

A Manual For Cleaning Women Study Guide

A Manual For Cleaning Women by Lucia Berlin

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Plot Summary

This study guide refers to *A Manual for Cleaning Women*, by Lucia Berlin: Picador Paperback. 2016 Edition.

A Manual for Cleaning Woman is a collection of short fiction by Lucia Berlin. The stories cover a range of issues facing the characters. A middle-aged woman reflects on her addiction and loneliness in the opening story.

The collection then takes the reader into the past as a young girl helps her grandfather pull out his teeth to prepare for a set of false teeth. Other stories about the girl find her attending a Catholic school as the only Protestant student. She wants to fit in at the school, but her religion and family prevent her from doing this.

Other stories explore how a woman's sexuality evolves. Stories address girls first learning how to flirt to having sex for the first time after sobriety. The author examines sexuality in light of power and poverty and sex after suffering a loss.

As a grown woman, the narrator works as a nurse and a cleaning woman. While working as a cleaning woman, she begins stealing sleeping pills with the intent of committing suicide. However, she changes her mind. Her time working in a hospital gives her insight into the troubles of alcoholics and people who are suicidal.

Slowly, the reader begins to understand the narrator's own struggles with addiction. For example, it is difficult having to face her children after sneaking out of the house for a drink one night. She remembers having to deal with police. Though some of those dealings turned out okay, they were all unfortunate. Then, she experiences detox at a rehab center. The consequences of addiction touch the individual as well as others.

The woman also must deal with her sister Sally's terminal illness. Through a series of short stories, the reader learns about the relationship between the two women. Their mother's own mental illness had affected their relationships with each other and the men in their lives. Each sister remembers and mourns the mother differently, which offers insight into how the women view death. The women are able to connect through Sally's treatment, but the narrator Lou knows that her sister is on borrowed time.

The stories give the narrator a chance to reflect on her own life and loves. She explores the darker side of drug addiction, unwanted pregnancy, and child abuse. She tries to help others to understand the issues they face in their time of need.

The author creates a world in which the consequences of addiction are on full display. The stories reflect a distance within her own family and how she connects with her own children. She is honest about how drugs destroyed relationships, such as her love affair with Max, the father of two of her children.

The collection contains semi-autobiographical stories, but the reader does not know the details of the author's personal experience. The stories give raw insight into themes such as family, death, addiction, sexuality, and loneliness. The stories are sometimes bleak, but the author does offer hope and insight into survival.



Stories 1-10

Summary

“Angel’s Laundromat” opens the collection. It is told in the first person and follows Lucia’s observations and interactions at Angel’s Laundromat in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At the laundromat, Lucia meets Tony, a Jicarilla Apache, as he hands her dimes for the dryer. Initially, she does not understand the gesture, but he explains that he has the shakes and has difficulty putting the money in the machine. The laundromat is mostly used by Apache Indians. Lucia continues to go to the laundromat, even though it is out of the way. She strikes up a friendship with the old Indian. One day he asks her to go back to his camper with him, but she deflects by pointing out that the machines should not be left unattended. She remembers Tony getting quite drunk and getting into a fight in the parking lot. Angel, the laundromat’s owner, tries to talk to him. Tony tells him he is a chief. As the Indian lights Lucia’s cigarette, she tells him her first cigarette was lit by a prince. Time passes. One day while Lucia is folding laundry, she realizes she cannot remember when she stopped seeing the Indian.

“Dr. H. A. Moynihan” is a first person narrative told by a young girl attending a Catholic school called St. Joseph’s. The girl was expelled for striking Sr. Cecilia. The girl’s grandfather is a dentist in West Texas, and she helps him in his office. Grandpa has a workshop where he makes false teeth. Over the summer, he instructs her to tell patients he does not have any available appointments. As time goes on, there is not much to do. Before dawn one morning, Grandpa wakes her up and he takes her to the workshop. He shows her a set of false teeth, and she realizes they are for him. He tells her that he is going to pull his teeth and that if he passes out, she will have to pull them for him. He starts pulling his teeth and laughing and swigging alcohol. He falls onto her laughing and tells her to pull them and she does so. After the teeth are all extracted, he asks for the false teeth. When they get back to the house, her mother does not notice the new teeth. When they explain about the teeth, her mother tells her father that he is crazy.

“Stars and Saints” is a first person about a girl who believes she makes a “very bad first impression” (18). She is a protestant attending a Catholic school. She explains about talking with a psychiatrist who misinterpreted that she enjoyed watching cats attack birds feeding on the seed she put out. While at the school, she decides that she wants to be a “nun, or a saint” (21). Sr. Cecelia keeps her after class and talks to her about the mysteries and sacraments in the Catholic Church. Because the girl is not Catholic, Sr. Cecelia excludes her from taking part of the rituals of the church. She asks Sr. Cecelia if she is allowed to keep the Saint cards she has earned, and the nun agrees. They say a Hail Mary together. The girl tells her mother that she wants to become a Catholic, but her mother and grandfather object. The girl’s mother sets a letter from the girl’s father on fire because he was writing her daughter more than he was writing to her (the mother). At school, the girl stops talking. Then, one day Lucia runs out of the classroom during prayer. St. Cecelia tries to grab her, but Lucia knocks Sr. Cecelia over and knocks off the head part of the nun’s habit. The girl is expelled for striking the nun.



“A Manual for Cleaning Women” is a first person narrative by a cleaning woman who offers tips and advice to others. She admits that all cleaning women steal, and she steals sleeping pills. She advises that cleaning women should take whatever their boss offers, even if they do not want it. She cleans for Linda and Bob, who are old friends, even though she does not recommend cleaning for friends. She gives the addresses of different clients and different details about the homes, for example whether they’re clean before she gets there. She continues to collect sleeping pills. She recommends not taking jobs where toddlers live, but babies are okay. She also says to put furniture back in the wrong place because this gives the clients the impression of thoroughness. She goes to a new house, where the woman’s husband has died a few months earlier. The woman is missing a puzzle piece and she finds it while cleaning. The cleaning woman realizes that she does not want to die while sitting at a bus stop in January. She begins to sob.

“My Jockey” is a first person narrative about a woman working in an emergency room. She enjoys her job. Because she is bi-lingual, she helps the Mexican jockeys who come in for treatment. The first she treated was named Munoz who called out for his mother before waking. She stays with him while he waits for an X-Ray technician.

“El Tim” is a first person narrative from the perspective of Mrs. Lawrence, a lay Spanish teacher in a Catholic junior high where Sister Lourdes is the principal. Sr. Lourdes speaks with Mrs. Lawrence about not befriending the students. Tim Sanchez returns to the school and Sr. Lourdes cautions Mrs. Lawrence about him and how his parole officer will monitor his progress. When he returns to school, he is referred to as El Tim. Mrs. Lawrence gives the class written work to help control the classroom. She catches Tim putting his hands on Dolores’ breasts, and Mrs. Lawrence demands Tim come to her desk. When he refuses, she tells him to get out and not come back. When Sr. Lourdes finds out, Mrs. Lawrence explains that she cannot handle him. Sister tells her she will speak to the Mother Superior. When Mrs. Lawrence and Sr. Lourdes speak, Sister calls Mrs. Lawrence weak and explains that Tim is their responsibility. Sister brings Tim into the room and explains that she does not want to send him back to the detention center. When he smarts off to Sister, Mrs. Lawrence slaps him and Sr. Lourdes leaves the room. Tim asks why she hit him. She explains that she was angry and “felt hurt and foolish” (49). He says they are even, and they return to the classroom.

“Point of View” is a first person narrative in which the narrator imagines Chekov’s “Grief” in first instead of third person. She decides to tell her story without explanation to engage the readers and make them care about her character Henrietta. Henrietta is in love with Dr. B, who mocks her and makes her feel inferior as the story closes. She struggles with how to convey the loneliness she feels at the end of the story.

“Her First Detox” is a third person narrative. The narrator walks the hall of the County detox ward, remembering “handcuffs, a straitjacket” (56). The men in the ward are nice to her, but laugh when they learn she prefers whiskey to their sweet wine. She was brought to detox after assaulting a police officer and having a seizure, which has left her with cuts and bruises, but she does not remember the incident. She calls her children while in detox. When she is released, she makes lasagna for her sons because it is



their favorite. At home she has wine vinegar, which will counteract with the Antabuse she has been prescribed; she decides to get cider vinegar.

“Phantom Pain” is a first person narrative about Lu remembering her father in Montana. She remembers her father telling her he loved her in Tierra del Fuego before she goes to college; it is the only time he has told her. He killed her mother after she gambled their life savings. He has problems with hallucinating and phantom pain where he had his legs amputated from diabetes. She visits him in the hospital, and senses she does so out of guilt. She parks his wheelchair outside to see the birds because she remembers he loves them. The wheelchair begins to roll down a brick path and as it gains momentum, Lu stops it.

“Tiger Bites” is a first-person narrative about Lou, a young woman who has a compromised relationship with her parents after marrying as a teenager, having a child, and getting divorced. Her mother Mary slit her wrists, leaving a note about how she “ruined her life” (70), and is on a 72-hour hold in a psych ward. She stays with Bella and Cletis and tells Bella that she is pregnant. Bella tells her to get an abortion and offers her the money to do it. Lou is worried about her son Ben if she were to die during the procedure. They have to travel to Juarez, Mexico, from Texas to get the procedure. The doctor explains the procedure and examines other women at the clinic. He refuses one woman because she is five months along. That night she hears someone crying and finds a girl hemorrhaging. She goes for help. The next morning, she asks about the girl, and the staff tells her she is fine. Lou decides not to go through with the abortion, but she will still have to pay. She returns to El Paso and asks if Joe, her ex-husband, tried to call. He did not.

Analysis

The collection opens with “Angel’s Laundromat”. It introduces the reader to a female narrator who appears in many of the stories throughout the collection. She is an older woman when she is introduced and interacts with an Old Indian in the laundromat. The story works to set up the themes of addiction and loneliness. Both the woman and the Old Indian has a sense of the toll loneliness takes on a person. He reaches out and she deflects, which is not always how the woman handles advances in later stories. In rejecting the Old Indian, she establishes herself as an independent character. It is not about her being alone or rejecting the man, but rather that she is capable of existing in this state. It is indicative of her survival, her sobriety, and her willingness to embrace who she is. It also foreshadows how the collection will conclude.

The second story is “Dr. H. A. Moynihan” and it introduces the female narrator as a young girl attending a Catholic school. In forthcoming stories, the reader will learn that the girl is a Protestant attending a Catholic school on a scholarship. She is in the school because of her intelligence and aptitude, but just as the woman is isolated in the first story, the girl exists outside of the community of the school. She is denied sacraments and rites because of her religion. She very much wants to be a part of this community,



but is rejected from the church, and when she suggests converting to her mother, she is denied that as well.

These stories give some insight into the family in which the girl was raised. The grandfather is a forceful presence, exposing the girl to something as jarring as pulling one's teeth out, and subsequently helping him do so. Further, the mother is first introduced as mocking her father. The introduction of the grandfather and mother establishes the theme of family as one of harshness and ridicule.

The first direct interaction that the girl has with her mother is an act of cruelty. The mother accuses the girl of receiving more letters from her father than the mother receives. To show both her spite and power over the girl, she burns a letter from the father before the girl has an opportunity to read it. If the girl has an opportunity for closeness or inclusion, her mother works against it.

It is not surprising then that the girl would want to be included in the church. She is reaching out to others, but is rejected. At the very least she is included at a safe distance, perpetuating the theme of loneliness. She is expelled from the school after being accused of striking a nun. The reader learns that the girl did not actually strike the nun and that it was a misunderstanding, but this information is only for the reader. There is nothing to suggest that the narrator is unreliable, but the incident may be subject to interpretation. It is possible the girl is defending her reputation in the eyes of the reader, especially given that throughout the collection, the reader may question the decisions made throughout.

The reader gets a true introduction to the woman as an addict in the short story "A Manual for Cleaning Women." In it the woman cleans houses and makes observations about the people who own the houses and how other women should go about taking care of other people's houses as well. There is some humor, but there is a dark undercurrent to the story. As the woman cleans houses, she steals the pills she can find. This addresses her addiction, but there is something darker: the woman is contemplating suicide. She is collecting the pills in order to kill herself. She ultimately changes her mind and breaks down after watching an older woman who is recently widowed putting a puzzle together. It is a sad moment in which the woman appears to be accepting of her loneliness.

Later in this section, the woman confronts her addiction. "Her First Detox" finds the woman in the county detox center with vague memories of being confined after assaulting a police officer. All the stories prior to this one are a first person narrative. "Her First Detox" differs in that it is a third person narrative. The author removes the woman character from having the power to share her experience. In part this is done because the character would not be clear or reliable in giving a first-hand account of what transpired. It also gives perspective on what the woman is going through.

While the reader is unaware of how cognizant the woman was of her drinking problem, the woman does seem amenable to going through detox. It is not a pleasant experience, but she seems to understand the necessity of it. By the time she is



released, she seems to be interested in maintaining her new sobriety. She considers how a bottle of wine vinegar will make her ill. Instead of thinking she should quit taking the Antabuse, she puts cider vinegar on her grocery list. This is encouraging that she will eventually overcome her addiction, but it should not be looked at as though this is a quick fix. No sooner is she home from rehab and she is taking stock of what kind of alcohol is in the home.

The collection returns to first-person narratives. “Phantom Pain” may be about her father experiencing leg pain after becoming a double amputee, but it may also be indicative of how the woman is feeling post-detox. She may be relating to her father’s phantom pain through her own alcoholism. Just as the earlier interactions with family are laced with toxicity, the woman has to actively remember that she loves her father. She feels disconnected from him and must reconcile his role in her mother’s death. She is ready to let go of her father’s wheelchair as it begins to roll downhill. She has the power to let him fall to whatever injuries he may incur, but she stops herself and him. It demonstrates her control over emotions and how she manages to survive in the wake of her dark past.

The final story in this section is called “Tiger Bites”. In it, a young woman is encouraged to get an abortion. She already has one son. Part of her reluctance at getting the abortion is the risk of leaving Ben without a mother. The reader learns that she has married and divorced as a teenager. Her mother has attempted suicide, leaving a note to suggest that the daughter’s actions are responsible. This again addresses the toxic nature of the family unit. The girl tries to figure out what is best for her and her family. Whether she is aware of her attempts to do what is best for her family is unclear.

The girl does show a capacity for caring outside of her family. She opts to cross the border into Juarez to have the abortion, but she ends up changing her mind. She is out the money and must spend the night in Juarez. While she is there, she comes to the aid of a young girl who is hemorrhaging. When she tries to get information about the girl the next morning, she is told that the girl is fine. The accuracy of this statement is questionable and the girl seems to understand that. The girl returns to El Paso. When she returns she asks whether or not her ex-husband Joe has called for her. He has not. The girl feels isolated and rejected, reinforcing the theme of loneliness.

Discussion Question 1

What does the misconception about striking Sr. Cecelia reveal about the girl's character?

Discussion Question 2

Given the narrator's problems with addiction, is the narrator reliable? Explain your reasoning.



Discussion Question 3

Why does the girl decide not to go through with the abortion?

Vocabulary

adobe, bigoted, obliterating, extraction, contrary, replica, bombardier, symmetry, intricate, lurch, homespun, coifs, fleur-de-lis, department, tremulous, penance, sacraments



Stories 11-22

Summary

“Emergency Room Notebook, 1977” is a first person narrative about Lucia, which is also the author's first name. Lucia is a nurse in an emergency room. She explains how ambulances turn off the sirens on the approach to the emergency bay and how medical staff behave during Code Three calls, in which the patients are critical. She uses gallows humor to cope with witnessing loss of life. She thinks “in terms of good or bad deaths” (90). Bad deaths involve reaching out to estranged family members or learning how a cleaning woman found a body. Good deaths involve family actively mourning or patients peacefully dying. She thinks of what patients have with them, such as bus schedules and dentures. She compares the patients’ complaints with diagnoses from tension headaches to heart attacks. She references the drunks who are alone and the suicides who come in with others. She thinks that people who make multiple suicide attempts who eventually succeed are accidents. A woman named Marlene complains she is going blind, but she is actually suffering from a migraine. Eventually, she leaves the emergency room.

“Temps Purdu” is a first person narrative following a ward clerk in a hospital. She ignores the patient intercoms, instead paying closer attention to those who do not speak. While treating Kentshreve, she documents a mole on near the crack of his buttocks. They knew each other when they were younger. She remembers being taken to a trout pool and having to wash her hair with tomato juice. One night, a charge nurse asks her what she is thinking about and when she replies that she is remembering an old love, the nurse says it is “neat” (102) that at her age she thinks about love. She remembers going to the movies and not being able to read the credits. When she is called to his room, the credits are rolling on the television and tells him she learned to read.

“Carpe Diem” is a first person narrative in which the narrator whose sons have grown and how she is okay with getting older. She goes to the laundromat and deposits quarters in one of the machines; she begins to cry. She has no more money from the dryers. She explains to a man in the laundromat that the machines cannot be stopped once started. She and man talk and she offers to help with his laundry, even though he is rude to her. Ophelia, another woman in the laundromat, tells him to be nice to her because she knows what she is going through. Ophelia talks about going through the change.

“Todo Luna, Todo Ano” is a third person narrative about Eloise Gore, a bilingual woman on vacation at a resort. This is her first trip since becoming a widow. In the morning, she swims out to an island after seeing a sign for Bernardo’s Scuba Diving. She asks if she can stay, but a woman tells her only fisherman live on the island. She is offered a room that divers sometimes use. She meets Cesar, who offers to take her diving. The next morning she meets him and tells him she has never gone diving and he tells her she will



be fine. She learns to dive and does well. She goes with Cesar each morning for clams. When Cesar cuts the hair of everyone, he cuts hers as well. He tells her she needs a bad dive. They have sex in the sea. Before she leave, he asks her for twenty thousand pesos for the boat and she agrees.

“Good and Bad” is a first person narrative about Adele, a high school student, in 1952. Miss Dawson is her teacher, the only American teacher at the school. The students mock her for her Boston accent. Discussions between Adele and Miss Dawson involve the elitism of the school and helping the poor. Miss Dawson asks Adele to help the poor on Saturdays for a month. When they are in the poor areas, Miss Dawson tells Adele not to tell anyone who she is. As they spend time together, Adele realizes she likes going with Miss Dawson and enjoys her time with her teacher. Eventually, she tells Miss Dawson she cannot go out with her on Saturday nights to “revolutionary theater or poetry readings” (130). While a workers’ protest, Adele is spotted by a friend of her father’s. On another Saturday, two of Adele’s friends catch her soliciting money on the street. They tell her that she can go to charity events, but that having “physical contact with other classes is simply vulgar” (131). She continues working with Miss Dawson. At Miss Dawson’s apartment, she changes clothes in front of Adele and puts on a sleeveless dress without a bra, and it makes Adele uncomfortable. Later, Miss Dawson tries to hitchhike and Adele tells her she cannot do that and tries to leave her. Miss Dawson begs her to stay with her. When Adele gets home, she tells her father that Miss Dawson is a communist, and her father arranges to have her fired.

“Melina” is a first person narrative and Lou is living in Albuquerque with Rex, her husband, and her son Ben. She meets Beau, a beatnik, on the street and they become friends. Beau would play with Ben and was in New Mexico on his way across country to his home in Brooklyn. Beau is in love with a woman named Melina, with whom he had an affair. He tells her all he knows about Melina and Lou misses him when he left. A couple years later, she has moved to Santa Fe with her new husband David, a jazz musician. David tells her about watching a nude sunbather and falling in love with her, but never spoke to her. Lou meets a woman she thinks is Melina and they talk. They talk astrology and palmistry. Lou reads Melina’s palm and tells her everything she knows from Beau talking about her. That night David tells her that Melina was the nude sunbather.

“Friends” is a third person narrative about Anna and Sam, who are both in their eighties, and Loretta, a younger woman who helps them. Anna and Sam have been together for fifty years and over time, Loretta learns more and more about their relationship, when they fell in love and how they never married. Loretta helps weed the garden and help Sam dress. Anna tells Sam that Loretta is lonely and needs them, but she cannot think of a story to tell Loretta. Sam says she will think of something just as Loretta arrives.

“Unmanageable” is a third person narrative about an alcoholic woman concerned that if she does not get a drink, she will experience DTs or a seizure. She thinks about what may be available in the house and drinks lemon extract. She goes through the change drawer and thinks about the long walk to the store and whether she would get home before her children wake up. She makes her way and refuses a handout from a drunk



on the street. He thinks she is too proud to drink his liquor, but she tells him she is afraid she will drop the bottle. He pours the wine in her mouth to get her by. She gets home and tends to breakfast and laundry. Her son tells her that she needs to stop drinking with the help of a hospital.

“Electric Car, El Paso” is a first person narrative about a girl, Mamie, her grandmother, and Mrs. Snowden, who drives an electric car. Mamie and Mrs. Snowden end parts of the conversations with quotes from the Bible. They go to the airport and watch planes take off. On their way home, they are stopped by a cop who tells them they need to speed up or he will ticket Mrs. Snowden. The cop is livid and speeds off with lights and sirens, crashing into a truck while going through a red light.

“Sex Appeal” is a first person narrative about Lou and her cousin Bella Lynn teaching her about sex appeal. Bella tells her the key is to “work alone” (160) so there is no competition. They meet Rickie Evers, an older man, in a restaurant and he buys Bella a drink. The three end up in his car and he gives them a ride home. He asks Lou for a goodnight kiss; Bella tells him she is only fifteen. He bites Lou’s neck as Bella gets out of the car.

“Teenage Punk” is a first person narrative in which the narrator has recently gotten divorced. Her son’s friend Jesse has come to visit at the farmhouse. She understands that she is prone to romanticizing. She and Jesse go for a walk before dawn to go see the cranes. The birds take off as she and Jesse feel the sun. Jesse walks ahead of her as they make their way back; he tells her it was scary.

“Step” is a first person narrative in which the narrator is at the West Oakland detox center. They residents talk about boxing. Carlotta figures out “solitary drunks” (168) are only seen on television. The fight starts: Sugar Ray Leonard vs. Benitez. The residents are rooting for Benitez, not to win, but to keep up the fight.

Analysis

“Emergency Room Notebook, 1977” gives insight into Lucia’s time working as a nurse. Her observations are poignant and detailed. She discusses the silence of incoming ambulances and how drunks and suicide attempts come in differently. She observes that the suicidal people are brought in with someone and often others. She recognizes that while the person may be struggling with their own hardship, there may be a higher likelihood of someone being there for them. If the attempts are a cry for help, someone is there. She sees the drunks differently, however. She sees them coming in alone. Perhaps her observations are clouded by her own experience. Seeing an alcoholic coming in alone suggests the loneliness and isolation she has previously written about. She views alcoholism as a disease that pushes people away from the alcoholic. Other might give up on an individual. She continues her discussion of the suicidal patients by suggesting that those who end up killing themselves may end up doing so by accident.



From a story about a nurse to a ward clerk in “Temps Purdu,” the author continues with insight into healthcare. Much as the previous narrator observed how people came into the emergency room, in this story, the ward clerk observes the level of need of the patients. She alters how she responds to patients pressing the call buttons. In the story, she reconnects with a man she knew in her youth. The introduction of Kentshreve gives some insight into how the woman has matured and changed over time. When they knew each other, the woman was illiterate. She is able to show Kentshreve that she has educated and empowered herself through literacy. When the other nurse asks her about what she is thinking, the woman admits that she is thinking about an old love. The nurse’s comment is somewhat condescending, but the woman does not respond. She understands the ability to connect with someone and its importance over time, further developing the theme of loneliness.

“Carpe Diem” continues with the concept of aging. The connection that the narrator has with Ophelia is not a strong connection. She sits with the woman in the laundromat and Ophelia is the one reaching for a connection. She talks to the woman about going through menopause. The woman goes along with the conversation, but she is focused on the issues she is experiencing with money. She continues to care for those around her. She offers to help a man with his laundry in spite of his being rude. In much the same way she holds conversation with Ophelia, she understands the need to be present for others.

“Todo Luna, Todo Ano” returns to a third person narrative. In this particular story, the woman is named Eloise and is identified as a widow. In later stories, a woman will interact with the character Cesar and will be identified by other names. Eloise appears to be a stand-in for the woman character used throughout most of the collection. Eloise is in a state of grief during the course of the story. This foreshadows the element of grief that plays a part in the forthcoming stories as well.

Eloise is vacationing on her own and while there are others at the resort, she does not seem interested in interacting with them. Instead she swims to an island and asks to stay there. She is offered accommodations and takes diving lessons from Cesar. While in his company, and the company of others, she appears to be comfortable. The connections she is making assuage her loneliness and help with her grief. She and Cesar become lovers, which happens casually. Just as in teaching her how to dive, Cesar reads her well. Lest it be thought that this was expected to be a great romance, the story takes a turn when after spending the night together, Cesar asks Eloise for money for his boat. She agrees to give it to him. It may be that she agrees to do so to be able to give him something that he needed or it could be out of obligation.

The narration returns to first person with the next story “Good and Bad”. Adele, the female character at the center of the story, returns to a younger feminine perspective. Adele fosters a connection with Miss Dawson because of her desire to help people. Adele is from a wealthy family and Miss Dawson sees exposing Adele to the impoverished parts of the city as a way of furthering her education. Miss Dawson, however, connects with Adele. While the two women appear to have a mutual admiration for one another, Adele keeps a distance. Miss Dawson goes beyond that.



She may be developing an attraction to Adele, or she may simply be connecting with her out of loneliness, but Adele withdraws. Adele is uncomfortable with the way Miss Dawson dresses and the way Miss Dawson changes her clothes in front of Adele. Miss Dawson appears to be a lesbian and Adele is uncomfortable with this aspect of Miss Dawson's sexuality. Unsure of what to do when Miss Dawson begs Adele to stay with her, Adele tells her father that Miss Dawson is a communist and Miss Dawson loses her job.

The theme of loneliness is explored in the stories "Melina", "Friends" and "Teenage Punk". Two of the stories continue with the first person narrative. In "Melina", Lou makes friends with Beau, a beatnik she meets while taking her son Ben for a walk. She has a strong connection with Beau and comments about how she misses him when he moves on. She is later confronted with meeting the woman that Beau was in love with. When she uses palmistry as a way to convey what she knows about Melina to her, it may be that she is doing so as way to connect with Beau through Melina after he leaves.

With "Teenage Punk", the other first person narrative, the narrator is a recent divorcee. She begins spending time with a friend of her son's. Jesse is a teenager and clearly the narrator is old enough to be his mother, but the two forge a connection or an understanding. Their interaction is innocent enough, but the narrator admits that she is prone to romanticizing a situation. Here the two of them are trekking through the woods together before sunrise to go see cranes. When the birds take off, it prompts Jesse to tell her that he was scared. He may have found the entire event scary, or was startled by the birds, but he may also be frightened of the connection he may be developing with the narrator.

"Friends" is the third story in the group to explore loneliness. It differs from the previous two because it is written in the third person narrative. Gone is the intimacy of a first-person narrative, making the reader feel as though the loneliness is being observed as an outsider. The story involves an older couple and a younger woman that comes and helps them. All believe that they are playing an important role in helping the others cope with their loneliness.

The author returns to the theme of addiction in "Unmanageable" and "Step". Like the earlier detox story, "Unmanageable" is in third person. The woman at the center of the story is in desperate need of a drink. She knows that she is at risk of a seizure and attempts to make her way to a liquor store. Along the way she encounters a wino on the street. She rejects his offer of alcohol and he misinterprets her dismissal as commentary on his social standing. Instead, the woman's problem is far more severe. She is fearful of dropping the liquor, thereby depriving them both of what they need. He offers to hold the bottle for her as an act of compassion.

"Step" takes the theme of addiction into first person. The setting of the story is a detox center and the residents are preparing to watch a boxing match. The title step calls to mind a twelve step program. By moving the narration to first person, it becomes symbolic of the woman taking the first step toward her sobriety. Instead of keeping



distance from the addiction in the third person, she is willing to be a part of the recovery. The fight for them becomes symbolic of the recovery of all the residents. They are rooting for Benitez to defeat Sugar Ray Leonard, a boxing legend. In this way they are all rooting for their own recovering, no matter how high the odds may be stacked against them.

The theme of sexuality is examined in “Sex Appeal”. The first person narrative gives insight into Lou’s sexual awakening. She observes her cousin Bella Lynn and how she interacts with men. Lou is only fifteen in the story and the man is much older. Bella Lynn’s advice is to work alone to prevent competition, yet she has brought her younger cousin with her. At the conclusion of the story, the man bites Lou on the neck after she rejects his advance for a kiss. Bella Lynn is defensive of Lou in the story, while his actions illustrates her policy for working alone.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator feel okay about getting older?

Discussion Question 2

What does the woman going home and starting breakfast after drinking alcohol on the street reveal about her character?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Bella Lynn take Lou out to teach her about sex appeal?

Vocabulary

translucent, cassock, affirmation, vertigo, emanate, indifference, sardonic, gelatinous, pneumatic, conspicuous, dispassionate, euphemism, docile, myriad, litany, gradations, hierarchy, frigate, jubilant, monolith, tenement



Stories 23-31

Summary

“Strays” is a first person narrative about a woman completing a six-month stay at La Vida, a methadone clinic, after being caught with needle marks. The group gets methadone in the morning and then group work through the afternoon, during which they work on anger and defiance. Her stay goes well for the first three months. She meets a woman called Sexy, who was a prostitute in Mexico. She likes her, but others in the group do not think she will last long at the facility. Later, Sexy is gets out and ends up back in jail. The stray dogs around the facility encounter porcupines and the quills cause an infection. The dogs need to be put down and Bobby beats them to death with a sledgehammer.

“Grief” is a third person narrative of Delores and Sally, two sisters, staying at a resort. They have recently lost their mother and Sally has breast cancer. Recently, Sally’s husband left her for a younger woman. Delores wants to talk about her struggle with alcoholism, but her problems pale in comparison to her sister’s. Sally does not want to go to the beach in a swimsuit because she is fearful people will see her mastectomy scars. Delores convinces her to swim. Later Delores suggests they talk about their mother and Sally says she is glad she is dead. Her mother was angry because Sally married a Mexican man. They make plans to go to an island, and Delores is looking forward to introducing Sally to Cesar, with whom she had an affair over twenty-five years ago. When they see him, Cesar remembers Delores. She wants to dive with him, but fears the regulator might damage her false teeth. Later, Cesar asks Delores to stay the night with him, but she does not. Sally leaves the next morning. The day after, Delores leaves, but not before buying a half-pint of rum to cure her shakes.

“Bluebonnets” is a third person narrative in Maria is going to meet Dixon in person after working on a translation for him. Her son Nick does not think she should go and that Dixon’s book was weird. Maria confronts Nick about how he is uncomfortable because his mother may have sex. She explains that she works in a hospital and the trip will do her good. As she travels, she thinks about how she has not been naked in front of man since she quit drinking. When she and Dixon are together, they talk and enjoy each other’s company. They get to the farmhouse and feed the animals. They make love and talk about how infrequently they talk to other people. They talk about his book and she explains that she does not understand the abstract and Dixon wonders how she translated his book at all. He gets angry with her when she walks on the floor with her shoes. She leaves the next morning, happy to be leaving.

“La Vie en Rose” is a third person narrative in which Gerda and Claire are sunbathing. They talk about people around them and rent a rowboat. They paddle to an island. They return and after feeling a temblor. They see Chilean aviation cadets in the lobby. They want to stay up late and watch people tango. They meet Roberto and Andres and they dance to “La Vie en Rose”. They go out on a boat together and before the girls jump into



the lake, the men have kissed them. Back at the hotel room, Gerda is told that she is not to see Claire for the rest of the summer.

“Macadam” is first person narrative. A woman is chewing ice and thinking about how her grandmother longed for everything to be clean. She thinks “macadam” (210) sounds like a friend’s name.

“Dear Conchi” is a narrative in epistolary form. None of the thirteen letters are signed, but all are addressed “Dear Conchi”. The letters are from a female college student at the University of New Mexico. She tells Conchi about how she feels uncomfortable in her clothes and that she has a part-time job. She explains that she misses him and how she has not made new friends, and that the people she has met are not “emotional or affectionate like Chileans” (212-213). She begins dating Joe Sanchez and in the next letter, she is dating a man named Dash. Joe is jealous of her relationship with Dash; he fears she is becoming an intellectual. She explains that she has written a short story and how she was happy with Joe. She reveals that someone contacted her family to tell them she was engaged in “an affair with a man much too old” (217). Her parents arrive on New Year’s Eve. She explains to Conchi that she knows they promised to tell each other about sex, but she is unable to do so. When her father mentioned “statutory rape” (219), Joe offers to marry her, but her parents will not stand for it. Her parents pull her out of school.

“Fool to Cry” is a first person narrative in which a mother is thinking about how when her sons used to come into her room it was for a reason. She is with her sister Sally. She and Sally go along with Tino to get coffee. Sally has a year left to live. They are in Mexico City and they meet up with Sally’s ex-husband Ramon, and Sally’s daughters, Mercedes and Victoria. They reminisce and she recalls Conchi daring her “to ask him to dance” (225). Sally has been having an affair with Xavier, who is married. Xavier takes Sally to her chemo appointment. Later Sally is in bed sick and Lou thinks about how she did not become friends with her sister until they were adults. The next day at a celebration, Lou talks to an old friend Carlotta. She tells Carlotta that she has been sober for three years. Back at the house, Sally sleeps and Lou gets into bed with her. When Lou wakes up she sobs.

“Mourning” is a first person narrative and Lou is working as a cleaning woman for a reality company. She considers how it would not take more than a couple hours to get rid of someone’s belongings. She recently cleaned the house of a widower who died. His son and daughter arrive at the house after the funeral. She notes how the son smiles frequently, but the daughter does not. She comments on how their father may have been happy in the house and it offends the daughter. They go through kitchen items and both want an old rolling pin. She watches the siblings interact and thinks the daughter is cold. The daughter finds aprons and towels and begins to sob for her mother and the son comforts her. A truck arrives to take the remainder of the stuff. Lou sweeps the floor and locks up and leaves.

“Panteon de Dolors” is a first person narrative that finds Lou in Mexico with her sister Sally, who is dying. She remembers her mother and how she commented about Mexico



smelling “of sex and soap” (243). She remembers her mother hoarding canned goods and the time her mother spent in her room. She sits with Sally and reads to her. She remembers her mother and father both coming from Texan families. She admits to herself that she is angry Sally is dying. Someone is constantly with Sally and Lou thinks about how “there is no guide to death” (250). She thinks about her mother’s dissatisfaction with her marriage and the lack of romance in her life. Like Sally, her mother wept alone.

Analysis

Both “Strays” and “Grief” offer insight into the author’s position on addiction. While the woman’s addiction is addressed in other stories in this section, such as the fact that she is sober in “Bluebonnets” and “Fool to Cry”, the author offers some perspective on addiction. In “Strays”, the narrator is staying at La Vida, a methadone clinic. The narrator has been sentenced to the drug treatment instead of going to jail after getting caught with needle marks. The story examines how the patients in the clinic cope with their anger and defiance in the wake of their addition. By the end of the story, the group has come across a group of stray dogs that need to be put down. It is likely that they get a sense of self in looking at the dogs. The porcupine quills could certainly symbolize the needles they used to administer drugs, but they may also see a sense of futility. Depending on where they are in their recovery, the idea of not being able to overcome addiction may be in consideration. The narrator watches Bobby take a sledgehammer and kill the dogs. It is a brutal death and reflects the violent struggle the addicts face in getting clean.

In “Grief,” addiction is not as pointedly addressed as in “Strays.” “Grief” follows two sisters – Delores and Sally – on vacation. Delores is coming to terms with her sister’s diagnosis. They are hopeful that Sally will beat breast cancer, but the title of the story indicates that the diagnosis is not hopeful. The two women are able to talk about their mother and the varying effects their relationship with their mother influenced their lives. Sally is happy that her mother is dead; this gives her peace. Delores defends their mother to a point. At the very least she is somewhat sympathetic to her mother. Delores reconnects with Cesar, who appeared in an earlier story with a character named Eloise. This is likely the same character. Delores and Cesar do not have a sexual encounter, even though Cesar asks her to stay with him. The weight of her sister’s health is weighing on Delores. By the end of the story, she is drinking in the airport to stave off withdrawal.

The remaining stories in the section explore the themes of sexuality and death. “Bluebonnets,” “La Vie en Rose,” and “Dear Conchi” explore the female characters sexuality in different ways. The first of the three stories to appear is “Bluebonnets”. It is a third person narrative in which a woman with grown children has decided to go and visit a man she translated a book for. Her son is uncomfortable with the idea that his mother may be embarking on a sexual relationship, particularly with someone she does not know very well. This does not seem to be of concern to the mother. Instead, her concern is with the fact that this will be the first time she takes her clothes off in front of



a man since she got sober. At present she is on the other side of her addiction and is faced with understanding her sexuality during sobriety. After she and Dixon have sex, not much is made of her insecurities. The two begin talking and find that they differ in the way that they view the world. For Dixon, his world view is abstract, which is in direct contrast with how the woman sees it. At the end of the trip, the woman is happy, if not relieved to be leaving. She has experienced a rite of passage in her sobriety and sexuality and is ready to move forward.

“La Vie en Rose” and “Dear Conchi” explore sexuality in younger women. In “La Vie en Rose”, there are two girls who are innocent and somewhat naïve. They are intrigued by men around them, particularly the cadets, and watch the tango. They seem to be enjoying this introduction to sexual elements around them. They meet and dance with Roberto and Andres and agree to go out with them on a boat. When the men make advances toward the girls, they dive into the water. They are not ready to explore their sexuality further. At the end of the story, Gerda is told that she is not allowed to see Claire any more. Her parents have intervened as a way to restrict the girl’s sexual awakening.

“Dear Conchi” takes the epistolary form. The unnamed author of the letters is writing to Conchi, a friend back home. In one of the letters she admits that she had agreed to discuss sex with Conchi if and when she had sex. When it does happen, she admits that it is not something she is comfortable discussing with Conchi. When her parents learn about the sexual relationship between the girl and Joe, the father threatens to charge Joe with statutory rape. The parents clearly want to stop their daughter’s sexual activity. Much as in the previous story, the parents try to intervene. Joe offers to marry the girl, but the parents oppose that. Ultimately, they decide to pull her out of school, sacrificing her education to keep her sexual exploration and relationship at bay.

The author briefly addresses the theme of death in “Strays” and “Grief.” The dogs are killed, which is an obvious look at death, while “Grief” alludes to impending death by discussing Sally’s cancer diagnosis and the mother’s death years earlier. The theme is further explored in the stories “Fool to Cry,” “Mourning,” and “Panteon de Dolors.”

All three stories are first person narratives, with “Fool to Cry” and “Panteon de Dolors” directly addressing Sally’s impending death. In “Fool to Cry,” Lou travels to Mexico City to be with Sally and her family. It is revealed that Sally has been having an affair with a married man, Xavier and that he is the one who takes her to her chemo appointments. Lou seems to get a clearer sense of her sister’s life while visiting. While staying with her, Lou recognizes how long it took them to become friends instead of just sisters. After spending the night with Sally, Lou wakes up only to start sobbing. She recognizes that her sister likely will not survive and that she is losing both her sister and her friend.

In “Panteon de Dolors”, Sally is closer to death. Not only is Lou angry that her sister is dying, but she recognizes that she does not understand how to grieve or prepare for death. There is no right or wrong way to do it. Without guidance, she feels both lost and helpless.



This understanding of how there is no right or wrong way to handle death is addressed more pointedly in the story that comes between “Fool to Cry” and “Panteon de Dolors”. In the story “Mourning”, Lou is working as a cleaning lady and has been tasked with cleaning a house after a man dies. His children come to the house and she notes the differences in the demeanor of the man and woman. The man attempts to be friendly and offer a smile, while the sister is stern and somewhat angry. Both are in mourning and are grieving in a way that works for them. This signals to Lou that there is no one way to grieve, but that she must find what works best for her.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Sally glad that her mother is dead?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Dolores refuse Cesar’s offer to spend the night with him?

Discussion Question 3

What do the letters to Conchi reveal about the narrator’s character?

Vocabulary

self-effacing, veranda, impetuously, haggard, disheveled, docility, eccentric, abstract, macadam, evocative, iridescent, luminosity, suffused, sluice, furrows, lavish, abated, farce, stolid, moored, melancholy, parasol, sanatorium, undulates



Stories 32-37

Summary

“So Long” is a first person narrative in which Lou is having an affair with Max and she loves to hear his voice. She has been living in Mexico City for about a year and rarely leaves the apartment where she is with Sally. She understands that she has been here long enough to have a life separate from before and she tries “to remember who I was in English” (253). She has made peace with her drinking problem and reflects on her past marriages. She married Jude after her first marriage failed and then later began an affair with Max. The difficulties in her marriage to Jude seemed to be handle in bed rather than verbally. One night she sees Max with a hypodermic needle and learns he is a heroin addict. They had two sons together, but the relationship suffered because “he loved heroin much more” (259). Max calls to check in and Lou tells him Sally does not have much longer to live and he asks how she is doing.

“A Love Affair” is a first person narrative and Lily is working as a nurse. She assists during a gynecological exam, but Dr. B is “painfully shy” (262). Ruth, a fifty-year old married woman, starts working in the office. Ruth has also decided that she would like to have an affair. She likes having Ruth around, but Dr. B calls her “Dyslexia” (264) because she transposes numbers. Dr. B asks Lily to fire Ruth because she is flirting with him. Ruth invites him to go to the opera with her and he declines forcefully. Ruth sends herself flowers at the office from a secret admirer. Dr. B asks Lily to fire Ruth again because she is “too cheerful” (268). Dr. B fires Ruth. When Ruth misses her scheduled lunch with Ephraim, her husband, he shows up at the office and tells her he misses Ruth and asks Lily to let Ruth go. Lily reassures him that Ruth loves him.

“Let Me See You Smile” is a first person narrative from the perspective of Jon Cohen, a defense attorney. Jesse arrives wanting to hire him with a recent inheritance to help the woman he lives with. Jesse explains about his relationship with Carlotta, whom Jesse calls Maggie, and how they are both alcoholics. He is a musician, and she is a teacher. Jesse claims his relationship with her is strange in that they are “the same person” (276). They were both arrested after a strip search in an airport. Jesse was seventeen when they began the relationship and Maggie is older than him. The narration shifts to Maggie’s perspective. She explains that Jesse was beaten by a policeman. Jesse and Maggie were handcuffed and she licked the blood from his eyes and kissed. They charged Maggie with lewd and lascivious behavior for licking Jesse’s eyes because he was a minor. Maggie stays in lockup until she is released on her own recognizance. She is ashamed to tell her son Ben what happened. The narrative shifts back to Jon Cohen and he goes to the apartment and observes Jesse and Maggie interact and notes the chemistry between them. He drinks cognac while they drink whiskey. Jesse and Maggie reveal information about a history of abuse of force with the police officer that beat Jesse. Later, Jon learns that Jesse and Maggie sleep on different rooftops throughout downtown. Ben tells Jon that Jesse and Maggie both worry that the other one will stop drinking and decide to leave the other one. Time moves on and Jon divorces his wife



Cheryl. The narrative shifts back to Maggie. Jesse and Maggie make love and have long conversations and drink. She notes how important Jesse makes everyone feel. Ben confronts her about her drinking. Maggie tells Jesse they need to stop drinking and they make an effort but get the shakes so bad they start drinking again. One night Jesse asks whether they should “get married or kill ourselves” (297). They make love repeatedly in the kitchen. The narrative shifts back to Jon explaining that Jesse did not want to have to go to court. He admits that his wife Cheryl cheated on him. Because of the police brutality, Jon asks for charges to be dropped and they are.

“Mama” is a first person narrative that returns to Lou and Sally. Sally tells her sister that their mother was a witch and that while their mother is dead, Sally fears she can still see her. Their mother told Sally not to have children or marry for love and how she hated children. Sally does not know if her mother disowned her because she “married a Mexican or because he was Catholic” (304). There is a break in the narrative and Lou tells Sally her observations about their mother. She talks about her mother’s wit and how even her suicide notes contained jokes. Sally admits she misses their father. Lou begins telling Sally stories at night, mostly from before their mother became an alcoholic. She tells her that their mother was on a ship in Alaska, going to see her new husband Ed and how small their mother was. Their mother loved Alaska, but after Lou was born, she was left with the baby and started drinking. As Lou got older, she referred to her as the “Bad Seed” (308). When their father came back from the war, the family moved to Arizona. Later the family moves to Chile and became rich. Lou explains that their mother was jealous of them as they grew older because they were “young and pretty and had a future” (309). Sally asks Lou to tell her about their mother on the boat and wishes she could tell her mother that she loved her; Lou does not feel the same.

“Carmen” is a first person narrative about Mona, a pregnant woman, who is also a drug addict. Noodles tells her Beto was busted and they need someone to go across the border for drugs. He explains to her that because she is “Anglo, pregnant, sweet-looking” (313), she will be able to get across the border without problems. She objects, but ultimately agrees to go. She makes the trip, understanding that if she is caught it will be as a drug dealer. She asks for La Nacha and she gives money to Mel. He gives her a Valium, which she does not want to take because of the baby, but Mel insists. He tells her to put the drugs in her vagina, which she also does not want to do. She takes the drugs and puts them in her underwear and leaves. In the hallway, two men grab her and steal her purse and one suggests they rape her. An old man stops them by yelling and waving a knife. The story picks up with the woman on a small plane to Albuquerque. Noodles discovers they were shorted the drugs and slaps the woman. Her water breaks and Noodles shoots up. She waits for an ambulance and delivers the baby at the hospital and names her Carmen. A nurse tells her they need to take her to the doctor for an episiotomy and the woman learns that because the baby was born prematurely, it died. The nurse asks if she should call anyone for her and she says no, “nobody’s home” (319).

“Silence” is a first person narrative about a girl who attends the Radford School for Girls on scholarship. She lives in the slums and prefers to be in silence. She likes the library. Because she is poor, she is accused when Miss Brick’s purse is stolen from beneath



her teacher's desk. When she gets home, her mother beats her without asking if she had stolen the purse. She later learns that a janitor stole the purse, but her mother did not apologize. The girl ends up at St. Joseph's school and decides to stop talking altogether. She meets Hope and they strike up a friendship and the girl talks to Hope. Hope's family speaks "English, Spanish, and Arabic" (323) and the girl feels like she belongs. The girls start stealing and when they get caught, Hope's mother stands up for her, whereas her own mother does not. The girls unwittingly help Hope's brother Sammy scam people for money so that he can buy a car. Hope makes the girl promise not to speak to Sammy, but Sammy offered her a ride and she went with him. After that Hope and the rest of the family stopped speaking to her. It leaves her lonely. At home, she hides when her grandfather is drunk. He tells her she is jealous of her sister Sally because of the attention she gets from their mother. One day she is in the truck with her Uncle John, who is drunk. He hits a dog, but refuses to slow down. He drops her at home and did not come back. John ended up on skid row in Los Angeles, met a woman, and got sober. She ends up helping John in his shop and understands why John was unable to stop that day because she "was an alcoholic" (332) as well.

Analysis

In the stories "So Long" and "Carmen," the death motif is further explored. Both are first person narratives. "So Long" revisits the characters Lou and Sally, while "Carmen" introduces a young pregnant woman named Mona.

"So Long" is similar in tone and content to many of the earlier stories in which Lou and Sally appear. Lou continues to come to terms with her sister's impending death. The character Max is introduced in the story and revealed to have been a former lover of Lou's, with whom she had two children. They split because of his drug addiction. When Max calls her, she is happy to hear his voice. While she does reveal the hardships in her relationship with Max, she is able to sense his kindness as well. Throughout her sister's illness, Lou has made mention of her addiction and sobriety in passing, but no one has genuinely asked how she is coping with Sally's illness. Max does so. She does not answer the question.

In contrast, "Carmen" deals with death differently. It contrasts death with birth. Mona is a pregnant woman who is asked by her boyfriend Noodles to cross the border into Mexico and bring back drugs. She is heavily pregnant during the trip, which she is reluctant to complete. She resists Noodles, but ends up giving in. Noodles figures that Mona will call less attention to herself because she is white and pregnant and will not appear suspicious. Mona completes the drug deal and returns only to learn that she was slighted in the deal. Before Noodles shoots up, he slaps Mona and not long after, she goes into labor. The baby, which she names Carmen, is still born. The death of the infant girl becomes symbolic of the impending death of Sally.

Obviously, "Carmen" addresses the theme of addiction as well. Mona is sent to Mexico to make a drug deal and her boyfriend shoots up as soon as she returns with the drugs. Similarly, "So Long" also tackles drug addiction. Lou's relationship with Max ends



because of his heroin addiction, as she points out “he loved heroin much more” (259) than her or their children.

The other two stories in this section that deal with addiction are “Let Me See You Smile” and “Silence.” Both are first person narratives, but “Let Me See You Smile” use an alternating narrative between two characters: a lawyer names Jon and Maggie. The character Jesse returns for this story as well. It is likely that the mother in “Teenage Punk” is Maggie in this story. Jesse and Carlotta, whom he calls Maggie, have been arrested for possession at the airport and strip searched. While they are being detained, Maggie licks the blood off of Jesse’s eye after he was beaten by an officer. In doing so, Maggie is then charged with a lewd act. Jon becomes involved in the court case and eventually the charges are dropped. But it is clear that both Jesse and Maggie have drinking problems and are caught up in their addictions. The story also addresses the theme of sexuality. Once Maggie is released, she and Jesse make love multiple times in the kitchen. For them sex is part of their addiction.

“Silence” tackles addiction in a much more subtle way. In the story, a girl who attends a school on scholarship has stopped speaking. It is frustrating for those around her, but she has become withdrawn. Her behavior certainly speaks to the theme of loneliness. Over the course of the story, she ends up befriending a girl named Hope who is from a mixed-race family. Multiple languages are spoken in the home and the girl is welcomed into the fold. As she begins to come out of her shell, she betrays Hope by going in the car with Hope’s brother. This causes an irreparable rift in the friendship, leaving the girl alone again. By the end of the story, the girl is with her uncle John. He speeds around in his truck and hits a dog. The girl wants him to go back and check on the animal, but as she looks back on this time with her uncle, she begins to understand why he did not stop. When she is older, she is able to understand her uncle’s alcoholism because she is able to recognize it in herself.

Building on the theme of loneliness are the stories “So Long”, which was discussed earlier with Lou how Lou feels since coming to Mexico City, and “A Love Affair.” The latter story has the character Lily, a nurse who appears to be a stand-in for the nurse characters earlier in the collection. The story is a first person narrative in which Lily watches Ruth, a fiftyish woman who is looking for excitement in her life. She is married and her revelation of her desire to have an affair reveals the loneliness she is experiencing in her marriage. Ruth projects onto Dr. B, seeking him out as a potential lover. Her husband Ephraim recognizes that something is happening with his wife, but he misinterprets the time that Ruth spends with Lily as the rift in the marriage. Ephraim, too, can be viewed as a lonely character as he makes an attempt to get his wife back.

Two stories tackle the theme of family: “Mama” and “Carmen”. Obviously, “Carmen” paints a dysfunctional portrait of a family and the family is eventually broken after Carmen is still born. “Mama” delves deeper into the darkness of the family Lou and Sally grew up in. The women talk about their mother and her suicide. Sally continues to struggle with the fact that her mother criticized Sally’s marriage because she married a Mexican man. Both women appear to have deep emotional wounds because of how their mother treated them.



The women have become close, and it is likely that they are pursuing these discussions because they know their time is limited to discuss them. Both know that aside from each other, no one else would fully be able to comprehend the difficulties of living with their mother. Lou begins to tell Sally stories about their parents when they met and a time in which they would have been happy. The stories resonate with Sally and she admits that she would like to be able to tell her mother that she loved her, but Lou does not feel similarly. Lou maintains a coldness toward her mother, likely because, as the eldest child, she experienced the brunt of her mother's abuse. Both are haunted by their mother. Even Sally considers her mother, not a ghost, but a witch, implying that the woman could still wield power over them even after death.

Discussion Question 1

What does Max's phone call to Lou reveal about their relationship?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mona tell the nurse "nobody's home" (319) after learning that her baby died?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the girl feel a connection with her uncle John?

Vocabulary

uncanny, self-recrimination, connotation, sordid, rebus, metronome, stevedores, embankment, transposed, unseemly, mortician, boutonniere, impotent, libelous, cynical, lascivious, recognizance, estuary, demonstrative, slanderous, careen, hassock, balmy



Stories 38-43

Summary

“Mijito” is a first person narrative that alternates between narrators. The first narrator is a young illegal immigrant named Amelia. She and Manolo marry so she can get welfare. She is alone most of the time. Manolo’s Uncle Ramon tells her that Manolo is in jail. Ramon takes her to see Manolo. Ramon does not tell her what Manolo has done. After they leave the jail, she tells Ramon she is pregnant. The narrator shifts to a nurse in a clinic. She treats Amelia, who has had her baby, Jesus. She teaches her about alternating breasts for feeding. Because the nurse speaks Spanish, Dr. Fritz has her ask Amelia how Jesus got the bruises on his arms. Jesus has a hernia and needs surgery. The nurse explains about the pre-op fasting, but Amelia feeds the baby before the surgery is scheduled and will have to wait a month. The narration shifts to Amelia’s perspective. She stays with Ramon and his wife Lupe. Lupe suggested that Amelia have an abortion because Manolo was sentenced to eight years. Amelia keeps the baby and gives birth at the house.

Ramon hits both Lupe and Amelia after Jesus is born. Lupe tells her that she can stay with them for a while longer, but they want her and the baby gone soon. Lupe tells her to get a job and Amelia tells her that she cannot read. When she arrives at the clinic for Jesus’ surgery, she breastfeeds and Dr. Fritz yells at her. Amelia passes out and when she comes to, the nurse is with her and encourages her to eat. The narration shifts to the nurse and she explains that the clinic mostly sees illegals as patients. She reflects on the anomalies of the children they treat and the different ailments. She remembers a time when a child with six fingers exclaimed that he wanted to keep them instead of having the sixth fingers removed. The narration returns to Amelia. Lupe tells her she has found a place for her to stay, but Amelia wants to return to Mexico. Later, Ramon comes in and grabs Amelia’s breasts and kisses her neck. Amelia and Jesus move to a building that looks like a store, where they have blankets in a corner. Jesus is crying through the night and she yells for him to stop. The next day, she notices that the hernia is worsening. She takes Jesus for the surgery. Dr. Fritz notices more bruising and the nurse explains that if he sees them again, he will report her to child welfare. The narration shifts back to the nurse who is treating a fourteen year old who has learning deficits and deformities. She gets called to the emergency room by Dr. Fritz. He wants her to translate to Amelia. Jesus has died from a broken neck. Amelia admits that Jesus was crying when she shook him.

“502” is a first person narrative about Lu who has gotten sober and now lives in Boulder. She has gotten her life back together, but sometimes is compelled to “mess it all up” (357). She remembers Officer Wong, who was nice instead of rough when arresting her and others drunks. One day she woke up to Officer Wong pounding on the door asking where her car is. He told her that she left her car in neutral and it his another car. He took her to see the car and starts to write her a ticket. The old drunks in the area tell him



that he cannot ticket her because she was not in the car when it happened. She remembers how Officer Wong quit being polite to her after that day.

“Here It Is Saturday” is a first person narrative about a man in prison. He has had drug problems and talks about the humiliation and brutality of prison. He meets CD, who is someone he knew on the street, and who exhibits power in the prison yard. They are both in a writing group. Mrs. Bevins is their teacher. They have to read their work aloud in class and the class meets for four hours. CD writes about pain and it moves the others. By the end of the class, they got a printed collection of their work and are excited to see it in print. They had a reading at a party in which a band played. As the narrator works through his story, he reveals that CD was killed after getting out of prison.

“B.F. and Ms” is a first person narrative about a woman who works as a switchboard operator. She needs tile work done at the house and calls B.F. He showed up a day late. He smelled pungent, a large, old man. She does not mind his smell. He tells her that she will have to go to a motel while the tile sets. She tells him she cannot and that she will need to use the bathroom; she only has one. He makes her promise not to blame him for shifts in the tile. He takes the measurements and they agree on a price. He does not show up or call. She reaches out to him and he tells her he will show up the next day.

“Wait a Minute” is a first person narrative in which Lou is reflecting on death. Her sister Sally is close to death, crying after the news, and reliant on oxygen. Sally thinks of what she will miss, “I’ll never see donkeys again!” (281). The sisters have bonded through the course of Sally’s illness, her mastectomy and radiation treatment. Lou quit her job and moved to Mexico to be with her sister. She remembers being envious of Sally when they were young girls. While in Mexico, Lou suffers an esophageal hernia and had to have blood transfusions. Lou is telling her story seven years after Sally’s death. She leaves the door unlocked in the event that she may die in her sleep. She thinks about how she misses her sons and how she only sees them and their families once a year. She remembers the sun on Sally’s face.

“Homing” is a first person narrative and the final story in the collection. Lou, who now uses an oxygen tank, sees a group of crows. She thinks about her past and what she may have missed. She reflects on her past relationship with Dot, whom she worked with at the General Store. Dot used to sneak out with her boyfriend Sextus. She used to do her homework with Willie and she imagine Heathcliff looked like Willie when she read *Wuthering Heights*. She keeps thinking she sees the crows out of the corner of her eye, but they are gone when she turns. She also believes that she is a nicer person since the death of her mother. She remembers being in a scoliosis brace when she was young and how surgery to correct would have risked paralysis. She has a memory of an earthquake in Chile and how she would have been there for it if she had gone to South America. She gets caught up in what if questions and then realizes that her “life would have ended up exactly as it is” (399).



Analysis

In this section, two stories focus on the theme of addiction: “502” and “Here It Is Saturday.” Both are first person narratives. In “502,” Lu is clean and sober and thinking about an incident that happened while she was still drinking. She is able to both laugh at the absurdity of what happened and understand the consequences. Prior to the incident, Lu understood that Officer Wong extended kindness to the drunks he dealt, including Lu. This differed from how the other officers handled the calls. After Lu and the other drunks are able to get Lu out of a ticket that she clearly deserved, Officer Wong’s demeanor toward her changes dramatically. As she remembers this, she recognizes that while she is presently sober, it does not mean that her self-destructive behavior is gone.

That self-destructive behavior could have resulted in Lu ending up like the characters in “Here It Is Saturday.” The story is set in a prison, which in and of itself can be considered symbolic of addiction. While in the prison, the narrator, a man who is an addict, takes part of a writing class. The teacher, Mrs. Bevins, tries to instruct them about how to show their feelings through their writing instead of telling about it. This is a very common writing technique. The narrator does not fully understand how to do it, but CD, one of his fellow inmates, takes to it more easily. The writing class is a positive experience for the inmates. They are able to celebrate their work in a printed edition and experience a sense of accomplishment. Like “502” there is some levity to this story. It appears to be heading in a positive direction, but much as Lu mentions her self-destructive behavior, CD is killed the day the he gets out of prison.

The writing class can be considered a family. Three first person narratives in this section address death and loss. “Mijito” differs from the other two in that the narrative alternates between a young pregnant girl named Amelia and a nurse in a clinic. Amelia speaks no English and is in Texas illegally. After her husband Manolo is put in prison, she is left relying on the kindness of Manolo’s family. The family, however, is not interested in caring for someone else. When the narrative shifts to the nurse, the reader learns that the baby has been delivered and is in need of hernia surgery. Jesus, the baby, cries constantly from his hernia, but Lupe and Ramon both want Amelia and the child out of their apartment. The longer Amelia stays, the more sexual advances Ramon makes toward her. Amelia lets Ramon take advantage of her because she has nowhere else to go and feels like she does not have a choice.

The reader understands more about Amelia through the narration of the nurse. Amelia simply does not understand much of what is happening around her. She wants to do right, but she cannot seem to make the proper decision. Jesus’ surgery is delayed because she breastfeeds him when he should be fasting, and this leads to the baby persistently crying. When Lupe learns about Ramon and Amelia’s sexual relationship, she arranges for Amelia to leave and stay in a corner of a warehouse-type building.

Through the nurse’s narration, the reader learns that Jesus has bruises on his arms when he comes into the clinic. Dr. Fritz threatens to report the child abuse, but gives



Amelia one more try. When Dr. Fritz calls the nurse to come to the emergency room, he has her speak to Amelia about the baby. It is likely that Dr. Fritz thought someone other than Amelia was harming the child and was giving her an opportunity to get away from the abuser. When the nurse speaks with Amelia she learns that Amelia is the one who shook the baby to death to get him to stop crying.

“Wait a Minute” is another story in which family and tragedy are explored. Lou is narrating the story seven years after Sally has succumbed to her cancer. She reflects on the time they spent together and tries to sort out her own thoughts on death and dying. Sally’s illness has been a large part of her life. She uprooted to live in Mexico City to help her through her illness. It is as though Lou has lived separate lives. There is the life in America she left behind and the life in Mexico with her sister. Lou is also confronted with her own health issues and mortality. No one is with Lou to care for her. She leaves the door unlocked in the event that she dies in her sleep so that someone can get in. Her isolation and loneliness feels like a death while living.

The final story in the collection is “Homing.” Lou is resigned to her life and all that has happened to her. She is at peace with it. When she thinks about how things might have been different had she gone to Chile and been there at the time of a major earthquake, she understands and accepts that she was fated to the life she led. Regardless of where she might have gone, she still would have had to battle her addiction to alcohol and still would have had to witness the death of her sister. The parts of her life that define her identity would have remained. It is a fatalistic ending to the collection, but Lou is still alive. As such, she is a survivor.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author use an alternating narrator for "Mijito"?

Discussion Question 2

How has Sally's illness affected her relationship with her sister?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Lou believe that her life would have ended up the same regardless of where she had gone?

Vocabulary

ego-maniacal, anomalies, martyr, gastronomy, tanager, incessant, sepia, incorrigible, officious, patronizing, feral, guile, deluged, genteel, transient, assayer, exacerbated, aura



Characters

Lucia, Lou, Lu, Eloise, Delores

Lucia, Lu, Lou are names used by a woman in many of the stories. The character is also identified as Eloise and Delores. The author uses these different variations of her own name. Sometimes, she does not use a name at all in a first-person narrative.

The character is a stand-in for the author's name as many of these stories are semi-autobiographical. The woman ages from a young woman to a middle-aged to an older woman.

Lucia is a recovering alcoholic and spends time in rehab. Sometimes her character is in the throes of her addiction. Lucia understands how her addiction may affect her children and the people around her.

Lucia's sister, Sally, is dying of cancer in the later stories. Lucia moves to Mexico City to help care for Sally. Lucia wants to conquer her own addiction and see her sister healthy again.

Sally

Sally is Lucia's younger sister. She is dying of breast cancer through many of the stories. She is married and has two daughters.

Sally travels with Lucia to the island where Lucia reconnects with Cesar. Sally is self-conscious about her mastectomy scars. Eventually, Sally succumbs to her cancer and dies in Mexico City.

Ben

Ben is Lucia's eldest son.

The Mother of Lucia and Sally

Known only as Mother in the stories, Lucia's and Sally's mother made several suicide attempts. Each time she would leave a suicide note addressed to Lucia. Finally, she succeeded in committing suicide.

Jesse

Jesse is the young man who is a friend of Ben's. Jesse and Lucia bond through their loneliness and addictions.



Miss Dawson

Miss Dawson is the American teacher in Chile. She is a lesbian. She and Adele go into impoverished areas to help. She loses her job after Adele tells her father that Miss Dawson is a communist.

Cesar

Cesar is a fisherman and diver. He teaches Delores how to dive, and they have an affair. Later, he reconnects with Delores, and he is introduced to Sally.

Sr. Lourdes

Sr. Lourdes is the principal at the Catholic school in "El Tim." Sr. Lourdes encourages Mrs. Lawrence to work with Tim as he readjusts to school after leaving a detention center.

Sr. Cecelia

Sr. Cecelia is the younger nun at St. Joseph's School. She is knocked over by a girl in school, and the girl is expelled for striking her.

Mona

Mona is the drug-addicted, pregnant woman whose baby (Carmen) is still-born.

Amelia

Amelia is the young pregnant woman who gives birth to Jesus. Jesus has surgery for a hernia. Then, Amelia brings the baby into the emergency room after shaking it to death.

The Old Indian

Lucia meets the Old Indian in "Angela's Laundromat." Like Lucia, the Old Indian is an alcoholic. Lucia turns down the Indian's invitation to go to his apartment. They continue to converse when they see one another at the laundromat. Then, one day Lucia discovers while at the laundromat that she does not remember the last time she saw the Old Indian.



Symbols and Symbolism

Detox

Detox is symbolic of how Lou mourns her sister throughout the collection of stories. Just as Lou purges the alcohol from her system, she sees her sister fading away, foreshadowing that Lou will be alone at the conclusion of the book.

Cancer

Cancer is symbolic of Lou's addiction. Just as Sally must fight her cancer diagnosis, Lou must fight her own disease. Sally's battle is futile. At times, Lou's battle with her addiction appears that way, too. However, Lou is able to overcome her illness.

Island

The island is symbolic of escape. For Lou, the island is an escape from her reality. For Lou's sister, Sally, the island is an escape from her cancer diagnosis. The island is an escape from mourning for Eloise who is recently widowed.

Nun

The nuns, Sr. Lourdes and Sr. Carlotta, are both symbolic of the familial relationship for which the girls long. Instead of being included in the church, she is denied, much in the way her mother rejects her, especially when she blames her daughter for her father writing to her.

Abortion

The abortion symbolizes Lou's struggle with her addiction. Lou goes to get the abortion, but she changes her mind. Her change of mind over the abortion symbolizes how it will take multiple attempts to overcome her addiction.

Step

The story title "Step" is a symbol of the woman taking action to get sober.



Boxing Match

The boxing match between Benitez and Sugar Ray Leonard is symbolic of the residents at the detox center who are fighting for their sobriety. They root for the underdog in the boxing match, just as they root for themselves.

Porcupine Quills

The porcupine quills that infect the dogs are symbolic of the needles the addicts use and how the drugs are killing them.

Sleeping Pills

The sleeping pills are symbolic of Lou's struggle with addiction. She steals the pills with the intent of committing suicide. After Lou witnesses an old woman coping with her husband's death, she changes her mind and decides to live. This foreshadows how Lou will overcome her addiction.

Cleaning

Cleaning is symbolic of Lou getting clean once and for all. She cleans the houses of other people before she can commit to getting clean herself.



Settings

Island

Lou swims to the island. It is there that she meets Cesar and learns to dive. Years later Lou returns to the island with her sister Sally and reconnects with Cesar.

El Paso/Juarez

El Paso/Juarez is where the story “Tiger Bites” takes place. The young girl in the story is pregnant and needs to travel from El Paso, Texas to Juarez, Mexico, to get an abortion. She changes her mind and returns to El Paso to have her baby.

Albuquerque

Albuquerque is the setting for the stories “Angel’s Laundromat,” “Melina,” and “Carmen.” It is where Lou meets the Old Indian and where she learns that Melina is the nude sunbather her husband saw. It is where she returned after a drug deal went bad while she was pregnant, respectively.

Mexico City

Mexico City is where Sally (Lou’s sister) lives while she is dying of cancer. Lou travels to live and care for her sister until Sally’s death.

Laundromat

The laundromat is the setting of the first story in the collection; “Angel’s Laundromat.” It is where Lucia meets the Old Indian and introduces the themes of isolation and addiction.



Themes and Motifs

Addiction

The author uses different stages of addiction to heighten the hardships faced by women throughout their lives. The female characters in the collection vary in ages from teenagers to older women facing their mortality. By commenting on their lives in the wake of addiction, it gives urgency to their situations.

The initial story of the collection finds Lucia (Lou) post addiction. Lou is able to recognize addiction in others, such as the old Indian named Tony in the laundromat. The collection introduces the woman as a teenager struggling in school, from problems at home to misunderstandings at school. By the time the author returns to the adult character, Lou is stealing sleeping pills from clients with the intent to commit suicide. She changes her mind, and several stories later, the character goes through detox.

In the story "Tiger Bites," Lou is a teenager facing difficulties with her parents, which is not uncommon. Her situation, however, is different. She has married, had a child, and divorced. She is now expecting a second child before she is out of her teens. Lou is confronted with the prospect of having an abortion. However, as with the suicidal thoughts earlier in the collection, Lou changes her mind. While the woman's addictions are not directly addressed in the stories that deal with the younger version of the woman, the hardships that can lead to that type of coping mechanism are present.

By juxtaposing the younger version of the woman with the woman in the throes of addiction and a woman in recovery, the author allows the reader to understand the struggle of addiction. Insight is given into the recovery process, the hardships of detox centers, and how some addicts end up in prison.

The author also explores the toll drugs and alcohol take on families, by losing a relationship when one member of the couple chooses drugs or alcohol, to the loss of human life, such as with "Carmen" and "Mijito."

Isolation

Having an addiction leads to the isolation of the individual, which, in turn, feeds the addiction. This is addressed by the author. In "Angel's Laundromat," Lucia and Tony, the Old Indian, live in isolation as they struggle with addiction. Although Lucia rejects the Old Indian's advances as he reaches out to her, Lucia reaches out to him in her own way to quell her loneliness. Nevertheless, their addictions prevent them from connecting. At the end of the story, Lucia cannot remember the last time she saw Tony. Thus, the story ends with the image of Lucia being alone again.

In "Stars and Saints," isolation feeds the loneliness of the the young girl who feels that she does not fit in with her Catholic classmates. Being the only Protestant attending the



Catholic school, the girl is not permitted to take part in the Catholic Church's sacraments. This leads to her decision to convert to Catholicism. However, her mother is against the decision. Feeling isolated can cause people to make choices that they would not ordinarily make if loneliness were not a factor.

Lou feels abandonment by her husband at the conclusion of "Tiger Bites." In "Melina," Lou reaches out to Beau because she feels disconnected as she is isolated from her husband. She would have not considered reaching out to Beau if it were not for the isolation from her marriage.

That need for companionship takes unorthodox forms in "Teenage Punk" and "Let Me See You Smile." A woman forges a connection with her teenage son's friend in the first story, and the relationship appears to continue in the latter with legal repercussions.

As the collection concludes, Lou has lost her mother, her father, her sister, and other relationships. She only sees her children once a year. The final image of Lou is merely an older version of the woman folding laundry by herself in the book's first story. Lou seems to acquiesce to her loneliness, as though her life turned out as it should have turned out. In this way, she accepts her isolation almost as though it is fated.

Death

Death is a motif in *A Manual for Cleaning Women*. Sally has terminal cancer, and several stories address how she is dying. "Grief" marks the introduction of Sally in the book. In the story, Sally is at a resort with her sister Delores following the death of their mother. Sally is self-conscious about her mastectomy scars. It is natural to assume that the title of the story marks the sentiment of the women following the death of her mother. However, using the title also introduces Sally, a character in the process of dying. The title foreshadows Sally's eventual death. As Delores (known also as Lou) spends time with her sister and later cares for Sally, Delores is aware of her own addiction. In "Grief," she drinks rum at the airport to help with the shakes.

In "Fool to Cry," Delores (Lou) has been sober for three years. In "So Long," she is contacted by her former lover, Cesar, with whom she parted ways because of his addiction. By the conclusion of the collection, Lou is surviving, but she is contemplating her own death. She even goes so far as to leave her doors unlocked should she die in her sleep.

Sally's death is not the only death confronted over the course of the collection. Sally's and Lou's father has passed away, and their mother committed suicide. The latter death seems harder on Lou because her mother's suicide mirrors Lou's own feelings about taking her own life. Also, the sisters' mother had treated Lou differently than Sally. The mother had attempted suicide many times before succeeding. Each time she had left Lou a suicide note.



The author also tackles death in other ways. Lou asks about the girl she found hemorrhaging in “Tiger Bites” at the abortion clinic. Amelia shakes her baby to death in “Mijito,” and Mona’s baby is still born in “Carmen.”

Familial Dysfunction

Familial dysfunction is a motif in several of the stories in *A Manual for Cleaning Women*. The introduction of the mother character in “Dr. H.A. Moynihan” shows both disinterest and mockery. She does not notice about Grandpa’s new teeth and tells him he is crazy for having pulled his teeth. In “Stars and Saints,” the mother burns a letter from the girl’s father as a way of punishing her for receiving more attention from the man than she does. Both mothers in these two stories exemplify familial dysfunction in that they are not nurturing matriarchs.

Lou has a difficult relationship with her father as well. She finds him responsible for her death in “Phantom Pain” and is pulled out of school in “Dear Conchi” after her father learns about her sexual relationship with Joe. In “Tiger Bites”, the mother attempts suicide, only to address her suicide note to Lou, telling her that she has ruined her mother’s life with her marriage, pregnancy, and divorce.

Lou's relationship with her mother is another example of familial dysfunction. After each of Lou's mother's suicide attempts before she succeeds, she leaves a note for Lou. Once again, the mother is not the nurturing person in the relationship with her daughter.

Lou's addiction plays a role in her dysfunctional relationship with her sister. However, the reader sees the relationship between Lou and her sister begin to take shape before Lou is sober. As Sally’s illness progresses, Lou achieves sobriety. Each sister is able to share her feelings about her relationship with the other sister and her relationship with their parents. While Sally is able to admit that she loved their mother, Lou is not. It is possible that Lou sees her dysfunctional mother as being the source for Lou's addiction.

During the stories that involve Lou’s struggle with alcoholism, her family appears absent, with the exception of her children. She makes lasagna for her sons after returning from rehab in “Detox,” and her son Ben tells her she needs to go to a hospital for help in “Unmanageable.” The latter is an example the family's dysfunction in that the child is parenting his mother.

Sexuality

The author uses aspects of sexuality as motifs in *A Manual for Working Women*. In the short stories, women are objectified and taught to fear their sexuality and to use their sexuality as social currency.

For example, when the Indian suggests he and Lucia go back to his camper, he is using his sexual advances as way to cope with his loneliness. Lucia rejects him, the collection continues with a look back at the woman as a chaste school girl in a Catholic school.



In "Tiger Bites" the sexuality of an older, yet still young, Lucia (Lou) is examined. Not quite sixteen, Lou is a divorced mother who is expecting another child. She is encouraged to get an abortion. Lou is dealing with the consequences of her sexual development. In the story "Sex Appeal", Lou is taken by her cousin Bella Lynn to a restaurant where the Bella Lynn is actively teaching Lou how to use her sexuality. Lou is fifteen, and the much older man makes a pass at her.

The story "La Vie en Rose" shows Gerda and Claire confronted with their burgeoning sexuality at a nightclub, dancing with men. When they are in a boat together, the girls dive away from the men when they try to kiss them. The scene demonstrates their sexual immaturity. As the story concludes, Gerda's father tells her she can no longer see Claire. It is likely the parents are trying to keep their daughter from having sex.

Similarly, in "Dear Conchi," the reader learns that the narrator has engaged in a sexual relationship that the girl's parents do not approve. The girl is underage, and her father threatens to accuse Joe of statutory rape. The girl's parents pull her out of school as if punishing her for her sexuality.

Other girls in the collection deal with pregnancies. In "Mijito," Amelia has an unwanted pregnancy. When she stays with her husband's family, Ramon makes multiple sexual advances on her, and she later kills her baby. In "Carmen." Mona's baby dies after going into premature labor. It is as though the women suffer heavily under the weight of their sexuality.

Another way that the author uses sexuality in the collection is to show women exploring their sexuality following a traumatic event. In "Todo Luna, Todo Ano", Eloise has a sexual encounter with Cesar following the death of her husband. In "Bluebonnets," a woman is having sex with a man for the first time since her sobriety.



Styles

Point of View

The point of view of the collection shifts from story to story. Thirty-six of the forty-three stories are in first person. The woman narrating the stories varies in age from a teenage girl to a middle-aged woman to an older woman.

While the character names change, the voice used throughout appears consistent. Lucia, Lou, Lu, Delores, and Eloise all use a similar voice and share a similar perspective. The stories “Carmen” and “Mijito” are told from the perspective of young pregnant women who are illegal immigrants.

The remaining seven stories are in third person. The stories use versions of the same female character throughout. The only male narrator appears in “Let Me See You Smile”, which employs an alternating narration in which the other narrator is female. This story is also in the first person.

The stories are largely set in Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico City. Other perspectives in the stories are from the point of view of female illegal immigrants, such as “Carmen” and “Mijito.”

Language and Meaning

The language in *A Manual for Cleaning Woman* is accessible and conversational. The dialogue of the characters is natural and appropriate for the ages of the characters. Slang is used infrequently and is reflective of the time frame of the collection. For example, “beatnik” is used to describe Beau in “Melina.”

Spanish is used sparingly since parts of the collection take place in Mexico and the illegal immigrants are from Mexico as well. Translations are offered in the text as part of the story. Examples include “ofrendas” in “Panteon de Dolores” and “Todo Luna, Todo Ano.”

There is not an over-reliance on dialogue, but it is used throughout the collection. Because of the frequency of the first person narration, there is greater emphasis on internal monologue as opposed to external dialogue.

As a narrator, Lou is candid and self-aware. Her addiction is often at the forefront of her narration. She does not ask for sympathy or pity. She is direct about her struggles and the harsh reality of them.

The narrators in the stories that concentrate on the younger versions of Lou view their world from an age-appropriate narration. As the character ages, her observations and narration matures as well.

Structure

There are forty-three stories that make up the collection. Each story stands alone; however, the stories are often connected by the same narrator or a version of that narrator.

On average, the stories are about ten pages long. “Macadam” is a flash fiction piece. The length of the stories is a common length for short fiction.

The individual stories are told in a linear fashion, with the exception of “Mijito”, which has an alternating narration between two women making their observations in slightly different timelines. While the majority of the stories in the collection appear to be connected, they are not presented in a linear fashion. Stories of the younger version of the woman appear interspersed with a woman in her forties and beyond.

The tone of the collection remains consistent. There are some instances of humor, but the overall tone is acceptance in sadness. “Angel’s Laundromat” is the first story in the collection, and it sets the tone for the stories to follow.



Quotes

Anybody says he knows just how someone else feels is a fool.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 14)

Importance: The quote demonstrates the isolation of the individual and how everyone's struggle is unique to them.

I couldn't go to heaven because I was Protestant. I'd have to go to limbo.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 17)

Importance: The quote shows the girl as an outsider. By referring to being left out in the afterlife, it contributes to her isolation from others.

I think it's because we are all pretty insecure.”

-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 2)

Importance: The quote speaks to how the narrator views those around her as a way of understanding others and building a community with them.

I envied Bella and Cletis, being so in love. I had adored Joe, but had always been afraid of him, trying to please him.”

-- Narrator (chapter 10 paragraph 12)

Importance: The quote shows how the narrator views the weakness in her relationship and how she accepts responsibility for it.

Drunks are invariably alone. Suicides come in with at least one other person, usually many more.”

-- Narrator (chapter 11 paragraph 49)

Importance: The quote demonstrates that alcoholics may have more community available to them than those who have other addictions.

It would take her three quarters of an hour; she would have to run home to be there before the kids woke up.”

-- Narrator (chapter 18 paragraph 4)

Importance: The quote demonstrates the desperation of the woman to gain access to alcohol in contrast to being available to her children.

The years were erased, their communication still there.”

-- Narrator (chapter 24 paragraph 116)

Importance: The quote emphasises the connection that still exists between Cesar and Lou, even though they have been apart for many years.



I work in a county hospital, in Oakland. How do you think a walk in the woods sounds to me?"

-- Lou (chapter 25 paragraph 8)

Importance: The quote speaks to how Lou is settled into her everyday routine and craves some kind of escape, which she may have previously found through alcohol.

Everyone knows she is dying, but she has never looked so beautiful or happy."

-- Narrator (chapter 29 paragraph 5)

Importance: The quote demonstrates how Sally's sister is able to recognize Sally's beauty as Sally is facing death.

Ofrendas are fun to make. Offerings to the dead."

-- Narrator (chapter 31 paragraph 4)

Importance: The quotes indicates how the stories of the narrator's sister offer joy by remembering her sister, even in the darkest hours.

Never ever marry for love. If you love a man you'll want to be with him, please him, do things for him."

-- Sally (chapter 35 paragraph 4)

Importance: The quote is Sally remembering advice from her mother. It shows the distance between her mother and Sally and Lou.

I leave the door unlocked in case I die in my sleep, but it's more likely I'll go endlessly on until I get put away someplace."

-- Narrator (chapter 42 paragraph 45)

Importance: The quote demonstrates Lou's awareness and fear of her isolation as she ages and survives those around her.