

# **Miller's Valley Study Guide**

**Miller's Valley by Anna Quindlen**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide specifically refers to the following version of this book: Quindlen, Anna. *Miller's Valley*. Random House, 2016.

In the historical novel of *Miller's Valley*, Mimi Miller, a *Miller's Valley*, Pennsylvania native, recalls life in her hometown before the area was submerged by the government in a water reservoir project in the 1960s. Mimi looks back on the events of her late teens and early twenties from four decades on, reflecting on her family life, her love life, and life in general growing up.

The novel then steps back in time. Mimi, part of local royalty as a member of the Valley's original founding family, the Millers, lives with her mother Miriam, father Bud, and brothers Tommy and Eddie while Aunt Ruth, a spinster and Miriam's sister, lives in a small house on the property. Mimi deeply loves her family, enjoys spending time with them, and excels at school. Tommy tends to be a troublemaker while Eddie tends to be an intelligent, hard worker at all he does.

*Miller's Valley*, first settled in the 1820s, has recently been prone to repeated flooding due to the Roosevelt Dam that has been constructed nearby by the government. Only belatedly does the government realize that the reservoir they have created is not enough to meet water demands, so *Miller's Valley* will have to be flooded. The residents of *Miller's Valley* must either be bought out or forced out. Despite years of trying, everyone refuses to go.

Meanwhile, Tommy joins the Marines and appears to straighten his life out, while Eddie takes a high-paying construction and engineering job in Philadelphia. When Tommy returns from fighting in Vietnam, he is changed dramatically. He gets into drinking and drugs, and ends up in jail. Eddie comes to oversee a new housing development being built just beyond *Miller's Valley*, with the hope that residents of *Miller's Valley* will move there after the valley is flooded. Mimi, securing a number of scholarships, is prepared to go to college at State, but decides to begin with community college when her father has a stroke.

Over the next few years, Mimi has a relationship with Tommy's older friend, Steven, but this does not work out because Steven is unfaithful. When Mimi's father dies, she is heartbroken. When Tommy does not attend the funeral, she is enraged. Ultimately, Mimi receives scholarships to go to the University of Pennsylvania, where she decides to become a doctor. While studying in Philadelphia, she encounters her childhood friend, Donald, who asks her out. This ultimately leads to marriage. Meanwhile, Mimi returns to the family farm to help her mother put things in order as one-by-one, following the worst flood yet, the residents have finally decided to sell and move out. Mimi is initially stunned by what is happening, but her mother explains the valley is no longer home to her because her family is no longer there.



Years later, and with a family of her own, Mimi comes to agree. She reflects how, during one of the final sweeps of her Aunt Ruth's house, she discovered the long-dead, hardened corpse of a baby wrapped in silk and hidden away in the attic. Mimi never learns anything more about the baby, but to protect the family from the final rounds of the authorities prior to flooding, she puts the baby down a well. Reflecting on everything decades later, Mimi realizes she does not miss Miller's Valley because it is a place that no longer exists, so it cannot be missed.



# Pages 1 – 50

## Summary

Prologue – Mary “Mimi” Margaret Miller, now an old woman, looks back to the 1960s when she was in her late teens and early twenties, and her mother, Miriam, and her father were faced with an uncertain future. Mimi recalls how the government had settled on Miller’s Valley – a quiet valley town – for a water management project, meaning that the people would be forcibly resettled elsewhere while the town and valley were covered up with water for the purposes of a reservoir. She recalls how some, like Elmer, knew they had no choice but to accept the future while trying to get as much money out of the government as possible before being forced out, while others fought the plans to flood the valley to the last moment. Strangely, Mimi recalls her mother not caring about the fate of Miller’s Valley while Mimi herself was enraged because, as Millers, the family was like local royalty and Mimi believed her mother had the duty to stand and fight. Instead, Miriam was content to let the water cover everything.

(untitled chapter) – The novel now shifts back in time. Mimi, age 11, enjoys hearing her parents talk in the kitchen on her mother’s nights off as a nurse through the vent, and listening to the sump pump working. Mimi can see her Aunt Ruth’s house from her window. One night, after sneaking out and drinking, Mimi’s brother, Tommy, who barely graduated high school and is seeing a local girl named LaRhonda Venti, sneaks in to ask Mimi if a state water department guy has been by yet. He explains that the guy has been visiting with locals, telling them the Roosevelt Dam has been constructed in the wrong place, and now the entire valley has to be flooded. Mimi thinks about how the construction of the dam some years before turned tiny Miller’s Creek into a broad river, and what might happen now. Tommy then borrows a couple of dollars from Mimi before sneaking out again, the sump pump masking the sound of his escape.

(untitled chapter) – An older boy named Donald is dumped on his grandparents as his own parents are largely uncaring, and he spends so much time in Miller’s Valley the locals consider him a resident. Mimi works a roadside produce stand with Donald and LaRhonda. Mimi’s father, Bud, is a farmer, growing the foods sold at the stand and working as a fix-it man around town. The land Bud works has been in his family since the early 1820s. Farming is barely profitable, so Bud consistently encourages his children to do something else with their lives though he hopes at least one of his sons will take over the family farm. One hot summer day at the stand, a man named Winston Bally arrives to see Bud. Bally is well-dressed and polite. A short time later, Mimi is sent over to Aunt Ruth’s to bring her dinner.

An untitled part-break is presented featuring a stylized illustration of waves.

(untitled chapter) – Mimi is now 13 years old. She is awakened one Sunday morning by Miriam, who tells Mimi to get up and put her waders on. Mimi discovers the front hall under a few inches of water, while the land around the farm is flooded as the rain falls.



The fire department has come in boats to escort residents to safety. Mimi's parents and Aunt Ruth remain in their houses. Along the way to the Presbyterian church hall in town, where residents are being taken to safety, Mr. and Mrs. Bascomb are picked up, along with Mrs. Donovan. Henry and Cissy Langer are already there. Cissy is Miriam's best friend from childhood, and she and her husband are not surprised that Mimi's parents are toughing out the flood. Donald is also present, having arrived with Taffy, his grandparents' elderly beagle. His grandparents are due in on the next boat but wanted him and Taffy to be first to safety, he explains. LaRhonda is also at the hall, helping to serve out chipped beef to those gathering together. LaRhonda's family is self-made and wealthy. They invite Mimi to spend the night with them.

(untitled chapter) – On August 21, 1966, Donald's grandmother drowns in a canoe accident. Mimi feels horribly for Donald. Tommy also announces he has joined the Marines, a decision that only Aunt Ruth supports.

(untitled chapter) – Aunt Ruth asks about Donald's grandmother's funeral afterwards, since she does not attend. Aunt Ruth rarely ever leaves the house, having been a shut-in for most of her life following World War II when her fiancé came home with a wife. Only Mimi regularly visits Aunt Ruth, though sometimes Donald does as well. Aunt Ruth spends her days reading, watching TV, and staying current with magazines and newspapers.

## Analysis

When the novel begins with a prologue, Mimi is speaking from a place more than four decades removed from the events she is about to relate. The narrative that follows revolves heavily around Mimi's family, which in turn leads to the construction of the thematic idea that family must always be counted upon. It is clear from the early parts of the novel that Mimi's family is close (despite Tommy's troublemaking and despite Aunt Ruth's isolation and antagonism toward her sister). Aunt Ruth survives on the goodness of Mimi and her family caring for her; and Mimi and her siblings depend upon (and help out around the house and farm) their parents to earn a living to support the family through nursing and farming. The reader will note that the families of Miller's Valley – both the town, proper, and the rural areas of the valley – are like an extended family, not only friendly toward one another, but actually looking out for one another. This is especially true during times of flood, such as when LaRhonda's family takes Mimi in for the night.

The flooding that comes to Miller's Valley is taken seriously by the residents, but the residents are serious to know they can deal with some flooding. For example, while all of the children are sent to safety in town during the floods, many adults remain on their farms because the situation is not life-threatening. Nevertheless, the floods coincide with increased government pressure on the residents of the valley to sell their homes and move out so that the valley itself may be permanently flooded for the sake of a reservoir. Initially, everyone in the valley resists, though it is clear that in the end, they will be powerless against the government. The idea that people are ultimately powerless



against the government is given great play as a theme as, over the next decade, the government will apply severe pressure in every way that it can to clear out the valley. (The reader should note the constant running of the Millers' sump pumps, which symbolize not only the government's scheming but serve as an ill-omen of things to come.)

The resistance to the government on the part of the people in the valley comes through the thematic idea of home. Home is something different to different people, but to the vast majority of people in Miller's Valley (apart from Miriam, for reasons which will later be noted) love what they call home and do not want to leave it. A huge part of this is the rootedness of family to a place it has called home, worked on, and survived from. Consider how the Miller family has been working their land since the 1820s, and how generations of people have lived and died in the place. This is the place that Bud, for example, has always known – and hopes that he will be able to pass down to his sons one day. There is a continuity of life in a home, a passing of experience, love, and knowledge from one generation to the next, a contract between the living, the dead, and the unborn as British politician and philosopher Edmund Burke would note. It is, therefore, only natural that what Bud's parents worked so hard for to pass along to him, he should work so hard for to improve for the sake of his family and so that he himself may pass the family land along to his children. The government, however, personified in the character of Winston Bally, has different plans. Nothing can ever stay the same, as the residents of Miller's Valley are about to learn.

## Discussion Question 1

How do the people of Miller's Valley initially respond to the presence of Winston Bally, and what he is offering? Why is this so?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways do the people of Miller's Valley as a whole function as a massive family? Why is this so important, especially during times like those of floods?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it so important to Bud that he pass along the family farm to his children? Why does the family farm mean so much to him?

## Vocabulary

reservoir, aquifer, divot, flood insurance policy, patriotic, balky



## Pages 51 – 110

### Summary

(untitled chapter) – Tommy comes home for a visit after Basic Training. He is far more mature and adult-like to Mimi, now. Each visit home is relished by the family, with Bud coming to call Tommy a man. Friends and neighbors, such as the Langers, are thrilled to stop by and see Tommy. Cissy reveals she has been working for herself, producing dolls, while Bud takes great pride in how his son has turned out. Mimi comes to watch how Tommy begins to take to the property, going off on long walks by himself. Tommy asks Mimi if she likes it in the valley. Mimi explains she never really thought about it. Tommy explains that things are always changing, and that people like him are stupid to think that nothing ever changes. Tommy tells Mimi she is smart and needs a good plan for the future. He also tells her not to smoke cigarettes. When Tommy leaves to head back to the Marines, the farm is quieter and sad without him.

An untitled part-break is presented featuring a stylized illustration of waves.

(untitled chapter) – Mimi is now 15 years old. LaRhonda's father, Mr. Venti, hires Mimi to work at the Villa Venti Diner. Although she does not have to work, Mrs. Venti chooses to work at the steakhouse the Ventis also own. LaRhonda has been sent away out west to a ranch for girls in need of reform, though Mimi knows LaRhonda's reputation is worse than reality. The women Mimi works with as a waitress are hard: widows, middle-aged spinsters, and single mothers. Mimi spends her days anxious for letters from Donald, and from her brother, Tommy.

(untitled chapter) – One day, Mr. Fenstermach and his daughter, 17-year-old Callie, arrive at the farm. Callie is pregnant, and says Tom is responsible. Mr. Fenstermach says that Tom must marry Callie. With Tom away, the best Mimi's parents can do is offer to help. Miriam is especially interested in helping out Callie, because Callie is brave and quiet and carrying Miriam's grandson. Callie drops out of school and gives birth to a boy named Clifton a short time later, then goes to work at the diner. Mimi quickly falls in love with Clifton, and is thrilled to have a hand in raising him as well. As Clifton gets older, Miriam wants to move Callie and Clifton into Aunt Ruth's house, and Aunt Ruth into a nice apartment near the hospital. Ruth will have none of it.

(untitled chapter) – The autumn comes on. Donald, planning on a visit, is unable to come because of work. Mimi is saddened by this. Mimi does very well in school, which earns the praise of her family, especially her mother who says Mimi's education is the ticket to a better life. When LaRhonda returns from out west, she explains she has accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, and begins to hang out with other similar girls. When Tommy comes home to visit, his hair is longer, he has grown a beard, and he is much harder from fighting in Vietnam. After he leaves, Winston Bally returns to the area again. Bud is enraged with Bally coming back, and orders Bally off the farm. Bally explains he has legal authority to visit people, but Bud orders him out anyways. After





Bally eats at the diner one day, Mimi overhears some of the older men saying that progress can't be stopped.

An untitled part-break is presented featuring a stylized illustration of waves.

(untitled chapter) – Mrs. Farrell, the chemistry teacher, tells Mimi that Mimi should enroll in the summer science program at the university. Mimi explains she cannot because she is saving money so she can go to college at all by working in the summers. As Mimi heads toward 16, she begins to feel a little empty and lost. Tommy returns home for good, but takes to drinking. One morning, Mimi and her father find Tommy down the road, having overturned the tractor while drunk. An ambulance is called for.

(untitled chapter) – Mimi and everyone else can see that Tommy has been changed by his experiences in Vietnam. Eddie, meanwhile, has gotten a job as an engineer at a big real estate development company and lives just outside of Philadelphia. He is now married to a kind young woman named Debbie. On the way home from work one day, Callie tells Mimi she needs to speak with her. Over time, Mimi and Callie have become good friends. Callie explains that she does not want Clifton left alone with Tommy for the time being given Tommy's condition. Even then, Tommy does not often visit Callie and Clifton. Mimi understands, knowing that Tommy is and is not himself.

(untitled chapter) – When Mimi comes home from school one day, she finds a used Oldsmobile 88 in the driveway – a gift to her from her parents. This is not only because Mimi deserves it, but because her parents will need her help getting Tommy around to his appointments as he recovers from his tractor accident. Mimi continues to receive letters from Donald, who has now saved up enough money to begin attending school in California. After Tommy recovers from his injuries, he goes back to drinking, hitting up bars, and always going around with loose women.

At the same time, Mimi gets closer with Richard Bachman, one of the sons of the Presbyterian minister. Richard is an adopted Korean-American. While he takes some mean comments over his race, Richard is not too concerned and keeps focused on the important things in his life. One day each week, Richard and Mimi drive over to the state capital to work on science projects at the Office of Mines, Soil, and Water. Mimi is doing a project on how the Roosevelt Dam has affected the water table in Miller's Valley. It is at the capital that Mimi sees Winston Bally again, where Bally explains he is an expert on what she is studying and says he would be happy to offer his knowledge as a primary source. Mimi later speaks to Cissy about growing up in the nearby town of Andover, which was very small and covered up with water by the dam. Cissy explains Miller's Valley is everything Andover was not, and that Cissy has fallen in love with Miller's Valley.

## Analysis

As Quindlen's novel continues, it is clear just how important family is. When Tommy decides to join the Marines, his decision is not met with opposition because the family



does not believe in the fight against Communism, but because the family is so concerned that something might happen to Tommy. Nevertheless, there is deep and abiding pride in Bud to see his son in uniform, and to see the way Tommy has cleaned himself up. However, the years that Tommy spends in Vietnam result in his falling apart: he turns to heavy drinking, and will soon turn toward drugs. However, despite Tommy's situation, his family unconditionally lends a helping hand, seeking to reach out and care for him. Not only that, but Mimi and the rest of the family essentially adopt and care for Callie and Clifton.

Tommy has changed dramatically from who he was, Mimi notes. Tommy is and is not her brother anymore. This is reflective of an important scene the reader should pay careful attention to, when Tommy and Mimi talk about life, Miller's Valley, the world, and the future. Tommy explains very clearly that nothing ever stays the same. Here, the idea that nothing ever stays the same becomes an important theme which will underscore the changes to come to Miller's Valley. Even now, things have already changed: the valley is flooding more and more, Mimi is coming into her own as a brilliant young woman, and Eddie has moved away to Philadelphia. Change – and an ill-omen – can also be seen in the recounting of the history of Andover by Cissy, a town that, though dramatically different from Miller's Valley, was still powerless against being flooded by the government. Andover, Cissy explains, was never home to her in the way that Miller's Valley is now – and this is why she is so determined to fight change by way of the government.

In addition to things changing, the idea that some people also change becomes an important theme as well. Related to, but not entirely the same as the theme that nothing ever stays the same, the idea that some people change is critical to the evolution of the novel's plot. While Tommy cleans up his act after joining the military, only to lose himself in peacetime after his service, changing quickly over a few years, Eddie remains the same person – kind, industrious, and hard-working – though he now lives a good distance from Miller's Valley. All of the Millers, despite their different paths in life, and despite even the changes that some of them experience, all remain committed to one another, reinforcing the idea that family must always be counted upon, whether one is helping or receiving help from another family member. This is certainly the case where Tommy is concerned. Tommy would be utterly lost without the support of his family.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Mimi's family take in Callie and Clifton? Why is it so important that they do so?

## Discussion Question 2

How do the lives of Tommy and Eddie contrast with one another? What may account for these differences? Why does the family repeatedly rally around Tommy, even when Tommy is in the wrong with his mistakes and accidents?



## Discussion Question 3

Why has Mimi begun a project on Miller's Valley and nearby Andover? What important things does Mimi learn from Cissy, especially regarding government relations and the idea of home?

## Vocabulary

incorrigible, literal, hoarseness, lacquered, idealistic



## Pages 111 – 160

### Summary

(untitled chapter) – Mimi believes in love at first sight. When Clifton is four, she brings him out to see the cows as she always does. Local volunteers and fire companies are up in the mountains, putting out a wildfire. On his way up to the mountain, Tom swings by in his pickup truck. With him is Stevie, who Tom calls a good guy. Mimi instantly falls for Stevie, though she prefers to call him Steven.

(untitled chapter) – Mimi interrupts the narrative to explain that Steven Sawicki would come to be her first for most things, from French-kissing to having sex. Mimi then returns to the narrative. Steven is almost seven years older than her, works construction, and is well-muscled. He is also the first person to express genuine interest in Mimi's project about the valley. She explains that she willingly gave herself sexually to Steven repeatedly, loving sex with him. Steven's friend from construction, Fred, is dating LaRhonda.

(untitled chapter) – As time continues, Bally begins showing up at the diner at least once a week. He and Mimi are cordial toward one another, but Mimi does not outright befriend him because she knows what he is up to for the government, buying people out or forcing them out. Mimi has figured out that when the government built the dam, they did it in such a way as to allow the valley to flood, meaning the people would be forced out one way or another. Each year, the government allows less and less water to leave the valley. It is why Miller's Creek is now a river and why the valley floods so often. The biggest mistake the government made originally was that they did not flood a large enough area – and so now have set their sights on Miller's Valley.

(untitled chapter) – Eddie comes by to visit, as he is in the area on business, overseeing a new development off 502. He is dressing well, drives a Toyota, and is happy to see everyone. Bud realizes that neither of his sons will ever come to run the farm, so he now begins hinting at the possibility that Mimi might one day take things over. He explains that everyone wants to eat, but that nobody wants to farm. Tommy arrives for dinner, but he and Eddie only commit to small-talk since they are so different and have so little in common.

Tommy later tells Mimi he does not care that she and Stevie are dating, but warns her not to lose sight of the future. He wants Mimi to be like Eddie and find a way out. Meanwhile, Eddie brings his parents out to the new development, but Bud is enraged after the trip. He goes on about Eddie wanting the family to move to the suburbs and leaving the family land. Bud asks Mimi if she wants to live in a new suburban house, but Mimi says she does not.

(untitled chapter) – Mimi's science project, "Andover, Pennsylvania, 1921-1930; A History of Water Management in a Drowned Town" wins second place at school.



Because of the award money Mimi wins for this and for other things like being salutatorian, she will be able to afford two years of state college. Steven gifts Mimi with a beautiful necklace upon graduation, and insists when she graduates from college, she will receive an engagement ring. Steven, meanwhile, has begun having success turning over houses. He and Eddie exchange business cards.

Aunt Ruth is happy and sad to see Mimi graduating, because it means Mimi will be going on to better things but will be two hours away. Donald mails Mimi a gift of a jewelry box with Pinocchio, which causes Mimi to remember how she and Donald saw the movie when they were younger. Steven laughs the gift off but Mimi is deeply moved. The state police swing by the party, looking for Tommy because Tommy beat someone up badly the night before. Bud is enraged because the latest word is that Tommy has been selling drugs. Bud then heads out to begin looking for Tommy.

An untitled part-break is presented featuring a stylized illustration of waves.

(untitled chapter) – A week after Tommy is arrested, Mimi's father has a stroke. Mimi and her mother spend every spare moment they can with Bud in the ICU. The community rallies around Mimi and her family, providing food and favors. Bud is eventually sent to rehab and recovers enough to be able to get by, though much of his right side is only partially-usable. Bud is able to speak, but only in bits and pieces. Day by day, he makes progress in recovery. Steven builds a ramp at the house so Bud can make it up and down without issue. Mimi decides to go to community college for a year until her father better recovers, so that she can help out around the house and the farm. Miriam is horrified, believing Mimi's life has been ruined. Mimi assures her this is not so.

## Analysis

Much of this section of the novel is devoted to Mimi's relationship with Steven, an older man she believes she is going to one day marry. This is an otherwise good point and good change in her life, for much of everything else going around Mimi is negative. Tommy continues to descend into drinking and drugs, leading to an altercation in which the police show up at Mimi's graduation party looking for Tommy. Rather than letting things be as they are, Bud personally heads out to look for his lost son. Family must always be counted on, Bud knows, and family is especially important to Bud based on his own family's history in the valley. Bud cannot allow his son to fall further, so he commits himself to trying to rescue Tommy.

The stress and difficulties weigh on Bud, and Bud suffers a stroke. The family, except Tommy, rally around Bud. Mimi takes the extraordinary step of delaying her entrance into state college in order to attend school locally for a year until Bud is well enough to get by on his own. Miriam is horrified by this, believing that Mimi's life has been ruined – but Mimi flatly disagrees. She loves her family deeply. Her parents have taught her well, having always led by example. Having long been supported by her parents, Mimi now endeavors to support her family in any way that she can while her father struggles to recover. At the same time, the community family rallies around the Miller family,



providing care, support, and even meals to alleviate the pressure the family currently faces. It is all done voluntarily, and out of love – and speaks greatly about why Bud considers the place home, and why Cissy considers Miller’s Valley to be her real home in a way that her childhood home never was.

At the same time, Winslow Bally remains in Miller’s Valley, haunting it like a ghost. People are generally kind toward him as a matter of common decency and simple respect, but have no patience for his attempts to get them to sell. Still, the government is not to be swayed, and as Mimi discovers through her science project, the government always gets what it wants while the people are powerless against it. Mimi learns that the government has constructed Roosevelt Dam in such a way as to control the flow of water in Miller’s Valley, ensuring the place will flood. This means that if the people cannot be convinced to sell, they will be forced out by designed flooding. It is underhanded and cruel, but underscores the thematic argument that in the end, the people are essentially powerless against the government.

## Discussion Question 1

What disturbing truth does Mimi learn about Miller’s Valley and Roosevelt Dam? Why does this matter? Why does Mimi keep this to herself rather than sharing it around?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the Miller family, and the community of Miller’s Valley, rally around Bud after his stroke? Why is this so? Why does this matter so much in terms of the idea of home?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Mimi delay going away to college for at least a year, opting instead to attend the community college? Why does this ultimately come to matter so much not only to Mimi, but to the family at large?

## Vocabulary

rigged, sidetracked, modern conveniences, orderliness, addled



## Pages 161 – 211

### Summary

(untitled chapter) – Despite his stroke injuries, Clifton does not notice any difference in Bud, and still loves to see him. Meanwhile, multiple attempts to visit Tommy at the state penitentiary are pointless. Tommy does not want to see anyone. Community college starts. There, Mimi reconnects with a high school friend, Laura, who has delayed going to State to help out with her sick mother. A new sump pump is installed in the house since one is not enough to handle all the water in the valley. Mimi also begins to notice how the farmland is now more and more waterlogged, and how much of it is turning to muck. One day, when Winston Bally comes to visit, Mimi tells him to get off her land. He says he will go and see Miriam at the hospital since Bud is no longer in a position to make decisions.

(untitled chapter) – Although Mimi is glad to be helping her family, she is not glad to hear about how much the kids of other people are enjoying State. LaRhonda gets engaged, and asks Mimi to be her maid of honor. LaRhonda will not be going back to college, while Fred will be going to work for her father. Much of the talk surrounding LaRhonda's wedding has to do with how most people think Mimi will be the next to get married, though Mimi is not so sure. Miriam tells Mimi she looks forward to her wedding, but does not expect it to be for years.

(untitled chapter) – When Mimi becomes pregnant by Steven, Laura writes down directions for Mimi to a place where she can have an abortion. Mimi is both scared and relieved by the procedure, and never tells anyone about it.

(untitled chapter) – Apart from school and sex with Steven, Mimi devotes herself to the family, cooking, cleaning, and caring for her father, the house, Aunt Ruth, and the farm. Mimi also visits occasionally with LaRhonda, who is now very pregnant. One afternoon, the Langers come over to visit Mimi and Miriam to announce they have finally decided to sell to the government, and leave Miller's Valley for the new development off 502 that Eddie is working on. Mimi has also been to see the new development with Eddie, and is horrified by it because of the clearcutting of the forest. Donald's grandfather and Bud now see the handwriting on the wall. One sale will lead to another. Bud, meanwhile, has not recovered well the way the doctors have promised.

(untitled chapter) – Steven's real estate turnover business is going very well. Meanwhile, Tommy has now been in jail for 18 months. Mimi sells off the cows for a little extra money and to have to contend with one less thing on the farm. By November, Tommy is due to be released. When Steven and Mimi go to pick him up, they learn Tommy has already been picked up an hour before. Steven is angry about this, but Mimi tells him not to be a jerk. The guard does not know where Tommy has gone.





(untitled chapter) – In February, Bud has a second stroke and dies. Tommy does not attend the funeral. Mimi is furious with him for it. Steven believes it is because Tommy is embarrassed by what he has allowed his life to become. Meanwhile, more and more people are now selling and leaving the valley. After two years of community college, Mimi applies for the Dr. Scheinman scholarship to attend the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia to study medicine at Mrs. Farrell's urging. Mimi is accepted, and moves at her mother's urging. Steven begins eyeing up Philadelphia for property purchases. Aunt Ruth is very proud of Mimi, but very sad that Mimi will be leaving.

(untitled chapter) – Mimi is not thrilled with life in Philadelphia, but she is glad to have Eddie, Debbie, and their children so close. Debbie decides to host Thanksgiving at their house for both sides of the family. Miriam is utterly proud of Mimi. Mimi goes home to spend the rest of Thanksgiving vacation with her mother. Still more people are selling. Steven urges Mimi to urge her mother to sell, while Mimi says she believes Donald's grandfather will be the last holdout. While out at a bar, Mimi runs into Tommy who is drunk and surrounded by rejects and criminal outcasts. Mimi tells Tommy he let her down, but Tommy says the best thing he could do was to leave her alone so she could move up in the world.

## Analysis

If there is one thing that Bud's stroke teaches Mimi, it is that things do not stay the same, and that all people do not remain the same. It confirms Tommy's realistic assertions from earlier in the novel. Bud, no longer able to fully care for himself, is heavily dependent upon the love and grace of loved ones. Mimi is only happy to help care for her father, for her father is still her father. He may be physically changed by the stroke, but he is otherwise still the same man. Yet Mimi's decision not to go away to college yet is a change from how things were supposed to be, while her decision to stay changes the nature and aspect of her life. Caring for her father in such a fashion gives her a unique insight into medicine – which she will in turn come to study in the future so that she may become a doctor. When Bud dies, Mimi is enraged that Tommy does not attend the funeral, especially after the way the family has exhausted itself to care for him.

Home is a difficult place for Mimi during these years, especially with her father's death, but it is still home. Although she has been elsewhere, there is no place like home for Mimi. Even when she goes away to Philadelphia following the death of her father, the pull of home leads to Miller's Valley. To Mimi, Miller's Valley is home because it is not only the place she has grown up, but because it is where her family's roots are found, where so many powerful memories have been made, where she has known love, is a place she knows by heart, and because it is the place where she has become a woman in terms of her responsibilities and maturity. Leaving Miller's Valley for college is not an easy thing, but coming home is just as difficult because Mimi must confront the fact that things are changing.





With Eddie raising a family of his own outside Philadelphia, with the college and field of study for Mimi changing, and with people finally beginning to sell in Miller's Valley, Mimi must confront the unavoidable fact that things are changing to the point that nothing will ever be the same again. Still, Mimi considers the slowly-emptying valley to be home. The Langers are the first to sell, it is revealed – and their breaking signals the beginning of a flood, so to speak, of other residents who sell and leave. This confirms to Mimi that the people are ultimately powerless against the government, for the government will ultimately have its way. For the time being, Miriam refuses to sell. Mimi herself believes that Donald's grandfather will be the last holdout, but it is clear that even he will be forced to leave sooner or later.

## Discussion Question 1

Although Mimi spends most of her year away at college, and despite so many people leaving Miller's Valley, and despite so many things changing in Miller's Valley, she still considers the place home. Why is this so?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Steven urge Miriam to sell her house? How does Mimi feel about this, and about so many people selling in general? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

What ultimately begins the flood of people selling and leaving Miller's Valley? Why do these people leave while others stay?

## Vocabulary

companionable, jittery, tolerated, homemade, trailblazing, classify, cornucopia, condolences



## Pages 211 – 257

### Summary

An untitled part-break is presented featuring a stylized illustration of waves.

(untitled chapter) – Sometime after Mimi's junior year of college, Tommy disappears. Callie gets a boyfriend and gets married, and then moves 50 miles away. Mimi's mother says Callie and her new family deserve some peace, though Callie brings Clifton around to see his family. One day in April, Mimi heads to a house Steven is working on to discover Steven having sex with a blonde girl. Mimi breaks up with him at once. Steven tries to improve his position by telling Mimi where Tommy had been recently – at a house off 502 being rented by a woman named Casey – but this does not impress Mimi. Mimi tells Tommy never to call her again unless he finds out where Tommy is. She then drives away.

(untitled chapter) – A massive spring storm hits Miller's Valley, destroying three houses, which has never happened before. Mimi's home is in such bad shape that most of the furniture and possessions in the house have to be thrown away. Mimi is saddened by this when she visits home, and saddened by the talk of the government agents everywhere talking about the tourism that will come to the area because of the new body of water that will be formed. News later comes that Bally had a heart attack just prior to the massive storm while out trying to speak to residents, but the water prevented his body from being found until the water receded.

While on a street corner in Philadelphia, Mimi is stunned to run into Donald out of nowhere one day. Donald explains he has come to find Mimi, and that Miriam told him where Mimi was. Mimi is thrilled to see him, and has been waiting for ten years to do so. He asks to buy her dinner. Mimi tells him that if he waits until ten that night, they can eat for free after her waitressing shift.

(untitled chapter) – At long last, the state decides to step in and force people out. Miriam has no choice but to sell. Mimi travels home to help her mom pack. When Mimi asks her mother how she can stand to leave, Miriam explains it is because her family is not there anymore.

Meanwhile, Donald and Mimi get engaged. Miriam and Ruth move in together, but in their own place outside of the 502 development with an attached apartment for Ruth. The valley will be flooded slowly, in stages, so that wildlife has time to get out. Before the valley is flooded, Mimi and Miriam head to the farm to look around one last time and grab a few more things for Ruth. In Ruth's attic, Mimi discovers the mummified-like corpse of a slightly less-than-full term baby.

Epilogue – The valley is flooded without fanfare. Mimi, knowing the topography of the valley well, knows that the Miller Farm, at the valley's lowest point, is the first to



completely flood. Forty years pass. Mimi, now 65, reflects on living in Philadelphia for a few years with Donald where she graduated from medical school and became a doctor. Ultimately, Mimi and Donald decided to move back to the part of Miller's Valley that had not been flooded, and took a house. Donald became the coach at the local high school while Mimi kept on in medicine. They went on to have two children, Nora and Ian, who themselves married and had children. Nora takes after Mimi and Eddie, while Ian takes after Tommy.

Mimi also reflects on going back to Ruth's house one last time before the flood to remove the dead baby to avoid authorities discovering it on their last sweep of the area prior to flooding. Mimi dropped the baby in the old well behind Ruth's house. Mimi considers that she has no idea who the baby belonged to, how it died, or why it was in Ruth's attic, but that she was determined to protect her family's past. Mimi has never been able to find Tommy, even from internet searches. Mimi misses her mother, who died at the age of 90, two years after Ruth. Mimi reflects on Donald passing away as well, and how much she misses him. Looking back, Mimi does not miss Miller's Valley, for she now considers it gone like her brother. To this day, Mimi has not visited the lake and recreation area. Every few years, Mimi dreams about diving down to the town, and seeing everything from the vanity case in which the dead baby is wrapped to her father's workbench to Tommy himself float by.

## Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, it is clear that nothing ever stays the same. This is as true for Miller's Valley as it is for Mimi's own life. Because of the government's pressure and flood-instigation, a major flood is the final breaking point that compels Miriam and Ruth to sell and leave. Even Donald's grandfather has no choice but to sell. Ironically, and perhaps fittingly according to some, Bally suffers a heart attack prior to the great flood, which in turn hides his body and prevents it from being recovered until the waters recede. The people are powerless against the government – including the people who work for it. Bally can be seen as a victim of his own methods in seeking to drive out the Miller's Valley locals.

The reader should note the poignant scene in which Mimi asks her mother how her mother can bare to leave. For Miriam, home is not a place, but is wherever family happens to be. Because of this, Miller's Valley is not home and is not a difficult place to part with. At the time, Mimi cannot truly understand this, for home to her is as much about the place and what it means as it is about the people who live there. Only decades later will Mimi admit to not missing home because what made it home – including the people – no longer exist. Home means different things to different people, but it does not make home any less important. Interestingly, however, Mimi never goes to the lake that has covered up her town. She may not miss Miller's Valley the way she claims not to, but it is clear she misses what it meant to her a long time ago.

As the novel concludes, Mimi not only briefly relates the fates of the major players – including herself, marrying Donald, and having children and grandchildren – but also



reveals two important and symbolic instances. The first is the discovery of the dead baby in Aunt Ruth's attic. Mimi has no idea why the baby is there, but takes great steps to protect the family by putting the baby's body in a well. While readers can speculate about the baby's origin, the symbolism is clear: the death of youth, and the idea that everything in life changes. Mimi is no longer the young woman she once was, while Miller's Valley is no longer the place it once was, just as the baby is no longer alive as it once was. It is the death of the past, a change in life few expected.

The second important symbolic occurrence is when Mimi dreams of swimming down through the flood to the old farm. While everything she sees floating by can readily be explained as things lost during or around the time of the flood, such as Tommy, that Mimi should see her father's workbench should give the reader pause. Mimi's father's workbench is a trademark tool of hard work, in addition to being essential to the family, something handed down through the generations to the family rooted to the land. Now, the place is gone and the family has been cut loose from its roots. No Millers are farmers, and no Millers live on the land anymore. Home is to be found elsewhere, now.

## Discussion Question 1

What does Mimi find in the attic of Aunt Ruth's house that disturbs her so much? Why is this discovery so disturbing? What do you believe may account for the presence of this discovery? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Although Mimi says she does not really miss Miller's Valley, she will not go near the recreation area that has been built around it. Why?

## Discussion Question 3

If you were in Mimi's position, or in the position of one of the residents of Miller's Valley, would you sell and leave, or would you remain? Why? If the place in which you currently live was being targeted for a project which compelled you to be forced out, would you feel any differently? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

dependable, fixture, motes, vague, recreation area

# Characters

## Mimi

Mimi Miller is the narrator of the novel, telling the events of the novel more than four decades after they have happened. Mimi is the daughter of Bud and Miriam, the niece of Ruth, and the younger sister of Eddie and Tommy.

During the time of the novel, Mimi grows from childhood into a young woman in her twenties, watching the way time changes herself, her family, and the place she calls home – Miller’s Valley, Pennsylvania. Mimi is very intelligent, very pretty, and very dedicated to her family. She delays going away to college to attend school locally to care for her father when he suffers a stroke, then goes on to study medicine so that she may become a doctor.

After breaking up with her boyfriend, Steven, due to Steven’s infidelity, Mimi falls in love with and marries her childhood friend, Donald, coming to raise a family with him. Mimi is later deeply saddened when Miller’s Valley is flooded, not understanding how her mother can so easily leave the place behind. Mimi later comes to realize she does not miss the place as much as she thought she would because Miller’s Valley no longer exists.

## Miriam

Miriam Miller is the mother of Mimi, Tommy, and Eddie, the wife of Bud, and the sister of Ruth. Miriam works not only as a homemaker, but as a nurse as well. She provides the greatest amount of income to the family through her work. She loves her family deeply, so much so that it is only family that makes her home a home. She could care less for the place so long as she is around those she loves. When she finally decides to sell the family farm, she does so without remorse or sadness, for her family has already left, meaning home is no longer home.

## Bud

Buddy “Bud” Miller is the father of Mimi, Tommy, and Eddie, the husband of Miriam, and the brother-in-law of Ruth. Bud is a kind, family-oriented, and strong-willed farmer who works very hard to provide for his loved ones. He considers Miller’s Valley to be home, especially his own plot of land, handed down through his family through generations. For Bud, home is not just where family is, but where family comes from, dwells, and is where memories, traditions, and rootedness are to be found. To Bud, the place is just as important as the people in it, and the people are immensely important. When Tommy gets in trouble, Bud leads the way to look out for him, but this ultimately wears on his health, leading to two strokes, the latter of which kills him.



## Tommy

Thomas "Tommy" Miller is the son of Miriam and Bud, the younger brother of Eddie, the older brother of Mimi, and the nephew of Ruth. Tommy is troublemaker as a kid, but enlists in the U.S. Marines to straighten himself out and serve his country. Tommy comes to see that things can change in life quickly, and urges Mimi to remember that nothing ever stays the same. Tommy's service in Vietnam haunts him greatly, and when he returns home, he turns to drugs and drinking, serving time in jail and later refusing to attend his own father's funeral. As he tells Mimi, the best thing he can do for her is to stay out of her life. At some point before the great flood, Tommy disappears from the radar of the lives of his family, never to be seen again.

## Eddie

Edward "Eddie" Miller is the older brother of Mimi and Tommy, the son of Bud and Miriam, and the nephew of Ruth. Eddie is kind, intelligent, and hard-working, and becomes an engineer living outside of Philadelphia where he marries and raises a family. Eddie oversees the construction of the new development off 502 where many of the residents of Miller's Valley go to live following their decision to sell and leave.

## Aunt Ruth

Ruth is the aunt of Mimi, Tommy, and Eddie, the sister of Miriam, and the sister-in-law of Bud. Ruth lives alone in a small house on the Miller family property, rarely ever leaving the house and relying on the kindness of her family to get by. Ruth is deeply haunted by being jilted after World War II, and has never married or romantically loved again. She has a love-hate relationship with Miriam, who believes Ruth is taking advantage of the family's goodness. Nevertheless, after the farm is sold, Miriam and Ruth take their own house together near Miller's Valley.

## Donald

Donald is non-native of Miller's Valley, but is considered a local by locals given the amount of time he spends there, constantly dumped on his grandparents by an uncaring mother. Donald is patient, kind, utterly loyal, and gentle. Donald befriends Mimi, and writes her letters for a decade until he has gotten an education, gotten steady work, and has made something of himself. With something to offer, he travels to find Mimi at college in Philadelphia, where he asks her to dinner, falls in love with her, and later marries and has a family with her.



## Steven

Steven Sawicki is a friend of Tommy's who does construction and gets into real estate flips. Steven and Mimi date for years, and even appear poised to be married. Eventually, Steven is caught cheating on Mimi, and the two break up.

## Callie

Callie Fenstermach is one of Tommy's many romantic conquests, though Callie comes to be the mother of Tommy's only child, Clifton. Callie is taken in by Tommy's family, though Tommy himself struggles to be a provider and a husband. Eventually, Callie falls in love with and marries someone else, with the result being that she and Clifton move away. Miriam congratulates Callie on this, because Callie has found some peace at last away from Tommy.

## Mrs. Farrell

Mrs. Farrell is the science teacher at Miller's Valley High School. Mrs. Farrell is brilliant and kind, and consistently encourages Mimi in her academic studies and desire to go to college. It is Mrs. Farrell who paves the way for Mimi to attend school in Philadelphia to attend college. Mimi keeps in touch with Mrs. Farrell for the rest of Mrs. Farrell's life, considering Mrs. Farrell a wonderful person and an unparalleled friend.

## Winston Bally

Winston Bally is a state government agent for Pennsylvania who spends much of his time over the course of years in Miller's Valley trying to get people to sell their land. Bally is initially treated kindly and politely though his offers are rejected. When Bally persists, many people begin to give him the cold shoulder or to treat him rudely. As Bally steps up his pressure, people become downright angry with him, such as when Bud orders Bally from his land. Just prior to the big storm, Bally suffers a fatal heart attack. His body is not found until after the floodwaters recede.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Sump pump

A sump pump can be heard running in the early chapters of the novel and symbolizes the duplicity of the government and the flood to come. The sump pumps are necessary to prevent the house from flooding as the water table rises in the valley. A second sump pump must eventually be added as the government increases the water table in the valley to force the people out. That the sump pumps are running almost all the time in turn denotes that eventually, all the sump pumps in the world will not be enough to stop the major flood that is coming.

## Roosevelt Dam

Roosevelt Dam is a massive water-retaining construction near Miller's Valley that symbolizes both the duplicity and shortsightedness of the government. Roosevelt Dam was originally constructed to create a reservoir to provide tourism and water to the area. However, the reservoir is too small to suit needs, so Miller's Valley beyond Roosevelt Dam is eyed for a new reservoir. The government, unable to force everyone in the valley to sell, alters water flow from the dam to increase the water table in the valley, ultimately leading to the great flood which causes the holdouts to sell.

## Tommy's letters

Tommy's letters are awaited with great anticipation, and read and responded to, by Mimi. Tommy's letters reveal his service in the Marines, his travels, and his experiences around the world short of the graphic nature of the combat he endures in Vietnam. Mimi treasures the letters, for they are the last time that Tommy ever sees himself before his return home.

## Donald's letters

The letters are Donald's efforts not only to keep in touch, but are an extension of the love he has for Mimi. Donald's letters are eagerly awaited by, read by, and responded to by Mimi. The letters come to Mimi over the course of a decade, sometimes steadily, sometimes here and there, and sometimes not at all depending on Donald's situation. The letters ultimately pave way for Donald's arrival in person, and the later marriage between him and Mimi.





## Science project

Mimi researches and completes a school science project for which she wins scholarship money, but which also exposes her to the duplicity of the government. Mimi's project, "Andover, Pennsylvania, 1921-1930; A History of Water Management in a Drowned Town," wins second place, and allows her to study extensively Roosevelt Dam, and the topography and water table of Miller's Valley. Because of this, she learns how the government can control water flow to force people out, and how the original reservoir was built too small. She also learns how the people are powerless against the government when it sets its mind to doing something, such as was the case with the small town of Andover.

## Real estate

Real estate is the business in which Steven invests himself, and which he makes a career out of as a young man. Steven's dealings in real estate make him successful, respected, and wealthy, and a great potential match for Mimi. However, when she catches him cheating on her in one of his real estate properties, she breaks up with him.

## Miller family land

The land is a source of pride to Bud, for the land represents the traditions, customs, culture, and memories of family, as well as the experiences, love, and wisdom handed down through time from one generation to the next. Miller family land has been in the Miller family since the 1820s, with the main house itself being constructed in 1822. When government agents arrive to buy the land, Bud outright refuses, and never once considers selling. Mimi largely feels the same way as her father about the Miller family land, but comes to believe, at least partly, as her mother does that home is not about the place, but the people.

## The great flood

The great flood occurs during a massive spring storm when Mimi is away at college, and denotes the point in time at which even the rock-ribbed holdouts of Miller's Valley finally relent and decide to sell. The great flood is made possible not only because of the spring storm, but because of the amount of water the government is letting into, and keeping in, the valley. The great flood causes the destruction of several homes, and ruins countless more. The waters cover up the body of Winston Bally, dead from a heart attack just prior to the storm, which in turn notes that not even the people who work for the government are safe from the machinations of government.



## **Baby's body**

The body of a long-dead baby is found wrapped in silk in a vanity case in the attic at Aunt Ruth's house by Mimi, and symbolizes not only the death of youth, but the fact that everything changes. Mimi, who discovers the body while doing a last sweep of the house for Aunt Ruth, never learns who the baby was or why the baby was there. To protect her family from the authorities that will arrive to do a final sweep before flooding, Mimi dumps the baby into Aunt Ruth's well. The baby was clearly the beginning of a change in someone's life, perhaps Aunt Ruth's – and the death of the baby also meant an emotional and transformative death for the mother of the baby.

## **Bud's workbench**

Bud's workbench is seen by Mimi in her dream floating in the currents of the water, and symbolizes the past and the loss of tradition. With the family farm now underwater, everything generations of the Miller family worked hard for – with hard work being symbolized by the workbench itself – is gone. The loss of the past is symbolized by the work bench itself floating past Mimi in her dream: the past is past.



# Settings

## Miller's Valley

Miller's Valley is both a valley and a small town located in the hills and mountains of southern central Pennsylvania, about an hour from Harrisburg and some distance from Philadelphia. Miller's Valley was first settled by the Miller family, and is a beautiful, staid, and welcoming place. Rural and isolated, the place, though easily accessible by to the outside world, has changed relatively slowly over time. Miller's Valley is the childhood home of Mimi, and is a place which she loves.

Miller's Valley is ultimately targeted by the government for a reservoir. While much of the town itself will be spared, the surrounding areas, including countless homes and farms, will be inundated with a lake that will provide both tourism and water for municipal use. Whereas Bud considers Miller Valley home because of his family's roots, memories, and hard work, Miriam does not consider Miller Valley home unless her family is there. For Mimi, Miller's Valley is home both because of the history of the place, her own experiences in the place, and because of family. When Miller's Valley is flooded, she no longer misses it after a while because it no longer exists, and because family is no longer there.

## First Presbyterian Church

The First Presbyterian Church is the focal point of Miller's Valley, both the town and the surrounding valley itself. The Church and its hall serve as a place of worship, a communal gathering place, and a refuge during floods and disasters. Everyone has a favorable opinion of the church, and the minister and his family who run it. Early in the novel, Mimi is sent to the church for safety during a flood, while volunteers tend to those displaced by the flood waters.

## Andover

Andover, Pennsylvania, is a small town not far from Miller's Valley that has been covered up by the initial reservoir constructed by the government, and symbolizes the power of the government to do as it pleases. A sparsely-populated town of only about a hundred people, Andover is the hometown of Cissy and is bought out by the government for the purposes of the reservoir. Not everyone is as glad to go as Cissy, with the government having to force some out.

## 502 housing development

A new development over on 502, near Miller's Valley, is being constructed and supervised by Eddie. The new development is to feature modern suburban housing with



garages, yards, and sidewalks, and it is hoped that the people of Miller's Valley will relocate to the development. Ultimately, some do, but most do not. Especially angry with the development is Bud, for it is like a kick in the gut to have something so new and so uniform replace something so natural and homely as the valley.

## Philadelphia

Philadelphia is a major city in southeastern Pennsylvania, and is a few hours' drive from Miller's Valley. Philadelphia is where Eddie moves, marries, works, and raises a family. It is in Philadelphia that Mimi attends the University of Pennsylvania, where she studies medicine and comes to miss home in Miller's Valley. It is also in Philadelphia that Mimi breaks up with Steven after discovering Steven having an affair. It is in Philadelphia that Mimi is found by Donald, falls in love with him, marries him, and begins a life before moving back to what remains of Miller's Valley.



# Themes and Motifs

## Nothing ever stays the same

Nothing ever stays the same, argues Anna Quindlen in her novel *Miller's Valley*. Time changes things, as Quindlen argues directly through the mouth of Tommy during one of Tommy's visits home, and while speaking to Mimi. Tommy explains that it is stupid to think that things could stay the same, especially when so many things are out of one's control.

Mimi's recounting of her early life – from her childhood through her twenties – is one of many changes. Though most of these changes are not overwhelming, and none are critical for *Miller's Valley* as a whole, they are still life altering in important ways for Mimi. When Mimi is young, she looks up to both her brothers, but Tommy, the troublemaker, only gets worse as he gets older. His heavy drinking and involvement in drugs after his return from the war lead him to be a heavy burden on his family, as his family must change how they do things and go out of their way to take care of Tommy and pick up for his slack, such as by taking in Callie and Clifton.

Although Eddie moving away to work and raise a family is a major change, it does not dramatically alter things at home. Bud, who originally hoped that Tommy or Eddie would one day take over the farm, now begins thinking that perhaps Mimi will. At the same time, Mimi begins experiencing her own changes by way of new experiences as she gets older. This includes falling in love with Steven, losing her virginity to him, and looking forward to marriage with him – though in the end, this does not work out. At the same time, Mimi attends college and begins preparing for a life beyond *Miller's Valley*, a change she never considered much as a child.

The biggest changes in Mimi's life come as a result of her father's stroke, and the great flood in the valley. Her father's stroke causes her to delay going away to college for two years, choosing instead to attend the community college locally so that she can help care for her family. This ultimately leads her on to medical school, a changed direction in life from what she had been considering before. At the same time, the great flood that hits the valley in the spring destroys three houses, and ruins dozens more. At last, the holdouts of the valley decide that they will sell, and their decision to leave finally means the valley will be inundated. As such, *Miller's Valley* as a whole will never be the same again. To many, it will no longer be home.

## Home means different things to different people

Home means different things to different people, argues Anna Quindlen in her novel *Miller's Valley*, though home still matters to everyone. In the novel, Quindlen presents a diverse array of opinions about home, and why it means what it does. Mimi absorbs all of these differences in opinion, which in turn come to influence her own decades later.



To people like Bud, home is as much the place as it is the people who live there. For Bud, home is a question of family roots, memories, and familiarity, in addition to love, experience, knowledge, and something physically shared – the land – that can be passed on from one generation to the next. Bud never once considers selling his land, and even forces out government agents who arrive to offer to buy the land. It is not only those born in the area that have come to love the land as home in such a way, as people like Cissy – born elsewhere – come to share the deep connection to the land and its people the way Bud does.

Others, like Mimi's mother, do not share such considerations of home. To Miriam, home has nothing to do with the place, but everything to do with the people. When Miriam learns that Miller's Valley will indeed be flooded one way or another, she throws her hands up in the air with her statement that the water can cover the whole place. Mimi does not understand what her mother means until much later, as Miriam explains that Miller's Valley ceased to be home when all the family left for other places. Mimi is not rooted to the place, but directly to her loved ones.

Mimi herself is angry with her mother for having such a careless attitude toward the place itself, for Mimi does feel a connection to the past and to the land like her father does. However, this connection is not as strong as her father's, and her missing of Miller's Valley fades over time. This is because Mimi believes she can no longer miss a place that no longer exists. Nevertheless, while her children and grandchildren go to enjoy tourist activities at the lake that was once Miller's Valley, Mimi herself will not go.

## **Family must always be counted upon**

Family must always be counted upon, argues Anna Quindlen in her novel *Miller's Valley*. Family is the one thing that can stand against all else, and can be depended upon against all else. These are not words spoken by any character, but convictions held by Bud and Miriam which are explained through their actions.

Bud and Miriam love one another deeply, and love their family deeply. It is why they work so hard to provide so that their children will have a better life than they themselves have had. It is why they also go out of their way to care for Aunt Ruth, who does not work and has no one else to care for her. A heartbroken shut-in spinster, Aunt Ruth only manages to get by on the kindness of her family, as her bills are covered, her meals are prepared, and company is given to her by her family members.

Bud and Miriam go far out of their way for Tommy. When Tommy gets into trouble after coming back from Vietnam – getting into drinking, drugs, and other criminal activity – Bud and Miriam do everything they can to try to get him back on the right track and try to clean up his messes. This ranges from taking in the mother of his child, and his child, to trying to find him before the state police can after Tommy gets into a vicious fistfight. Yet, when Tommy cannot even come home for Bud's funeral, Mimi is enraged.



Prior to Bud's death, after his first stroke but before the second which finally kills him, Mimi alters her life for her family. With her father a recovering invalid, Mimi chooses to defer going away to college for two years to attend college locally for the time being. This is so that she may help care for her father, the house, Aunt Ruth, and the family farm, knowing that otherwise, her mother will essentially be doing everything alone. Mimi does not mind this at all, because she loves her family deeply and is only happy to help care for the people who have raised her and protected her, giving her a chance at a life they themselves never had.

## **Time changes some people, but does not change others in all ways**

Time changes some people, but does not change others in all ways, argues Anna Quindlen in her novel *Miller's Valley*. In keeping with the theme that time changes everything, the idea that people themselves also change either in large or small ways is also explored through the course of the story. While some people are utterly transformed, others remain the same at heart even though their circumstances may change.

The character that experiences the greatest shifts in change is Tommy. A good-natured troublemaker as a kid, Tommy's teenage years are unremarkable because he is just like most other teens. His entrance into the military cleans him up, and he becomes a respectful and responsible young man. However, his experiences in Vietnam lead him to drugs and drinking when he returns home. He becomes distant, cruel toward his family, gets into frequent trouble, is unappreciative of his family, and ultimately ends up in jail before disappearing. Decades later, Mimi has not heard a word from him.

Mimi herself presents a character that does not change over time. At heart, she remains the kind, intelligent, and family-oriented person she has always been. Her circumstances may change –where she is, who she loves, what she is studying, and what she is doing – but who she is as a person remains uncorrupted by negative changes around her. Eddie, too, remains unchanged by the circumstances of his life. He remains family-oriented, hard-working, and intelligent no matter where he lives or what he does for work. Donald, likewise, remains in love with Mimi, and remains a kind and gentle person no matter where he is or what challenges he is faced with.

Other characters may be transformed in some physically-apparent way by the tragedies and circumstances of their lives, but remain generally who they have always been. Bud suffers a horrible stroke, and though partially paralyzed and with difficulty in speech, Bud still remains a gentle, kind, and family-focused man who does his best to pull his own weight. Aunt Ruth, jilted as a young woman, becomes a shut-in as opposed to the optimistic, outgoing, and sunny person she once was. However, this does not change her love for her family, even though she is at times antagonistic toward her sister.



## People are powerless against the government

People are powerless against the government, argues Anna Quindlen in her novel *Miller's Valley*. As Quindlen argues through the mouths of many of the locals at various points throughout the novel in different ways, the government will do what it wants to do, and the people affected by the governments actions can only be forced to take them. This is certainly the case for the people of Miller's Valley.

The fate of Miller's Valley is preceded by the fate of Andover, the hometown of Cissy. Cissy and her neighbors are forced from their hands for the creation of a reservoir by way of the Roosevelt Dam. Although some are happy to sell and go, others want to stay. These people end up unable to stop the government, and are ultimately forced from their homes. The lesson of Andover is a hard lesson to accept for the people of Miller's Valley.

The people of Miller's Valley resist government pressure to sell for more than a decade. The valley is their home, and they do not want to be forced to leave it. However, the locals can read the writing on the wall. Winston Bally is not going away, but stepping up his efforts to convince people to sell. At last, the Langers consent, and their decision breaks open a dam of sorts that leads to a flood of people leaving.

However, not everyone wants to leave. In order to force the others out, the government uses the Roosevelt Dam to increase the water table in the valley, leading to more frequent and far worse flooding than ever before. Destroyed and damaged homes are too much for even some of the most staunch holdouts to endure, so they are forced to sell. Miriam and Donald's grandfather are among the last to go, as they no longer have a choice against the government and its power.



# Styles

## Point of View

Anna Quindlen tells her novel *Miller's Valley* from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist Mimi in the first-person reflective omniscient perspective. The prologue of the novel clearly sets out the fact that Mimi will be recalling the events of her childhood, teenage years, and early adulthood as they relate to the flooding of Miller's Valley. Because the events being recalled are Mimi's, it is only natural that Mimi herself should tell her own story, for it was Mimi who personally and directly experienced the events she is relating to readers. Mimi's first-person narration gives readers a very personal and very intimate glimpse into those years, as though Mimi was recalling the times to a close friend. The reader is able to see things and understand things as Mimi saw and understood them, and is able to personally relate to Mimi through her thoughts, feelings, and considerations of the times as they unfolded.

## Language and Meaning

Anna Quindlen tells her novel *Miller's Valley* in language that is gentle and reflective. This is done for several reasons. First, the gentle aspect of the language - there is little cursing or coarse language, for example - is reflective of Mimi's own gentle nature and kindness. It is only natural that the language Mimi uses be reflective of her own characterization as a person. Secondly, the gentle language is reflective of Mimi's upbringing, as her parents were quiet, decent, and gentle people who were never hesitant to be kind or to demonstrate love for others. Third, the reflective aspects of the narrative language - such as when Mimi interrupts the narrative with asides (such as on page 111 where Mimi explains she believes in love at first sight, and that Steven would come to be her first love) or in the prologue when Mimi explains on page 8 that she was wrong about things then, 40 years before, that she would only come to understand in time - demonstrates that the events of the novel are being told many years later (four decades later), with Mimi looking back on her childhood, teenage years, and young adulthood.

## Structure

Anna Quindlen divides her novel *Miller's Valley* into untitled, unnumbered chapters, which are grouped in unnumbered, untitled parts, which are themselves preceded and succeeded by a prologue and an epilogue, respectively. The prologue serves to set the stage for the novel that will come, in which Mimi explains what the reader is about to read are the events of the past that Mimi is now reflecting on. The unnumbered and untitled chapters serve as memories recalled from the past, with the idea that a person's memories are recalled without chapter numbers or titles, but simply as different memories. The untitled and unnumbered parts follow the same pattern, but also serve

to help organize the memories by bridging the gap between years and specific periods of time in Mimi's past. The epilogue returns the reader to the present time, with Mimi recalling what became of the major players in the events of her youth, and what her life has become.



## Quotes

Let the water cover the whole damn place.  
-- Miriam Miller (Prologue)

**Importance:** In the prologue to the novel, Mimi sets the scene: Miller's Valley is to be flooded with the living resettled elsewhere so that the valley can become a reservoir. Mimi is enraged with this turn of events, but even angrier with her mother when her mother refuses to fight with the statement that the water can cover the whole place. Mimi feels that, as not only residents of Miller's Valley but as Millers themselves, they should be fighting. Mimi's anger at her mother is understandable, but Mimi later learns is wrong.

Ten, twenty years, this whole place will be different than it is now. It's like, how come we're so stupid, to think that things are going to stay the way they are forever? We should know better, right?  
-- Tommy (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** When Tommy comes home for a visit from the Marines, he and Mimi get to talking about Miller's Valley and how nothing seems to change. Tommy says that everything changes whether people know it or not, and that people who do not think anything will change are stupid. Tommy's predictions of change are a bad omen for Miller's Valley.

I believe in love at first sight.  
-- Mimi (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** As Mimi's seventeenth year comes on, she reveals she believes in love at first sight. This happens when she meets Tommy's friend Steven for the first time. Meeting Steven will open up an entirely new phase in Mimi's life, being his first for most things – from French-kissing her to taking her virginity.

You all rigged it.  
-- Mimi (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** As Mimi studies the topography, water table, and geography of Miller's Valley for a science project, she comes to realize something very important about the Roosevelt Dam. This is that the government has rigged things to ensure that, one way or another, Miller's Valley will become the reservoir they want it to become. Because the government did not originally flood an area large enough for the initial reservoir, the people of Miller's Valley must now pay the price.

Nobody's life is getting ruined.  
-- Mimi (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** When her father has a heart attack, Mimi defers going to state college for



a year. Instead, she will attend the local community college while helping her mother and father around the house and the farm, until her father recovers enough to take back over things. Miriam is horrified by this plan, believing Mimi's life has been ruined and that she will not be able to go away and make something of her life – but Mimi is not worried in the least. She is genuinely glad to be able to help her family.

Somewhere, nineteen year-old girls were going to parties, but I wasn't one of them.  
-- Mimi (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** Following her father's stroke, Mimi not only attends college locally, but devotes all the time she can to caring for her family. This invests her in caring for home in a way that she has never cared for home before. This also reveals just how much family means to Mimi, and how much she is willing to sacrifice in order to love the people who have always loved her.

We're selling.  
-- The Langers (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** As Mimi's college career gets underway, pressure to sell in the valley becomes immense. At long last, the first holdouts to sell emerge. The Langers explain to Mimi and her mother that they will be selling and moving to the development Eddie has overseen. The sell triggers a flood of sales, so that by the time Mimi finishes up her second year in college, half the people in the valley are gone.

I came to find you.  
-- Donald (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** Mimi is stunned when Donald suddenly appears in Philadelphia one day. He explains Miriam has told him where Mimi was, and that he has come to find Mimi. He reveals he has been waiting ten years to do so, and asks her to dinner. This leads, in the end, to them getting married.

How can you just stand to leave?  
-- Mimi (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** After the big storm comes, Miriam and those remaining in the valley have no choice but to sell. The government will force them out, regardless. Mimi is stunned by everything, for the place has been her home and is full of so many memories. She has no idea how her mother can simply sell and leave without a fight.

My family isn't here anymore.  
-- Miriam (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** When Mimi asks her mother how she can stand to just leave, Miriam explains that home to her is a question of family. Because the family has essentially left Miller's Valley, Miller's valley is no longer home. Because the house is now empty



except for Miriam, the house is no longer home. She and her sister Ruth will now move in together, elsewhere.

I didn't want to hear any of it.  
-- Mimi (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** Despite Miriam's positive way of looking at leaving Miller's Valley, and despite all the positive talk of how the valley will be flooded and the tourism industry that will come, Mimi does not want to hear any of it. To Mimi, home is more than just a place or family, but it is memory, tradition, and roots.

I don't really miss the Miller's Valley I used to know, the one in which I grew up, my very own drowned town. It's been gone a long time now, almost as long as my brother has.  
-- Mimi (untitled chapter)

**Importance:** Forty years later, Mimi recalls her time in Miller's Valley fondly, but does not miss it. This is because the Miller's Valley she knew and loved no longer exists, and because it, like her brother, will not be coming back. She has accepted that things are the way they are, and that they cannot be changed. Rather than dwelling on what she has lost, she focuses on what she has – a wonderful family and a wonderful life not far from the old family farm. Mimi knows that home is more than just a place, both in the sense that home is the people and memories that make it as well as the land itself.