

Mislaid Study Guide

Mislaid by Nell Zink

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Plot Summary

“Misland” is an historical social novel by Nell Zink which follows the lives of a married homosexual couple, the lesbian Peggy and the gay Lee, and their children over the course of three decades. When the novel begins, Peggy Villaincourt is a 17-year-old freshman at Stillwater College in Virginia. A lesbian, she unsuccessfully pursues other girls until she meets Lee Fleming, a professor and famous poet eight years older than she is. Lee is a closeted gay, and finds it strange that he is attracted to Peggy. He imagines this must be because she is much more like a boy than other girls, and considers that maybe he has simply been pursuing the wrong kind of girl. Peggy, likewise, finds herself taken aback by how much she enjoys Lee’s masculinity, and his being in control. She considers that the manly qualities she has been looking for in women she has found in a man.

The two begin having sex frequently, during which time Peggy becomes pregnant. The two get married, but their romance quickly wears off as both realize their homosexuality is unavoidable. Nevertheless, they ultimately have two children – a boy named Rhys Byrd “Byrdie” Fleming, and a girl named Mireille, nicknamed “Mickey”. Lee and Peggy become antagonistic toward one another as Peggy’s dreams of education and becoming a famous writer lose out to being a wife and mother, while Lee becomes emotionally controlling and demanding. Eventually, Peggy has enough and leaves Lee. She takes the 4-year-old Mireille with her. They assume the identities of black people in the backwaters of Virginia to avoid Lee. Peggy takes on the name Meg, while Mireille is given the name “Karen” and the birth certificate of a dead black girl Peggy steals from the records office.

Lee and his family hire private detectives to find Peggy and Mireille, but the most ever discovered is that their names have been changed. Meanwhile, Byrd and now-Karen are raised in two completely different ways. Karen is driven to succeed based on merit and academics, while Byrd enjoys being brought up in southern white culture at the end of its era. Byrd ends up railing against his own while still enjoying the benefits of being rich, while Karen refuses to allow her circumstances to affect her future. She works harder. While Byrd goes through a series of girlfriends, dabbles in drugs, and works to improve himself academically, Karen begins seriously dating her best friend, a black boy named Temple, refuses any and all drugs, and gains access to college through scholarships. Meanwhile, Lee continues to work at Stillwater, baffled by the social and cultural changes that range from feminism to antagonism toward whites. Meg commits to dealing drugs to survive, and ends up doing them as well. She falls in love with a feminist professor of women’s studies.

While a senior in college, Byrd’s fraternity hosts a Halloween party in which alcohol and drugs are involved. Temple and Karen attend. Both pass out drunk. Other kids in Byrd’s sorority prepare to gang-rape Karen, but Byrd stops them, sensing something familiar and kind about Karen. He brings her safely back to her dorm. However, an informant in the fraternity, along with a sting operation seeking to make it appear as though the Democrat mayor is as interested in targeting white criminal youths as well as black



criminal youths, causes the prosecution to go after Byrd. As a result, Byrd, Karen, and their parents are forced into court, where they all recognize one another within seconds. Meg tries to rush away, but Temple stops her. Meg, Lee, Byrd, and Karen go out to get dinner together. Over dinner, they discuss the past, and how they all want to move on beyond it.



Chapters 1 – 2

Summary

Chapter 1 – It is 1965. Stillwater College in Virginia is known for its beautiful scenery, lake, and English professor Lee Fleming, a famous poet. Seventeen-year-old Peggy Villaincourt is born north of Richmond to an Episcopal priest who manages a girls' boarding school, and his wife, who serves as secretary and counselor for the girls. Peggy, ever since she was a child, believed she should have been a boy. She remembers how her only real friend was Miss Miller, the gym teacher, who told Peggy she was not meant to be a girl. She remembers how her desire to join the army got her called a “thespian”, which in turn led her to pay attention to the thespians at school – fat girls and boys with scarves. She also remembers how the actor kids corrected her and called her and Miss Miller “lesbians”, leading to Miss Miller being fired. Peggy recalls her mother telling her she had chosen a very difficult life for herself. As her freshman year at Stillwater begins, Peggy cuts her hair short and wears boyish clothing. Peggy's roommate is from Newport News, her father fighting in Vietnam. Peggy develops a crush on a senior girl who rides horses, but the girl does not return Peggy's feelings.

Lee is gay, and his wealthy parents, rather than casting him out and condemning him, have set him up with a house at Stillwater. Lee believes that America is where all the important writing – especially poetry – is happening. He runs the Stillwater Review, a literary magazine, and commutes to work by taking a canoe across the lake. He meets with Peggy, who wants to take his writing workshop. Lee is sexually attracted to her. He wonders if he is truly gay, or merely has been pursuing the wrong kinds of girls. Peggy too feels a sexual attraction to Lee, enjoying how masculine he is. The two become lovers quickly, having sex frequently. Peggy opts to transfer schools so she won't endanger Lee's position, but never does. She learns soon after that she is pregnant, and the two decide to wed.

Lee's oldest gay friend, Cary, helps to plan the wedding. Lee no longer feels sexually attracted toward Peggy, while Peggy dislikes the idea of the wedding and being dependent on someone. Peggy does like speaking to all the famous poets who stay with Lee while visiting the college. She discovers they are all wealthy and upper-class. Peggy herself desires to write a play. She becomes despondent when Lee keeps putting off the wedding, and threatens an abortion if he doesn't marry her. He does so the following afternoon.

Chapter 2 – Lee and Peggy have a baby boy that Peggy names Rhys Byrd “Byrdie” Fleming, though Lee's mother prefers the name Harry. Peggy quickly learns her life as a wife and mother is not intended to go beyond cleaning the house and caring for Rhys. Still, Peggy wants to get a degree and wants to do so in New York. However, as Byrdie grows, Peggy's desire to return to college fades. She blames Lee for it all. On vacations, rather than going to new and exciting places, Lee decides his family will visit the rest of the family. This annoys Peggy greatly. On a tour of Stratford Hall, the



birthplace of Robert E. Lee, Byrdie sees a black woman serving cookies who doesn't look up. Byrdie asks if the woman is a slave, causing everyone to laugh and give him cookies. Lee and Peggy occasionally have sex, ultimately leading to the birth of a daughter, Mireille, nicknamed "Mickey".

One day, Peggy returns home from the grocery store to find her clay sculptures ruined. She drives to the college to confront Lee about it, believing he is to blame, but decides to drive the car into the lake instead. She gets out of the car, only to have Byrdie threaten to tell his father on his mother. Peggy and Lee both feel as if they are living in hell, but Peggy knows she cannot leave him. She has no other options. Lee uses her frustration against her, claiming she is mentally unwell and threatening to call a doctor. He hopes this will drive her away. However, he loves his son dearly and hopes his son will have an amazing life. Peggy finally decides to leave, taking Mireille with her. They find an abandoned cottage in southeastern Virginia, and settle in. She then visits her parents to reveal the separation. Her parents take her side, but she will not accept help from them. She seeks out the birth certificate of a dead black girl named Karen Brown, who died in 1973, and gives Mireille Karen's name.

Analysis

"Misland" is a historical social novel by Nell Zink which follows the lives of a married homosexual couple, the lesbian Peggy and the gay Lee, and their children over the course of three decades. From the start, the novel deals with themes of bigotry and change relating to those who do not fit the novel's traditional model of American citizens – white, straight, sexually uncomplicated, and middle-class. Lee is an upper-class gay poet who teaches university, while Peggy is an adventurous teenage lesbian from the middle-class. Both break the molds of their classes, especially in terms of sexuality, and both will be the recipients of bigoted remarks and commentary.

Lee does his best to keep his sexuality quiet, not merely just for reasons of protecting himself but for reasons of tact and respect. 1965 represented the end of an era in America, when big changes socially and culturally were about to happen, but had not happened yet. As a result, Lee wants to keep in line with his class and his culture by adhering to conventions of the time. Sex was something for the home and in privacy, not to be flaunted in public. Peggy is less reserved, actively pursuing other girls. That Lee and Peggy could end up sexually attracted to one another despite their homosexuality likewise breaks the mold of homosexuality in general.

Sexuality itself becomes an important theme in the novel. Among those things considered sexually straightforward at the time was not only for relationships to occur between men and women, but between men and women of very similar ages. From the start, Peggy pursues older girls, and ultimately engages in a sexual relationship with Lee, eight years older than she is. Apart from their age difference is the fact that Peggy is only 17, and is one of Lee's potential students. This understandably raises eyebrows among readers, but Peggy and Lee do not care at all about what is considered acceptable. Indeed, they do their best to handle Peggy's pregnancy by getting married.



The marriage itself is not a happy one, in large part because both husband and wife are homosexual, and because their personalities do not mesh well. Despite Lee's homosexuality, he wants the traditional family life, while Peggy is not content with dropping out of school to be a mother and a housewife. Ironically, Lee is more conservative even as a gay man because culture then favors men. Peggy feels inferior to Lee, both as a person and intellectually. Lee's emotionally controlling nature does not help Peggy either, and she ultimately decides to leave him. Neither press for a divorce because it is simply something that isn't done, and both fear they will lose out to the other in court somehow. Lee believes the law will take the side of the helpless woman, while Peggy believes the law will take the side of the dominant man.

When Peggy flees, she uses the bigotry of some whites, like Lee, against Lee. She goes into hiding and pretends to be black, something which will confound and obstruct Lee's efforts to find her. She knows that Lee will never look for her if she pretends to be black, and won't demean himself by dwelling among blacks to try to find her. Interestingly, while exploiting Lee's racism, Peggy herself demonstrates a sense of racism by choosing to impersonate another race for her own personal gain. She is taking advantage of one race at the expense of another.

Discussion Question 1

For what reasons does Peggy decide to leave Lee? Do you think she is right in having done so? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Despite the fact that Lee and Peggy are homosexuals of different ages, they are sexually attracted to one another. Why is this so? Does it last? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Peggy decide to take on the name and persona of a black woman? Do you believe her decision to impersonate a black woman is a form of racism in and of itself? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

indelibly, bemused, thespian, cliques, secluded, garret, androgynous, mystified, fraternization, accrue, quand meme, reiterations, infanticide, moralists, chivalry, vulgarity, monosyllabic, reverential, ambiguity, ambivalence, incontrovertible, glutinous, egotistical, indeterminate, sentient, chortle



Chapters 3 – 4

Summary

Chapter 3 – Peggy is careful to keep her home a secret from even her parents. She does not want Lee to find her. Peggy is determined to become a successful playwright, so that she may live wealthy in New York. She decides to write under a pseudonym, commits to writing, and commits to fixing up the cabin. Lee has a warrant issued for Peggy, but the sheriff and deputies are not very concerned because Peggy has done nothing criminal. Lee commits to throwing out anything that belongs to her in the house. Lee is unhappy and angry. Cary suggests he see a psychic to find out where Peggy and Mireille have gone. Lee's parents hire a private investigator. The investigator dislikes Lee and his wealth, but still commits to the search by putting an ad in the paper seeking information about Peggy.

Lee himself searches for Peggy, first in all the large towns and cities they have visited, then by trying to trace her car – the candy apple red 1966 Fairlane. Meanwhile, Lake Stillwater is slowly draining. No one can quite understand why, but Lee knows Peggy is to blame. Peggy assumes the name “Meg” and registers Mireille at school as “Karen”, and black. Meg tells Karen to stand up to bullies and to hit them back if they hit her first. Karen befriends a black boy named Temple Moody as the new few years pass. She longs for a horse, but because of Meg's financial situation, a horse cannot be afforded.

Chapter 4 – Meg knows her financial situation is tight, but she manages to get by. She cannot risk a public job like a cashier or a waitress, knowing Lee might find her. She needs a job where she is as good as invisible, but even that will be difficult to come by. Meg's writing is coming along, but not well enough yet. She begins finding and selling roadkill for a little extra money. She then moves on to selling psilocybin mushrooms to a hippie American Indian named Lomax. She purchases a dog, a Cockapoo named Cha Cha, for protection. Lomax, who is 21, is dating and sleeping with a girl in sixth grade. Meanwhile, Lee raises Byrd to appreciate his class and the marks of higher society. Byrd is taught to ride horses, attend events like steeplechases, and spends his leisure time reading.

Both sets of Byrd's grandparents pay for a private education at a private high school in Orange called Woodberry, the same one Lee attended. Byrd has two roommates – a black middle-class kid from the middle of the state; and the son of a model and a photographer. Byrd asks his father how his mother is doing when Lee drops him off. Byrd quickly explains that he's afraid his mother will visit and embarrass him. Lee gives Byrd a letter to give his mother if she ever does show up. Meg does consider going to visit Byrd, but worries whether or not she'll be remembered or if she'll ruin things somehow. As Karen gets older, Meg tells her little about her father. While hiding Karen from Lee in the first place solved a problem, it now creates a new problem for Meg because Karen is asking questions. Meanwhile, another private detective is hired who reveals that Peggy is going by the name of Meg, while Mireille is going by Karen, and



both are passing as black. The detective explains the search will be hard, and draws up a composite sketch of an older Mireille which is published all over the place. It turns up nothing.

Analysis

The theme of bigotry continues in this section of the novel as Peggy continues to impersonate a black woman, taking advantage of the entire race in order to exploit the prejudices of others. Lee commits to searching for Peggy personally, but as Peggy predicted, Lee will not venture into backwater places where there are large populations of blacks and rednecks. Lee's class and sensibilities leave this dirty work up to hired help, compelling others to pick up where his bigotry leaves off.

Peggy – now Meg – brings Karen up as though she too was black, and pushes Karen to excel in all that she does rather than consigning herself to the fate of identifying as black. Like women, many blacks felt inferior to the dominant class of whites and believe they can never get ahead. There is something of a bigoted and intellectual dishonesty on the part of Meg here who hasn't truly experienced life as a black person, but still pretends to have suffered all the same while she contends that Karen can do just as well as anyone else.

Changes are fast coming to American society. They are beginning to be seen in small ways. The appearance of Lomax, a dedicated drug dealer, indicates the heavy influence drugs will have over the next decade, whereas before, the widespread use of drugs was nonexistent. Byrd's upbringing occurs according to his upper class identity, and he learns to ride horses, attends private schools, and receives the best that society has to order given his race and his class position. It is a privileged status that will not last for long. (Meanwhile, Karen can only dream of owning a horse or wearing better clothing.)

Changes also come to the novel in other ways as well. Meg begins passing along drugs to earn money. Indeed, she ends up doing them as the years pass. Her encounters with Lomax also expose her to his 12-year-old girlfriend. Rather than displaying disgust at such a situation, Meg is unconcerned and accepts it as the new normal. Her own relationship included one of an age difference – though not one illegal or disturbing as this one. Nevertheless, given her own life, Meg feels no compulsion to pass judgment. The refusal to pass a moral judgment on Lomax's life is also representative of the changes coming in society. Whereas in the past, a universal morality helped maintain ethics and keep culture in moral order, the changing times mean moral relativism – different people live differently, and passing judgment on someone else, no matter how despicable their lives might be (drugs and pedophilia), they are not to be judged.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Meg take on work pushing drugs? Is her decision to do so morally defensible in any way, shape, or form? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Meg refuse to pass moral judgment on anyone, including Lomax? Do you believe she is correct in living and letting live, or do you believe there are situations that require moral responses from Meg?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the childhood of Byrd with Karen. How do their lives as children differ, and where are they similar? What accounts for these similarities and differences? Why?

Vocabulary

pseudonym, noblesse-oblige, fantasized, eradicate, megalomaniac, pedantic, contractual obligation, insurmountable, glumly, laconic, dichotomy, promulgated, absentmindedly, impunity, raconteur, manifold, excruciatingly, unrequited, versatile, introspection



Chapters 5 – 6

Summary

Chapter 5 – Byrd is well-liked at school because he doesn't pretend to be anything other than what he is. He keeps his father's homosexuality quiet, preferring not to dwell on it. He also wonders how his mother managed to stay with his father for ten long years. As he has gotten older, Byrd, like most children, finds his father annoying. Lee, meanwhile, feels his time as a poet has come to an end so he shifts into literary criticism. The changing times also bring changes to campus in the way students act and dress, and the way in which conventional authority and institutions are now challenged.

A lesbian Maoist feminist on campus leads a protest against Lee's magazine because he publishes any poetry at all by men. The student editors of his magazine propose an all-women's issue, publicly recited by all editors but not actually printed before a live audience of only women in Richmond. Lee refuses and threatens to take his magazine elsewhere since people who have paid subscriptions expect four printed issues a year. The editors back down. Byrd takes on a girlfriend in college, while Lee does his best to cut back on the drinks, knowing he has been drinking too much lately. He thinks he sees Karen at a restaurant in Norfolk, but it turns out to be a foster child.

Chapter 6 – White flight from the cities brings new suburbs, houses, and white families to the area in which Peggy now lives. She joins the newly formed Parent Teacher Association to advocate for better schools and libraries in them. She is seen as common ground between whites and blacks, and seen as an excellent spokeswoman for the black middle class. She is continually looked to for advice and thoughts. She befriends many of the mothers and begins to talk to them of sex, and about how men, husbands, and society use sex to keep women in their place. Meg pretends her own husband is dead. She learns that one of the women, Diane, is a lesbian. Diane wants Meg's support to get poor black families to move into housing projects to help them escape poverty, but Meg argues that white families don't have to move into housing projects to escape poverty. Diane pushes her political plan, having Meg's cottage condemned, Meg put on welfare, and sent to new housing projects in Centerville. They are hastily built, and poorly maintained. Meg does her best to keep up her business with Lomax, having gone from growing mushrooms to growing marijuana to helping move cocaine. She begins doing drugs as well.

Karen remains friends with Temple. Meg begins ordering books from her new address in Centerville, allowing both Karen and Temple to read them. Meg herself continues to write. Temple's father is a public liberal, but a closet socialist hoping for revolution. Temple's mother, Dee, is a patient realist, while his younger sister, Janice, is gorgeous and popular. One afternoon, Meg discovers a red Fleming's Oil, Gas, and Propane truck in the front yard. The driver recognizes Meg, but Meg buys his silence with cocaine. The driver is killed in a freak auto accident a few miles down the road. For months, Meg is terrified Lee will find her. It hides her other fear that she has a daughter wholly



dependent on her, with what she does for money constantly risking her freedom and her life. Considering Lee was mean but not physically abusive, and fearing that she might have been thrown out or committed, Meg truly wonders if her current situation is worth running. Still, she refuses to change.

Analysis

As times continue to change, bigotry evolves and takes new forms in some places, whereas it truly dissipates in other areas. Byrd, much more a man of his time than his father was of his own times, tolerates his father's homosexuality, even though he still doesn't openly acknowledge it. He recognizes his father is a human being. There is a code of honor still to be observed among the upper classes, even though times have change. One does not sell out or condemn one's own unnecessarily, especially when it comes to family.

Ironically, despite the ever growing openness of gays and lesbians, Lee is more put off by the changes than he is heartened by them. Homosexuality is one thing, but Lee's position as a white male member of the upper elite is being challenged like never before. When Lee grew up, his future seemed assured; now, it is severely in question. His student editors lead a short-lived rebellion against Lee at his magazine which he barely manages to put down, while he must deal with the hideous fashions of the 1970s. Sexual promiscuity and openness about sexuality, as well as illegitimacy rates also increase. Regardless as to whether or not Lee would have been homosexual, sexuality, period, was not something publicly discussed or spoken about. Now, it is everywhere.

The increase of crime and poverty in the cities compels white families to move out to the suburbs. This means that poor blacks and whites will themselves be displaced by suburban communities, and forced into housing projects. Meg experiences this kind of racism firsthand. The poor are forced out of their homes under the guise of relocation and betterment, but the projects are shabby and poorly constructed. Arguably, the poor blacks and whites forced off their land are made even worse in the housing projects they are forced into. The hypocritical part of this is that the housing projects – a public campaign to demonstrate fairness among the races – is itself racist because it disproportionately targets blacks.

Changes occur elsewhere in the women's rights movement, which seems to be gaining more steam than racial equality. The rebellion against Lee's magazine requires an issue of all-women poets and interviews, while the women and mothers that Meg befriends through the PTA speak about how men use everything they can, including dominating women in sex, to keep them in their place. Meg's work as a drug dealer – and now drug user – defy the stereotype that dealers and users of the era are men, and her disturbing business practice utterly corrodes everything socially and culturally expected of a mother. Still, because of the moral relativism of the age, no one challenges Meg or her concept of a stable family. Meg's own conscience wears on her when she is almost caught by a Fleming employee – but in the end, her selfishness and desire for drugs win out.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Meg refuse to stop selling drugs or to change her life even after almost being caught by the Fleming employee, and her own moral crisis?

Discussion Question 2

Although there is more openness about homosexuality in the 1970s than there was twenty years before, Lee is disgusted with the changes that have occurred. Why?

Discussion Question 3

Despite publicity that racism and sexism are on the decline, racism and sexism still occur. Identify and describe three instances of such continued bigotry in this section of the novel, explaining how it affects the plot of the novel.

Vocabulary

derogatory, aplomb, blasé, finagled, sordidness, Brechtian virtues, quintessence, quixotic, polymath, existential, instantaneously, tacitly, inconsequential, sublimating, unregenerate, lucrative, slatternly, repercussions, redolent, angst



Chapters 7 – 9

Summary

Chapter 7 – Byrd attends the University of Virginia, where he is tapped for the FHC, a secret society. He enjoys sleeping with girls, and joins the Theran House fraternity, where the richest kids congregate. There, Byrd gets into drugs. He loses focus on his major in business administration, and begins contemplating things like helping others and running for office. This concerns Lee, who out for drinks with Cary, commiserates on how the Old South is changing for the worse, especially in fashion, the lack of family-owned and responsible businesses, and making money off borrowed money without any real product to show. Karen, meanwhile, turns fourteen although her birth certificate indicates she is fifteen. Temple excels academically, and is nominated to the Governor's School for the Gifted. It helps Temple decide to learn Russian and become a diplomat. Karen's own gifted writing program doesn't help her much. Still, she makes friends with a girl named Angela Mendez, and take a keen interest in literature. She doesn't talk about it with her mother, because her mother is privative.

Lomax, meanwhile, launders his money through his parents' wildlife conservation association, unbeknownst to them. He has them buy land for a wildlife refuge, on which sits the old house of Kenilworth. Lomax moves into this house with his girlfriend and an ex-SEAL now peddling drugs to keep up the trade and to take heavier drugs themselves. Meg goes to visit and continue her dealing and suggests everyone take up tennis because it is a natural high. Meg begins bringing Karen and Temple along to play tennis.

Chapter 8 – Lee worries about his financial situation as his parents begin spending the family fortune on retirement. He tells Byrd to watch his spending. Temple is offered scholarships to historically white colleges across the state, while Karen nervously applies. Both interview with the University of Virginia. Admissions admits Temple, not because he is black, but because he is so intelligent. They admit Karen not only because she is intelligent, but also because they assume she is Temple's girlfriend, and do not want Temple pursuing white girls. Temple gets into reading work by authors like Malcolm X. When Meg buys him the book "Coming of Age in Mississippi", Temple begins questioning whether all races share the same values. He begins to wonder if society doesn't owe black people something for their efforts to the tune of trillions of dollars.

Temple and Karen both come to love college. It makes Meg envy Karen and want to be young again, to have a truly different college experience. Meg meets a woman named Loredana "Luke" De Luca, who teaches women's studies at CUNY, who is writing a novel about a black lesbian playwright. Meg and Luke are instantly sexually attracted to one another, and Luke helps encourage Meg's writing. Meg ends up falling in love with Luke.



Chapter 9 – Temple and Karen are excited to go out on Halloween in Charlottesville and attend a party at which Byrd is also present. A heated discussion is underway about Nietzsche. Byrd brings Temple into the discussion. Temple in turn wants to try some hash, but Karen tells him not to. Byrd recognizes something familiar about Karen, but he can't tell what. Both Karen and Temple pass out drunk. Byrd finds a group of fraternity brothers led by Mike preparing to have sex with the unconscious Karen, but he angrily stops them from doing so. Temple wakes up in his own vomit and urine. Byrd tells him to shower and borrow some of his clothes while he takes Karen home. Temple is humiliated, and vows to go to a revival to give himself to Jesus.

The next day, Mike is busted in a sting for buying LSD by the police, who at the urging of the Democratic mayor worried about reelection, wanted to raid white kids to show he was just and fair. Mike argues that he never resold the LSD, but gave it away to a girl. Karen wakes up safe and sound in her bed in her dorm room. She finds acid in her pocket and seeks Temple out. Both resolve never to talk about the previous night again, then Temple crushes the acid into the ground.

When Mike returns to the house, Byrd gets rid of his own drugs by throwing them out of the window, and having his girlfriend come over to help clean his room. Mike fingers Byrdie for everything. The other boys follow suit, but nothing can be found in his room. Byrd then calls Lee, who picks him up at a gas station. Byrd explains the whole situation, including how he thought Karen was a good kid and didn't want to see her gang-raped. He lawyers up using his Uncle, Trip. Trip says he will work to get the charges expunged.

The police search the house at nine the following morning. One of the house residents is an informant, prompting the guys to come clean quickly. The police seek out Temple, who tells them about Karen. The prosecutor is dismayed to learn Karen is black. The police go to Karen, who shows them where she and Temple destroyed the drugs. Dee comes to yell at her son and Karen, and learns they have slept together for the first time. While doing Karen's hair, Dee realizes that Karen is not black at all.

Analysis

Traditional American culture and values are clearly on the decline in this section of the novel. While there was much that needed change, there was also much that should have been preserved – such as an avoidance of drugs and self-debilitating behavior, something which Karen and Temple both ultimately uphold as a new generation that, like Meg's generation, rejects the values and attitudes of their parents to some degree.

Meanwhile, those raised in the traditional culture but those who are now confronted with changing times either adapt or they fall apart. This is best seen in a Roman-like way in which Byrd and his frat brothers – the richest on campus – live off the glory of their former selves and the former age, trying to avoid falling down a crumbling structure while committing to sex, drugs, and degeneracy. Yet Byrd still retains some sense of



moral class about him, which is among the reasons why he stops the gang-rape of Karen.

Byrd seeks to adapt while many of his frat brothers are content with decline. The world no longer exists for them, and they no longer control the world – so why try? This is exemplified by the fact that their frat – the richest and oldest on campus – has fallen into decay and had their charter revoked. In many ways, this reflects the elite power structure which has socially, culturally, and politically had its own charter for rule revoked since their rule was not inclusive or fair. Byrd insists on carrying on, however.

As more and more blacks and women turn out to vote, and as the values of middle-class America bridge the gap between past and future, the traditional power networks politically also realign. The Democrat Mayor of Charlottesville knows he faces a tough reelection unless he can demonstrate his willingness to go after white as well as black criminals. To secure these votes, a sacrifice must be made – and Byrd is fingered as the sacrifice to be made. Though Byrd's use of drugs, and being around other uses is relatively minor, the fact that he is white is not. The power structure acts in a bigoted and racist way in targeting Byrd because he is white and the perfect scapegoat. This is no longer a challenge to the old order, but a direct assault upon itself in order to maintain whatever semblance of its former self can still be maintained.

Interestingly enough, it is Dee who first discovers that Karen is not black when doing her hair. But what Dee's reaction is to this is not truly known. Whether or not she sees this pretending as racist is unclear. Meanwhile, changes in sexual relationships do not merely come by way of age difference or gender preference, but interracial as well. The relationship that quickly develops between Karen and Temple is, traditionally, even more shocking than homosexuality or severe age differences. It stands to be seen how others will react to this relationship when Karen's identity as a young white woman is revealed. Meanwhile, Temple is admitted to university primarily as a point of merit, of having actually earned it – shattering the idea that a black could only attend college due to quotas. Ironically and racially, Karen herself is accepted because she is black and seems to be Temple's girlfriend in addition to her intelligence.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the Mayor of Charlottesville have his administration so relentlessly target Byrdie? Do you believe this is fair? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways do Byrd and Karen reflect the previous generation of Americans? In what way do they represent their own generation? What do you believe accounts for this divide between the past and the present when it comes to Byrd and Karen?



Discussion Question 3

What is Byrd's reasoning for having saved Karen from being gang-raped? What does this say about Byrd's character as a person?

Vocabulary

subsumed, rubric, lassitude, retro, conglomerate, conviviality, convoluted, prestigious, proletarians, discombobulated, pragmatic, assimilationist, potent, transaction, bestowed, incommunicado, connoisseur, nascent, expunged, obsequious



Chapters 10 – 11

Summary

Chapter 10 – Karen writes to her mother about everything, leading Meg to label Karen a narc. Meg then confesses her true identity to Lomax and his girlfriend. She vows to clean up her life, and gets away from drugs. Karen and Temple begin sleeping together as much as they can. Trip continues to prepare for Byrd's coming court hearing. Mike's story keeps changing, frustrating the prosecution who are already having a hard enough time preparing a case. Still, the chief prosecutor intends to make a big show out of bringing justice to an elite, old, white Virginia family, but a gag order from the judge silences him. The court convenes in early March. Meg and Temple are in attendance and wait in the hallway. Meg is stunned to learn that Byrd is being tried.

As things begin, Karen recognizes Lee, also in attendance, immediately. She begins screaming for her mother and pointing at Lee. Karen and Lee rush together to embrace. The court is amazed. The case is dismissed immediately. Meg tries to flee, but Temple stops her. Meg argues she will never trust Lee again, and she is sure that Karen will now come to hate her because the truth is known. A police officer stops Temple, thinking he is harassing Meg. Meg waves the officer on.

Chapter 11 – Meg and Karen meet Lee and Byrd at a private room in the back of a restaurant. Champagne is brought out. Meg apologizes to Byrd over and over again, but Byrd is quickly forgiving of the past. Still, the family talks things out. Lee is especially upset that Peggy would have been so untrusting of him to have gone into hiding. Byrd wonders what his life would have been like growing up with his mother. Both children are stunned to learn more about their parents, including their homosexuality. Both children conclude their parents are crazy. Lee is impressed with how intelligent Karen is. All four are anxious to get to know one another again.

Lee consents to Karen's relationship with Temple provided Temple stays in school, especially because Karen is actually 16 and not 18 as she previously believed. Byrd spends some time with his mother at the wildlife sanctuary, where he steals Felicia away from Lomax. Byrd and Karen get acquainted, both realizing that Temple and Byrd will end up bankrupting them both pursuing bizarre things –comp lit for Temple, and freelance city planning for Byrd. Family money is used to ensure Karen remains at university when her minority scholarship is put in jeopardy due to knowledge of the court case. Karen grows closer to Lee, and learns to focus on herself rather than just focusing on Temple.

Analysis

As the novel ends, the theme of family emerges front and center as Meg, Lee, Byrd, and Karen reunite at the court case, and afterward at the restaurant. While there is



serious talking that is done, forgiveness is also quick to be given out. Meg at long last has a moral revelation now that the game is up - and she regrets deeply having kept Karen away from her father and brother for so long. There is much learning that must now occur, as Karen and Byrd must learn more about one another and the parent who did not raise them. Still, the fact that the family is able to come together to work through the past 14 years is a testament to the power of love and loyalty among families. Meanwhile, Meg decides it is finally time to clean up her act. She might not be a traditional mother in every sense of the word, but that doesn't excuse her from setting a good example and demonstrating true maternity – not because society expects it of her, but because she owes it to her children.

Elements of racism linger even now in the 1980s, as a police officer stops Temple and Meg to question them on the automatic assumption that Temple is somehow harassing Meg. Yet at the same time, Lee consents to the relationship between the black Temple and his white daughter, Mireille, given that Temple finishes college and given that Mireille remain focused on her own studies. It is further evidence of changing times. While Lee regrets much that has changed, he will not begrudge love to his daughter, no matter if she is underage or if she is dating someone of another race. Human sexuality is human sexuality, according to Lee and Peggy. While their children are rightfully disturbed by the idea of sex with minors, their parents are casual and unaffected by it. There is some disingenuousness on Mireille's part, however, as she is a minor in a sexual relationship, although her lover is only a few years older rather than eight or more years older.

Interestingly enough, despite being raised by her mother, Mireille resembles her father more closely than her mother by way of her strong morals and financial adeptness. Meanwhile, her brother more closely resembles his mother with his temporary indulgence in drugs and his wasteful spending. Lee and Mireille both reflect sadly on the changes that the current generation has wrought, including non-traditional college majors which do not guarantee good jobs. It is a future of uncertainty, but it is also apparent that many of the good parts of the previous generation continue to manifest themselves in people like Mireille. At the same time, Mireille contends that everything that has happened – from how the family met up once again to the way society is headed – is fate.

Discussion Question 1

Which parent do Mireille and Byrd more closely resemble? How so? Why do you believe this is the case?

Discussion Question 2

What concerns do Lee and Mireille share about the present and the future? Why?



Discussion Question 3

Although it takes a while for Byrd to warm up to his mother and his sister, and for Meg to accept that Lee doesn't want to take thing out on her, the family seems to repair itself relatively quickly. Why?

Vocabulary

narc, ostentatiously, garrulously, blatant, nepotism, dialectics, intellection, extricated, autodidact, blandly, amnesty, tabula rasa, moral imperative, ignoble, chatelaine



Characters

Peggy/Meg

Peggy Fleming, nee Villaincourt, later Meg Brown, is born in 1948 to an Episcopal preacher and his wife. Peggy determines early on that she is a lesbian, which her mother explains will make her life very difficult. Peggy doesn't mind. She is tough, intelligent, and has great aspirations to be a writer. She attends Stillwater College, and even though she is only 17, she begins a sexual relationship with Lee Fleming, eight years her senior, that results in an unplanned pregnancy and a wedding. They ultimately have two children, Byrd and Mireille.

Peggy is surprised by her sexual attraction to Lee given that she is a lesbian, but the marriage quickly falls apart due to a clash of personalities, Lee's dominance, and Peggy's unhappiness with being a housewife and mother. She runs away with Mireille, assumes the name Meg Brown, and raises Mireille as a black girl named Karen Brown. Meg turns to selling drugs to keep her afloat financially, and out of the public eye.

Meg/Peggy remains in hiding for 14 years until the court case that involves Karen brings her face-to-face with Lee and Byrd. Meg immediately apologizes for the past, is quickly forgiven, and looks forward to reconnecting with her son.

Lee

Lee Fleming is a famous poet hailing from a wealthy Southern family. A professor at Stillwater College, Lee is secretly gay. Despite this, he is very conservative, and takes great pride in his class and position in society. He is surprised when he finds himself sexually attracted to Peggy, given that he is gay. He considers it must be because she is a different type of girl than he is used to. He ultimately marries and has two children with Peggy, but the marriage does not last. Peggy does not want to conform to the traditional family model that Lee wants. Lee's demands are met with Peggy's departure with Mireille, leaving Lee to raise Byrd on his own. Lee spends 14 years trying to find Mireille and Peggy, but is unsuccessful.

As he waits and raises Byrd, Lee is disgusted by the changes that occur around him – from the pulling down of the upper classes, to fashions, to business to the challenging of his own authority at his own publication, the Stillwater Review.

When Byrd is scapegoated on a drugs charge publicity campaign, Lee attends the trial. There, he sees Mireille for the first time in over a decade, and later reconnects with Peggy. The past is put aside in favor of the future. Byrd is delighted to learn that his daughter shares much of his conservatism, and the two worry about what the future will bring.



Byrd

Rhys Byrd “Byrdie” Fleming is the son and oldest child of Lee and Peggy Fleming, and is the older brother of Mireille. Byrd is a handsome young man, very much aware of his class and position in society – but is thrown off by the countercultural changes sweeping the country. He dabbles in drugs, sleeps with many girls, and does his best to bridge the old world and the new.

Byrd is angered when his mother packs up and leaves home with his sister, and doesn’t see his sister again until she appears at one of his frat’s parties. He prevents her from being gang-raped, brings her safely back to her dorm, and is later fingered by the law enforcement of Charlottesville in a politically-motivated drug sting. The case brings his family back together again.

Mereille/Karen

Mireille Fleming, later Karen Brown, is the daughter and youngest child of Lee and Peggy Fleming, and is the younger sister of Byrd. Mireille is a quiet and inquisitive girl who is forced away from home when Peggy lives. Mireille grows up believing she is black and that her name is Karen. She rejects her mother’s immorality, refusing to do drugs and committing herself to a quality college education.

Mereille befriends and later falls in love with Temple Moody, and attends the University of Virginia where she is nearly gang-raped at a party. She first encounters her father again for the first time in 14 years at her brother’s court case. Like her father, Mireille harbors great moral concerns about the future, but accepts that everything is left up to fate.

Temple

Temple Moody is the best friend and later boyfriend of Mireille. An African-American child, Temple refuses to let racial tensions or class hold him back, believing very much in the American Dream. His merit alone earns him a place at the University of Virginia, where Mireille helps keep him from veering into drugs. They remain dating even after Mireille learns she is white.

Luke

Loredana “Luke” De Luca is a feminist women’s professor of Women’s Studies at CUNY. While on sabbatical in Virginia, she meets and begins sleeping with Peggy. The two end up falling in love, with Peggy considering a move to remain with Luke in New York.



Lomax

Lomax is a drug dealer who meets, befriends, and brings Peggy into the drug trade. He is without any real kind of morality or scruples, for not only does he deal drugs and launder the money through his unsuspecting parents' conservation agency, but he is in a relationship – and having sex with – a 12-year-old girl named Felicia. When Felicia is in her early twenties, she leaves Lomax for Byrd.

Felicia

Felicia is the long-time girlfriend of Lomax. When she is 12 and he is 21, she begins dating and having sex with him. She remains with him for ten years, ultimately becoming disillusioned with the world of drugs and cheap promises. She ends up in a relationship with Byrd when she is in her early twenties.

Mike

Mike is a member of the same fraternity that Byrd heads up. Mike is a rarity in the frat, for his parents are working class people. Still, he indulges in drugs and risks his parents' sacrifices to get him into college. When he is fingered for a drug deal in a sting, he blames everything on Byrd.

Diane

Diane is a PTA member in the new suburbs that are crowding out blacks and poor whites in rural and backwater Virginia. Diane is a lesbian, is active in local politics, and tries to enlist Meg's help in getting blacks and poor whites to move into housing projects under the guise of helping the disadvantaged, when in reality, Diane is racist. Meg refuses, and is forced out of her home and into a housing project.



Symbols and Symbolism

Poetry

Poetry is written by Lee and the contributors to his magazine. Lee is famous for his poetry, which in turn helps earn him a teaching spot at Stillwater College. Lee's poetry is admired by many of his female students, including Peggy. After a few decades of writing poetry, Lee feels as if he no longer has anything good left to say, so he moves on to literary criticism.

Ceramic sculptures

Ceramic sculptures are crafted by Peggy at the college. They are often blue, reflect her depression at being a housewife, and allow her a creative and emotional outlet. When Lee decides to throw them out, Peggy has had enough, and decides to leave him.

Karen Brown's birth certificate

Karen Brown's birth certificate is obtained by Peggy at the county records office when she pretends to be there to pick up something for her father. The birth certificate is for a black girl who has died at the age of four. It becomes the cover for Peggy to change her name and her daughter's name, and to go undercover and live as African-Americans to avoid Lee.

Conservative clothing

Conservative clothing – including polos and buttoned shirts – is worn by Temple Moody as he gets old and is able to choose his own styles. His rejection of the casual clothing of his day is a rejection of the extreme racial beliefs of the day, since Temple believes in merit and the American Dream. Temple gains access to the University of Virginia based not on his being black, but on his intelligence and good grades. He continues to wear conservative clothing through college as a result.

Drugs

Drugs are used to an alarming degree in the novel by many of the characters. Lomax, Felicia, and Peggy are dealers and users, while Byrd dabbles in drugs. Everything from mushrooms and marijuana to cocaine and LSD are used and sold. They are a sign of the changing times and a breakdown in the moral structure of the country. However, Lee and Mireille both reject drugs in any way, shape, and form, and it is Mireille who helps keep Temple away from using drugs.



Money

Money is a motivating factor for Peggy and Lee during the novel. Lee's meager salary as a writer and professor is supplemented by his parents and the family fortune, which is also relied upon to send Byrd to college. Peggy, who refuses to take a public job and risk being seen and reported to Lee, takes to dealing drugs to make money. This disgusts Mireille, ultimately prompting her to reject drugs as she ages.

Fashions

Fashions change as the times change. The fitted, traditional, and conservative fashions of the 1950s and mid-1960s give way to jeans, baggy clothing, bizarre colored outfits, and unusual clothing of the late 1960s and 1970s. The change in fashions are alarming to Lee, who sees it as a physical manifestation of the moral, social, and cultural decay of the country.

New college majors

New college majors rule the day on college campuses in the 1970s. These non-traditional college majors include Women's Studies, Compositional Literature, and Freelance City Planning. Lee is disturbed by the majors because they mark a departure from steady work to uncertain chances of finding work. Temple majors in Comp Lit while Byrd majors in Freelance City Planning. Lee realizes that this means Byrd will be dependent on him for money for years to come, while Lee cautions Mireille to manage her and Temple's finances carefully.

Stillwater Review

The Stillwater Review is a quarterly journal of poetry founded and published by Lee through Stillwater College. It is a student-run publication that turns into a nightmare for Lee when its editors all become members of the counterculture. When they seek to print only three issues, Lee has had enough of their changes and threatens to remove the magazine. The editors back down.

VSCA

Virginia Squirrel Conservation Association is an environmental, tax-exempt group begun by Lomax's parents. Lomax's parents are upstanding, moral people who have a dedicated interest in saving the Virginia Squirrel. They unknowingly launder money for Lomax, who supports the agency and encourages them to buy a preserve of land on Virginia's Eastern Shore. He uses the property as a base for his drug dealing operations, and as a place to live.



Settings

Stillwater College

Stillwater College is a rural Virginia all-girls' college in central Virginia. It is known for the massive pond which borders campus, across which Lee lives in an old house. Stillwater is a pleasant, inviting, and relaxing college and is the perfect place for Lee to write his poetry, run the Stillwater Review, and to teach classes. Peggy attends school at Stillwater, and it is there that she and Lee begin a sexual affair that leads to marriage and family. Meant originally as an escape and a chance to better her education, Peggy ends up feeling trapped by Lee and the college, ultimately driving their car into the lake, damaging the lakebed, and causing it to drain.

Virginia backwater

The Virginia backwater country is where Peggy and Mireille move when Peggy leaves Lee. There, they find an old, abandoned cabin and set it up as home. They assume the identities of light-skinned African-Americans, and live there quietly for several years. Eventually, white flight from the cities leads to new suburbs and forcing blacks and poor whites off their land in the rural areas of the state. As a result, Peggy and Mireille are forced to move into cheap urban housing projects.

Centerville

Centerville is an urban housing project constructed for rural blacks and poor whites to move into when they are forced off their land for suburban housing. Centerville is poorly and hastily constructed, proof of gentle neglect and thinly-veiled racism. Peggy and Mireille live in Centerville for years until the court case which brings the family back together.

Charlottesville

Charlottesville is a city in central Virginia which plays host to the University of Virginia, and becomes the city where Byrd, Temple, and Mireille live to attend school. Charlottesville is beset by changing times and a shifting political power structure as more and more blacks, women, and poor whites are beginning to vote. The Democrat Mayor sees his old power base slipping away, and in an effort to keep his seat, seeks to show he is racially fair, and targets Byrdie for prosecution in a drug crime.



Virginia's Eastern Shore

Virginia's Eastern Shore lies across the Chesapeake Bay, and is separate from the Virginia mainland. The Eastern Shore is less populated, more rural, and is the perfect place for Lomax to set up a house and drug operations. Laundering money through his unsuspecting parents' conservation agency, he has them buy a huge parcel of land to devote to wildlife. The land also contains a beautiful old house that Lomax transforms into a home for himself and Felicia, and to serve as the center of his drug trafficking.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Mislaid” by Nell Zink. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Family can be found consistently throughout the novel, and family affects the plot of the novel in various ways. Indeed, the presentation of the family exists in both a traditional, and nontraditional way.

In a traditional sense, Lee, Peggy, Byrd, and Mireille present a quintessential portrait of the American family: a mother, a father, and two children in a beautiful home. Certainly Lee and Peggy are devoted to their children, but not to one another. Lee and Peggy are a nontraditional married couple, because Lee is gay and Peggy is a lesbian. Likewise, Peggy never wanted to be only a wife and mother, a role she now finds herself compelled into. Peggy rebels against this normality, and against Lee’s dominance in the household by leaving him.

Divorce is practically unheard of in this time period, so divorce is not something Peggy even considers. Taking a public job will potentially expose her to Lee, so Peggy opts to pretend to be black, deal drugs, and to live under assumed names to avoid detection. Peggy’s desire to avoid Lee is more a matter of selfishness than concern about her daughter, as the narrator notes. Likewise, Peggy’s decision to deal and do drugs is a tremendous detriment to her capabilities as a mother. Peggy could very easily be killed or arrested doing what she does – and this would in turn leave Mireille defenseless. Peggy might not be a traditional mother in every sense of the word, but that doesn’t excuse her from setting a good example and demonstrating true maternity – not because society expects it of her, but because she owes it to her children.

Lee does his best to be a traditional father to Byrd, setting as moral an example as he can and ensuring that Byrd goes to college. This is ultimately reflected in Byrd’s decision to use his life to help the lives of others, even if such work is not the steady kind of employment that Lee hoped his son would find. When the family is reunited in court, and when they eat at a restaurant together afterwards, they are all anxious to put the past behind them and patch things up, even though Lee and Peggy will not get back together. Both parents will continue to support both of their children through college. Interestingly, despite being raised by Lee, Byrd takes after his mother, being more free-spirited while Mireille is more conservative and morally conscious like her father.

Sexuality

Sexuality is an important theme in the novel “Mislaid” by Nell Zink. Sexuality involves not merely the act of sex, but the choice of sexual partners. Zink and her characters



challenge conventional norms of sexuality throughout the novel, ranging from gender, to race, to age. No sexual stone is left unturned in the novel.

Lee and Peggy are themselves homosexual. Lee prefers men while Peggy prefers women. They defy the conventional norm that men and women should like one another. However, they go on to defy assumptions about homosexuals when Lee and Peggy are sexually attracted to one another. While Peggy aggressively pursues female sexual partners openly, Lee keeps his homosexuality quiet, even when homosexuality becomes more widely accepted in society. This is due to the fact that traditional morality maintained sexuality was a private thing meant for the home, and not to be spread in public.

The relationship between Lee and Peggy also challenges the conventional norm of dating someone close in one's age range. Lee is eight years older than Peggy. While Peggy is 17 and is at the age of consent, to have sex with her professor is a moral quail that Lee and Peggy seek to solve by having Peggy transfer schools. They end up married instead. The age of consent is likewise challenged later in the novel when Mireille, at the age of 16, begins sleeping with Temple, who is 18. The age of consent is further challenged by the relationship between the 12-year-old Felicia, and the 21-year-old Lomax. Disturbingly, neither Lee nor Peggy are concerned with such sexual activity, while their children are both unnerved by it.

Age difference and homosexuality pale in comparison, however, to interracial relationships. Of all the sorts of sexual relationships frowned upon, this was considered to be the worst. However, by the time that Temple and Mireille begin dating, such concerns are largely a thing of the past. Lee consents to his daughter dating Temple – even though she is underage and even though he is black – provided Temple and Mireille stay in school. Lee does not want his daughter to end up like her mother; and as a result, Mireille focuses less on her relationship and more on school.

Change

Change is an important theme in the novel "Misland" by Nell Zink. Change in the novel occurs primarily along social and cultural lines, in which the status quo is challenged and usually done away with. Sometimes it is for the better, sometimes it is for the worse. While some seek to adapt to, or defy the times, others refuse to try to fight the changes. Lee is most deeply affected by the changes.

When the novel opens in 1965, the tail-end of the days of the ruling white upper-classes are in sight, as are the traditional morality and ethics of America. Over the next few decades, everything changes in dramatic ways. When the novel begins, Lee is a closeted homosexual. He keeps his sexuality private not merely because homosexuality is frowned upon, but because sexuality in general is something that is not meant to be public. Likewise, Meg's aggressive pursuit of sexual pleasure becomes commonplace from the late 1960s on. This leads to an alarming number of illegitimate children and the



growth of foster care – something which terrifies Lee when he thinks he sees his daughter at a restaurant parking lot.

Lee's position as a white man, unchallenged in the mid-1960s, is totally in doubt by the 1970s. He is challenged at his own publication, the Stillwater Review, by feminist editors who want to totally rework the magazine and its method of publication. Lee barely manages to hold onto the reigns by threatening to pull the magazine completely if the format is changed too drastically. Meanwhile, the challenging of old styles and conventions is seen manifested in the outrageous fashions of the era, which Lee comes to be appalled by.

Likewise, the assurance of the upper-classes in running society is gone. This is best seen through Byrd's fraternity brothers, who would rather do drugs than try to succeed in college, for they believe they are no longer relevant or necessary in the world. They would rather ride the decline than try to return uphill. Byrd, though he has done drugs, refuses to be a part of the decline, and struggles to remain on top by merit rather than by class. Mireille, like her brother, is disgusted by the times. She rejects out of hand any and all drugs and their use, and remains focused on her studies. Temple, too, refuses to accept either that the American Dream is dead or impossible to him as a young black man. He dresses conservatively and earns admission to the University of Virginia by merit rather than filling a racial quota.

Bigotry

Bigotry is an important theme in the novel "Mislaid" by Nell Zink. Bigotry – harboring views of prejudice towards others different from oneself – is rife throughout the novel. Bigotry exists in various forms ranging from racism and sexism to sexuality. The bigotry in the novel deeply affects society and culture at large, and directly affects some of the characters in the novel. Some is overcome, while some is not.

When the novel begins, homosexuality is frowned upon. Homosexuals – especially gay men – are referred to as "faggots", and are often discriminated against. Lesbians are referred to as "dykes" and are also often discriminated against. This is among the reasons that Lee chooses to keep his own homosexuality quiet, and is what causes Peggy's mother to explain her life will be difficult as a lesbian. However, Peggy is undeterred, and aggressively pursues other women. However, by the end of the novel, attitudes toward homosexuality have largely shifted. Homosexuality is not condemned in the same way that it once was.

When Peggy marries Lee, traditional culture maintains that men are to be the head of house and to go to work while women manage the home and the family. Peggy never wanted to only be a wife and mother, and wanted to continue her education. It is assumed by Lee, and by prevailing convention, that Peggy should manage the home and her children. It is a mild form of bigotry that ends up driving Peggy crazy, and helping lead her to decide to leave Lee.



Racism is also rampant in the novel. Lee would never associate among blacks early in the novel, which is among the reasons why Peggy to decides to take on the identity of a black woman and live among blacks. Interestingly, while exploiting Lee's racism, Peggy herself demonstrates a sense of racism by choosing to impersonate another race for her own personal gain. She is taking advantage of one race at the expense of another.

Peggy, other blacks, and even poor whites are forced out of rural areas and into housing projects for companies to build new suburban developments. The projects are hastily and shabbily constructed, a gentle neglect and demeaning vestige of racism. The Democrat Mayor of Charlottesville decides to racially target a member of his own white social class in a sting operation in order to prove he is not racist. Temple, however, rejects any kind of racism, believing ethics and values to be universal. He truly believes in the American Dream, regardless of race. Lee himself ultimately comes around, giving his blessing to Temple and Mireille to date one another at the end of the novel.

Fate

Fate is an important theme in the novel "Mislaid" by Nell Zink. Fate is the idea that there is no such thing as human free will, that all actions, events, and outcomes are predetermined, and will happen no matter what people try to do about them. In the novel, Mireille is a deep believer in fate, and she explains that fate can only ever be properly understood in retrospect.

It is fate, she believes, that two homosexuals of the opposite sex end up marrying members of the opposite sex. It is further fate that these two – Peggy and Lee – should have two children, Byrd and Mireille. Because of their homosexuality and the expectations they have of one another, it could easily be seen that the marriage wouldn't work out, and that Peggy would leave. As children, Byrd and Mireille have little choice or say in the matter of what happens to them.

It is fate, Mireille further believes, that both children should be raised by parents with whom they share opposite characteristics. Mireille retains conservative moral values and common sense like her father, while Byrd is free-spirited and morally ambiguous like his mother. It is fate that both brother and sister should attend the same college, Mireille believes, and it is fate that she should attend her brother's frat party at which time they will have seen each other without knowing it for the first time in fourteen years.

Mireille goes on to believe that it is fate that a sting operation mandated by changing politics and changing times should lead Byrd, as head of his frat, to be put on trial for drug charges. This in turn directly involves Mireille and her mother, leading to a reuniting of both halves of the family. All this would never have happened if Peggy and Lee had not become sexually attracted to one another in the first place. Mireille is thus not upset about the past, but is anxious to see how the future turns out.



Styles

Point of View

Nell Zink tells her novel “Mislaid” in the third-person omniscient narrative mode from her own point of view. The third-person narrative voice provides a unifying link between various characters, their backstories, and subplots, as Zink traces the lives of not only Peggy and Lee, but of Byrd, Mireille, Temple, Lomax, Felicia, and others. Likewise, the omniscient aspect of the narrative allows the narrator, and the reader, to know what is going on at all times and in all places in the novel. This leads to a better and broader understanding of events as they unfold in the novel. Likewise, Zink inserts her own thoughts about the narrative as she tells the story. For example, in Chapter 4, Zink poses the question directly to the reader as to whether or not Meg is selfish, and responds succinctly that she is. This helps the reader to better understand the novel and the characters in it.

Language and Meaning

Nell Zink tells her novel “Mislaid” in language that is educated but casual and straightforward as well. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the educated aspect of the language is drawn from the fact that all of her characters – some especially like Lee and Temple – are very well educated. The language they use is reflective of their levels of education. Second, the casual and straightforward nature of the language used is reflective of both the time in which the novel was written (the mid-2010s) and the era in which the novel takes place (the 1960s through the early 1980s), when casual and straightforward language rapidly replaced more traditional and formal language. This adds a sense of realism and authenticity to the novel’s setting, and makes it easily accessible for readers in the 2010s.

Structure

Nell Zink divides her novel “Mislaid” into eleven consecutive, linear, chronological, and numbered chapters from 1 to 11. This simple and straightforward approach to the novel’s structure stands in contrast to the novel’s multifaceted approach to numerous characters, backstories, and subplots. This allows the reader to more easily traverse the events of the novel, moving from one chapter’s situations to the next chapter’s situations. This also allows the plot to rapidly progress as needed, as months and sometimes years are passed by between chapters. The number of chapters – 11 – are an odd number, reflective of the idea of being mislaid. Rather than two equal halves making a whole in the form of Lee and Peggy, they are two unequal halves whose differences mislay them together, and mean they cannot make a whole.



Quotes

You have chosen a very difficult life for yourself.

-- Peggy's mother (Chapter 1 paragraph 15)

Importance: When Peggy's mother learns Peggy is a lesbian, she doesn't become angry or enraged with Peggy, but casually notes that Peggy's life is going to be difficult. Peggy herself, as a freshman at college, still does not totally understand her lesbianism, as do many other people. What is known, however, is that the life Peggy will have will be very difficult, for society at large is not accepting of homosexuality.

Each was mystified, but for very different reasons.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 64)

Importance: The sexual attraction that develops between Lee and Peggy confuses both of them. Peggy is a lesbian while Lee is gay. Lee imagines that he has simply been attracted to the wrong kind of girl, while Peggy's desire to dominate another girl like a man has been lost against an actual man – and now she desires to be dominated.

She was made to bring out the baby and accept praise for her work as if she were a being of a slightly lower social class – which she was. A woman.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 25)

Importance: Here, the narrator explains how Peggy moves into motherhood. She loves her baby, but hates how her entire life has now been confined to that of mother and housewife. Even among gay men, as a woman, Peggy is relegated to a lower class. It is both ironic and hypocritical that those suffering a lack of rights – gay men – should in turn deny rights and decency to others.

He was in hell. She was in hell. Yet she refused to leave him. She couldn't leave him.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 63)

Importance: Lee and Peggy both feel as if they are living in hell. They are denying who they truly are, which is bad enough already, but now that they are angered and frustrated by their present situation, things are only getting worse. But things are worse for Peggy herself because she knows if she leaves Lee, she has nowhere to go and no way to support herself or her children.

I'm going to call a doctor. You're not well.

-- Lee (Chapter 2 paragraph 63)

Importance: Lee has more options in life than Peggy does. He is a white male living in the South, and even though he is closeted, he still has more rights and options than Peggy does. He hopes she will leave, and if not, she knows he will be able to get her committed to a psychiatric hospital with no problem. It demonstrates bigotry and



unfairness with respect to equality between the sexes, and further underscores the irony and hypocrisy of Lee's position.

He would never imagine her fleeing a rural backwater for its murkier depths.
-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 39)

Importance: Peggy's decision to take a place in the country is a blessing. She knows Lee will look for her in larger towns and cities –from Fredericksburg to Washington, D.C. – but knows he will never seek her out in back country. It buys her time, but not much else. She must still care for herself and her daughter, and her prospects are grim at best.

Meg's financial situation was delicate.
-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: Having assumed the identities of a black mother and child, Meg and her daughter live as frugally as they can. She has about thousand dollars saved up, but this won't last if an emergency comes along. She realizes at long last that she needs an actual job. But she will need a job where she isn't in the public eye, so that Lee may not find her.

Hiding Karen from her father: It might not solve any problems she currently had. But once upon a time it had solved a problem, and now it prevailed by force of habit.
-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 126)

Importance: As Karen gets older, she begins to ask questions about her father. Meg refuses to answer them, and say very little about Lee in order to ensure that her daughter will not blow their cover, or go off in search of Lee. Likewise, Meg does not want to have to be forced to return to Lee, or to change her life as it is turning out. She doesn't want to risk Karen's upbringing being influenced by Lee, either.

Here a person might ask: Was Meg self-centered or what? Meg was self-centered.
-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 128)

Importance: Meg's insistence on keeping Lee away from Karen brings to light questions about Meg herself. The narrator directly tackles these questions head-on. The narrator reveals that Meg's work to keep Lee out of the picture isn't merely about raising Karen or keeping Lee out of her life, but because Meg is selfish. She doesn't want her life to change no matter what her daughter may or may not want.

Here she was, on her own with a little daughter entirely dependent, surviving in a way that could get her sent up for a near lifetime, or even killed. And all to protect herself from what?
-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 120)

Importance: As Meg's life evolves, so too do her ways of earning money. Not wanting to risk a public job, she takes to moving hard drugs, principally cocaine. She has an



encounter with a man who works for Lee's parents' oil company which terrifies her, because the man recognizes her. Meg's fear of being found out temporarily overcomes her fear of ramifications from earning money. She knows dealing drugs is a dangerous thing that could result in jail or death, a serious situation all brought about by Meg's selfishness and her desire to avoid difficulties with Lee.

I'm so sorry.

-- Meg (Chapter 11 paragraph 5)

Importance: After the court case is dismissed, Lee invites Meg and Karen out for dinner. Meg is distraught over everything that has happened, and so she apologizes to Byrd over and over again for everything in the past. Byrd quickly forgives her, anxious for the next phase in their lives.

Everything that happens is predetermined. We just don't know how until afterward.

-- Karen (Chapter 11 paragraph 94)

Importance: While talking to her mother about the way everything has turned out, Karen reveals she holds no blame or anger toward anyone for what happened. She reveals that this is because she believes in fate, that things happen as they are meant to happen – otherwise her family would never have been united through a court case after she and her brother met at the same party in the same town in the same state. This underscores the theme of fate in the novel.