jack is unaware of his wife's stray from their marriage.

Mr. Harvey is not brave enough to stay after being confronted by a friendly police officer. He cannot have a confrontation because his biggest fear is of being caught. His life with his mother gave him the fear in the pit of his stomach.

All of the girls and women who Mr. Harvey has killed are haunting him now. All the years that Mr. Harvey has repressed the memories of killing them suddenly begin to dissolve, and his victims now visit him in his truck. They wear their bloody clothes as they sit next to him.

Ruth and Ray renew their friendship after Ruth returns from New York. They head to the sinkhole to see it before it will be filled in by the company that is building a housing development. Ruth feels Susie's presence at the sinkhole. She talks to Susie, and Ruth wonders if Susie wants anything. As Ruth walks, Susie falls to Earth, and Ruth blacks out.



# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

Ruth collapses on the road, and Ray runs to her asking if she is okay. At that moment Susie feels like she is in Ruth's body. She feels the scrapes on Ruth's back, and she feels everything Ruth would feel. She has fallen into Ruth's body. In Susie's heaven, Franny and her dog Holiday search for Susie, but she is gone.

Susie feels the weight of a human body she is occupying. Ray stands over her, asking her if she fainted. But looking at her, he is unsure, and he says something has changed. Susie tells Ray to kiss her. Ray stares at her, and although he is confused, he kisses her. Susie feels herself in a body of a fully-grown woman.

Ray and Susie head across the street to Hal Heckler's bike shop. Hal has a room and bath in the back of the shop, and Susie knows how to get in his shop. She has watched Hal bring his dates there and knows the way. Ray kisses Susie again, and he is beginning to realize that he is not kissing Ruth. He asks her who she is, and Susie is evasive.

Ray and Susie enter Hal's bike shop after finding a hidden key. Susie wants to take a shower and asks Ray if he will join her. Ray tells her that she is not Ruth and calls her Susie. He asks if Ruth is there, and Susie tells him that Ruth is reading poetry. They make love in the back of Hal Heckler's bike shop. Afterward Susie says, "My name is Susie...last name Salmon, like the fish" (page 309).

Susie and Ray talk about Ray's life and if he ever thinks about the dead. He says that he does, and Susie tells him that he can talk to those who are dead without it being scary. Susie tells Ray to read Ruth's journals. After more time together the room gets cloudy for Susie. She picks up the phone and calls her house. Buckley answers, and Susie tells him it is his big sister calling. Buckley tells Susie that he cannot hear her.

Ray comes out of the shower and touches Ruth's shoulder. He can tell that Susie is gone. Susie feels like she has gone through a dark tunnel.

## Chapter 22 Analysis

Ruth's fascination and obsession with Susie comes to a head in this chapter. Susie's need to be with Ray and her family is likewise coming to a crescendo as Susie enters Ruth's body. Ray is mystified by Ruth's change, and he slowly realizes that this is not Ruth at all. Her face looks different, and she does not look like the same girl who was standing with him a moment earlier looking down at abyss of the sinkhole.



It is Susie. She has fallen to Earth to fulfill her long-awaited wish in the back of Hal Heckler's bike shop as she and Ray make love. They talk about death and if Ray's interest in it as a medical student.

Susie tells Ray that the dead are all around and that all he has to do is talk to them. She assures him that it does not have to be a scary thing. It is not a horror show. The dead are merely observing, unaware to the living.

As Susie fades from Ruth's body, Susie calls her house on the telephone. Buckley picks up the line, but he cannot hear his sister. Moments later Susie fades out of Ruth's body and describes her leaving as entering a dark tunnel on a highway. Before she left Ruth's body, Susie tells Ray to read Ruth's diaries. What clues will be inside these journals?

Susie return to Earth is unconventional but perhaps not an unexpected turn in the plot. There have been hints, such as the connection Ruth has forged with Susie and the Salmons seeing Susie in many places.



# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

As Ruth and Ray lay together at Ray's house, Ray reads Ruth's journal entries. He reads of all the spots where people have been murdered. Ruth wakes and says that she has much to tell him of what she has seen. Ruana bakes apple pies for them to wake up to. Ray's mother is thinking of divorcing her husband and at the same time is glad her son has a girlfriend.

At the Salmon house, Buckley receives a drum set from Hal weeks before his thirteenth birthday. Jack is ready to come home from the hospital, and Grandma Lynn, Samuel, and Hal prepare for Jack and Abigail's return. The parents arrive with Buckley and Lindsey, and as they are getting out of the car Lindsey asks her mother, "Are you going to hurt him again?" (page 317). Abigail assures her daughter that she will not hurt Jack, but she does not promise this time.

Buckley is surprised and happy at his new drum kit as Abigail adjusts to being home with her mother. She thinks of being kind to Lynn. Downstairs, Buckley is getting used to his drums, and the family celebrates Jack's return. Outside, Ruana and Ray drop off an apple pie for the Salmons. They are invited inside to join the Salmons' celebration.

In her heaven, Susie realizes that lovely bones have grown around her family. They are the connections that have set around her mother, father, sister, and brother. Her family is no longer broken. Samuel tells the group about the house he and Lindsey wish to restore when he hears from Ray that Ruth's father owns that particular house and he wishes to restore the same.

## Chapter 23 Analysis

Ruth and Ray's relationship is transformed after Susie occupies Ruth's body. Ruana feels good that her son is with Ruth, as her own marriage to the always-absent Dr. Singh is slowly dissolving.

The Salmons celebrate Jack's from the hospital. Abigail is returning as well. Lindsey wants her mother to assure her that she will not hurt Jack again. Abigail tells her that this time she will not make any promises to stay. But there is a new happiness in the house.

Abigail decides to be friendly to Lynn after years of coldness. She accepts Lynn rather than wishing she was different. Abigail ends the freeze between them that has lasted since Abigail was young.

In her heaven, Susie sees her family in a different light. The lovely bones are symbols of the new strength the family grows. It symbolizes their healing. Susie being wrenched



from them and taken to her heaven shattered them. Now they are stronger and have a new outlook.



# Bones

## Bones Summary

Through the years, Susie continues to watch her family. She watches her family less regularly, as Grandma Lynn dies, Lindsey and Samuel marry, and Buckley grows up. Ray becomes a doctor but is not with Ruth, who is in New York. Ruth believes that Susie entered her body, and she tries to convince others that the dead talk to the living.

Susie is in a wide heaven that is comfortable but different from her first heaven. She has all the comforts she ever wants in her heaven. Her grandfather is with her, and one day when they are watching Earth they see Mr. Harvey. He is eating at a diner and traveling on the Greyhound bus.

Mr. Harvey comes out of the diner and into the heavy snow. He begins talking to young girl. He asks her if she is traveling alone, and she calls him a creep and walks away. At that moment an icicle falls and knocks Mr. Harvey off balance. He falls down an embankment. His body will not be found until the snow melts weeks later.

Susie watches Lindsey work in her garden. With her is her new baby, Abigail Suzanne. Susie calls her Little Susie. A few miles away, a man holds a bracelet he found in the mud. He wonders if the little girl who it belonged to is grown up by now. From her new heaven, Susie says: "Almost. Not quite" (page 328).

## Bones Analysis

Susie continues to watch, but less regularly. She is in a different heaven, a wide heaven that she considers more comfortable. Her grandfather is with her in this heaven. She is in the heaven where he had come from before to visit her. Was her first heaven a way station to this one? Are there more afterworlds awaiting her in the future?

Susie and her grandfather watch as Mr. Harvey eats at a diner that Susie's grandfather had eaten at in life. The diner is seedy, and they spot Mr. Harvey. He is taking a break from riding a Greyhound bus. Perhaps he is trolling for his next victim, because he is now a man haunted by his killer past. He is no longer the amiable but false neighbor the Salmons knew before he killed Susie.

Mr. Harvey attempts to talk to a teenage girl. Will this be another victim? She brushes him off, and a moment later he loses his balance after an icicle lands on him and falls into the snow. His body will not be discovered for weeks, when snow melts. Is this justice for her killer? Did Susie make the icicle fall, knocking Mr. Harvey into the snow? Mr. Harvey is never caught.

Lindsey and her baby, Abigail Suzanne, garden in the sun as Susie watches. Nearby, a man finds Susie's bracelet and wonders if this girl has grown up. The bracelet



symbolizes Susie's youth as a happy, well-adjusted child with loving parents. The man and his wife assume that the girl has grown up, but Susie tells the reader differently.

All little girls like Susie and Lindsey are supposed to grow up and have families one day, but that was not Susie's destiny. Susie finishes the story by telling the reader to live long and happily.



# Characters

## Susie Salmon

Unlike her sister, Susie is not gifted. She is curious like her father. When George Harvey asks Susie to come in to his underground structure, she obliges. Mr. Harvey rapes and kills Susie, and she feels like she was naive for believing him.

Susie's counselor in her heaven, Franny, tells Susie that she was a naive kid for walking into the man's presence. In her heaven, Susie's dog Holiday joins her, and her grandfather visits her briefly.

Susie has left her life unfulfilled, so she remains close to her family. They see her often. Her brother Buckley, the youngest, is accustomed to seeing Susie on a regular basis.

Susie floats through her town, and she likes to watch the boy she loved in life, Ray Singh. Ray has become friends with Ruth, a girl who only slightly knew Susie in life. Ruth is obsessed with Susie, and Ray joins in her obsession.

Susie watches as her brother and sister grow up. She cannot do all the things that she wanted to do in life. Her desire has led to her always being present for her family and with Ray.

Susie finally lands back on Earth, where she inhabits Ruth's body. She and Ray make love, and Ray realizes what has happened. After this Susie finds herself in a new heaven, where she joins her grandfather. She watches as her killer falls and freezes to death in the deep snow.

## Lindsey Salmon

Susie's sister Lindsey is slow to believe her father's suspicion of Mr. Harvey. When she finally decides to believe him, she breaks into her neighbor's house to search for evidence.

Mr. Harvey spots Lindsey's number five on the back of her soccer shirt as she escapes from his roof. Her number five haunts him the rest of his life. Lindsey loses her virginity to Samuel at the gifted students' camp. The people who stare and point fingers at the girl whose sister was murdered disturb Lindsey.

Lindsey realizes that her mother has had an affair with Detective Len Fenerman, and she is very angry at Abigail. Lindsey asks her mother to promise that she will not leave the family. Abigail breaks her promise.

Lindsey and Samuel go to college together, and after they graduate Samuel proposes. They run into a house in the rain that they want to restore and start their life together.



Lindsey and Samuel have a baby and name her after Susie.

## Jack Salmon

Susie's father Jack is a man haunted by his daughter's murder. His feeling that Mr. Harvey killed Susie is one he cannot get rid of, and it leads to an obsession with the neighbor.

Jack lands in the hospital when he mistakes Susie's friend Clarissa in the dark and Clarissa's boyfriend Brian beats him severely. Later, Jack has a heart attack when his son Buckley confronts him about Susie's belongings that he cannot let go.

Jack never realizes that his wife had a short affair with Fenerman. He does not have the anger Lindsey has because she knows and he does not.

## Abigail Salmon

Susie's mother Abigail breaks out of her motherly role and is quick to want to let go of Susie. She is haunted by the investigation and the torture of hearing the grisly details of her daughter's death.

Abigail promises Lindsey that she will stay with the family, but she does not. She winds up in California working at a winery. She sees Susie everywhere, but she does not admit this for years. Abigail never has a warm relationship with her own mother Lynn, who often embarrasses Abigail.

Abigail has an affair with Fenerman because she is numb and she wants to feel something again. Later, when Abigail returns to Pennsylvania to be with Jack in the hospital, she regains her love for her husband and makes amends with her children.

Her worst fear is the reopening of Susie's case, but this does not happen.

## George Harvey

Susie's killer, Mr. Harvey, is practiced at acting and pretending to be someone he is not. When Lindsey breaks into his house, he becomes obsessed with her number five. He is afraid of talking to Fenerman, and he leaves his house and the neighborhood for good.

Mr. Harvey's mother and he were scavengers and petty thieves as he was growing up. His father was abusive and never approved of either of them. Mr. Harvey and his mother killed a drunken man when made advances on her one night.

Mr. Harvey is a coward, and when confronted he makes up lies. All of his victims begin to haunt his dreams. They sit with him, and he is isolated further. Mr. Harvey finally freezes to death in the snow.



## Ruth Connors

Ruth is not a close friend of Susie's in life, but she became obsessed with Susie after Susie's murder. Ruth is an outcast and a gifted artist, and she leaves town after graduating early from high school. She lives in New York and returns to see Ray.

Ruth writes poetry and can see places where girls and women have been murdered. She feels the dead, and when she returns to Pennsylvania she can feel Susie's presence. She talks to Susie, asking her if she wants anything. A moment later, Susie falls into Ruth's body.

Ruth does not stay in Pennsylvania after Susie's entrance into her body. She and Ray remain friends, but Ruth heads back to New York. Her diaries indicate how she can see where people have been murdered.

## Ray Singh

Ray is Indian and an outsider to the town. He is anxious to leave, but he stays close to his mother, Ruana. He wants to be a doctor like his mostly absent father.

Ray is Susie's first love, and they share their first kiss. Susie comes back to Earth to be with Ray, not with her family. They make love while Susie is in Ruth's body.

## Len Fenerman

The detective on Susie's case, Fenerman, has a short affair with Abigail Salmon. He does not believe Jack Salmon's theory that Mr. Harvey killed Susie until years later when evidence from the other victims starts to come out and Susie's keystone charm is found.

Fenerman keeps track of Susie's case even though the clues come slowly. Lindsey confronts him when she spots Abigail's scarf on his desk. Fenerman visits the Salmons when Jack is in the hospital after his heart attack. He gives the Salmons Susie's charm, and Abigail asks him to leave the room.

## Samuel Heckler

Samuel is Lindsey's boyfriend and fellow gifted student. He makes love to Lindsey at a gifted symposium they attend. Lindsey and Samuel go to college together, but school is not Samuel's first choice. He loves to work with wood in construction.

Samuel and Lindsey run into the house that Samuel falls in love with. He proposes to Lindsey there, and they later find out that Ruth Connors's father has bought the house.



## Hal Heckler

Hal is Samuel's brother and motorcycles. Hal watches over Samuel and later watches over Lindsey. Sitting in the hospital hallway, Hal reminds Abigail that her husband and daughter are waiting.

## Ruana Singh

Ruana Singh, Ray's mother, smokes foreign cigarettes and is a lonely woman. She lives for her son and is an outsider in town. She is estranged from her spouse because her husband spends most of his time working.



# Objects/Places

## Suburban Pennsylvania

Suburban Pennsylvania is the setting of this story. The neighborhood where Susie and her family live is near a cornfield. Susie is walking through this cornfield when Mr. Harvey lures her into his workshop. A cornfield is a large, endless setting where something can be lost.

The suburbs are an area where people know each other's business and secrets. Mr. Harvey sticks out because he is single and does not mix with his neighbors. He refuses to come to block parties. He keeps to himself and builds doll houses in his house. His is a non-traditional lifestyle, which makes his neighbors distrust him.

Near the cornfield is a sinkhole where Mr. Harvey throws the safe into which he has stuffed Susie's body. The sinkhole is well-known for its mysterious makeup. Later when the sinkhole is to be filled in, Ruth and Ray come to look at it for the last time. The sinkhole draws them there, but their town is repelling, and Ray and Ruth do not want to live there.

## The Charm Bracelet

This bracelet that belonged to Susie is found in the deep mud miles away from where she was murdered and many years later. Susie was wearing it on the day she was murdered, and Len Fenerman gives Abigail and Jack a charm from the bracelet when Jack is in the hospital after his heart attack.

The return of the charm throws Abigail back into the terror of thinking about Susie's case. Abigail desperately does not want the case reopened. For Jack, the charm is akin to receiving his daughter's body, as it is as close as he will come to having Susie's remains returned.

## The Cornfield

The cornfield is where Susie is murdered and where Brian beats Jack after Jack mistakes Brian's girlfriend Clarissa for Susie. The Salmons' friends and neighbors hold a memorial for Susie in the cornfield.

## Five

Five is the number on the back of Lindsey's soccer shirt. The number haunts Mr. Harvey and drives him back to the town.





## **Susie's Heaven**

Susie's heaven is a way station for what will come next. She slowly realizes that more heavens are beyond her reach. In this heaven Susie has the kind of house and patio that she always wanted, and dogs play with abandon.

## **The Wide, Wide Heaven**

A comfortable heaven, this is the second of Susie's heavens. She capitalizes the name of this heaven. This is where her grandfather is. It seems to be less of a free paradise as her heaven was.

## **Mr. Harvey's Underground Room**

This earthen room is under the cornfield Mr. Harvey made and where he lures Susie and then rapes and kills her. Mr. Harvey later collapsed the room with dirt. The room is never found.

## **The Sinkhole**

The sinkhole is behind a neighbor's house and where Mr. Harvey buries Susie's body. He stuffs her in an old safe and dumps it into the hole. The hole also represents the abyss of emotions into which the Salmons descend.

## **Ships in a Bottle**

Jack's hobby is building ships in a bottle, and no one else in the family except Susie shares his interest. The ships represent a perfect world, frozen in time. After his world is shattered by Susie's murder, Jack destroys the ships.

## **Susie's Elbow**

Susie's elbow is the only body part that is found. A neighbor's dog finds it and brings it home.

## **Susie's Wool Cap**

Mr. Harvey stuffs Susie's wool cap into her mouth when he was rapes her. When Detective Fenerman later gives the cap to the family they break down, knowing Susie is dead.



## Ruana's Apple Pies

Ruana's pies are delicious and a reminder of traditional American motherhood. When Abigail leaves, Ruana sends apple pies to the Salmons.



# Themes

## Overcoming Loss

Overcoming loss is a two-way street. Susie Salmon cannot overcome her own loss. She follows her family and Ray around for years. She remains in her heaven, a way station to where she believes others are waiting for her. First, however, she has to let go of her family.

Jack cannot let go of Susie. This has a terrible effect on his health, he is beaten for mistaking Clarissa for Susie, and eventually he has a heart attack. Jack's son Buckley does move on, and Buckley does not understand why his father cannot.

Abigail's way of overcoming the loss of her daughter is to have an affair with the detective on Susie's case. Abigail feels nothing and desperately wants to feel alive again. Buckley overcomes Susie's loss and sees her everywhere. Jack and Abigail have the same experience but do not admit it for years.

## The Closeness of Suburbia

This story is set in suburban Pennsylvania where the older homes clash with the coming of the new subdivision. People are close, but the gossip of this closeness cuts close for the Salmon family.

The Salmons realize that many people in their neighborhood are sad for their loss as the impromptu memorial lasts for hours a year after Susie's death. The odd man in the neighborhood is Mr. Harvey, who is an outcast and strange to many. Many begin to suspect him in Susie's murder.

## The Afterlife

Susie's heaven seems to be a way station to something grander. She has a counselor, Franny, who guides her in this heaven. Franny helps Susie with the transition into her heaven. Every heaven is different. It is all in the eye of the beholder. Susie's heaven has dogs playing and music. It is everything that makes her happy.

Susie knows that there is more to heaven than just her own personal heaven. She receives a visit from her grandfather, who tells her that she has to be patient, but she will get there.

After Susie falls to Earth, she returns to a wider heaven. This heaven is different. It is filled with creature comforts, and her grandfather is there. Are there more heavens? Susie suspects there might be, but she is not sure.



People in their heavens watch the living like they are watching a television show. They pick favorites and stay with them. Ruth is a celebrity in Susie's heaven because of her connection to the dead. The dead do not influence the living, but they watch closely. Sometimes the living can feel the dead if they are tuned in. The Salmon family has felt Susie numerous times, but except for Buckley, they are afraid to admit it.

## Family

The dysfunction caused by Susie's death lasts for years. The family is split by feelings of loss and mourning. Abigail leaves and does not return until Jack's heart attack.

The family relies on Grandma Lynn after Susie's death and later when Abigail leaves. The family stays together, with Lindsey being a strong center when Jack is overwhelmed.

The family is strengthened when Samuel Heckler proposes to Lindsey. Samuel and his brother Hal become important parts of the family, and they help Lindsey keep the family from disintegrating further.

## Loss and Grief

Loss of a loved one and the stages of mourning or grief manifest as overriding themes in *The Lovely Bones*. Through the voice of Susie Salmon, the fourteen-year-old narrator of the novel, readers get an in-depth look at the grieving process. Susie focuses more on the aftermath and effects of her murder and rape on her family rather than on the event itself. She watches her parents and sister move through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. However, Alice Sebold makes clear that these categories do not necessarily remain rigid and that individuals deal with grief in various ways. For example, Abigail, Susie's mother, withdraws from her living children, Lindsey and Buckley, whereas Jack, her husband, draws closer to them. Lindsey, Susie's sister, vacillates between denial and acceptance, sometimes exhibiting both elements simultaneously. In addition, Sebold expands the definitions of both loss and grief by including Susie herself in the process. If readers limit their understanding of grief to losing and coping with the death of a loved one, then they have trouble accounting for Susie's emotions. She mourns her own death and the missed opportunity of getting to grow up, but more significantly, Susie grieves over the loss of living people. In other words, the novel extends the grieving process to include the dead themselves.

By including Susie in this process and having Abigail leave the family, Sebold investigates the nature of loss and its relationship to grief. The novel suggests change equals loss, which in turn initiates grief. While Susie's death emerges as the most blatant change in the lives of the Salmons, other significant changes also occur. Lindsey changes from adolescent to adult; Buckley changes from child to adolescent; Jack changes from a man secure in his place in the family to one questioning his ability to hold the family together; and Abigail changes from a woman questioning her position as wife and mother to one who redefines and then embraces that position. While each of



these changes generates a sense of loss, ultimately each character moves on from the loss and grief. In *The Lovely Bones*, both the living and dead learn letting go opens up possibilities.

## Life and Death

On some level, all literature investigates the nature of human experience or the human condition. Certainly life and death constitute the two most significant experiences of being human, and as such, much literature deals with these two issues. *The Lovely Bones* pointedly asks two questions: "What does it mean to be alive?" and "What does it mean to be dead?"

As Susie learns what being dead means, she must deal with what being alive means as well. The fact she can no longer experience the physical world—that she can no longer experience living—emerges as her biggest disappointment. The novel then offers experiencing the physical as an attribute of living. Although denied this aspect of living, the dead Susie can engage in the human condition of wanting, wishing, and desiring. Thus Sebold blurs the lines between what constitutes life and death. Susie clearly understands she is dead. She knows she inhabits a realm different from earth, but in many ways, not completely separate from it. After all, Susie's heaven looks earthly, not celestial, and she participates in activities that associate much more closely with earth than heaven: eating ice cream, romping with dogs, living in a duplex.

The novel presents life as a series of changes, all of which involve the body and the physical environment—physicality seems the defining characteristic of life. The event that allows Susie to move on in her heaven, or to move on in death, is her return to earth. Although she has "returned" in a disembodied form, when she inhabits Ruth's body, Susie "realize[s] that the marvelous weight weighing [her] down was the weight of the human body." Yet Susie understands the temporariness of this corporality, but perhaps that realization is precisely one of Sebold's points.

## Coming of Age and Rites of Passage

The coming-of-age novel involves the initiation of the protagonist into adulthood. This initiation usually occurs through the acquisition of knowledge and experience. In many of these novels, the move into adulthood includes a loss of innocence or the destruction of a false sense of security. The protagonist often experiences a shift from ignorance to knowledge, innocence to experience, idealism to realism, or immaturity to maturity. In addition, coming of age involves rituals or rites of passage. *The Lovely Bones* focuses on these issues as the author explores the process of growing up.

The novel begins when Lindsey Salmon is thirteen years old and ends almost ten years later, with Lindsey as wife and mother. It traces her move through the routines and events of female adolescence—first kisses, shaving of legs, makeup, summer camp, love, friendship, college. The novel, however, also traces Susie's coming of age. By presenting the development of a dead girl along with a living one, Sebold imbues the



experiences of growing up with enhanced significance. Susie cannot move on in death until she finishes "growing up."

Susie's rape and murder hastens the process of moving from innocence to experience for both girls. Susie learns her suburban and rather ordinary world is not safe—men murder children in this world. She moves swiftly and violently from innocence to experience, and from idealism to realism. Yet this shift does not culminate in her "coming of age;" rather, it initiates a need for her to experience these things more slowly and more naturally. While Susie's death also hastens Lindsey's loss of innocence, it does so less dramatically. Although Lindsey understands that her world is not particularly safe, that bad people exist and that these people do bad things, she still participates in the normal rituals of growing up.

Like many teenage girls, Lindsey experiments with makeup and with finding a style that suits her. She experiences a tender first kiss with Samuel, and they move slowly through the rituals of courtship. She grows into her sexuality, developing a relationship based on trust, gentleness, and understanding. However, Susie's murder, combined with her mother's absence, pushes Lindsey into adult roles early in her life. So while acknowledging the naturalness of growing up, Sebold also contextualizes that experience. In *The Lovely Bones*, moving from a place of innocence to one of knowledge can occur violently and abruptly. Coming of age can happen in circumstances that circumvent the normal, perhaps suggesting a need to rethink normal.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in the story is remarkable because it belongs to narrator who is both a character in the story and dead. Susie dies in the opening moments of the novel, and from then on the reader is privy to her memories and the thoughts and actions to all the people she watches. Susie is omnipresent, and she brings the reader from the past to the present.

## Language

Susie's narration is conversational in tone. She is not formal and very emotional. Her surroundings in life, such as the suburbs, her school, and her house, are not formal settings.

Susie watches her family disintegrate, so her emotions are on display in her language. There are wrenching moments, such as when Abigail leaves the family for a few years and Jack breaks down emotionally and later has a heart attack.

Susie flashes back to much of her life, recalling her mother when Susie and Lindsey were small children or what life was like before she was killed. She recalls the embarrassing stories that her father used to tell about Susie as a toddler. Much of the story is told with flashbacks.

## Structure

The book is separated into twenty-three numbered chapters and two named ones. "Snapshots" is a chapter where Susie recalls brief moments with separate characters. "Bones" is the last chapter.

## Point of View

In *The Lovely Bones*, point of view, the perspective from which the story is told, plays a crucial role in the narrative. Generally, a novel's point of view consists of one of four traditional stances: first person, second person, third person, and third person omniscient. First person point of view presents the events of the story from the perception of a single character. Second person point of view involves the author telling the story as if it is happening to the reader. With third person point of view, the reader has no insight into the character's minds; therefore, he or she must make sense of the action as it takes place. Third person omniscient offers a "godlike" perspective, transcending time or place, allowing the reader to see the actions and to look into the minds of the characters to know their thoughts, feelings and motives.



Alice Sebold presents a story told from an omniscient first person point of view, the perspective of Susie Salmon, who is dead. Susie, from her vantage point in heaven, sees everything—actions, motivations, thoughts—so her narration functions like third person omniscient, except that she tells the story in first person. Susie's access to the minds of other characters provides readers with this same access. In addition, as an omniscient first person narrator telling the story from beyond the limitations of earthly time, she also can and does experience many of the characters' memories. For example, she sees and relates incidents from her killer, Mr. Harvey's, childhood and his past killings. Because of her omniscience, Susie often glimpses intensely personal thoughts and actions, such as her mother's first tryst with Detective Fenerman, or her mother's internal thoughts about motherhood.

This combination of third person omniscient and first person points of view proves an innovative move on Sebold's part. Few novels offer the perspective of a dead protagonist—especially one who has been brutally raped and murdered. However, this new point of view makes the disturbing subject matter bearable and also allows Sebold to inject some humor and lightness into a rather horrifying story. Because she sees everything and because she relates what she sees, Susie provides the reader with opportunities to sympathize and or identify with various characters. In addition, because this omniscient viewpoint filters through a first person or personal voice, it also emerges as a specific perspective: sometimes angry, sometimes confused, sometimes spunky, and sometimes humorous, which carries with it a distinctive personality.

## Setting

Setting includes the time, place, and culture in which the action of the narrative takes place. Time and place emerge as crucial elements in understanding the setting in *The Lovely Bones*. Traditionally, time can involve three elements: historical period, duration, and the perception of time by the characters. Sebold uses dates at various points throughout the narrative; in fact, the novel opens with a specific date, December 6, 1973. Immediately, the reader understands the historical time—the early 1970s—as well as the seasonal time—winter. However, as the story progresses, the historical periods shift as Susie takes the reader into the past and alludes to the future. For example, after giving us the date of her death, she offers a contemporary reference to the pictures of missing children on milk cartons and in the daily mail. This reference raises questions regarding the time period from which Susie is telling the story. Sebold's use of time shifts—the narration slides among past, present, and future—ties very closely to elements of place.

Like the shifts in time, the location of the story shifts between heaven and earth. Most of the action itself occurs on earth with the telling occurring in heaven. Some action does, however, take place in heaven: Susie meets Mr. Harvey's other victims in heaven; she and her roommate, Holly, explore; she dances with her grandfather. However, these actions do not necessarily propel the plot (the pattern of carefully selected events), but they do expand the story (all the events which are to be depicted). Both place and time



closely relate to the coming-of-age element in the book, as well as to the themes of loss and grief.

## **Foreshadowing and Flashback**

For the most part, Sebald's novel follows the traditional structure of plot. However, the events do not necessarily unfold in chronological fashion. For instance, the novel opens with Susie's murder, and as events unfold, establishes a relationship between events. To understand the causality, the reader needs background information, which Sebald presents through the use of flashback, a device that offers actions that occurred before the beginning of the story. Once Sebald establishes the murder, she has Susie look backward to how the murder occurred. As with point of view and setting, Sebald also complicates the traditional idea of plot. For example, in chapter one, Susie discusses her murder and includes a detail about a neighborhood dog finding her elbow and bringing it home. However, the actual incident of the dog finding the elbow and the police telling her parents about it occurs weeks after the murder. These occurrences in the story are moments of foreshadowing, which create expectation. Through the use of flashback and foreshadowing, Sebald veers away from a strictly chronological unfolding of events; rather, plot becomes more circular even while the narrative progressive chronologically through the 1970s.



# Historical Context

Alice Sebold wrote *The Lovely Bones* in the late 1990s; the book first appeared in print in June 2002; and the story takes place in the 1970s. All of these dates prove significant. At the time of the writing, America was facing both a new decade and a new millennium. By the late 1990s, Americans saw the creation of the World Wide Web; engaged in debates over health care, social security reform, gun control; watched national sex scandals unfold (the Tailhook affair and the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinski affair); sat riveted to the O. J. Simpson murder trial; and were stunned by the violence of the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado. Sebold penned her story amid a growing awareness of, and concern with, issues of domestic, sexual, and teen violence. In many ways, her novel reflects these concerns as it reflects the cultural climate of the 1990s.

Its publication date, however, carries added significance. The novel, released less than a year after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D.C., speaks directly to a nation's need for comfort. *The Lovely Bones* made its debut in an America forever stripped of its belief that terrorism and random violence happens elsewhere. The social and cultural atmosphere at this time radiated fear, distrust, sadness, anger, and grief. Although Sebold wrote this novel before the attacks, the subject matter echoes the contemporaneous concerns of America.

The novel also draws on the historical, cultural, social, and political issues of the 1970s. In many ways, America "came of age" in the 1970s as social change, discontent with the government, advances in civil rights for minorities and women, environmental concerns, and space exploration defined the decade. The Vietnam War, which sparked antiwar protests and student demonstrations, and the Watergate Scandal, which resulted in the resignation of a president, shattered the last vestiges of a naive America. Other changes arose in the 1970s that added to America's cultural and social climate, including the women's movement. Women's places in American life expanded into political and professional areas, and people began to question the traditional gender roles of women and men.

The changes of the 1970s figure into *The Lovely Bones* in several ways: first, through Sebold's female characters. Ruth Connors embodies the feminism of the 1970s with her avant-garde approach to her drawings, poetry, and reading. She refuses the constraints of the status quo in these areas as well as in the arena of acceptably feminine behavior and attire. However, whereas Ruth overtly embraces feminism, Susie's mother, Abigail, struggles to name her discontent. Abigail illustrates many of the women in the 1970s who did not publicly espouse feminism, yet whose desire to transcend the constraints of motherhood and wifehood drew on feminist principles. Secondly, the novel reflects the 1970s concern with the environment through the encroachment of building and industry into the Salmons' suburban neighborhood. Finally, the disturbing subject matter of a child's rape and murder, and Susie's refusal to sanitize the images of her death reflect the horrific pictures of the dead and dismembered of the Vietnam War. During the



1970s, images of violence entered the homes of suburban Americans through the television, and for the first time, Americans watched a war—complete with all of its horrors—from their living rooms. In *The Lovely Bones*, the tangible marks of violence that enter suburbia are not media images of war dead; rather, those marks are the objects of a raped and murdered girl.



## Critical Overview

*The Lovely Bones* enjoyed immediate popular success from the time of its publication. The novel, published in June 2002, topped the *New York Times* bestseller list that summer. Prior its publication, as Charlotte Abbot notes in *Publishers Weekly*, bestselling author Anna Quindlen told viewers of the *Today Show*, "If you read one book this summer, it should be *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. It's destined to be a classic along the lines of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and it's one of the best books I've read in years." For the most part, the novel garnered excellent reviews after its publications, with critics praising the first person omniscient point of view and the stunning opening pages.

In a review for *Christian Century*, Stephen H. Webb argues that Sebold's reworked point of view "is the only way to fully comprehend such an intolerable tragedy [the rape and murder of a fourteen-year-old girl]." Writing for the *London Review of Books*, Rebecca Mead deems Susie "a bright and ironical observer," and Michiko Kakutani, in her front-page review of *The Lovely Bones* in the *New York Times*, points out that the narrator possesses a "matter-of-fact charm." Finally, in his review in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Ron Charles writes, "The power of *The Lovely Bones* flows from this voice, a voice at once charmingly adolescent and tragically mature." Most reviewers identify Susie's voice as one of the novel's strong points.

Critics also agree on another of the novel's strengths: the opening pages. Even unfavorable reviews praised Sebold's compelling opening. In Daniel Mendelsohn's review in the *New York Review of Books*, he likens the novel to TV movies of the week—artificial, contrived, and lightweight. However, Mendelsohn also writes, "The novel begins strikingly.... The few pages that follow ... are the best in the book," and he praises the authenticity of these pages. Writing for the *Guardian*, Ali Smith slams *The Lovely Bones* for its timidity and sentimentality, but finds "the opening chapters ... shattering and dazzling in their mix of horror and normality." Despite a handful of negative reviews, the novel has been the "breakout fiction debut of the year" that Lev Grossman predicted in the book section of the July 1, 2002, edition of *Time* magazine.

Sebold's novel does, however, exhibit some weaknesses, and even her most ardent admirers recognize them. Kakutani comments that Sebold stumbles in the "highly abstract musing on Susie belonging to a historical continuum of murdered girls and women," and this critic finds the scenes dealing with Susie's classmate, Ruth Connor's, "belief that she can ... channel Susie's feelings" unconvincing. Other critics find troubling Susie's return to earth, which Sarah Churchwell of the *Times Literary Supplement* calls "a false move that violates the contract of willingly suspended disbelief."

Overall, critics believe that the novel's strengths outshine its weak moments. In her *Washington Post* review, Maria Russo considers *The Lovely Bones* "utterly original and deeply affecting," and she asserts that Sebold "manages to put her readers into contact with a throbbing pulse of life." Sebold, says Russo, "has an unusual flair for both owning

and transforming dark material." Katherine Bouton of the *New York Times Book Review* concurs. Sebold, she writes, "deals with almost unthinkable subjects with humor and intelligence and a kind of mysterious grace."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

# Critical Essay #1

*Catherine Cucinella, a freelance writer, has edited a reference volume on contemporary American poets and has published articles on poetry and film. She has a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Riverside. In this essay, Cucinella analyzes the effects of domestic ideologies on the mother-daughter relationships in The Lovely Bones.*

Although *The Lovely Bones* has garnered many reviews, critical work on the novel proves scarce. Most reviewers and critics comment on Sebald's innovative use of point of view, the omniscient first person narrator, Susie Salmon. These same critics point to Sebald's mastery in presenting a disturbing subject—the rape and murder of a young girl. More often than not, however, the unsettling elements in the text involve issues of motherhood and mothering. Through her depiction of mothers and daughters, Sebald examines the effects of patriarchy and domesticity on women. *The Lovely Bones* questions the roles and demands placed on women by society as it presents the consequences that arise for mothers and daughters if these roles and demands remain unexamined.

Sebald examines the dictates of patriarchy, the social system in which the father is the head of the family and men govern women and children; and domesticity, the devotion to home life. This examination of the place of women unfolds primarily through the first person omniscient narration, characterization, and through the motif (recurring images in a literary work) of confined spaces. Although the restrictive systems under which each woman must live come to light in *The Lovely Bones*, the novel makes clear that recognizing these restrictions begins the process of loosening them.

Susie's omniscient perspective affords the reader the opportunity to watch as the Salmon women work through that process. From her heaven, Susie provides insight into the internal thoughts of all the characters. Susie's insights work within the narrative itself, offering Susie the opportunity to experience the move from girlhood to womanhood. Significantly, the internal musings to which Susie is privy involve her mother's struggle with feelings of discontent, a discontent that feminist Betty Friedan labeled "the feminine mystique." According to Friedan, "a strange discrepancy [exists] between the reality of [women's] lives as women and the image to which [women are] trying to conform." Abigail Salmon, Susie's mother, provides the clearest example of this "schizophrenic split" and its consequences.

On the morning of her eleventh birthday, Susie, awake before the rest of the family, discovers her unwrapped birthday present, an Instamatic camera. Eager to use it she, she hurries to the back of the house and finds the back door open. There in the backyard, Susie comes upon her mother, unaware of her daughter's presence. Susie narrates:



I had never seen her sitting so still, *so not there* somehow.... That morning there were no lipstick marks because there was no lipstick until she put it on for ... who? I had never thought to ask that question. My father? Us?

Because Susie retells this incident from her heavenly vantage point, she can now read significance into it. Her status as omniscient first person narrator allows her insight that she may or may not have possessed when the incident first occurred. After all, Susie's narration unfolds after all events have taken place. Significantly, however, Susie makes clear the split between the private, unencumbered Abigail and the woman who assumes a face for the world.

Susie's camera captures this moment, and the picture glaringly reveals the split to which Freidan refers:

When the roll came back from the Kodak plant ... I could see the difference immediately. There was only one picture in which my mother was Abigail. It was that first one, the one taken of her unawares, the one captured before the click startled her into the mother of the birthday girl, owner of the happy dog, wife to a loving man, and mother again to another girl and a cherished boy. Homemaker. Gardner. Sunny neighbor.

Thus, Susie catches her mother in the moment before Abigail conforms to an image. This passage further delineates the roles expected of women as it makes clear that Abigail held part of herself apart from those roles.

As the narrative progresses, Susie watches and narrates her mother's struggle to reconcile the need for autonomy with the demands of motherhood and wifehood. Susie's murder initiates much of Abigail's unrest. Her grief and unacknowledged guilt over her daughter's death seem to suffocate Abigail, causing her to withdraw from her husband and children. However, this feeling of confinement predates the murder. As a young wife and new mother, Abigail saw the withering of her dreams: "the stack of books on [the] beside table changed from catalogs for local colleges, encyclopedias of mythology, novels by James, Eliot, and Dickens, to the works of Dr. Spock." The birth of her third child, Buckley, pushes Abigail further away from the woman who earned a master's degree in literature, who read philosophy, and who aspired to teach at the college level. She found that she could not "have it all;" she could not even remain in love with her husband. Susie observes poignantly that her parents "had been deeply, separately, wholly in love—apart from her children [her] mother could reclaim this love, but with them she began to drift."

The narrative time in *The Lovely Bones* spans the 1970s; however, Abigail herself came of age in earlier decades, and she took on the role of new wife and mother in the late 1950s. Therefore, she carries within herself the constrictions of 1950s domestic ideology, an ideology that, according to Nancy Woloch in *Women and the American Experience*, "posited fulfillment within the family as a goal to which women of all classes and backgrounds might aspire." In addition, the rise of the suburbs extended the demands of domesticity, an extension clearly visible in *The Lovely Bones*. Woloch





explains, "The domestic passion of the 1950s coincided with a massive exodus to the suburbs, the ideal place for raising families," and federal policies such as low-interest mortgages and veteran benefits, as well as federally funded programs for highway construction, contributed to the suburban growth. These policies, according to Woloch, "promoted domestic ideals, since suburban life, for women, meant commitment to home and family, to house care and child care." In addition, advertising throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s further promoted a domestic ideology. The message: domesticity equals happiness and contentment. However, as Abigail demonstrates and Freidan's study confirms, not all women enjoyed these feelings. Instead, this domesticity pushed them into spaces of confinement and restriction.

Abigail, then, fails to embrace the dictates of domestic ideology. Even before Susie's murder, she grows distant from her children, and after the murder, she distances herself physically, as well as emotionally, from her family: avoiding Jack; eating macaroons in a downstairs bathroom hidden away from Jack, Lindsey, and Buckley; having an affair with Len Fenerman, the lead detective on Susie's case; and finally, leaving the family. However, for Abigail, the repressive aspects of 1950s and 1960s domesticity combine with the changing position of women in the 1970s—changes brought about by second wave feminism—and with the overwhelming grief and guilt attached to Susie's death. This grief proves just as stifling to Abigail as does her wifedom and motherhood. In California, whenever Abigail "walked inside a gift shop or café the four walls around her would begin to breathe like a lung. She would feel it then, creeping up the sides of her calves and into her gut, the onslaught, the grief coming." The image of the shop breathing like a lung evokes earlier images of confinement in *The Lovely Bones*: the hole in the cornfield where Mr. Harvey rapes and murders Susie, the small hospital balcony where Abigail and Len first kiss, the fort where Buckley shuts himself off from the world, the closet like room in which Ruth Connors lives, the narrow hospital bed in which Abigail and Jack finally cry about Susie. The spaces of confinement that Abigail inhabits simultaneously restrict her and free her. In these places, she confronts her discontent and disappointment, in them she identifies her oppressions and weakness, and within these small spaces, she often comes to understandings. The two most significant instances of resolution occur in an airplane and in a hospital room. Susie listens to her mother's thoughts as she flies to Pennsylvania after Jack's heart attack,

[s]he could not help but think of how, if she were a mother traveling, there would be two seats filled beside her. One for Lindsey. One for Buckley. But though she was, by definition, a mother, she had at some point ceased to be one too. She couldn't claim that right and privilege after missing more than half a decade of their lives. She now knew that being a mother was a calling, something plenty of young girls had dreamed of being. But my mother had never had that dream, and she had been punished in the most horrible and unimaginable way for never having wanted me.

In order for Abigail to reunite with her family, she must honestly confront her feelings about motherhood, and she must come to realize that she can love her children, living and dead, without sacrificing herself. Maternal love, in and of itself, does not demand the elimination of a woman's sense of self. As Sebald makes clear in *The Lovely Bones*, domesticity as constructed within patriarchy makes this demand.



Abigail occupies the positions of both mother and daughter, and just as she must work through her feelings about her own mothering, she must also confront the way she was mothered. Like her daughters, Abigail felt closer to her father than to her mother, Grandma Lynn. Lynn and Abigail, though in many ways polar opposites—Lynn flamboyant and frivolous, Abigail vulnerable and serious—exhibit the same ambivalence toward motherhood. Susie provides insight into her mother and grandmother's relationship:

Grandma Lynn embarrassed my mother by insisting on wearing her used furs on walks around the block and by once attending a block party in high makeup. She would ask my mother questions until she knew who everyone was, whether or not my mother had seen the inside of their house, what the husband did for a living, what cars they drove. She made a solid catalog of the neighbors. It was a way, I now realized, to try to understand her daughter better. A misguided circling, a sad, partnerless dance.

Much later, after Susie's death, after her almost ten-year absence from the family, after her return to Pennsylvania, Abigail accepts Lynn as Lynn: "[Abigail] was beginning to wonder how useful her scorched-earth policy had been to her all these years. Her mother was loving if she was drunk, solid if she was vain." This thought process and the realization to which it leads upend the dictates of an idealized motherhood, one generating from the limitations of a domestic ideology constructed in the 1950s and 1960s.

Lynn, however, possesses little of the accepted maternal attributes. Her cooking skills run to frozen dinners, and she breezes in and out of her grandchildren's lives, staying long enough only to upset routines. However, after Susie's death, she comes to understand her daughter's needs much more clearly. In a rare mother-daughter moment, Abigail confesses to Lynn the terrible loneliness she felt as a child, and Lynn realizes that Susie's death took Abigail "inside the middle of a ground zero to which" nothing in the older woman's experience "could offer her insight." This realization provides the first glimmer of connection between mother and daughter. When Abigail leaves the family, Lynn moves in and assumes the maternal role. This assumption, similar to Abigail's eventual return, succeeds because Lynn assumes the maternal role by choice, not because society demands that she does so. Unlike her earlier experience as mother, Lynn understands her motivations; thus she can mother Lindsey and Buckley without risk to her own position as an eccentric and independent woman.

Just as Abigail, by understanding her feelings about her own mother, herself as mother, and motherhood in general, can take her place within the family, Susie comes to understand the connection that she shared with her mother in life. By seeing her mother's internal conflicts and watching Abigail seek ways to erase her loneliness, disappointments, grief, and guilt, Susie realizes that she wants and needs her mother. She "hears" her mother calling her for dinner as Mr. Harvey rapes her; she repeatedly describes her mother's "ocean eyes;" she recalls her mother's stories; she names her mother's loneliness and need. Referring to Franny, her intake counselor in heaven, Susie says, "Franny was old enough to be our mother—mid-forties—and it took Holly and me a while to figure out that this had been something we wanted: our mothers."



Letting go of the living and accepting herself as dead emerges as Susie's major quest throughout the story; however, the need to accept her mother for who she was proves another significant task for Susie.

The reconciliation between Susie's parents makes clear the nature of acceptance. Reconciliation depends upon an unconditional acceptance. In the hospital after his heart attack, Jack wakes in the early morning hours to find Abigail sleeping, her hand in his. Susie's omniscient position reveals her father's thoughts: "She was here, and this time, despite all, he was going to let her be who she was." Susie comes to this acceptance along with her father. Watching Abigail's flight from and return home, Susie learns to see her relationship with her mother from outside the confining parameters of socially mandated motherhood. When Abigail can finally say aloud, "I love you, Susie," Susie acknowledges, "I had heard these words so many times from my father that it shocked me now; I had been waiting, unknowingly, to hear it from my mother." Susie continues, "She had needed the time to know that this love would not destroy her, and I had, I now knew, given her that time."

Susie's sister, Lindsey, inhabits the middle ground in these mother-daughter configurations. Susie's death moves Lindsey from middle child and younger daughter to older child and only living daughter. Gradually, she also moves into the position vacated by her mother. In the chaos that ensues when Jack is rushed to the hospital after being beaten in the cornfield, Abigail sees Buckley turn to his sister rather than to his mother. The maternal role falls on Lindsey. Susie observes, "My sister felt more alone than she had ever been but also more responsible. Buckley couldn't be left by himself," and after her mother leaves, Lindsey's maternal role expands.

However, unlike her mother, Lindsey does not push aside her own aspirations for family. Admittedly, Lindsey is not Buckley's mother, but that fact does not lessen the responsibility that Lindsey bears. Whereas Abigail illustrates 1950s and 60s domestic ideology, Lindsey embodies the promises of 1970s feminism. Bright and ambitious, she takes an active role in both her home and in the investigation of her sister's murder. When the police fail to find evidence linking Mr. Harvey to the crime, Lindsey breaks into his house and steals drawings that he made of the underground room where he killed Susie. Lindsey participates in gifted symposiums, graduates from Temple University, earns a master's degree in counseling, and starts a career with that degree. She also marries her high school sweetheart, Samuel.

Lindsey accomplishes most of these things during her mother's absence, an absence that Lindsey saw coming. On the first anniversary of Susie's death, Lindsey asks her mother, "Are you going to leave us?" As Susie narrates, "'Come here baby,' my mother said, and Lindsey did. She leaned back into my mother's chest, and my mother rocked her awkwardly on the rug. 'You are doing so well, Lindsey; you are keeping your father alive.'" Lindsey does not have the benefit of Susie's all-encompassing perspective; Lindsey does not know her mother's thoughts, but she does understand that her mother will not stay, and somehow, Lindsey seems to accept her mother's need to go. When Abigail returns, Lindsey poses yet another question. Referring to Buckley, she asks, "Are you going to hurt him again?" Abigail hears a challenge in the question, a



challenge glaring from her daughter's eyes. "I know what you did," Lindsey tells her mother. This mother-daughter relationship, Abigail and Lindsey, perhaps the most tenuous of all those depicted in the book, manifests as the most honest. Lindsey has always accepted Abigail for who she was, and she seems able to accept their relationship for what it is—desiring nothing more.

*The Lovely Bones* holds motherhood, along with mothers and daughters, up to scrutiny, and in the end the narrative offers a new understanding of those bonds by demonstrating the importance of examining the ideologies behind them. The novel reinforces the connection of generations through women with the closing image of a strong and confident young mother, Lindsey, with her daughter, Abigail Suzanne.

**Source:** Catherine Cucinella, Critical Essay on *The Lovely Bones*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.



## Critical Essay #2

*In the following excerpt, Mendelsohn argues that the general failure to recognize the book's weaknesses says something about the cultural climate in which it was first published.*

On May 22 of this year, six weeks before the official publication date of Alice Sebold's debut novel [*The Lovely Bones*], which is narrated from Heaven by a fourteen-year-old girl who's been raped and murdered, the novelist and former *New York Times* columnist Anna Quindlen appeared on the *Today* show and declared that if people had one book to read during the summer, "it should be *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. It's destined to be a classic along the lines of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and it's one of the best books I've read in years." Viewers did what they were told and seemed to agree. Within days of Quindlen's appearance, Sebold's novel had reached the number-one position on Amazon.com, and her publisher, Little, Brown, decided to increase the size of the first printing from 35,000—already healthily optimistic for a "literary" first novel by an author whose only other book, a memoir of her rape, was a critical but not commercial success—to 50,000 copies; a week before the book's official publication date, it was in its sixth printing, with nearly a quarter-million copies in print.

In an interview with *Publishers Weekly* at the end of July, when the true extent of the book's success was just coming into focus, Michael Pietsch, the publisher of Little, Brown, suggested that the book's appeal lies in its fearless and ultimately redemptive portrayal of "dark material": "grief, the most horrible thing that can happen in a life."

And yet darkness, grief, and heartbreak is what *The Lovely Bones* scrupulously avoids. This is the real heart of its appeal.

Sebold's decision to have the dead girl narrate her story—a device familiar from *Our Town*, a sentimental story with which this one has more than a little in common—suggests an admirable desire to confront murder and violence, grief and guilt in a bold, even raw new way. And yet after its attention-getting opening, *The Lovely Bones* shows little real interest in examining ugly things. Indeed, the ultimate horror that Susie undergoes is one for which the author has no words, and chooses not to represent. In the first of what turns out to be many evasive gestures, the author tastefully avoids the murder itself, to say nothing of the dismemberment. "The end came anyway," she writes, and there is a discreet dissolve to the next chapter.

I use the word "dissolve" advisedly: it is hard to read what follows in *The Lovely Bones* without thinking of cinema—or, perhaps better, of those TV "movies of the week," with their predictable arcs of crisis, healing, and "closure," the latter inevitably evoked by an obvious symbolism.

Equally soft-focus are the novel's sketchy attempts to confront the face of evil that Susie, and Susie alone of all these characters, has looked on directly: the killer himself, Mr. Harvey. Sebold perfunctorily provides some sketchy information that never quite



adds up to a persuasive portrait of a sociopath. Harvey's father abused and eventually chased away his wild, rebellious mother, whom the boy sees for the last time, dressed in white capri pants, being pushed out of a car in a town called Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. He sometimes kills animals as a means of avoiding homicide. And Sebold grapples with punishment—with, that is, the moral meaning and consequences of the crime at the heart of her book—as weakly as she does with the crime itself. At the end of the novel, in what is apparently meant to be a high irony, Harvey, who has managed for years to elude Susie's increasingly suspicious family and the police, is killed accidentally: as he stands at the edge of a ravine, plotting to attack yet another girl one winter day, he falls when an icicle drops onto him.

So having the murder victim be the protagonist offers no special view of evil, or guilt. I asked myself, as I read *The Lovely Bones*, what could be the point of having the dead girl narrate the aftermath of her death—what, in other words, this voice could achieve that a standard omniscient narrator couldn't—and it occurred to me that the answer is that Susie is there to provide comfort: not to those who survive her, to whom she can't really make herself known or felt, but to the audience. The real point of Sebold's novel isn't to make you confront dreadful things, but, if anything, to assure you that they have no really permanent consequences. This is most evident in the author's vision of the "healing process" that takes place after the murder, a process that furnishes the book with the bulk of its matter. Susie herself must undergo it, we learn: she has to be weaned of her desire to linger in the world and "change the lives of those I loved on Earth" in order to progress from "her" heaven to Heaven itself. (The cosmology is vague—more shades of *Our Town* here—but that's the gist of it.) *But The Lovely Bones* is devoted even more to the aftermath (which is to say healing and closure) of her death as it is experienced by her friends and family.

That a novel with the pretensions to moral, emotional, and social seriousness of this one should end up seeking, and finding, the ultimate salvation and redemption in a recuperative teenage fantasy of idyllic sex suggests that cinema, or television, is the wrong thing to be comparing it to. Sebold's final narrative gesture reminds you, indeed, of nothing so much as pop love songs, with their aromatherapeutic vision of adult relationships as nothing but yearnings endlessly, blissfully fulfilled—or of breakups inevitably smoothed over and healed with a kiss. Just after Ray and Susie/Ruth make love, Susie's estranged parents are reunited on her father's hospital bed, weeping and kissing each other.

That Sebold's book does so little to show us a complex or textured portrait of the evil that sets its action in motion, or to suggest that the aftermath of horrible violence within families is, ultimately, anything but feel-good redemption, suggests that its huge popularity has very little, in fact, to do with the timeliness of its publication just months after a series of abductions and murders of girls had transfixed a nation already traumatized by the events of September 11. It is, rather, the latter catastrophe that surely accounts for the novel's gigantic appeal.

Confidence and grief management are what *The Lovely Bones* offers, too: it, too, is bent on convincing us that everything is OK—whatever, indeed, its author and promoters



keep telling us about how unflinchingly it examines bad things. "We're here," Susie's ghost says, in the final pages of the novel."All the time. You can talk to us and think about us. It doesn't have to be sad or scary." The problem, of course, is that it does have to be sad and scary; that you need to experience the badness and fear—as Sebold's characters, none more than Susie herself, never quite manage to do—in order to get to the place that Sebold wants to take you, the locus of healing, and closure: in short, Heaven. And yet what a Heaven it is. In the weeks following September 11, there was much dark jocularly at the expense of those Islamic terrorists who, it was said, had volunteered to die in order to enjoy the postmortem favors of numerous virgins in Paradise. But how much more sophisticated, or morally textured, is Sebold's climactic vision of Heaven, or indeed of death, as the place, or state, that allows you to indulge a recuperative fantasy or great sex?

That for Sebold and her readers Heaven can't, in fact, wait is symptomatic of a larger cultural dysfunction, one implicit in our ongoing handling of the September 11 disaster. *The Lovely Bones* appeared just as the first anniversary of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks was looming; but by then, we'd already commemorated the terrible day. September 11, 2002—the first anniversary of the attacks, a day that ought to have marked (as is supposed to be the case with such anniversary rituals) some symbolic coming to terms with what had happened—was not a date for which the American people and its press could patiently wait. Instead we rushed to celebrate, with all due pomp and gravitas, on March 11, something called a six-month "anniversary." In its proleptic yearning for relief, and indeed in its emphasis on the bathetic appeal of victimhood, its pseudo-therapeutic lingo of healing and insistence that everything is really OK, that we needn't really be sad, that nothing is, in the end, really scary, Sebold's book is indeed timely—isindeed "the novel of the year"—although in ways that none of those now caught up in the glamour of its unprecedentedly high approval ratings might be prepared to imagine.

**Source:** Daniel Mendelsohn, "Novel of the Year," in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 50, No. 1, January 16, 2003, pp. 4-8.



## Quotes

"Inside the snow globe on my father's desk, there was a penguin wearing a red-and-white-striped scarf. When I was little my father would pull me into his lap and reach for the snow globe. He would turn it over, letting all the snow collect on the top, then quickly invert it. The two of us watched the snow fall gently around the penguin. The penguin was alone in there, I thought, and I worried for him. When I told my father this, he said, 'Don't worry Susie; he has a nice life. He's trapped in a perfect world.'" (Page 3)

"My name is Salmon, like the fish; first name, Susie. I was fourteen when I was murdered on December 6, 1973." (Page 5)

"You aren't leaving, Susie. You're mine now." Mr. Harvey (Page 12)

"I'd say it would be pretty hard to play soccer on the soccer field when it's approximately twenty feet from where my sister was supposedly murdered." Lindsey Salmon to Mr. Caden, her principal (Page 33)

"'You know something,' my father said. 'Go home. I can't help you.'" Jack Salmon and George Harvey (Page 57)

"'Mr. Salmon,' she said, 'I would do exactly what you are doing: I would talk to everyone I needed to, I would not tell too many people his name. When I was sure,' she said, 'I would find a quiet way, and I would kill him.'" Ruana Singh to Jack Salmon (Page 88)

"Stones and bones; snow and frost; seeds and beans and polliwogs. Paths and twigs, assorted kisses, We all know who Susie misses..." Lullaby for Susie (Page 278)

"'Ray?' 'I don't know what to call you.' 'Susie.'" Ray and Susie after she has fallen back to Earth (Page 308)

"'I know what you did.' 'I stand warned.'" Lindsey and Abigail (Page 317)

"I wish you all a long and happy life." Susie (Page 328)



# Adaptations

- Recorded Books published an unabridged edition of *The Lovely Bones* on audio CD in August 2002.

## What Do I Read Next?

- *Lucky* (1999) is Sebold's memoir of her 1981 rape. In it, she details the rape itself and chronicles the arrest, trial, and conviction of the rapist. She also addresses the emotional aftermath and consequences of the attack.
- Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees* (2003) is a coming-of-age story. Set in the 1960s, *The Secret Life of Bees* deals with tragedy, the absence of a mother, and the protagonist's need to look backward and then to let go in order to move on.
- *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* (2003), by Mitch Albom, follows the protagonist, Eddie, through his last moments on earth, his funeral, and the days after his death. Then the story shifts to Eddie's arrival at and experiences in heaven.
- Aimee Bender's first novel, *An Invisible Sign of My Own* (2000), is about a girl named Mona who deals with her father's mysterious illness by withdrawing from the things she likes to do: eating dessert, playing piano, spending time with her boyfriend. She grows up to become a second-grade math teacher, and must use her own experiences with illness to help a student through her mother's cancer.
- *Family* (1991), by J. California Cooper, is narrated by a dead main character. Clora, a pre-Civil War slave, escapes slavery through suicide. After her death, her spirit narrates the story of her children and grandchildren as they live through slavery and the Civil War.
- *The Afterlife* (2003), by Gary Soto, is the story of Chuy, a murdered seventeen-year-old boy. Now deceased, Chuy must solve the mystery of his murder and come to terms with his new identity in death.



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss loss. Why is this emotion a two-way street in this story?

What effect does not accepting loss have upon the various members of the family?

Why is Buckley the only one seems to be able to move on from Susie's death?

What similarities does Ruana Singh have with Jack and Abigail Salmon?

What loss has Ruana suffered?

Does Susie's heaven imprison her? Or is it a perfect world?

Why does Mr. Harvey get away with Susie's murder?

Do the characters experience closure at the end of the story?

Did this story turn out the way you expected?

What about this story defies the conventions of the genre?

Do you think a jury would have excused Jack Salmon if he had carried out the suggested revenge upon George Harvey?

What is the significance of the title?

Is the ending of the story a hopeful one?

Is this a depressing novel because the main character is dead?

- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D., developed the five-stage grief model, which outlines and defines the stages that a grieving person goes through while healing. Research this model, list and define the five terms, then write an essay explaining how Jack Salmon, Abigail Salmon, and Susie Salmon in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* progress through each stage.
- What would have happened if Susie were never killed by Mr. Harvey? Knowing what you do about her desires, interests, and goals, do you think Susie's life would have turned out more like Abigail's or Lindsey's? Would Susie have married Ray, or lived a bohemian life in the city like Ruth? Write a short biography of Susie's life, including her family, that addresses who Susie might have been if she had not been murdered at age fourteen.
- Using some historical research on the Women's Movement in the 1970s, explain how Abigail Salmon, Lindsey Salmon, Ruth Connors, and Ruana Singh in Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* exemplify elements of that movement. In other words, what aspect of the Women's Movement does each of these women illustrate? Write an essay incorporating your research into your explanation.



- One can easily read Sebald's *The Lovely Bones* as a coming-of-age story. Identify which characters "come of age" and why. What does the novel offer as the rites of passage for growing up? Do these rites seem bound by the time frame of the novel? In an essay, compare the rites and rituals of adolescence presented in *The Lovely Bones* with those of today's teenagers. Try to account for any differences by addressing relevant cultural, political, or social issues.

## Further Study

Baily, Beth L., and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies*, University Press of Kansas, 2004.

*America in the Seventies* is a collection of essays by leading scholars in the field. These essays address such issues as the cultural despair of the decade; analyze elements of seventies' culture such as film, music, and advertising; and discuss the attempt by Americans to redefine themselves in the 1970s.

Douglas, Susan, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Three Rivers Press, 1995.

This book focuses on media images of women in the last fifty years of the twentieth century. Douglas's discussions regarding the 1970s help in contextualizing the cultural atmosphere of Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*.

Evans, Sarah, *Born for Liberty*, Simon & Schuster, 1997.

This one-volume history of American women examines the changing role of women in this country. The later chapters, particularly chapters 11-12, prove helpful in understanding Abigail Salmon and Ruth Connors in Sebold's novel.

Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique*, Norton, 1963.

*The Feminine Mystique*, a foundational feminist text, examines the discontent of white, educated, suburban wives and mothers. Although published in the early 1960s, Friedan's study seems relevant to Abigail Salmon's conflicting feelings in *The Lovely Bones*.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, *On Death and Dying*, Scribner, 1969, reprint, 1997.

This book, written in plain, understandable language, introduces and explains the five stages of grief. It remains a classic in understanding both the dying and grieving processes.



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Russo, Maria, "Girl, Interrupted," Review of *The Lovely Bones*, in the *Washington Post*, August 11, 2002, p. BWO7.

Sebold, Alice, *The Lovely Bones*, Little Brown, 2004.

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Smith, Ali, "A Perfect Afterlife," Review of *The Lovely Bones*, in the *Guardian*, August 17, 2002, *Guardian Unlimited*, [www.books.guardian.co.uk](http://www.books.guardian.co.uk). (August 17, 2002).

Webb, Stephen H., "Earth from Above,?" in *Christian Century*, Vol. 119, No. 21, October 9-22, 2002, p. 20.

Woloch, Nancy, *Women and the American Experience*, 3d ed., McGraw-Hill, pp. 508-09.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of *Novels for Students (NfS)* is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *NfS* is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently





studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

### Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

### How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
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- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

### Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

### Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: [ForStudentsEditors@gale.com](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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