

Midwives Study Guide

Midwives by Chris Bohjalian

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Plot Summary

Midwives is the third novel from acclaimed author, Chris Bohjalian. The novel tells the story of Sibyl Danforth, a midwife put on trial for the death of one of her clients. A trial that is supposed to be about the death of a single woman turns into a battle between science and nature as the right of a woman to choose home birth is debated. Sibyl's young daughter, fourteen-year-old Connie, watches from the sidelines, powerless to control the chaos that threatens to tear her family apart. Midwives is a novel of family, of trust, and of loyalty that will keep the reader guessing until the very last page.

Charlotte Fugett Bedford is a quiet woman who recently moved to Vermont from Arkansas. Charlotte has few friends and is often lost in the shadow of her minister husband, Asa. When Charlotte becomes pregnant with her second child, she chooses to visit a midwife rather than an ob-gyn. Charlotte's pregnancy is uneventful, except for a brief struggle with anemia, convincing Sibyl Danforth, her midwife, that she is a good candidate for a home birth. When Charlotte goes into labor, it seems the birth will be as uneventful as the pregnancy. However, things begin to change as the labor progresses late into the night.

When Sibyl notes some excessive bleeding, she suggests Charlotte be moved to a hospital. Unfortunately, an ice storm has knocked out the phones. Sibyl decides to go get her car and move Charlotte that way, but the driveway is so slick Sibyl ends up driving her car into a snow bank. It seems there is no hope of moving Charlotte. Gratefully, the bleeding stops and Charlotte appears to be out of danger.

Sibyl encourages Charlotte to push. Over four hours, the baby moves down the birth canal but stubbornly refuses to emerge into the world. Sibyl continues to encourage Charlotte, convinced the baby only needs one more good push. Charlotte has grown tired and is struggling to find the energy to keep up with Sibyl's demands. Suddenly Charlotte has a seizure that Sibyl believes is caused by a stroke. Sibyl performs CPR, but after the final cycle, Sibyl does not feel a pulse or hear a heartbeat. Sibyl does, however, detect a fetal heartbeat. Sibyl elects to do a cesarean section and deliver the baby from his deceased mother.

Charlotte's body is taken to the medical examiner's office for what Sibyl is told is a routine autopsy. Unknown to Sibyl, her assistant begins to question Sibyl's actions by calling Sibyl's backup physician, Asa, and finally the police. That night, Sibyl is visited by the police who take a statement. Sibyl quickly hires a lawyer through whom she learns that the state is going to charge her both with practicing medicine without a license and involuntary manslaughter. When the autopsy is released, Sibyl begins to lose some of her confidence in her own innocence. It seems the autopsy found no sign of a stroke, but determined Charlotte died from blood loss directly related to the cesarean section Sibyl performed.

The trial quickly becomes a debate between science and nature, fighting over the safety of home birth. The prosecution claims Sibyl is unqualified to provide medical care for a



woman in labor and that her profession misled Charlotte and her husband into a false sense of security. The defense claims that Sibyl has fewer infant and maternal mortalities than a comparable medical practice and that Charlotte is partially to blame for her own death for withholding part of her medical history.

During the trial, it comes out that Sibyl keeps a journal in some notebooks at home that might have her personal impressions about the night Charlotte died. The judge orders the notebooks brought to the court so he can determine if they should be handed over to the prosecutors. Connie, Sibyl's daughter who has read these journals, steals particular passages from the notebooks in order to protect her mother from her own words. A few days later, after the judge has decided the notebooks have no bearing on the case. Sibyl is found not guilty on the manslaughter charge.

Connie grows up to become an ob-gyn, despite the slap in the face this appears to offer her mother's profession. Connie believes it is important to keep the lines of communication open between the medical community and midwives. Connie also feels that someone owes a debt to women for what happened the night Charlotte Bedford died. Connie feels this way because her mother wrote in her journal the night after Charlotte's death that she felt the body flinch. Charlotte was alive when Sibyl cut into her abdomen.



Prologue and Part 1: Chapters 1-3

Prologue and Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Summary

Connie Danforth is a fourteen-year-old girl the spring her mother is charged with the death of a client of her midwife practice. Connie watches the drama unfold around her and is powerless to stop the events that could lead to her family's destruction.

In the prologue, Connie watches as the jury returns to the courtroom after deliberating her mother's fate. When no one in the jury will look at her mother, Connie becomes hysterical under the belief that this behavior means her mother will be convicted. In chapter 1, Connie recalls using words such a vulva as a young child, unaware that a word such as this has no place in polite conversation. Connie also recalls how many of her friend's mothers would hesitate to allow their children to play with her because of her mother's profession. Connie can remember seeing her first child birth at seven or eight on a night when one of her mother's clients went into labor and there was no one available to babysit. Connie sat and watched the events unfold, with the awe only a child can experience.

In chapter 2, Connie recalls the spring the Bedfords first came to Vermont. That spring, Connie was twelve, almost thirteen, and she spent most of her free time riding her best friend's horse with the hopes of sneaking a peek at Tom Corts, the boy on whom she had a crush. Connie remembers one afternoon in particular when she was mucking out the horse's stall and her mother drove by to let Connie know she would have to make dinner that night because her mother would be delivering a baby. Connie left the stall to see if Tom was at his usual place by the baseball field and is disappointed to find him gone. However, when Connie returns to the barn, Tom is waiting for her. It is that afternoon that Tom gives Connie her first kiss. In chapter 3, Connie tells the reader about her mother's formative years, specifically her choice to quit college after two years in order to live with a man, a relationship that only lasted a short time. After this, Sibyl became involved in the hippie movement, to the extent the movement touched rural Vermont. Shortly before learning she was pregnant with Connie, Sibyl had her first experience with child birth. During a party in which everyone was smoking pot, a friend went into labor. The men decided to walk to the nearest phone rather than risk driving, leaving Sibyl alone with her laboring friend. Sibyl caught the baby just as an ambulance drove up the drive way over an hour later.

Prologue and Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The reader is introduced to the first person narrator immediately in the prologue as the young lady expresses her deep fear that her mother is about to be convicted on manslaughter charges. This deep fear, expressed through a hysterical fit the girl describes herself falling victim to, immediately sets the tone for the novel and begins the journey that will take the reader from getting to know the ex-hippie midwife and her



family to watching the midwife's daughter go through the darkest moment of the midwife's life as she stands trial for the death of a woman she was supposed to aid in the most beautiful moment of her life, the birth of a child. Connie, the narrator, is fourteen, young and innocent, describing horrific events that at the time were far beyond her comprehension when attempting to consolidate the murderess the prosecution describes with her own mother. At the same time, Connie has written this memoir as an adult, reflecting back on her childhood memories with the wisdom of a grown woman. Not only is Connie a grown woman now, but she is also a ob-gyn, a medically-trained doctor who delivers babies every day. It is a point of view that puts Connie in direct conflict with her mother and her mother's philosophy on childbirth, adding conflict to the slowly developing plot.

Connie introduces her mother in these early chapters, describing her as a hippie who came into midwifery by accident in that Sibyl (the mother) delivered the baby of a friend during a sudden delivery that was neither planned nor expected to take place at home. This delivery is the first of many that excite Sibyl, that show her a world she never thought existed and gave her a feeling of excitement and satisfaction that would never be equaled. Sibyl becomes a midwife because it seems natural to help a woman labor at home because having a baby is the most natural thing in the world. This description of Sibyl sets up a theme for the novel, suggesting a separation of science and nature, allowing the reader to embrace Sibyl as nature's child and the natural alternative to a medically-trained birthing partner. This description of Sibyl also introduces her character, shows her motivations and her personality as her daughter saw it before the event that would change Sibyl forever.



Part 1: Chapters 4-5

Part 1: Chapters 4-5 Summary

In chapter 4, Connie talks about her father's feelings toward Sibyl's career choice. Connie describes many arguments that took place between her parents, often fueled by alcohol, in which Rand would complain about the long hours Sibyl would spend away from home delivering babies and seeing to the physical and emotional needs of her clients. As a direct result of Sibyl's career, Rand and Connie often spend long afternoons alone together. In fact, it is Rand who first drives Connie to the Bedford home where she spends long afternoons the spring and summer after the Bedfords first came to Vermont babysitting their son, Foogie, with her friend, Rollie. Connie's first impression of Charlotte Bedford is of a frail, pale woman who seemed eager to melt into the background. It is the Fourth of July of that summer as Connie and Rollie are more concerned with their own changing bodies, when Charlotte asks Connie about her mother's profession.

In chapter 5, Connie recalls how Stephen Hastings, her mother's attorney, would explain that it takes many events together to make a plane crash, just like it took many different events the night of Charlotte's death to lead to that death. Connie recalls that her mother never really agreed with Stephen's assessment, although on the surface it would appear he was correct. Charlotte goes into labor on a Thursday morning as Sibyl is preparing to take her car for an oil change. Sibyl sends Anne, her assistant, to be with Charlotte while she has her oil changed. Sibyl arrives at the Bedford home early afternoon and expects to deliver a baby shortly after dinnertime. However, Charlotte's labor progresses slower than Sibyl predicts. It is after midnight before Charlotte is ready to begin pushing. Not long after Charlotte begins pushing, Sibyl notices a large amount of blood. The blood coupled with intense pains Charlotte is experiencing from back labor cause Sibyl to decide it might be safer to transfer Charlotte to the hospital. Unfortunately, no one has noticed the ice storm that has been raging for quite a while until Sibyl picks up the phone and finds it dead. Sibyl decides to drive Charlotte in her own car, but when she goes outside to warm up the car, Sibyl finds the ground too slick to safely navigate the roads. When Sibyl returns to the bedroom with the bad news, she discovers that Charlotte has stopped bleeding and believes it is safe to continue the delivery at home.

Charlotte pushes for four hours but makes little progress and becomes exhausted, often insisting that she can no longer deliver this baby on her own. Toward dawn, Charlotte is filled with a new burst of energy. While pushing one final time, Charlotte is hit by some sort of seizure and stops breathing. Sibyl, fearing a stroke, performs CPR but receives no response. Sibyl asks for a sharp knife and Asa, Charlotte's husband, and Anne both leave the bedroom to retrieve it. When they return, Sibyl announces that Charlotte is dead, and they must quickly act to save the baby. Asa retreats to the window as Sibyl punctures Charlotte's abdomen and performs a cesarean section. Sibyl wipes blood out



of the field with a pillow and rips the uterus with her own hands, removing a healthy baby boy from the dead woman's abdomen.

Part 1: Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Connie discusses her parents' relationship, suggesting there was some degree of discord between them because of Sibyl's profession. Rand, an architect, does not like that Sibyl is often away from home for days at a time, seeing to the physical and emotional well being of her patients rather than caring for her own family. This suggests to the reader some degree of jealousy on Rand's part, perhaps a desire to not share his wife with so many other people. Rand's reaction to Sibyl's career also suggests that he might not be overly supportive when Sibyl is charged with manslaughter, although the reader might simply interpret Rand's feelings as those of a man who deeply loves his wife and wants to spend as much of his free time with her as possible. The reader must keep in mind that they are being shown this marriage through the eyes of a woman who will forever see her parents as she did at fourteen, when her world was turned upside down by a justice system she had not even begun to comprehend. Connie is something of an unreliable narrator, leaving the reader to interpret this marriage through their own experiences.

Charlotte's death is tragic. In telling about Charlotte's death now, Connie allows the reader to see the tragedy that unfolded through Sibyl's eyes, without the minute details that will be revealed as the plot continues to develop. Sibyl came to this birth the same as she always has, with the expectation that nothing serious could possibly go wrong in something that is completely natural, an event that takes place nearly every minute of every day with minimal interference from science. This birth does begin to go wrong, however, and Sibyl finds herself put in a position to continue encouraging a woman to have a home birth not because it seems like the right thing to do, but because it is the only choice open to them. No one could have foreseen an ice storm that would make the roads impassable, though it will later be suggested that Sibyl should have known, and no one could possibly have known that Charlotte would stroke out. Sibyl did what she thought was right, saving one life in the face of another's death. If Sibyl had not acted, two people would have died instead of just one. This is the question that will linger as the plot continues to develop, however. The question whether Sibyl had another choice.



Part 2: Chapters 6-10

Part 2: Chapters 6-10 Summary

In chapter 6, Connie learns about Charlotte's death at school as the rumor of a home birth gone wrong begins to circulate through the high school hallways. Connie returns home that afternoon to find her father waiting for her in the kitchen and her mother upstairs asleep. When Connie sees her mother for the first time after Charlotte's death, she is struck with the absence of the vibrancy she has always known her mother to have. In chapter 7, Connie and her father are making dinner when they see a state police cruiser pull up outside the house. Connie is sent from the room as Rand and Sibyl speak with the police. Sibyl gives a statement willingly, feeling as though she has nothing to hide, even though Rand feels they should wait until they have an attorney present. Not only does Sibyl give the statement willingly, she signs it before the officers leave her home that night. In chapter 8, Connie's parents spend Saturday morning visiting lawyers while Connie remains at home, screening the hundreds of calls from reporters and friends who want to speak to Sibyl. Rollie comes over for a while, then Tom, who is now Connie's boyfriend. Tom tells Connie that her parents are smart shopping around for a lawyer, just in case Sibyl needs one.

In chapter 9, Connie talks about Stephen Hastings, the lawyer her parents finally chose. Stephen is a lawyer from Burlington who is used to handling rape, murder, and drug related cases. Connie recalls seeing Stephen in the courtroom during her mother's trial, joking around with the prosecutor and the judge, leaving Connie feeling nauseous because of the joke they were making of the tragedy that was taking over her family life. The Monday following Charlotte's death, Stephen came to the Danforth home with a photographer to record Sibyl's injuries sustained when she tried to retrieve her car in the ice to take Charlotte to the hospital. This is Connie's first meeting with Stephen, who she finds charming and capable, leaving her confident in her mother's chances should charges be brought against her.

Chapter 10: The days following Charlotte's death bring fear to many lay-midwives like Sibyl. Many of these midwives rally around Sibyl, attempting to support her through her ordeal. One in particular, Cheryl Visco, makes it a habit to hang out at the Danforth home. Cheryl comes over so often that Rand becomes annoyed, but the support she has to offer is appreciated by Sibyl.

Dr. B.P. Hewitt, Sibyl's backup physician, visits the Danforths Monday night and tells them how Anne called him the morning after Charlotte's death. Dr. Hewitt says that Anne claimed Charlotte bled in an arch during the cesarean and that there was no way she was dead when Sibyl cut into her. Dr. Hewitt advised Anne to call Sibyl, but instead she called Asa before contacting the state police.



Part 2: Chapters 6-10 Analysis

In the hours after Charlotte's death, news is already floating around the high school, which is the first place Connie hears about it. Connie returns home to find her mother in a state of shock, saddened by what has happened to her client. Connie describes her as missing the basic enthusiasm that defined who she was, suggesting that Sibyl has taken this death much harder than a physician might take the death of a patient. This is the first clear indication the reader gets of how Sibyl takes the death of Charlotte Bedford, suggesting that Sibyl is heartbroken, but not telling the reader if this is because Sibyl is saddened by the death in general, because she is a warm person, or if Sibyl is upset because she knows she caused the death.

Connie's parents set out to find a lawyer almost immediately, again suggesting that they know something illegal has taken place and that they will need legal representation. This belies Sibyl's reaction to the police coming to their door that Friday night. Sibyl is cooperative with the police, answering all their questions and even fixing them coffee even though they are clearly there to gather information in what they must feel is some kind of crime. The lawyer the Danforths pick is a sharp man, charming and witty, who appears to be a competent defense attorney. Connie is impressed by him, but at fourteen she would likely have been impressed by almost anyone in a suit.

The theme of home births is beginning to take form in these chapters as well. The midwives in the area begin to rally around Sibyl, clearly fearful of what might happen to Sibyl and how it might affect them in the future. A death can happen to almost any midwife, and they seem to all understand that even if they do not seem willing to acknowledge it. If Sibyl is charged with a crime, then it is also something that could happen to any of them, leaving them all fearful for their individual futures. It does seem that Sibyl could face a charge when she learns that her trusted assistant has turned on her, going to the police with the suspicion that Charlotte was alive when Sibyl performed the cesarean, based on an arc of blood Anne witnessed upon the first cut. The reader is not sure how to take Anne's desertion at this point in the novel, concerned only that this break in trust, a theme of the novel, is like a slap in the face for poor, earthly Sibyl who only wanted to share her knowledge of her beloved craft.



Part 2: Chapters 11-13

Part 2: Chapters 11-13 Summary

In chapter 11, Connie discusses how the arc of blood Asa and Anne supposedly saw that morning affected her mother's case. Stephen spends a great deal of time during the trial trying to prove that Asa could not have possibly seen blood arc from his wife's abdomen from his position across the room, in front of the windows and that his grief would have made any such vision incomprehensible. Stephen also brings in experts on home births and blood evidence, attempting to disprove Asa and Anne's eye witness reports even before Sibyl is officially charged with a crime. Stephen also hires an investigator, Patty Dunlevy, whom Connie finds wild and exciting, when she establishes she is not another reporter looking for a story. Hopes that Sibyl will not be charged with a crime were high despite all this preparation by Stephen Hastings, but those hopes begin to perish when the autopsy report is released, revealing the cause of death not a stroke or blood clot in the brain, but hemorrhagic shock due to a cesarean section.

In chapter 12, the Danforth family spends most of April waiting to learn exactly with what crime Sibyl will be charged. Stephen warns that it is possible the state will charge Sibyl with second degree murder as opposed to involuntary manslaughter. When the news finally comes, Stephen drives to the Danforth home personally to inform Sibyl that she will be charged with manslaughter. It is good news, but it still carries a possible sentence of fifteen years. Stephen tells Sibyl there is also the possibility of a settlement, but when she realizes that almost any settlement will mean giving up her practice, Sibyl makes it clear that she would rather face jail time than give up her calling. In chapter 13, Sibyl is arrested and arraigned on felony manslaughter charges as well as misdemeanor practicing medicine without a license. As part of her bail agreement, Sibyl is instructed to stop working as a midwife until the trial is completed. Over the summer, Stephen and Bill Tanner, the prosecutor, file a lot of motions; some they win; some they lose. Stephen wins a motion to review Charlotte's medical records. Stephen has Sibyl review these records, and she notes that Charlotte had not informed her of a history of high blood pressure and anemia. While dropping off these records for her mother, Connie happens to see notes Stephen and his team has written on boards in a conference room, including the word *vagal*, a term Connie has never heard before but one that will play an important role in the case against her mother.

After Sibyl delivered Veil, Charlotte's baby boy, she returned to the body and attempting to clean up the mess she had made. Sibyl sewed together Charlotte's abdomen to repair the cut she made, but did not attempt to repair the uterus. Sibyl will later testify in court that she did this because she could not allow Asa and Veil to see their loved one in such a sad condition. The coroner will also testify that Sibyl did a beautiful job with the stitches, sewing the wound together in a professional manner.



Part 2: Chapters 11-13 Analysis

Stephen begins preparing Sibyl's defense before there are charges brought against her. Stephen is convinced early on that Sibyl will be charged, even warning her she could face a murder charge before learning the state will only charge Sibyl with unintentional manslaughter. This lighter charge is a small victory in Stephen's eyes, a victory that he takes the time to drive more than an hour out of his way to share with Sibyl. Stephen's decision to drive out to tell Sibyl this news suggests to the reader one of two things. First, that Stephen is so relieved that he cannot wait to share the news with Sibyl and share in the celebration. Second, it hints that Stephen might have stronger feelings for Sibyl than those of attorney, client. Connie seems to feel this way as well, as she chooses to eavesdrop on her mother's conversation with the lawyer after she has been sent away from the meeting by her mother.

The case against Sibyl appears to be based mainly on the blood Anne and Asa saw flowing from Charlotte's body the day she died. This is Stephen's focus as he begins to build his case. However, Stephen is too smart to focus on only one aspect of the case, and Connie stumbles upon evidence that Stephen intends to tackle the issue from many sides. Connie sees the word *vagal* on a board in Stephen's conference room. Connie does not know what this word means at the time she sees it but instinctively knows it is important to the case. The reader wonders about this word as well, based on Connie's reaction to it, and wonders what bearing, if any, it will have on the outcome of the trial. Finally, Connie mentions her mother's decision to repair the gaping wound to Charlotte's body. This line of narration almost appears to come out of nowhere, being expressed here perhaps simply to show her mother's compassion for her client. However, the reader suspects this act might have some bearing on the case, especially when the reader recalls that autopsy states Charlotte's cause of death as hemorrhagic shock due to the cesarean section. The reader wonders if it is possible Charlotte died because of the cesarean section rather than a stroke or other event, and if so, could Sibyl have saved her life if she had sewn up her uterus as well as her abdomen. It would seem ironic if this is true, but the reader should also recall that Sibyl was convinced Charlotte had already died before she performed the cesarean section, so in her mind there was no reason to repair the wound to the uterus.



Part 3: Chapters 14-16

Part 3: Chapters 14-16 Summary

In chapter 14, Sibyl learns that her trial will proceed in September. Sibyl and Rand decide to allow Connie to attend the trial rather than force her to hear about it second hand. Connie's grandmother is unhappy with this decision, but she is overruled. At the same time, Connie is becoming aware of a flirtation taking place between Stephen and her mother. Connie also discovers that her father is spending a great deal of time reviewing legal precedent, hoping to learn something to help Sibyl. In chapter 15, the trial begins. When the Danforths first arrive at the courthouse, they discover a group of midwives have taken up positions of protest on the courthouse steps and many of her clients will be attending the trial with their infants. The first few days are spent searching for a jury. Stephen outlines the type of jury he would like, one filled with older women who understand the desire to have a home birth. As Connie watches the jury selection, she begins to get a feel for the prosecutor, Bill Tanner. At the same time, Connie comes to realize that Charlotte Bedford had a family who loved her, a mother, sister, and brother-in-law who, like Connie, sit in the courtroom each day to await her mother's fate.

In chapter 16, the trial against Sibyl Danforth begins. Bill Tanner makes his opening remarks as storm clouds roll in over the city. In those remarks, Tanner claims home births are dangerous and that Sibyl forced Charlotte to push longer than was appropriate, causing the situation that led Charlotte to stop breathing. Tanner also claims that Sibyl, a lifelong resident of Vermont, should have known the weather was going to turn bad and should have called for an ambulance before it became medically necessary. Finally, Tanner claims Sibyl should never have allowed Charlotte, a fragile, unhealthy woman, to attempt home birth in the first place. Tanner ends his remarks just before lunch. Tom comes and eats with Connie. After lunch, Stephen begins his remarks. Stephen refutes many of Tanner's remarks, claiming that home births are natural, that women have been having babies since the beginning of time, often at home where they feel most secure. Stephen stresses Sibyl's statistics of fatalities against that of several hospitals and points out that home birth is often safer than a hospital birth. Stephen also stresses that although Charlotte died that morning, Sibyl's actions saved the life of her infant son.

Part 3: Chapters 14-16 Analysis

The trial begins with jury selection, followed by the opening remarks of both lawyers. Before this, however, Connie notes the affection she sees growing between her mother and Stephen. This affection shows how deeply involved in the case Stephen is becoming and suggests some sort of flirtation between Stephen and Sibyl. Perhaps Stephen has fallen in love with Sibyl, and it is this love that motivates him to work so hard to help win Sibyl's freedom. It is also possible that Stephen and Sibyl have simply become friends through their time together and that Connie sees something that is not



really there. Either way, Stephen has become an important part of Sibyl's life and is the only thing standing between her and jail time.

As the trial begins, Connie discovers that Charlotte had a family in Arkansas. This discovery makes Charlotte more real to Connie, reminding her that a woman lost her life, whether Sibyl is to blame or not. At the same time, Connie watches the man who is determined to take her mother away from her. Connie is terrorized by Tanner, angry with him for his determination to destroy her family. Connie reacts to Tanner as any fourteen year old would to a man trying to hurt her mother, with anger and contempt, setting in motion the motivation Connie will need to carry out an act of defiance in support of her mother. At the same time, the reader begins to see the case the state has against Sibyl, learning the depth of prejudice the medical community has against home births. It seems that this prejudice is what is spearheading the case, giving weight to Sibyl's dislike and distrust of the medical community.



Part 3: Chapters 17-18

Part 3: Chapters 17-18 Summary

In chapter 17, Connie comes home late one night and sneaks in through a window in her mother's office. Connie sees her mother's private notebook open on the desk. Connie reads the current entry and when she sees a reference to March 15's entry, Connie turns back the pages to read that as well. Soon Connie finds herself reading all the entries from the day Charlotte died to the present. The following day, the trial continues with the state's first witness, a state trooper. The state trooper describes the bloody scene within the Bedford's bedroom and how the knife had been washed clean in the sink downstairs. Tanner calls a nurse-midwife, who testifies that her personal belief is that home births are dangerous. Stephen gets her to admit, however, that many women in her own profession disagree and often deliver babies at home. Tanner's next witness is a midwife who later became an ob-gyn. This woman testifies that Charlotte's medical history should have prevented her from participating in a home birth, but Stephen is able to force her to admit that Sibyl was not aware of Charlotte's past history of high blood pressure and that she successfully treated Charlotte's anemia during the pregnancy. On Friday, Tanner puts on the stand two of Sibyl's past patients, one a woman who ended up having her baby via cesarean section in the hospital and a man who testifies that Sibyl misled him and his wife about the safety of a home birth.

In chapter 18, Anne Austin testifies. Anne had not worked with Sibyl long when Charlotte died. Anne was an enthusiastic student who believed in as little interference as possible in child birth and who had read every book there was on the subject. Anne objected to Sibyl breaking Charlotte's water, not because she did not understand the purpose, but because she saw it as interference. As Anne testifies in court, the jury begins to see Charlotte as a person, not just an abstract idea, and they begin stealing uncomfortable glances at Sibyl that make Connie uncomfortable. At the end of her testimony, Anne becomes emotional and openly accuses Sibyl of murdering Charlotte Bedford. When Stephen questions Anne, he stresses the fact that she did nothing to stop Sibyl from performing the cesarean section even when she became convinced that Charlotte was not dead. After Anne, the medical examiner testifies. Tanner underscores the autopsy report in his questioning of the doctor, emphasizing the amount of blood found in Charlotte's abdomen. It is also during this testimony that the word vagal once again appears. The doctor claims that rather than having a stroke, as Sibyl believed, that Charlotte vaged. This means that the vagal nerves in the back of Charlotte's neck went into spasm because of the strain of pushing and that this caused her heart to stop beating. However, the doctor expresses his belief that Sibyl was able to restart Charlotte's heart, but killed her by performing the cesarean section.



Part 3: Chapters 17-18 Analysis

As testimony begins in the case against Sibyl, Connie steals a look into her mother's notebooks and reads the entries Sibyl has made since Charlotte's death in March. Connie does not comment on these entries, but the fact that she read them at all shows a change in her relationship with her mother. Connie mentions earlier in the novel that she respects her mother's privacy and would never dream of reading the journals, but here Connie breaks that trust. At the same time, the case against Sibyl begins to unfold in the courtroom. At first it appears to be mostly a crusade against home births, but soon the prosecution begins to present witnesses who appear to have evidence that suggests Sibyl's guilt. The first of these latter witnesses is Anne Austin. Anne is an eyewitness to Charlotte's death and for the first time the jury begins to hear testimony that makes Charlotte more than an abstract thought. This fact worries Connie who is sitting in the audience watching the jury begin to take worried glances at her mother.

The most important of the witnesses at this point in the trial is the medical examiner. The medical examiner says that Charlotte died of blood loss from the cesarean section, exactly what the reader expected to hear. However, the medical examiner surprises the reader when he claims that rather than dying of a stroke, Charlotte suffered a common phenomenon in which the strain of pushing causes some nerves in the back of her head and neck to spasm and cause her heart to stop. The medical examiner claims that a trained medical professional would have seen this coming and would have known what it was when it did happen, but that Sibyl did not recognize it because she is not properly trained. The medical examiner's conjecture here is a blow to Sibyl's defense, which is based on the idea that Sibyl is experienced when it comes to a mother's laboring. The medical examiner also claims that Sibyl brought Charlotte back when she performed CPR but then killed her with the cesarean section she performed with the hopes of rescuing Charlotte's unborn child. The medical examiner's theory is highly ironic because it would mean that Sibyl killed Charlotte after spending several minutes attempting to save her.



Part 3: Chapters 19-22

Part 3: Chapters 19-22 Summary

In chapter 19, Stephen cross examines the medical examiner and establishes that a woman who had died from blood loss during a cesarean section would most likely have had more blood in her abdomen than Charlotte had in hers. This testimony ends the trial's first week. On Monday, Asa Bedford takes the stand. Asa testifies to the events of the night his wife died, with emphasis on the cesarean section the prosecution claims took her life. Asa claims that Sibyl never asked permission to save the baby, or even asked Asa what he wanted Sibyl to do about the baby. Asa claims that Sibyl simply stated that Charlotte had died and that she had wasted precious time attempting to revive her that should have been spent on rescuing the baby. Asa also claims that he never saw Sibyl check his wife for a pulse or heartbeat and did not see her check for a fetal heartbeat. In chapter 20, the defense begins their case. Stephen begins with witnesses who testify to the conditions of the roads the night of March 13, and the length of time the phones were down in Lawson. Stephen then calls Dr. Hewitt, Sibyl's backup physician, who assures the courtroom that Sibyl never would have performed the cesarean section if there was any chance Charlotte was still alive. This ends the testimony for Monday. The tension of the trial is beginning to take its toll on Connie and her family. Connie is frightened that her mother will be convicted.

Sibyl testifies on her own behalf. Stephen leads Sibyl carefully through her testimony, emphasizing the fact that she checked Charlotte's vitals while Asa and Anne were getting a knife. Sibyl also expresses her opinion that her intention to save the baby was implied when she asked for the knife; therefore, she felt no need to ask Asa's permission. Sibyl simply assumed he would want his child saved. Sibyl then makes a mistake and mentions her notebooks in which she keeps her private thoughts. Stephen instructed her to never write in them or speak of them again after she showed them to him in the spring. After mentioning them, however, Sibyl has brought the notebooks to the attention of the prosecution who then insists on seeing them, should they have bearing on the case. The judge orders the notebooks be brought to him so he can review them and make the decision on whether or not they have bearing on the case. Knowing what is in the notebooks, Connie becomes agitated. Connie volunteers to go with Patty Dunlevy to retrieve the notebooks during the lunch break where she removes several of the most damning entries before rejoining Patty in her car. The judge reviews the notebooks and determines that they have nothing to do with the case.

In chapter 21, Sibyl endures a cross examination by Tanner that is brutal. After Sibyl, Stephen calls a group of character witnesses who each testify to Sibyl's competence as a midwife. On Friday morning both lawyers give their closing remarks. Afterward, everyone goes to the Danforth house for lunch and to wait for the verdict. It is a tense time for Sibyl and all her supporters. When the call comes, everyone is shocked by how quickly the jury deliberated. As the jury files back into the courtroom, Connie collapses into hysterics in fear that her mother will be convicted. However, Sibyl is found not guilty



of manslaughter, but is found guilty of practicing medicine without a license. It is almost a week later when Sibyl discovers what Connie did with her notebooks. Sibyl suggests they go to the court and confess, but Connie knows she does not really mean it. After a while, Sibyl goes back to work, but when she begins delivering babies again and finds the joy is missing, she quits. Seven years pass and Connie begins medical school. Many believe Connie's choice is a slap in the face to her mother and midwives everywhere, but Connie feels as though she is doing midwives a favor by keeping open the lines of communication between the medical community and midwives. Sibyl becomes ill with cancer a short time later and dies, but she lived long enough to see her daughter become an ob-gyn. In chapter 22, Connie offers Sibyl's entire entry from her notebook dated March 15, 1981. In this entry, Sibyl admits to having seen Charlotte's body flinch when she cut into her abdomen.

Part 3: Chapters 19-22 Analysis

When Asa testifies, once again the jury sees Charlotte as a real person with a family and a life to lose. The prosecutor plays on Asa's grief, allowing the jury to really see the tragedy in Charlotte's death. Then the prosecution rests, confident his case is strong enough to convict Sibyl. Even Sibyl is beginning to doubt her own chances of surviving this trial, as the reader can see through Connie's assessment of the situation. When Sibyl takes the stand, Connie believes she is simply going through the motions, no longer hopeful she will escape these charges. It is this reason Connie believes her mother mentions her notebooks even though Stephen instructed her to never mention them after he read the entries after Charlotte's death. Connie knows what is in these notebooks, so she volunteers to go get the notebooks when the judge requires them to be brought to court. In an act of misplaced loyalty, a theme of the novel, Connie removes some of the entries that could possibly cause trouble for Sibyl. What Connie has done is illegal, but it appears to work. The judge rules the notebooks have no bearing on the case.

Sibyl is found not guilty, but the reader is later allowed to read the March 15 entry in her notebook in its entirety. This entry makes it clear to the reader that Sibyl did in fact kill Charlotte when she performed the cesarean section. Not only this, but Sibyl knew it, even if the truth did not penetrate until after the fact. The reader is conflicted about this revelation, although it does appear to explain Connie's choice to become a doctor. Connie, deep down, agrees with the prosecution when he says that midwives are not knowledgeable to deliver babies at home. However, Connie believes that home birth should be an option as long as the midwife in question has access to a competent doctor to help her through the process. This is a role Connie takes on with enthusiasm. Connie also feels as though she owes society a debt because of her mother's actions and that she pays it back every time she delivers a baby via cesarean section. This experience with her mother has molded Connie's life, created a competent doctor as well as a sympathetic doctor determined to end the animosity between the medical community and midwives.



Characters

Sibyl Danforth

Sibyl Danforth is a child of the sixties and was somewhat of a hippie as a teenager and young adult. Sibyl attended college for a short time, but never got her degree. Instead, Sibyl left school early in order to live with a man she had known a short time. This relationship did not work out, but rather than return to school, Sibyl met another man who would eventually become her husband. Sibyl became interested in delivering babies in the early months of her own pregnancy when a friend went into labor at home. Due to the fact that everyone in the house had been smoking pot, it was decided that the men should walk a mile to the nearest phone rather than attempt to drive the young woman to the hospital. Sibyl was left alone with her friend as she labored and actually delivered the baby as the ambulance pulled into the driveway.

Sibyl never had any formal training in medicine. Sibyl is certified in CPR and carries with her medical supplies a laboring mother might require, including several drugs that it is illegal for Sibyl to have in her possession because she is not a medical professional. Sibyl is a midwife. Sibyl strongly believes that it is a woman's right to choose to have her baby in the security of her own bedroom rather than the cold, sterile atmosphere of a hospital. This belief often causes tension between Sibyl, as well as other midwives, and the medical establishment. There are those doctors who believe that women should only have their babies in hospitals and that midwives misrepresent the danger inherent in home births. As a result, when one of Sibyl's mothers dies, the medical community places pressure on the prosecutor to bring charges.

Sibyl is a loving woman who simply gets a thrill from the moment a new life comes into the world. Sibyl believes she is extremely careful in the service she provides for her mothers and her record seems to prove this. However, several things combine on the night of March 13, 1981 that ends in the death of one of Sibyl's mothers. As always, the baby is Sibyl's priority; therefore, she decides to save the life of the unborn child after viewing convincing evidence that the mother has died. Later, Sibyl will be called a murderer for performing a cesarean section on the young mother and will even question her own observances in the aftermath of a situation that could only be called tragic.

Constance (Connie) Danforth

Connie is Sibyl's daughter and narrator of the novel. Connie is only fourteen when her mother is arrested and placed on trial for the death of Charlotte Bedford. Connie watches the drama unfold from the sidelines, powerless to do anything to protect her family from destruction. As a child, Connie believes her mother could do no wrong, and although she feels pity for the family of Charlotte Bedford, a family she knew quite well, she cannot see how ruining another family could bring justice for what could only be as a gross mistake. Even when Connie reads her mother's notebooks and comes to realize



that even her mother is unsure about the cause of Charlotte's death, Connie believes a trial is wrong.

When Sibyl goes on trial in Charlotte's death, Connie feels as though she is watching her family fall apart. While Connie is sad for Charlotte's family, she cannot see how destroying her own family will help the grief the Fugetts and Bedfords are feeling. Therefore, when the judge demands to see her mother's notebooks, Connie knows she must remove some of the entries to prevent her mother's conviction. Connie does this not because she knows her mother is guilty, not because she does not want to see justice done, and not because she feels her family is more important than the Fugetts or Bedfords, but because she can see that her mother and her family have been punished enough.

When Connie becomes an adult, she does what some midwives see as a betrayal and goes to medical school. Connie becomes an ob-gyn not because she no longer believes in the right of a woman to have a home birth, but because she sees the necessity of a trusting relationship between midwives and the medical community to prevent the kind of tragic event that nearly destroyed her own mother. Connie feels she is repaying a debt every day for her mother and for Connie's own actions about the notebook, when she delivers a baby safely in a hospital and oversees the home birth of another.

Rand Danforth

Rand is Sibyl's husband. Rand was once a hippie much like Sibyl but has grown up to own his own architectural firm. Rand never fully supported his wife's profession as a midwife because he resents the amount of time it forces her to spend away from home. However, when Sibyl is arrested and charged in the death of Charlotte Bedford, Rand stands beside her and vows to do whatever it takes to help her fight the charge. Rand and Sibyl's marriage is a strong one despite the unique challenges they face because of Sibyl's profession.

When Sibyl is arrested, Rand feels out of control when he is unable to do anything to protect his wife. Rand resents the intrusion in their lives by other midwives who are attempting to support Sibyl and the lawyer whose job it is to defend Sibyl. Rand is the kind of man who needs to have something to do, who can make things better for the people about whom he cares. This situation leaves Rand feeling out of sorts and leads to tension in the home. However, Rand loves his wife and will later be able to be the support she needs him to be when she lies dying of cancer. At this point in their marriage, however, Rand can only be an observer, a role he finds uncomfortable, but which he fills gallantly.

Stephen Hastings

Stephen Hastings is the defense attorney Sibyl and Rand hire to defend Sibyl should charges be brought against her in Charlotte Bedford's death. Stephen begins the case by photographing the injuries Sibyl sustained while attempting to move Charlotte to the



hospital. Stephen is a strong, confident man who believes from the very beginning of the case that he can convince a jury Sibyl is innocent of murder. Stephen never claims that Charlotte did not die from the cesarean that Sibyl performed, but instead concentrates on the idea that Charlotte would not have needed the cesarean if she had been honest with Sibyl about her past medical history. Stephen also attempts to convince the jury that having a home birth is a natural process that every healthy woman should have the right to choose.

Through the course of defending Sibyl, Stephen spends a great deal of time with Sibyl and her family. Connie slowly becomes aware that Stephen comes to the house much more often than he should and that he spends a great deal of time alone with Sibyl. Eventually, Connie overhears a conversation that suggests to her that Stephen attempted to kiss Sibyl. Clearly, Stephen has fallen in love with his client, which is perhaps his main motivation in his defense of the charges against her. However, this love does not go anywhere because Sibyl is committed to her marriage. Eventually, after the trial is over, Stephen slips out of their lives, but Connie believes he never truly leaves her mother's thoughts.

Charlotte Fugett Bedford

Charlotte Fugett Bedford is a shy, unassuming woman who moved to Vermont from Arkansas so her husband, a minister, could begin a new church there. Charlotte is homesick being so far from her family and does not appear to have any friends in her new home town. When Charlotte learns she is pregnant with her second child, she asks Connie about her mother, Sibyl. Charlotte wants to have this second child in the comfort of her own home. However, Charlotte fails to tell Sibyl that she has a history of both high blood pressure and anemia. Sibyl takes Charlotte on as a client, believing the sickly-looking woman is a lot stronger than she appears. Sibyl sees Charlotte through the pregnancy, finding little to be concerned about despite a short-lived struggle with anemia.

On the day Charlotte goes into labor, her first call is to Sibyl. Sibyl sends her assistant, Anne, to Charlotte's house while she goes to get the oil changed on her car, convinced Charlotte will not need her assistance until later in the afternoon. When Sibyl arrives at Charlotte's house, she finds the situation firmly under control. Sibyl expects to deliver a baby not long after dinnertime; however, Charlotte is not ready to push until well after midnight. Shortly after she begins to push, Sibyl notices that Charlotte is bleeding profusely. Sibyl decides to take Charlotte to the hospital, but an ice storm makes this impossible. Instead, Sibyl encourages Charlotte to push for more than four hours. As Charlotte pushes one final time, she has what looks to Sibyl like a stroke. Sibyl works hard trying to revive Charlotte but comes to the conclusion that Charlotte has died. Sibyl decides to save the baby by performing a cesarean section. Later, the autopsy will show that this surgery caused Charlotte's death.



Asa Bedford

Asa Bedford is Charlotte's husband. Asa is a minister who runs an unorthodox church that many find strange. Asa, like his wife, is a mild-mannered man, quiet and passive. While his wife is in labor, Asa is content to sit back and allow Sibyl to run the show. When Charlotte has her seizure and stops breathing, Asa is concerned, but again sits back and lets Sibyl deal with the situation. Asa claims later that he was in shock when Sibyl asks for a knife which is why he obeyed her request and retrieved one. Asa also says later in court that he had no idea for what Sibyl intended to use the knife. As Sibyl cuts into Charlotte's belly, Asa says that he can see blood spurting, but Stephen insists that Asa could not have seen anything from his position by the window. When all is said and done, Asa is left a grieving widow with a child whose mere existence is a daily reminder of the tragic death of his young wife.

Jared (Foogie) Bedford and Veil Bedford

Jared, or Foogie, Bedford is Charlotte and Asa's oldest child. Foogie is seven or eight when his mother becomes pregnant for the second time. Connie Danforth comes to know Foogie when the Bedfords hire her best friend to be his babysitter and Connie goes to the house as her friend's assistant babysitter. It is during one of these babysitting excursions that Charlotte asks Connie about her mother's profession as a midwife, beginning the journey that will end in Charlotte's death. Veil Bedford is the baby Sibyl takes from Charlotte's womb after Charlotte appears to have died. Veil grows up to be a strong, athletic young man, unlike his weak, sickly mother.

Tom Corts

Tom Corts is Connie's boyfriend the fall Sibyl is on trial for Charlotte's death. Tom is two years older than Connie and comes from a poor family; however, Tom is strong and determined to become something more than a mechanic like his brothers before him. Tom is also very thoughtful, often showing up just when Connie needs someone to help take her mind off the trial. Tom comes to court on several occasions as well, simply to offer support to his young girlfriend. Connie and Tom will eventually drift apart and stop dating but will continue to see each other when their professions overlap.

Anne Austin

Anne Austin is Sibyl's assistant the day Charlotte Bedford goes into labor. Sibyl often takes on assistants who want to learn the craft of midwifery, teaching them all she can before they go off to open their own practice. Sibyl takes on Anne only three or four months before Charlotte's death. Anne is an eager young woman who wants so desperately to be a midwife that she has read every book ever written on the subject. Anne believes strongly that labor is a natural process and there should be very little intervention; therefore, she questions Sibyl's every move, especially when she does



something that seems like interference. The night Charlotte labors, Sibyl breaks Charlotte's waters which Anne sees this as interference even though it is a natural way of helping the labor progress. When Charlotte has her seizure and Sibyl announces she has died, Anne goes with Asa to look for a knife. Later, as Sibyl begins to cut into Charlotte's belly, Anne does nothing to stop her but later claims that there was too much blood for Charlotte to have been dead. It is Anne's recollections and her subsequent phone calls to the local police that pushes forward the charges brought against Sibyl in Charlotte's death.

Bill Tanner

Bill Tanner is the prosecutor in Sibyl's case. Tanner and Stephen Hastings are good friends; therefore, they often spend time together joking and laughing in a way that seems inappropriate to Connie. During the trial, Tanner accuses Sibyl of being a rebel, of choosing to be a midwife because of her ideals and her objection of the medical profession as a whole. Tanner claims that what Sibyl does is dangerous and that she is attempting to practice medicine in defiance of the law. Tanner's arguments are supported by key witnesses, especially the medical examiner who has determined that Charlotte did not die of a stroke, but from blood loss due to the cesarean section Sibyl performed. It is this testimony that encourages Tanner to bring charges against Sibyl and what leads his prosecution of her.



Objects/Places

Knife

Sibyl asks for the sharpest knife in the house when she comes to the conclusion that Charlotte Bedford is dead. No one questions what Sibyl is planning to do and no one attempts to stop her as she performs a cesarean section on Charlotte in order to save the unborn child.

Pillow

Sibyl wipes away Charlotte's blood during the cesarean section with a pillow.

Bed Sheets

Early in her labor, Charlotte begins to bleed profusely and soaks the bed sheets beneath her body. Sibyl attempts to get her to a hospital, but an ice storm makes it impossible.

Sibyl's Car

When Sibyl decides Charlotte needs to go to the hospital, she attempts to drive her car up to the front door, but the ice that has fallen during the night causes Sibyl to slide her car into a snow drift.

Sibyl's Notebooks

Sibyl keeps a personal journal in notebooks within which she writes down her personal thoughts. This journal is ordered by the judge to be brought into the courtroom for review when Sibyl refers to it during her testimony. Connie removes several pages from the journal before turning it over to the court in order to protect her mother from conviction.

Sibyl's Statement

The night following Charlotte's death, Sibyl makes a statement to the police when they come to her home to interview her. Sibyl signs this statement without fully understanding its implications, leaving her vulnerable to prosecution.



Autopsy Report

In the autopsy report on Charlotte Bedford, loss of blood associated with a cesarean section is named as the cause of death.

Air Vents

Connie learns most of what she knows about the case against her mother from conversations she overheard through the air vents in her family home.

Sibyl's Office

Sibyl has an office in her home where she sees her patients. This office is also where Sibyl keeps her journal and where her daughter reads the journal one night, giving her the information she needs to be aware of the danger should the court read her mother's journal entries.

The Bedford Home

Sibyl helps Charlotte Bedford labor in her own home, encouraging her to continue to push even though Sibyl herself has become concerned that Charlotte's health and the health of her unborn baby could be in danger.

Reddington, Vermont

Reddington, Vermont is the small town in which the Danforth family lives and where Sibyl conducts her practice as a midwife.

Newport, Vermont

Newport, Vermont is the next largest town near Reddington and where the local hospital that Sibyl would have taken Charlotte to is located.

Lawson, Vermont

Lawson is a small village not far from Reddington where the Bedfords live.



Themes

Home Births

Sibyl is a midwife, a woman who is not medically trained, but works out of her home helping women give birth. Sibyl most often helps her clients have their babies in the comfort of their own homes. On occasion, Sibyl will become aware of a problem with her mother and will have the client transferred to a hospital. This has happened on a few occasions in the past. Sibyl has never hesitated to call for help when she sees a woman in trouble. Unfortunately, on the night in question, Sibyl is unable to get Charlotte Bedford to a hospital because of an ice storm that cut off the phones and leaves the roads impassable.

Home births become a central theme in the prosecution's case against Sibyl after the death of Charlotte Bedford. The prosecutor sees home birth as an unnecessary risk to mothers and babies. The prosecutor argues that if Charlotte had been laboring in a hospital, she never would have died. This argument is vehemently denied by Sibyl's supporters who swear the only reason Charlotte Bedford died is because she failed to disclose her entire medical history to Sibyl. Had Sibyl known that Charlotte suffered high blood pressure in the past, she would have refused to allow her to labor at home.

In the end, the readers are left to come to their own conclusions about home births. The prosecution makes a good case against it, claiming that too many women and too many babies die from the uncontrollable circumstances of a home birth versus the preparation surrounding a hospital birth. The midwives, too, make their case that women have been having babies for thousands of years and that it is a perfectly normal event. A woman should have the right to choose to have her baby in the security of her home versus the impartiality of a hospital, according to these supporters. Home births are natural, but in the end the reader also comes to the conclusion that sometimes bad things happen, even in the course of a natural event.

Loyalty

Loyalty is illustrated in this novel through the relationship of a daughter with her mother. Connie Danforth is fourteen when her mother is charged and tried for the murder of Charlotte Bedford. Connie is too young to make judgments about the actions of the adults in her life. However, as an adult Connie becomes an obstetrician, taking on a role that many believe is a slap in the face of Connie's mother. Connie does not see her actions in that way, however.

Connie is raised to believe that having a baby is a natural thing and there is nothing more natural than having a baby in the safety of one's own home. Connie knows all about the working of the female body before she begins school and understands her mother's natural rivalry with the medical community. However, when Connie reads her



mother's personal journals during her trial for the murder of Charlotte Bedford, Connie begins to see the world in a different light. Connie's whole world is crashing down around her and she is facing the possible destruction of her own family, something that will never bring back Charlotte Bedford and would only leave three children motherless instead of two. Therefore, when the judge in her mother's case requests to see Sibyl's journals, Connie takes it upon herself to remove incriminating entries her mother has written in order to keep her mother from facing sure conviction.

Connie's actions are meant to protect her family, not to impede justice or to deny the truth in the death of Charlotte Bedford. However, what Connie now knows about the death of Charlotte Bedford changes Connie's opinion of the medical profession and perhaps is part of what leads her to become an obstetrician. Connie is not being disloyal to her mother or making a statement about her mother's profession. Connie is simply accepting that sometimes bad things do happen and it is up to those who have the opportunity to step in and make sure they do not happen more often than necessary.

Trust

Sibyl Danforth's patients trust her to bring their babies into the world safely and in an environment that will create warm memories for the parents and their families. Sibyl trusts her patients to tell her everything she needs to know in order to determine if the patient is a good candidate for a home birth. On both accounts, Charlotte and Sibyl let each other down. Sibyl expects Charlotte to labor only a few hours and give birth before dinner, but when her labor progresses into the night, Sibyl fails to become concerned until an ice storm has made going to a hospital impossible. Charlotte is asked to report all her medical history, but fails to tell Sibyl she has a history of high blood pressure and anemia.

When Sibyl is charged with Charlotte's death, she learns the reason this death came to the attention of the police is because her assistant turned on her. Anne Austin is a young woman who desperately wants to become a midwife and is therefore working with Sibyl to learn the trade. Anne questions everything Sibyl does, convinced she knows more because of all the books she has read. When Sibyl breaks Charlotte's water, Anne sees it as intrusive and does not agree it is necessary. However, when Sibyl pronounces Charlotte dead and begins the cesarean section, Anne does nothing to stop her. Later, though, Anne makes many phone calls expressing her concern that Charlotte was not dead when Sibyl cut into her abdomen. Sibyl trusted Anne as a friend and an assistant, yet Anne turned on Sibyl and became the star witness in her trial, ending any trust Sibyl might have had in her.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is first person. The novel is written from the point of view of Sibyl's daughter, more than fifteen years after the death of Charlotte Fugett Bedford. Connie tells the story of Sibyl's arrest and trial not only from the view of Sibyl's fourteen-year-old daughter, but also with the maturity that has come with the passing years since the trial took place. At the same time, Connie includes in the beginning of each of the chapters an excerpt from her mother's journal. These entries, too, are in the first person point of view, telling the story from yet another point of view and giving the reader some deeper insight into the emotional trauma this family suffers during Sibyl's trial.

The point of view of this novel works because it is told from the point of view of a loving daughter who also has become an obstetrician in the intervening years since Sibyl's trial for murder. If the novel were told in the third person point of view, there would not be the same intimacy between reader and writer. The point of view also allows the author to insert a number of comments in the authorial voice that would not be possible in another view point. Finally, the point of view allows the reader to feel the tension Connie suffers through the arrest and trial her mother endures in the aftermath of Charlotte Bedford's death.

Setting

This novel is set in rural Vermont. The Danforth family lives in Reddington, Vermont, a small village where everyone knows everyone else. Connie is allowed to run free in 1980s Vermont as a fourteen-year-old child, portraying the village as a safe, family-oriented place where Connie would not possibly face the dangers that a child in a larger city might. As the novel progresses, the setting moves to another small town up the road from Reddington where the Bedford home is located, and then to the big city where the trial takes place. The contrast of the big city to the smaller village is subtle, but it plays a part in symbolizing the changes that are taking place in the Danforth family and the danger that could possibly lay ahead for Sibyl.

The setting of the novel allows the reader to see Sibyl Danforth as a nature's child, an ex-hippie who spends her life helping women have their babies at home. Sibyl is a strong advocate of allowing natural child birth to take place in a safe environment as it did in generations in the past. Sibyl appears to be anti-establishment, against the medical community. The countryside of Vermont, the natural environment of a small community, allows the reader to see Sibyl in this natural environment much easier, as though Reddington is a hippie commune of sorts. When Sibyl is put on trial in the larger city, she is taken out of her natural environment and forced into the more modern world, a place where home birth is the exception rather than the rule, making Sibyl's beliefs



appear radical and unusual. In this way, the setting works well within the plot, supporting the developing plot and the characters that drive that plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is proper English laced with the slang common of people living in the 80s. The novel also includes language important to the profession of midwifery. In fact, Connie mentions using several anatomic words before reaching an age where she might understand the significance of those words. During the trial, both the prosecution and defense use many legal words pertinent to the case.

The language of the novel is used to characterize the narrator and her mother. Connie uses strong, intelligent language, appropriate to a woman who is a doctor. At the same time, Connie uses language appropriate to the child she was at the time her mother went on trial for murder, expressing many of her emotions in the voice of the child she was when she was going through the situation that created those emotions. Connie also introduces words used in her mother's career as a midwife, words that Connie used freely as a child before she understood that some words should not be spoken in common conversation. Finally, Connie uses words while expressing the circumstances around her mother's trial that fit the legal atmosphere of the situation and are appropriate to the ordeal she and her family were experiencing at the time.

Structure

The novel is divided into twenty-two chapters as well as a prologue. Each of these chapters begins with an excerpt from Sibyl Danforth's journals that she kept before and during her trial for the murder of Charlotte Bedford. The story is not told in a linear fashion but instead skips around, with the narrator revealing events of that year in a random style that keeps the reader from knowing the complete circumstances of Charlotte's death until the final chapter in the novel. The plot is told mostly in exposition, written as though a memoir of the grown daughter of Sibyl Danforth, rather than through both exposition and dialogue in a more familiar novel format.

The novel contains a main plot and several subplots. The main plot is the story of Sibyl Danforth's arrest and trial for the death of Charlotte Bedford and how these events affected her fourteen-year-old daughter. The trial becomes a statement about home birth, but to Connie Danforth the trial is a fight for the survival of the Danforth family. The subplots follow Connie's growth during that year, as she experiences her first real relationship with a local boy. Another subplot follows the developing relationship between Sibyl and her lawyer, Stephen, and its impact on Connie's concern for her family and respect for her mother. The subplots interweave within the main plot and come to a conclusion almost simultaneously, giving the impression of one powerful plot within this amazing novel.

Quotes

"I used the word vulva as a child the way some kids said butt or penis or puke." Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 9

"No one had bothered to unplug the plastic Christmas candles, so I did: Even in 1975, even just shy of eight, I was an environmentalist concerned with renewable resources. Either that or a cheap Yankee conditioned to turn off the lights when they weren't needed." Part 1: Chapter 1, pg. 18

"Most of the time, labor is like going for a ride in the country. Nothing unusual will occur. But sometimes—sometimes—you'll hit that patch of black ice and skid off the road, or a dump truck will lose control and skid into you." Part 1: Chapter 2, pg. 19

"My mother was a full-fledged, honest-to-God, no-holds-barred, Liberation News Service, peace-love-and-tye-dye hippie. This was no small accomplishment, since she grew up in a small village in northern Vermont. Villages like Reddington are buffered from cultural change by high mountains, harsh weather, bad television reception, and low population density (which might explain why she never actually tried to escape to places like San Francisco, the East Village, or Woodstock), so it probably took a certain amount of attentiveness, research, and spine to find the revolution—or even a decent peasant skirt." Part 1: Chapter 3, pgs. 34-35

"Charlotte had eyes as gray as moonstone, and thin hair the color of straw. She was pretty if you didn't mind the subtle but unmistakable atmosphere of bad luck that seemed to pulse from that pale, pale skin." Part 1: Chapter 4, pg. 57

"It may have been the confident way that he spoke, and it may have been the ramrod way that he stood. It may have been the way he was dressed, that one-click-above blazer. It may have been all of those things combined. But I went to sleep that night absolutely convinced that if my mother indeed needed a lawyer—and, in all our minds, that still wasn't a sure thing—she had the best one in Vermont." Part 2: Chapter 9, pg. 139

"The Vermont midwives, all of whom knew my mother, rallied around her like Secret Service agents around a president who's been shot." Part 2: Chapter 10, pg. 144

"I'm not superstitious now, and I wasn't in 1981. In my mind, it is merely ironic—not symbolic—that Charlotte Fugett Bedford went into labor on the thirteenth of March, and that the results of the written autopsy arrived on the first day of April. April Fool's Day. The former a day of bad luck, the latter a day of bad jokes." Part 2: Chapter 11, pg. 177



"She opened her mouth to speak, and I heard in my mind the echo—Sure, Connie, sure. Then everything will get back to normal—but no words came out, not even a whisper. Instead she nodded, but we both knew in our hearts that Charlotte's death had changed everything forever. For my mother, nothing would ever be normal again." Part 3: Chapter 15, pg. 262

"It was during Anne's testimony that the jury began growing uncomfortable, and began to steal glances at my mother. Although Anne did not begin speaking until the afternoon of the fifth day, the trial's first Friday, and although the panel knew well the outline of what had occurred in the Bedfords' bedroom, they had not yet heard an account from an eyewitness. And as Anne answered question after question Bill Tanner asked, I think Charlotte Bedford grew real for the first time in some of the jurors' minds." Part 3: Chapter 18, pgs. 308-309

"Even seven years after my mother's trial, many of her midwife friends feared that my decision to go to medical school would be seen by many people as an indictment of home birth. It was not. I became an ob-gyn at least in part because a woman's right to choose to have her baby at home was important to me, and I wanted to be sure there were always doctors on call who would support that decision." Part 3: Chapter 21, pg. 365

"I don't think anyone but me saw the body flinch. At the time I just thought it was one of those horrible postmortem reflexes that you hear about in some animals, and so I went on. I thought the same thing when there was all that blood, and it just kept flowing." Part 3: Chapter 22, pg. 372

Topics for Discussion

What is a midwife? What does a midwife do? What is a home birth? How does a home birth compare to a hospital birth? Is one more dangerous than the other? Compare and contrast the two birthing options. Why does home birth come under fire in this novel? Who chooses home birth? Should home birth be made illegal?

Who is Sibyl Danforth? What is Sibyl's profession? Why did Sibyl begin this profession? How does Sibyl feel about this profession? How does Sibyl's background make her the perfect person for this profession? Did Sibyl's youth lead her to make the choice to enter this profession? Why or why not?

Who is Connie Danforth? Why is she writing this book? What is Connie hoping to tell the world with this narration? Does Connie believe her mother did anything wrong the night Charlotte Bedford died? Why or why not? Why did Connie become an obstetrician? What does this profession say about Connie's feelings for midwives?

Who is Charlotte Bedford? How did she die? Why did she die? Would Charlotte be alive if she had been honest with Sibyl about her past medical history? Would Charlotte be alive if she had chosen to have her child in a hospital? What does Charlotte's death say about home births?

What is a cesarean section? Why does Sibyl elect to perform this procedure on Charlotte? Has Sibyl ever performed this procedure before? What is Sibyl hoping to do with this procedure? Is Charlotte dead when Sibyl begins the procedure? How can the reader be sure Charlotte is dead or alive?

Who is Anne Austin? Why does Anne begin making phone calls the morning after Charlotte's death? Who does Anne call? What does Anne hope to do with these phone calls? What does Anne believe happened the night of Charlotte's death? Why did Anne not stop Sibyl from performing the cesarean section?

Who is Stephen Hastings? Why does he become such a fixture in Sibyl Danforth's life? How does Stephen feel about Sibyl? How does this affect his defense of her? What does Connie believe the relationship is between her mother and Stephen? Why does Connie never tell her father her suspicions about Stephen? How would this revelation have affected the outcome of Sibyl's case?

What is significant about Sibyl's journals? What does Connie do with the journals? Why? What is Connie hoping to achieve with her actions? Did Connie do the right thing? Why or why not? What would have happened had Connie not done what she did? How would this alternative outcome have changed Connie's life? Would Connie have become an obstetrician if the trial had turned out differently? If Connie had not read her mother's journal entries? Why or why not?