

Modern Lovers Study Guide

Modern Lovers by Emma Straub

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Contents

Modern Lovers Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Part One, One - Fifteen.....	5
Part One, Sixteen – Part Two, Twenty-Eight.....	10
Part Two, Twenty-Nine – Forty-Three.....	15
Part Two, Forty-Four – Part Three, Fifty-Nine.....	20
Part Three, Sixty – Part Four, Ephemera.....	25
Characters.....	29
Symbols and Symbolism.....	32
Settings.....	35
Themes and Motifs.....	37
Styles.....	42
Quotes.....	44



Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers to the 2016 Riverhead Books/Penguin Random House Hardcover Edition of *Modern Lovers* by Emma Straub.

Modern Lovers is a contemporary novel by Emma Straub. It follows the daily struggles of Zoe, Elizabeth, and their respective families. Elizabeth and Zoe have known each other since they attended Oberlin College, where they, along with Elizabeth's now-husband Andrew and a young woman named Lydia Greenbaum formed a band called Kitty's Mustache. It was during this time that Elizabeth penned the words to the song "Mistress of Myself" about women taking charge of their own lives. It was also during this time that Elizabeth and Andrew began dating, while Andrew slept with Lydia a number of times. Ultimately, Andrew moved in with Elizabeth, and Lydia left college, going on to become a famous singer. Not long after college, Lydia asked for the rights to perform "Mistress of Myself" as a singer in exchange for copyright and credit rights to Elizabeth and the others. Two years later, Lydia died of a drug overdose.

In present-day Brooklyn, Zoe and Elizabeth live within walking distance of each other. Zoe, a black lesbian, is married to a white Jew named Jane. The two have a daughter, eighteen year-old Ruby, who was conceived and carried by Zoe with sperm from Jane's brother. Zoe and Jane own and operate a restaurant called Hyacinth, while they fret about Ruby being rejected from every college she has applied to. In reality, this is because Ruby intentionally sabotaged herself by writing essays about how much she did not want to attend college because she would rather experience the world. At the same time, Zoe and Jane's marriage has hit the rocks as both seem distant from the other and unable to connect and be close. Elizabeth, white and straight, has been married to Andrew, also white and straight, for years, and the two have a seventeen-year-old son named Harry. Elizabeth works in real estate while Andrew is unemployed. Harry is in love with Ruby, and desperately wants to date her.

Elizabeth is contacted by Hollywood producer Naomi Vandenhoovel, who wants the rights to "Mistress of Myself" signed over so that a biopic can be made about Lydia. Elizabeth and Zoe quickly agree to this, but Andrew refuses. He claims this is because he does not want to see Lydia turned into glorified hero, when in reality, she was a jerk. Andrew actually opposes the movie because he is worried his cheating on Elizabeth will be revealed. In order to get things moving, and because she is frustrated with Andrew, Elizabeth forges his signature. Andrew, meanwhile, begins taking yoga classes at a new center called EVOLVEment, where Andrew befriends the owner, Dave. Elizabeth takes Andrew's hanging out with people half his age as a sign of a marriage in trouble and as proof that he is on the verge of going through a midlife crisis.

Zoe and Jane begin seeing a therapist to try to make their marriage work, while Ruby and Harry begin dating. Slowly, Zoe and Jane are able to work through their differences and reconnect. Meanwhile, Ruby's ex, out of spite, sets fire to Hyacinth. Ruby is able to call for help just in time to prevent structural damage. Harry comes to propose to Ruby, but Ruby turns him down so she can go and experience Mexico. The truth comes out



both about the signature and Andrew's past when Naomi comes to visit, leading Elizabeth and Andrew to both be angry with each other, and to feel guilty about the things they have done. Andrew and Elizabeth decide to see a therapist to ensure their marriage will continue to work. Newspaper clippings at the end of the novel reveal that Zoe and Jane reopen Hyacinth as a gourmet bakery instead, while Ruby opens an American pizza place in Mexico. Harry goes to be an English graduate student, and is preparing to write a novel. Andrew and Elizabeth work through things, with Andrew volunteering for Big Brother and Elizabeth coming to write new music for which she gains fame.



Part One, One - Fifteen

Summary

Part One: Ruby Tuesday

A new Mary Ann O'Connell Real Estate listing is presented for a large Victorian home in Prime Ditmas Park, Brooklyn, which includes five bedrooms and a two-car garage.

One – It is June. Zoe hosts the book club at her house. Elizabeth walks the half-block to her house, having been best friends with Zoe for years. Many years before, the two, along with Elizabeth's husband Andrew (then-boyfriend) and two other young men had rented the very same house. Elizabeth thinks about how Zoe's wealthy parents purchased the house for her after their lease had run out. Zoe welcomes Elizabeth in, happy to see her. Zoe calls her teenage daughter, Ruby, downstairs to say hello. She will be graduating on Thursday and intends to wear an old white dress belonging to Zoe. Zoe says it is still up for debate.

Two – With Elizabeth out, Andrew tends to their teenage son, Harry. Harry is an indoors-preferring introvert, much unlike Andrew himself at a young age. They decide to order pizza for dinner. Andrew thinks about how he and Elizabeth had always wanted more children, but they never came. Andrew regrets that Harry will soon be taking the SATs, knowing his son is almost fully-grown.

Three – Ruby reflects on hating having to have taken the SATs, and how much she hates high school. She finds them both extensions of the patriarchy, like Whitman, the private school she attends. She resents much in her life, such as getting into none of the schools she has applied for, and so must take a gap year. She wonders if it is because she is a black Jew with lesbian mothers (whom she calls Mom and Mum). Ruby's mothers own a restaurant three blocks away. Ruby gets a text message from nineteen year-old Dust, asking her to meet at the playground at 10. She responds that she cannot because her mother's book club is over, though in reality, it is because she has been broken up with Dust for a few weeks, having decided his street corner routine was not her thing. Ruby already hates the summer, and it has not even started yet.

Four – By eleven, the book club meeting is over and some of the women have remained behind to help clean up. Among them are Allison and Ronna, new to the neighborhood, both having purchased homes through Elizabeth. Elizabeth also helps Zoe clean up as Allison and Ronna leave. Elizabeth later reveals to Zoe that someone is interested in making a movie about Lydia Greenbaum, who formed one part of the band in which Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew were in many years before. It is revealed that Lydia went on to become a famous musician but died of a drug overdose at age twenty-seven. Now, the rights to the song "Mistress of Myself," written by the band but which made Lydia famous, are being sought. Andrews wants to say no, Elizabeth reveals –but all former bandmates would have to agree to sell the life rights for it to work. Zoe, however, is all



for such an undertaking. She then reveals that she and her wife (Jane) are talking about getting a divorce again. She hugs her dog, Bingo, and begins to cry. Elizabeth then hugs Zoe.

Five – Ruby is one of only twelve minority students in the senior class at Whitman Academy on Prospect Park West. Zoe drives Ruby over to the ceremony, but traffic is bad. Jane stays home. Zoe thinks about meeting Lydia at Oberlin College and forming a band with her where she played drums, Andrew played bass, Elizabeth played guitar, and Zoe played both guitar and piano. At the school, Elizabeth and Harry welcome Zoe and Ruby. Harry, who has a crush on Ruby, can barely look at her. When Ruby suddenly goes across the room to talk to a boy, Harry inadvertently says it is Dust, Ruby's boyfriend. They appear to be arguing. Harry intercedes, knocking Dust to the floor, and causing him to scramble out of the building. Ruby helps Harry up and calls him her hero.

Six – That night in bed, Elizabeth tells Andrew she cannot believe Harry attacked someone. Andrew is not too concerned. Elizabeth turns the conversation to Lydia and the song rights. It causes Elizabeth to think about meeting Andrew in college, and how the two had instantly fallen in love. Elizabeth reflects on writing the lyrics to “Mistress of Myself” after reading Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, with the idea being that women will be in control of their own lives. Elizabeth remembers when Lydia asked to license the rights to the song, and how everyone agreed because they did not know what would happen. Elizabeth recalls how Andrew regretted the version that Lydia put out, while Elizabeth did not mind because she felt music belonged out in the universe. In the present, Elizabeth has no regrets. She enjoys her life as it is.

Seven – Jane begins sleeping in the guest room, tipping Zoe off that her mothers are having problems. The summer comes on in full swing. Jane thinks about how perfect things were in the past, and now how much it hurts to have to sleep on the old futon in the guest room. Jane wonders if Ruby leaving home for college would give her and Zoe more space to figure things out. It is revealed that Jane and Zoe are a mixed marriage: Jane is a white Jew from Long Island. She hopes it is not too late to figure things out.

Eight – Harry attends an SAT prep course on Saturday morning at the karate school on Church Avenue. Ruby sits down beside Harry. Harry apologizes for the graduation incident. Ruby tells him not to be sorry, because it was awesome. The teacher, a young woman named Rebecca, introduces herself and says they will all be together for the next eight Saturdays. Ruby is bored by Rebecca’s energy.

Nine – Elizabeth goes to see Zoe at Zoe’s house to see how Zoe is holding up, and because Zoe has asked her to assess the value of the house and help Zoe find a new place. Zoe explains that she never thought she and Jane would last so long, and that now, things are breaking down. They have not had sex in over a year, Zoe explains. Zoe cannot remember, however, when the roof was done.



Ten – Ruby texts Harry to meet her outside that night to walk with her. Ruby explains her mothers are being jerks. Ruby lights up a cigarette as they walk to Prospect Park. Ruby believes her moms are going to get divorced. Harry asks to share the cigarette.

Eleven – Andrew, between jobs, is constantly searching for a new one. Andrew follows the address on a flyer, thinking he may end up doing woodworking. Andrew is met at the address by a man named Dave who welcomes Andrew to EVOLVEment.

Twelve – Jane is at work at the restaurant she owns with Zoe, called Hyacinth. While Jane handles the food, Zoe handles all other aspects of the business. Jane reflects on meeting Zoe when Zoe was twenty-four, and worries what will happen if they divorce – especially in regards to working at Hyacinth. In the bathroom, Jane looks at herself in the mirror, realizing she is over fifty and that life is becoming disastrous for her.

Thirteen – Elizabeth is one of five agents who work at the Mary Ann O’Connell Realty Group, a boutique firm. Mary Ann is kind, but very business-oriented, always wanting to see her agents moving and working. Mary Ann’s two children, Sean and Bridget, also work at the firm, along with Sean’s wife, Deirdre. At work, Elizabeth gets a call from Naomi Vandenhoovel regarding the rights to the song. Naomi tells Elizabeth the life rights to the song are needed ASAP, as filming is slated to begin in the fall. Naomi says the song is her favorite song of all time, and even has it tattooed on her ribs. Naomi then sends Elizabeth a picture to prove it. Naomi urges Elizabeth to sign the forms and keep working on Andrew.

Fourteen – Andrew and Elizabeth get together in their garage to play music and write lyrics, which they frequently do. Elizabeth broaches the subject of the song again. Andrew explains his problem is that Elizabeth did not write the words for “Mistress of Myself” for Lydia to sing or for teenage girls to pretend they are punk. Elizabeth says the money is something to think about. Andrew calls her cheap, but Elizabeth reminds him that Harry will be going to college in a year, and the house needs repairs. Elizabeth says the biopic and the song will also inspire young women to play music. Elizabeth tells him they do not have to decide that day what to do.

Fifteen – Harry and Ruby attend their next SAT class. Ruby reflects on how she intentionally sabotaged her chances at being accepted by colleges by writing in her essays the truth that she did not want to sit through another four years of BS lectures about books. Ruby then leaves the class, pretending to be sick to her stomach. Harry heads out with her, knowing she is not sick. They end up heading to Harry’s house. They get chips and salsa and go up into Harry’s bedroom. In the old storage room which doubles as a guest bedroom, Ruby discovers a picture of Lydia, Andrew, Zoe, and Elizabeth from back in 1992. Ruby shuffles through some more things and discovers more pictures of Lydia, which she realizes would be worth a lot of money.



Analysis

Getting older is a natural part of life. As the novel gets underway, getting older is a reality for Zoe, Elizabeth, and Andrew, as well as for their children. Ruby and Harry are now the age when Zoe, Elizabeth, and Andrew first met. The age of college for their children plunges Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew into memories of the past. The novel's structure will be composed heavily of not only events in the present, but with characters recalling events of the past. This weaving back and forth between the past and the present helps to explain the situations of the present, and as well as to make sense of the past. Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew frequently reflect on how old everyone is getting. This seems to be a moderate concern for Zoe and Jane, barely a concern for Elizabeth, but a major concern for Andrew. This is because he is getting older and he is unemployed.

The past is also made alarmingly relevant when Elizabeth is contacted by Naomi over the rights of "Mistress of Myself" with respect to wanting to create a biopic about Lydia's life. (Ironically, the reader should note that "Mistress of Myself," essentially about female empowerment, is now being held up by a male.) For Andrew, such a situation should be seen as though a Godsend, for it would give him a kind of relevance and yield financial support to his family. Andrew, however, flat-out refuses –and will continue to do so through most of the novel. There is something else at play behind the scenes which inspires Andrew's opposition to signing over rights (the reader will note that his ideas morph and change over time), but what this is, is not yet known. It is clear here that the past very much matters –a thematic idea that will come to have great influence on the rest of the novel.

Apart from the plot, readers are treated to very contemporary ideas about romance, love, and marriage. These form core portions of thematic arguments explored in the novel. First, there is the idea of modern lovers, with all things relating to romance and love being fluid. Readers observe not only traditional kinds of marriage with a traditional family structure –like the marriage between Andrew and Elizabeth –but also marriages given expanded meaning in contemporary society –such as the mixed-race lesbian marriage of Zoe and Jane. Readers should note that Zoe and Jane's daughter, Ruby, was conceived with a sperm donation from Jane's brother. Although the circumstances surrounding Ruby's birth may not be seen to be traditional, they are still seen to be normal and acceptable and a natural outcome of marriage equality. Marriage itself, far from being considered a thing of the past, is demonstrated to be critically important by Straub. Marriage is not easy, but it is worth it, she argues. This is not only for the sake of raising children like Ruby and Harry, but marriage is worth it in terms of love, romance, stability, and security.



Discussion Question 1

While Andrew opposes signing over rights of “Mistress of Myself” to Naomi, Elizabeth and Zoe readily agree to do so. What is their reasoning? Why are they so quick to sign over these rights?

Discussion Question 2

What two major events in the lives of Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew compel them to begin recalling the events of their own youths from college? Why do these two events have an influence on Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew in their remembering of the past?

Discussion Question 3

What different kinds of marriages are presented in the novel? How do these marriages differ? How do they compare? What does this say about the overall idea of marriage itself?

Vocabulary

multi-syllabic, rudimentary, stymied, oscillating, sanguine, sanctuary, purveyors, anecdotally



Part One, Sixteen – Part Two, Twenty-Eight

Summary

Part One, continued

Sixteen – EVOLVEment is a yoga, meditation, and massage therapy place. Andrew quickly realizes he enjoys being there. He hopes that EVOLVEment will come to need his services as a woodworker.

Seventeen – Elizabeth brings Zoe out to look at apartments and condos. When Elizabeth comments that she hates driving in Brooklyn, Zoe tells her she sounds like Zoe's mother. As they view different apartments, it causes Elizabeth to reflect on how she and Andrew had always wanted to live in many different places around the world, but Harry and reality meant they remained where they were in Brooklyn. Elizabeth wonders if, when Harry goes off to school, they would still be young enough to move—or if they should wait until age seventy-five and move into a retirement community. Zoe, meanwhile, thinks about the horrifying prospect of being single and alone. Zoe tells Elizabeth she has been moving through her house, making mental lists of what is hers and what is Jane's. Zoe explains that Ruby has been a typical, terrible teenage girl lately, while she gets along well with Jane. Zoe worries that Ruby actually hates her, and she also worries about being in Ruby's life.

Eighteen – Since Ruby is not in school, she takes on work at the Hyacinth. She is not thrilled about being a hostess. While working one day, Jorge, the bartender, points out that Dust has been pacing in front of the restaurant. Ruby goes out to confront him. Dust wonders if Ruby misses him. Ruby does, but she will not admit this. Dust tells her to text him as she goes back inside.

Nineteen – Elizabeth, who likes things to be neat and orderly, is dismayed to see things out of place in the storage room. She discovers some old band photos are missing, and asks Andrew about it. Andrew does not know anything about it, so Elizabeth goes to ask Harry about it. Harry is instantly on the verge of tears, confessing he and Ruby have listed them on eBay. Harry reveals they are already exceeding the reserve bid. Andrew is furious when he finds out about this, saying he is going to call Zoe at once. Harry feels humiliated, but Elizabeth tells him it is not his fault.

Twenty – After an angry phone call with Zoe and Jane, Andrew takes a walk around the block, then heads to EVOLVEment to relax and destress. He gets to talking with Dave who says that at least six people live at EVOLVEment, including himself, Jessie, three artists-in-residence, and Salome. Andrew is invited to crash at the place whenever he needs to. He offers to help with woodworking, which Dave is grateful for. Andrew is given kale juice by the young Jessie, who then kisses him on the lips as she walks on.



Andrew is saddened by her youth, knowing the young have done nothing to deserve it and the old have not done anything to drive it away. Andrew can see his old age, and later death, ahead of him.

Twenty-One – Harry and Ruby have not spoken since the photo theft incident. Still, his feelings for her remain. He wants desperately to kiss her. He is glad the photos could be taken down from eBay because the bidding had not yet ended. Harry, looking to see where his mom and dad are, discovers Elizabeth's open laptop, and several e-mails from Naomi regarding Lydia and "Mistress of Myself." He instantly becomes aware of the situation. Harry considers his parents to be reasonably cool, especially when they were younger –and now he aspires to be more masculine in order to take Ruby by the hand and kiss her.

Twenty-Two – Elizabeth makes chicken for dinner, but always feels like an inferior cook compared to Zoe. Elizabeth is happy to find that Andrew seems relaxed and affectionate that afternoon. He explains it is because of the new yoga place he has gone to. Elizabeth then asks Andrew about the Lydia thing. Andrew says he still does not know. Elizabeth says she wrote the song. Andrew counters that she wrote the lyrics, and that she does not get to decide for the rest of them what happens. He asks if Elizabeth is that much of a narcissist to want some teenage girl to play her in a movie. Andrew tells her she is not thinking about the big picture. Elizabeth says she is. Andrew then storms out of the house. When Andrew does not return for dinner, Elizabeth heads to the new yoga place to find him. A dance-session, like a rave, is underway. Elizabeth finds Andrew, seemingly high like when he was nineteen, dancing among countless other young people. He is not kissing or dancing with anyone else, but Elizabeth realizes he is losing himself in a midlife crisis.

Twenty-Three – Ruby is stunned to find that she is without Harry at the next SAT class. She figures he must have ditched it. Ruby reflects on how she is not necessarily opposed to college, but that the world holds too many other unique opportunities. After class, Harry is waiting for her with a duffle bag and a large umbrella to go to a hipster beach in the Rockaways.

Part Two: Jane Says

A newspaper article about EVOLVEment appears in the Ditmas Park Local Beat paper, wherein EVOLVEment owner David Goldsmith describes his place as a yoga and health center offering classes, memberships, massage services, and healthy beverages.

Twenty-Four – Salome hosts the Friday night dance parties at EVOLVEment. Andrew finally leaves at three in the morning, knowing Elizabeth will be angry. Despite beautiful young girls being all around him, Andrew has no interest in sleeping with them. He only has interest in going back to being nineteen. At home, Andrew wakes Elizabeth upon getting into bed. He is truthful about where he has been, telling her he was at a party. With Harry at a friend's house, Elizabeth and Andrew end up having passionate sex.



Twenty-Five – Harry and Ruby go to the beach in the Rockaways. They nap, eat, and go swimming in their underwear. They cuddle on the subway on the way home. Harry then brings Ruby to a property for sale that is under his mother's purview. Having snuck out with the keys to the place, Harry lets himself and Ruby in. They kiss, and then Ruby takes his hand to lead him further into the house to explore.

Twenty-Six – Elizabeth takes a call from Naomi, who is in New York. She asks to meet with Elizabeth. Elizabeth agrees. Not only does she meet Naomi, but Darcey, the actress who will be playing Lydia. Naomi also reveals they have done some digging, and discovered the three music videos that Kitty's Mustache (Elizabeth's band) made. Elizabeth unhappily listens to Naomi describe Lydia as a wildchild secretly concerned with her historical legacy, because Elizabeth knows Lydia in real life was selfish, unreliable, and a jerk much of the time. Elizabeth later decides to forge Andrew's signature on the rights form, then decides she will fax it over to Naomi.

Twenty-Seven – In the kitchen, Jane feels like a mastermind. She longs to feel like the mastermind of her life in general as well. She is very sad, knowing things in her own life are about to change in immense ways. To relieve stress, Jane bakes bread, knowing it has always been her way of relieving stress.

Twenty-Eight – Andrew is only happy when he is busy, so he does his best to keep himself busy. He spends as much time as he can at EVOVLEment as he builds bookshelves for the upstairs. Andrew and Dave, the owner of EVOLVEment, become friends. Andrew considers building a boat. He wonders how he appears to other people. Perhaps, they think that he is the father of the kids inside or that he might be a cool older brother. Andrew knows he always feels like an old man sitting in the garage with Elizabeth.

Analysis

Getting older is a natural part of life, but that does not always make it easy. Andrew especially has a difficult time with getting older, in large part because it forces him to reflect on the past and on things that can never be again. Suffering from a lack of purpose –he is without a job, seems to be losing his struggle in opposing signing over the rights, and has no prospects –Andrew takes to hanging out at EVOLVEment. There, he and Dave befriend one another, and Andrew begins using EVOLVEment as an escape from his present life. The much younger people at EVOLVEment readily accept him, and Andrew can only think about how much he wants to be nineteen again. Andrew goes on to party at a rave-like dance at EVOVLEment as though he was nineteen – something that Elizabeth sees. Here diagnosis is succinct: he is on the verge of a midlife crisis, and this is not the marriage she thought she had. Andrew simply cannot handle being older at the moment.

Marriages, Straub continues to argue, are not always easy –but they are worth it. Even when, in chapters to come, Elizabeth confesses that she has forged Andrew's signature, and even as Andrew reels from this and Elizabeth reels from Andrew's behavior at the



rave, neither one even considers something like divorce. They love one another deeply, despite their flaws. Andrew, for his part, continues to evolve in his reasons for opposing signing over the movie rights. As the reader correctly continues to suspect, this is because Andrew is not being completely honest or forthright with his reasoning. (Interestingly enough, Harry proves to be more of a man than his father: his father is checking out, unable to cope, unable to handle the situation as it is, while Harry is taking charge of his own life by pursuing Ruby romantically –though Ruby ends up taking the lead in many situations. She and Harry are, after all, modern lovers.) It would appear as though Elizabeth and Andrew are headed for very rocky times ahead, just as Zoe and Jane are struggling with their own marriage. Jane feels as if she is losing control in her marriage, because she feels as if she has no control over herself. Jane wants her marriage to work, but does not believe it will work because it appears as if Zoe is determined to end it.

As the narrative unfolds, the reader is plunged into the past time and time again. This is Straub's way of continuing to put the present in context. The rapid back-and-forth between the present and the past also helps to add dimension to the characters and demonstrates that the past plays a significant role in the present. Although Andrew's reasoning for opposing the film can be considered suspect, he does make some valid points, drawing on the reality of the past. For example, he worries the film about Lydia will turn her into a loving, glorified kind of a hero –but in reality, she was a jerk and was very selfish. At the same time, the idea that their parents had their own lives before being parents is a revelation to both Ruby and Harry. They learn more about their parents being in Kitty's Mustache and how they were band-mates with Lydia. This helps them to see their parents as three-dimensional people –who have their own pasts –in addition to being who they are in the present.

Discussion Question 1

Although Zoe seems geared toward divorce, Jane opposes the idea of divorce even though she thinks it may be unavoidable. Why is this so? What accounts for the difference between them?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Andrew come to spend so much time at EVOLVEment? Why are the members of EVOLVEment so happy to have him around, despite the age difference between them? How does Andrew spend his time when he is at EVOLVEment?

Discussion Question 3

What new reasoning does Andrew give for his opposition to the film about Lydia? How does reasoning draw on the past? Why does it matter?

Vocabulary

chivalry, delinquent, engrossed, interminable, effete, polymath



Part Two, Twenty-Nine – Forty-Three

Summary

Part Two, continued

Twenty-Nine – Lunch hours are the slowest, and weekdays at Hyacinth become very boring to Ruby. Ruby is confronted by Dust again, who invites her to a party Nico is hosting. Dust and his friends, including Sarah Dinnerstein, have been taking Molly. Dust offers Ruby some, but Harry shows up. Ruby puts her arm around Harry and says that perhaps they will come by the party. Harry is worried about going to a party, but is willing to go so long as Ruby is going. Ruby says Nico and everyone else are not that bad. She holds Harry's hand as they go into the party, feeling guilty about it.

Thirty – Zoe calls the therapist she and Jane have been seeing, Dr. Amelia, who is on vacation. Zoe asks how it is possible to know when a divorce is needed, but Dr. Amelia says she can't tell Zoe whether to stay married or not. Dr. Amelia instead encourages Zoe to try to have some fun, to go out on a date with Jane. Zoe hears a thump downstairs, but no one answers when she calls down.

Thirty-One – Elizabeth is torn about Andrew spending so much time at EVOLVEment. She is happy he is in touch with his feelings, but she is angry that he is not working a paying job. Iggy Pop, the family cat, goes missing. Harry offers to help look for the cat. As they circle the block to look for Iggy, Elizabeth asks Harry how things are going with Ruby. Harry writes it off simply as hanging out. It makes Elizabeth think about how Ruby was conceived given that Zoe and Jane were lesbians, and makes Elizabeth consider how two moms would raise one child. Elizabeth reflects on how it was Jane's young brother who donated sperm to Zoe to conceive Ruby. Harry worries about getting older, but Elizabeth assures him that being an adult doesn't mean he has to have all the answers. Elizabeth and Harry are unable to find the cat, so they consider putting up signs.

Thirty-Two – Zoe, Ruby, and Jane all come together to talk while at Hyacinth, figuring out what to do for dinner that night. They get to talking about Ruby's SAT scores and her future. Ruby tells them her SAT scores were not the problem. Ruby argues the neither of them benefited from their college educations, though Jane says a culinary school counts and Zoe argues that studying art allowed her to make prints. Ruby heads into the kitchen while Zoe leans against Jane. Zoe wishes marriage could only ever be about the good parts of it.

Thirty-Three – Ruby invites Harry to see the Aeroplanes perform at the Barclay's Center, as the singer lives in the neighborhood and is a regular at the Hyacinth. At the show, Ruby snuggles her face against Harry's neck. They then begin making out. Before the show is over, Harry tells her to follow him. Ruby agrees.



Thirty-Four – Harry and Ruby head to a playground at the park. There, Ruby leads Harry into sex. Harry is the fourth guy Ruby has slept with, but he is the only one who has ever looked at her lovingly.

Thirty-Five – Zoe and Jane are called down to the 67th Precinct, where Ruby and Harry have been taken after having been caught having sex in the playground. Zoe believes that had Ruby been white, the police would have just sent her and Harry home. Ruby admits to having sex with Harry. Andrew blames Ruby for everything, which immediately angers Zoe. As the families leave the station, Elizabeth apologizes to Zoe. Jane turns and demands to know why Elizabeth is apologizing to Zoe. She tells Elizabeth that her family is not the perfect family they pretend to be. Elizabeth says she never said they were perfect. Jane accuses Elizabeth of feeling superior, causing Ruby and Zoe to tell her to stop. Elizabeth explains she was apologizing to Zoe for Andrew, and for the difficult situation everyone is in. Jane storms off while Andrew becomes angry that Elizabeth has apologized for him.

Thirty-Six – Elizabeth wonders about how life works out the way it does. She reflects on her time at Oberlin, and how Zoe let her into their dorm building after Elizabeth had lost her key, thus beginning their lifelong friendship. She remembers one night how, watching Bonnie and Clyde, she and Zoe nearly made out, but were interrupted by a girl named TJ who showed up at Zoe's place. She remembers leaving after that, though desperately wanting to stay with Zoe.

Thirty-Seven – Andrew forbids Harry from seeing Zoe outside of SAT class. Andrew, meanwhile, continues his friendship with Dave. Dave reveals that, before EVOVLEment, he was doing life coaching, body work, and yoga. Dave asks Andrew about his own life. Andrew reveals he has done all sorts of things, from music to documentaries to fatherhood to magazines. Andrew admits he is currently trying to figure everything out. Dave tells him not to worry, that everything will come together at the right time and in the right place. Dave brings Andrew to the beach to talk about the hotel he has planned.

Thirty-Eight – Zoe is furious with Ruby for being so careless as to expose her body in such a way in a public place. Zoe is secretly grateful for the problem, however, as it has put her marriage issues on the back-burner. Jane tells Zoe she thinks something weird is going on next door, and that Elizabeth is not the problem. Jane then apologizes for going crazy at the police station.

Thirty-Nine – Harry misses Ruby desperately, but understands why everyone is so upset about the other night. He looks forward to the SAT class so he can see Ruby there. Iggy Pop is still missing. At the class, Ruby tells Harry she has decided they will see the same sex doctor, Amelia, that her mothers are seeing. Harry tells her he loves her. Ruby pinches his arm and says she knows he does.

Forty – Elizabeth worries Iggy Pop is dead. She receives an update from Naomi, saying that filming has begun in Pasadena. Elizabeth worries about how much from her college days will be in the film. Naomi offers to send over the script. Elizabeth worries about



how she will explain things to Andrew, having had to put off telling him because of the Ruby-Harry situation.

Forty-One – When Elizabeth gets home that night, she decides to tell Andrew the truth. Andrew is enraged by this. He tells Elizabeth he is worried about her, because at least Lydia did not pretend to be something she was not. He tells Elizabeth that it is clear she has never understood him, and that if she is capable of something like this, he has never understood her. He is also angry that the movie will more than likely focus on Lydia as a martyr. He urges Elizabeth to remember the last time they saw her. Elizabeth remembers being at Veselka in the East Village for dinner, with Harry being six months old. She remembers Lydia having already become famous, and the place going silent upon her arrival. Elizabeth also remembers how Lydia appeared high, and how she called Harry scary and a cannibal for breastfeeding. Elizabeth recalls not knowing then that Lydia would be dead in a year and-a-half. In the present, Andrew announces he is going over to EVOLVEment. He tells Elizabeth it is not for the yoga, but the self-care. He tells her she should try it sometime.

Forty-Two – Dave has been planning The Waves, the Rockaway Beach hotel, for a while. He wants Andrew to come along for the ride as an investor. He explains the place he wants to buy is on the market for seven hundred thousand dollars. He says he would ask other investors, but Andrew “gets” it. Andrew agrees.

Forty-Three – Elizabeth, who has the keys to Zoe’s house, goes next door to take some reference pictures. She walks in on Ruby and Harry having sex, which startles her. Harry is apologetic, but Elizabeth says she just does not care anymore. Elizabeth explains she accepts things as they are, but still worries. Instead, she asks Harry and Ruby to help her figure out what is going on with Andrew.

Analysis

Marriages are not always easy, but they are worth it. This is especially the case where children are involved. Children can be blessings, and they can be a challenge. Zoe and Jane must work together to try to convince Ruby that college is worth the effort. Being united for the sake of their daughter, and putting their own differences aside to help the most important thing in their lives, is proof that their marriage matters. It is also proof that they can still work together. The reader sees that Zoe and Jane are slowly coming around, though Jane remains relatively hopeless and Zoe unconvinced that the marriage can work after all. Marriages are not easy, but they are worth it, Jane believes. Still, no one can tell what the future holds. Days, weeks, and months can bring about positive changes, or can bring about things for the worst.

The idea that no one knows what the future holds here becomes an important theme, as the reader is plunged again into the past in the narrative. The weaving together of the past and the present demonstrates that no one knows for sure how the future will turn out –but does underscore the point that the past is very much relevant to the present. For example, Elizabeth wonders if she and Zoe could have ever been sexually involved



with each other as she recalls the past. She also remembers the last time she saw Lydia. It was in a meeting that was terse and disillusioning. Lydia presented Elizabeth with an alternative to her own life. Lydia, drug-addicted and somewhat famous, is contrasted with Elizabeth and Andrew, who are then content and happy with their newborn baby boy. The stability and security of marriage to the present day provides Andrew and Elizabeth all the proof they need that their marriage matters. Whereas Lydia came looking for permission to use a song for herself, the love Elizabeth and Andrew shared led to marriage and a child.

As Zoe and Jane and Elizabeth and Andrew examine the states of their marriages, they are confronted by a very new reality in the present. They discover that Ruby and Harry are sexually active. Everyone responds differently to the situation. Zoe and Jane are relatively unconcerned, knowing that this is how love in the modern world looks. Elizabeth is a bit taken aback, but willing to accept things as they are. She knows Ruby and Harry are growing up, and that they are very much lovers in the modern world. Things like age, race, and gender no longer matter. (Indeed, Elizabeth herself can be seen as a forerunner to a modern lover given her almost-romance with Zoe.) Only Andrew is put off by the sexual relationship between Ruby and Harry. This is less because he is concerned with them having sex, but worried that Ruby may lead his son down the wrong path and cause him to lose focus. Being caught having sex in a park in the middle of the night is proof enough for Andrew that Harry's future is at risk. At last, Andrew begins behaving like a real father. Whereas the others take a less concerned approach, Andrew is determined that Harry should succeed in life, especially because Andrew is a role model of how not to live life. Andrew does not want Harry to repeat his own mistakes like being unemployed and without purpose. Andrew is dependent on his wife's income and his own family's wealth.

Discussion Question 1

Who do you believe approaches the situation of Ruby and Harry having sex correctly? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Andrew's reaction to Ruby and Harry having sex is justified? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

How does Andrew respond when he learns that Elizabeth has forged his name? Why? Do you believe his reaction is justified? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

affiliation, philosophical, bigots, likeliest, procrastination, sommelier, indoctrinated, improbability, impertinent, ambient, emissary, archaic



Part Two, Forty-Four – Part Three, Fifty-Nine

Summary

Forty-Four – Zoe invites Jane out to get Chinese at Sunset Park for dinner. Jane is happy the two of them are going out on a date.

Forty-Five – Ruby, at work at Hyacinth and wonders what the future will be like – especially with respect to how she will get along with Harry if their parents are still crazy about it. She thinks about how cool it was of Elizabeth to keep quiet about walking in on her and Harry. She also thinks about how Dust seems to have no plan and how he is happy with the situation. Ruby gets a text that there will be another party at Nico's house. When she gets off work, she heads toward the party, thinking about how all of the kids she has been friends with will soon be leaving for college. She realizes that in high school, she would have acted as if she was on top of the world at a party, but now, she is a hostess with a boyfriend who takes practice SATs for fun. Ruby does not go to the party, being over it. Heading back down the block, she sees people gathering around Hyacinth. The place is on fire.

Part Three, Mistress of Myself

An online blog at the Ditmas Park neighborhood blog asks if anyone else smells smoke or a fire.

Forty-Six – After dinner, Zoe and Jane have sex in the backseat of their car until someone begins calling their phone. They learn there has been a fire at Hyacinth. They race over to discover a fire has broken out in the backyard of the building, spread to the building, but that Ruby called for help soon enough to make the building salvageable. Only part of the interior is damaged. They already begin figuring how soon it will be until they can reopen. Jane goes to check on Ruby, who blames herself for not acting sooner, saying she saw something when she was closing the gate for the night at the restaurant.

Forty-Seven – It is not long before Elizabeth, Andrew, and Harry learn about the fire. Elizabeth goes over to see Zoe and Jane. Jane is making breakfast while Zoe is on hold with the insurance company. Ruby comes down for breakfast, and Jane invites Elizabeth to have breakfast with them. Despite the tragedy of the night before, Elizabeth is happy to see Zoe and Jane getting along better.

Forty-Eight – Plans for the Waves come together quickly. Phillip is hired on as the architect. Dave introduces Andrew to everyone as his partner. Andrew withdraws the needed funds from his family's estate. Andrew recalls the past with Kitty's Mustache, and how the band already had a seven-inch record and was looking forward to making



a full album when Elizabeth wrote the words to “Mistress of Myself.” Andrew recalls how, after finishing the song and celebrating at the bar, Lydia wanted to sleep with Andrew, as they have done so a number of times despite Elizabeth also being in the picture. Andrew remembers how, after he moved in with Lydia, Lydia dropped out of school, though she claimed this was not the reason. When Andrew hears “Mistress of Myself,” all he can feel is guilt and remorse for the past.

Forty-Nine – Ruby uses her newly-acquired free time to be a creeper for Elizabeth. Ruby begins investigating classes at EVOLVEment. There, she meets a teacher named Lena who offers to show Ruby around.

Fifty – Zoe and Jane meet with Dr. Amelia. Dr. Amelia urges them to talk more about the things they are feeling. Jane tells Zoe she loves her, but worries about Elizabeth because there seems to be something there between Zoe and Elizabeth. Jane worries about how much Zoe runs to Elizabeth. Zoe says this is all ridiculous, but tells Amelia they will need more sessions.

Fifty-One – Dave makes an offer on the place he wants to transform into the Waves. Meanwhile, Andrew also invests over fifty-thousand dollars into EVOLVEment. Dave gets Andrew to try surfing. While surfing, Andrew believes he sees Harry behind Dave, but when he looks again, Harry is not there.

Fifty-Two – Elizabeth is concerned because it has been a while since Zoe has responded to any of her texts or calls. At last, Elizabeth catches Zoe outside walking her dog, Bingo. Elizabeth asks if everything is alright between them. Zoe assures her they are, but says she has been busy because of the fire. Elizabeth asks about Zoe’s intention to sell the house, which infuriates Zoe. Zoe accuses Elizabeth of being greedy. Elizabeth insists this is not true. Zoe says she is sorry, saying that everything is crazy, and promises to call. Elizabeth recalls how Kitty’s Mustache slowly fell apart after Lydia dropped out, and how Zoe grew distant until they ended up in New York.

Fifty-Three – Only one more SAT class remains before the test. Harry enjoys even this time he has with Ruby, and wonders what the future will have in store for them. He thinks about how neither he, nor Ruby, have seen their friends in weeks because all they have wanted to do is be with each other. As he and Ruby have sex yet again, Harry wonders if she loves him, if it matters, and if his love is enough for both of them.

Fifty-Four – Andrew is home less and less. Elizabeth is lonely, and begins looking out through the window more and more. Naomi suddenly calls Elizabeth to say Andrew has been in touch with her, saying his signature was forged and that no amount of money in the world would make him sign over the rights to the song. Naomi reports that Andrew says he has lawyers. Naomi tells Elizabeth that Andrew has to sign, and that she is prepared to visit Andrew in person about the rights. Naomi tells Elizabeth that if Andrew does get a lawyer, Elizabeth had better get one, too. Elizabeth remembers how Lydia called about “Mistress of Myself” two years after graduation, with Elizabeth agreeing to let Lydia use the song only so long as the correct copyright information was filed with Elizabeth, Andrew, and Zoe all receiving credit. Elizabeth remembers asking what the



record would be called, but Lydia not wanting to say, meaning it would probably be “Mistress of Myself.”

Fifty-Five – Dust sends Ruby a text message around midnight, saying he has a present for her outside. When Ruby goes outside, she discovers Dust has Iggy Pop. She is happy to see Iggy and asks where Dust found him. Dust says around. Ruby asks how long Dust has had the cat, but Dust refuses to say. Dust reveals that it was Sarah who accidentally set the restaurant on fire, playing with sparklers when she was tripping, and set up a line of candles and sparklers on the fence between Nico’s and the restaurant, forgetting about them not long after. Ruby is angered. Dust tells her that she is more like him than like Harry. He then skates away.

Fifty-Six – Dr. Amelia assigns the task of keeping feelings journals to Jane and Zoe. Meanwhile, Hyacinth is put under repairs. That evening, Jane and Ruby make dinner together. Ruby even hangs around rather than running upstairs with her food. After dinner, Jane turns to writing in her journal.

Fifty-Seven – Harry is happy to have Iggy Pop back, but wonders just who had Iggy Pop, and how long. He knows that someone must have had Iggy, because he does not believe cats are stupid. Harry has a sneaking suspicion that person is Dust. He goes over to Nico’s to see Dust. Dust says he found Harry’s cat on the street and was just trying to do the right thing. Harry tells Dust that Zoe is with him, now. He tells Dust not to steal any more pets, such as Iggy Pop. Dust says he thought the cat was a girl, and reveals he had been calling her Whiskers. This confirms to Harry that Dust has had Iggy for a while.

Fifty-Eight – Ruby continues going to EVOLVEment not only to learn more about Andrew but EVOLVEment itself Ruby, while getting a massage from Lena, asks about EVOLVEment and how it operates. Lena reveals that Dave used to be an actor, that he is something of a spiritual guide for people, and that there are some big investors. Ruby takes this to mean that Dave is good at parting people from their money. She comes to think that Andrew is being made a dupe.

Fifty-Nine – Andrew waits for more news from Dave on the Waves. The doorbell rings and Andrew faints upon seeing Lydia Greenbaum. When he comes to, Andrew is introduced by Elizabeth to Darcey, the young actress playing Lydia in the movie. He is also introduced to Naomi, the film’s producer. Naomi begins by showing Andrew some diary entries Lydia wrote about him. Andrew brings Naomi outside to speak with her privately. Andrew demands to know what is going on. Lydia demands to know why Andrew opposes the film being made, saying they don’t want to make her into a saint, but to tell the story of a complicated person. Andrew thinks of all the problems he has – such as feeling like a failure, not wanting his wife to hate him, not wanting to feel like he is selling out, and so on. Lydia tells him he can choose to accept the movie or to fight it, but if he chooses to fight it, her lawyers will get involved and win. Naomi tells him that by agreeing to the movie, Andrew is not giving them his whole life –just a part of it, who will become a character who only shares these things in common with Andrew, not who is Andrew himself. Naomi’s phone then rings. The ringtone is “Mistress of Myself.”



Analysis

Marriages are not always easy, but they are worth it. Zoe and Jane both believe this, though neither one previously believed that their marriage was salvageable. Great tragedies often bring people together, and this is the case when Hyacinth is torched. Zoe and Jane recommit to one another through this time, and the ruins of Hyacinth become the ashes from which Zoe and Jane will rise not only professionally, but romantically. Interestingly enough, Jane At the same time, warning signs begin appearing for Harry in his relationship with Ruby. It is clear that Harry has fallen in love with Ruby, but Ruby has not fallen in love with Harry. This is made obvious when readers observe Harry wondering if his love for Ruby will be enough for both of them. Unrequited love is as much a risk and source of heartache for the modern lover as it has been for lovers of all ages in all times and in all places.

The past, both recent and distant, continues to matter for the characters of the novel. In this section of the novel, Ruby is unable to jettison her past with Dust, who seems to find every way possible to weasel his way back into her life. Andrew, meanwhile, is confronted by the past head-on when Naomi and Darcey pay him a visit. Elizabeth herself must also confront the past in this way –both her forgery and Lydia’s role in her own life. Jane and Ruby are forced to confront their past and their lives as they are through their sessions with Dr. Amelia, and through the journals of their feelings that they are required to keep. The past continues to underscore the point that no one knows what the future will bring. In the present, which will soon become the past, none of the characters know exactly how the future will turn out.

This is also true for Andrew, who in the present time, is struggling not only to recapture his youth but to establish himself somewhere professionally. He finds the perfect opportunity through investment into the Waves with Dave. Although Ruby suspects this is all a sham, Andrew is primarily concerned with professional purpose. He even goes to the great length of taking money out of his family’s inheritance –something which he would never have done before because Andrew is resentful of his wealthy background. Getting older is a natural part of life, Andrew understands, but not if he is rootless. In a sense, Andrew is trying to find himself again just as he did when he was a teenager. Although times may change, some undeniable truths remain about men: they tie their worth to their purpose, and their purpose consists of a handful of things, including marriage and family, protection and providing, and identity by way of a career. That Andrew could reinvent himself as a hotelier would give him a professional founding that he does not currently have.

Discussion Question 1

Do you believe that Ruby actually loves Harry, or do you believe she is merely invested in a relationship with him because it is convenient? Why? How does Harry feel about his relationship with Ruby? Why?



Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Andrew's identity crisis has to do, in large part, with his manhood? Or do you believe there is something else to blame for why he feels listless and not grounded?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Naomi and Darcey personally appear at Andrew and Elizabeth's house? How does Andrew react to their appearance? Why?

Vocabulary

monotone, indefinite, hiatus, infrequently, reservations



Part Three, Sixty – Part Four, Ephemera

Summary

Part Three, continued

Sixty – Inside, Darcey shows Elizabeth the notebook kept as a diary by Lydia. Within seconds, Elizabeth learns that Andrew had been sleeping with Lydia. She then goes out to see Andrew. Andrew says he does not know what difference it makes not having told Elizabeth. Elizabeth says it makes a big difference that she married a man who cheated on her. She then tells Andrew to go spend the night at his yoga house. She then orders Naomi and Darcey out, keeping the notebook and telling them they can keep it later. Elizabeth then goes into the shower with her clothes on.

Sixty-One – Zoe and Jane go on vacation to a little Airbnb in Montauk where they continue having sex. Zoe takes a call from Elizabeth, who explains everything that has happened. Zoe is not surprised by the revelations, for she has long suspected something happened between Lydia and Andrew. Zoe invites Elizabeth to take the train out to Montauk.

Sixty-Two – Andrew heads to EVOLVEment. He is in shock. When he goes to see Dave, two girls are leaving his room. Dave reports the city has denied rezoning for the hotel, so they must now look elsewhere, such as further out on Long Island or in the Hudson Valley. Andrew quickly ducks into the bathroom and begins throwing up. He then receives a text message from Elizabeth saying she is going out to stay with Zoe and Jane in Montauk. Andrew wants everything to be better. He wants to deserve his son and wants his marriage to withstand old dragons. Lena later talks to Dave, telling him that Ruby has been around asking questions. She thinks Ruby is worried about him. Andrew says he will be back later.

Sixty-Three – With their parents otherwise occupied, Harry and Ruby have more freedom to see each other frequently and easily. He decides to buy Ruby a gold ring that appears as if a woodpecker has hammered it, and with a small black stone on the top. Harry purchases the ring for \$295 with his parents' credit card.

Sixty-Four – The summer is winding down. Ruby has a sex dream about Harry which becomes a nightmare when Harry and Dust become one person. In the morning, Sarah invites Ruby to the park to smoke a joint. Ruby decides to accept, thinking she will punch Sarah in the face for Hyacinth. Sarah says she and Dust are together, but says that it was Dust who set the fire intentionally. Sarah says it is up to Ruby if Ruby chooses to call the police. She says she would if she was in Ruby's place, but does not want Dust to get in trouble, saying Dust has plans –such as wanting to become an architect. Ruby gets up and leaves without saying goodbye.



Sixty-Five – Zoe picks up Elizabeth at the station, then brings her back to the house where Jane is out back grilling. Over dinner, Elizabeth gives them more details about the situation. She goes to sleep drunk that night. In the morning, talking some more about the past, Zoe says it is funny to think about the past as if it actually mattered. Elizabeth wonders about this, because Andrew sleeping with Lydia deeply bothers her now. Elizabeth and Zoe reflect on the romantic night they almost had together in college, then tell one another they are each other's best friends, now.

Sixty-Six – In bed with Harry that morning, Ruby reflects on how Harry means a lot to her, but not that much. She considers her relationship with him something akin to a sex mentoring program or a practice run. Meanwhile, Ruby looks up Dave Wolfe online to try to learn more about him. When Harry wakes, he gives her the ring. As she looks at the ring, she says she thinks Dave is a total fraud. Harry then outright proposes marriage to Ruby. For a moment, Ruby reflects on what life might be like with a family, but rejects it. She tells Harry she is going to sail a boat to Mexico.

Sixty-Seven – Andrew has cleaned the entire house, not knowing what to do with himself. Elizabeth has not yet returned, and he is panicking. Dave goes to EVOLVEment. While there, two police officers arrive to investigate reports of illegal activity –the selling of kambacha without the proper licenses. Dave brings the officers into the back, but the officers then emerge with Dave as though he is under arrest. Andrew asks what is going on, but Dave tells the officers Andrew is only a yoga student, and that they have never spoken before. Andrew, though at a loss for money, realizes he is free. Elizabeth calls. When she does, Andrew begins to cry and apologizes.

Sixty-Eight – Andrew confesses everything to her, including the investments with Dave. Elizabeth also confesses the details of her past, such as almost kissing Zoe. Elizabeth then boards the train for home, telling Andrew she hates him and she misses him. On the way home, Elizabeth sings “Mistress of Myself,” causing everyone to look at her.

Sixty-Nine – Zoe and Jane decide to transform Hyacinth into a gourmet bakery, as it will be the change they both need in their lives. They know it will bring them closer together.

Seventy – Elizabeth and Andrew meet with Dr. Amelia. Andrew explains he thinks everything began because he is feeling lost professionally. Elizabeth counters that everything began when they were nineteen, and that not everything that is happening is Andrew's fault. Elizabeth says if she had been more wild, more willing to experiment, she would not be married to Andrew. Andrew compliments Elizabeth on her songwriting and her ability to be a good mother. Elizabeth wants Andrew to continue.

Seventy-One – Harry, though hurt, understands Ruby's rejection of his proposal, saying they are both too young to be engaged. Ruby has decided to do a three-month college credit program which will bring her to Mexico for three months, kayaking. Ruby bleaches Harry's hair, but it comes out orange so Harry cuts most of it off. He comes to resemble his dead, and Harry believes he looks less like a kid. At home, Harry listens to his mother playing music in the garage. He finds it pretty.



Part Four, Ephemera

A series of newspaper clippings are presented demonstrating the futures of the characters of the novel. Different drugs and substances are found at EVOLVEment, leading to the center being closed down while under continued investigation. The film “Mistress of Myself” is revealed to portray Lydia as a complicated character in her pre-fame life which humanizes, but does not glorify her. Zoe and Jane officially open their gourmet bakery, Hot + Sweet. It is a hit. Kitty’s Mustache, plus Darcey filling in for Lydia, performs at the All Tomorrow’s Parties Festival to thrilled crowds. Sarah and Dust, real name Anthony Dustinsky, get married. Dust is an architecture student at Columbia and has cleaned up his act. Ruby now lives in Mexico, having opened up an American pizza shop, Brooklyn’s Finest, to cater to locals and tourists using both American and local ingredients. Andrew goes on to volunteer with Big Brothers, helping kids to find meaning, purpose, and companionship. Harry goes on to become an English graduate student at Brown University. Harry plans to write a novel about young, reckless love, and how older people deal with the same feelings. Elizabeth begins a music career, preparing to release a new album called “Modern Lovers”.

Analysis

Although Zoe argues that the past does not actually matter, it is clear that it does. The entire novel has been structured around the events of the past playing a serious role in the present. Although the present can be shaped by the past, it does not have to be determined by the past. The reader should consider several cases-in-point. Although Zoe and Jane have drifted apart, this does not mean that they will continue to drift apart. Instead it gives them a point from which to work around. Although Andrew may have stumbled with his attempt to finance a hotel, this does not mean he will fail at everything he does in the future. Although Andrew and Elizabeth experience difficulty in their marriage due to Andrew’s infidelity decades before when they were dating, it does not mean their marriage now must fail. Rather, it gives them something to work on, move past, and a reason to be closer.

Getting older is a natural part of life, as Straub continues to argue. However, she points out that getting older is not the end. Every day is a new beginning, as no one knows what the future will hold or how life will turn out. This is made clear through her assemblage of newspaper articles at the end of the novel. The newspapers reveal the varied paths the characters take –from Harry writing novels to Ruby following in the path of her mothers to Elizabeth going back into music to Andrew volunteering in service organizations to Zoe and Jane opening a new bakery. The relationship between Harry and Ruby ends as Ruby is less committed than Harry, and the two go their separate ways amicably, with no strings attached as modern lovers often do. Indeed, Harry’s own experiences aging, and watching his parents and his parents’ friends age, gives him the inspiration for the novel he will be writing about modern lovers.



Discussion Question 1

What comes to be the saving grace for both the marriages of Zoe and Jane, and Andrew and Elizabeth? How are both couples, though different in many ways, similarly able to move beyond difficult circumstances to remain together?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe the past actually matters? Or, like Zoe, do you believe it has no bearing on things? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Straub argues that, although marriage may be difficult, it is still worth it in the end. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Vocabulary

demure, hypochondriac, prudish, indecipherable, nary, fluttering



Characters

Elizabeth

Elizabeth Marx is the wife of Andrew and the mother of Harry. White and in her fifties, she is a graduate of Oberlin College and a real estate agent, Elizabeth has been best friends with Zoe since college when the two were in the band Kitty's Mustache.

Elizabeth is neat, orderly, and kind. She values both her family and her friendship with Zoe. Elizabeth is saddened by watching Harry grow up, but she is proud of the man he is becoming. At the same time, she struggles with Andrew over the rights to the song "Mistress of Myself," for which she wrote the lyrics. She is also dismayed that Andrew is spending so much time at EVOLVEment because of his midlife crisis.

When she learns that Andrew slept with Lydia while she and Andrew were dating, Elizabeth is devastated. However, she and Andrew manage to work through the past and keep their marriage intact.

Andrew

Andrew Marx is the husband of Elizabeth and the father of Harry. Deeply valuing the stability of his family, Andrew is white, in his fifties, and lost professionally. He is doubting his abilities as a father and a husband because he is unemployed and cannot abide being idle. He volunteers and takes classes at EVOLVEment, where he befriends Dave and becomes an investor. Having known Zoe and Elizabeth since the days of being in the band Kitty's Mustache, Andrew opposes the making of a biopic about Lydia. Publicly, he does not want the film to glorify a jerk. Privately, he does not want Elizabeth to know about his affair with Lydia. Andrew is plunged into a midlife crisis. When Elizabeth does learn about the affair, Andrew scrambles to make things right. The marriage survives, and Andrew goes on to volunteer for Big Brother to give himself purpose and meaning.

Zoe

Zoe Kahn-Bennett is the wife of Jane and the mother of Ruby. A graduate of Oberlin College, Zoe runs the restaurant Hyacinth with Jane. Zoe has been best friends with Elizabeth since school when she was part of Kitty's Mustache. Zoe, a black lesbian, is very open-minded, tolerant, and business-oriented. Lately, she has been worried about the state of her marriage and her daughter's rejection letters from every college where she has applied.

Wanting to work on their marriage, Zoe and Jane visit a therapist. However, as a backup plan Zoe has Elizabeth assess the value of her house. She also asks Elizabeth to help her look for a new place. Slowly, Zoe and Jane reconnect over their love of Ruby and



having to rebuild after Hyacinth is torched. By the end of the novel, Zoe and Jane have repaired their marriage and reopened Hyacinth as Hot + Sweet, a gourmet bakery.

Ruby

Ruby Kahn-Bennett is the eighteen year-old half-black, half-white daughter of Zoe and Jane. She is the girlfriend of Harry for much of the novel. Ruby is restless, wanting to experience the world rather than attend college. By doing so, she sabotages her chances at college by writing in her essays that she does not want to sit through another four years of classes.

Ruby considers dating Harry convenient. As such, Ruby rejects Harry's proposal for marriage. She goes to live in Mexico where she later opens an American-style pizzeria.

Jane

Jane Kahn-Bennet is the wife of Zoe and the mother of Ruby. Jane, a white Jew, is the head chef at the restaurant she and Zoe own. Jane is always concerned about being in charge of her own life. Because of this, the distance between her and Zoe and the likelihood of divorce bring Jane to the edge emotionally.

Jane worries there is something romantic going on between Zoe and Elizabeth because they have a long history. Also, Zoe always runs to Elizabeth instead of Jane when there are problems. Jane is later relieved to know there is nothing between Zoe and Elizabeth. Jane is thrilled when she and Zoe work together to save their marriage.

Harry

Harry is the son of Elizabeth and Andrew. He is the boyfriend of Ruby for much of the novel. Beginning the novel as shy, slightly effeminate seventeen year-old, Harry grows into his own through the course of the novel. He becomes more of a man through courage in life and courage in romance by taking the initiative with Ruby.

Harry, who falls in love with Ruby, is later saddened when Ruby turns down his marriage proposal. However, he understands why she has turned him down. Harry goes on to become an English grad student, with his hat tipped toward writing a novel about lovers in the modern era.

Lydia

Lydia Greenbaum, known by her stage name "Lydia," is a famous singer who died at twenty-seven of a drug overdose. Having formerly been a member of Kitty's Mustache with Zoe, Elizabeth, and Andrew in college, Lydia slept with Andrew a number of times while he was dating Elizabeth. When he moved in with Elizabeth, Lydia dropped out of



college and pursued her own music career. As she grew in fame, she came back to ask for the right to sing the song “Mistress of Myself,” for which she became famous. Selfish and unkind, Lydia’s fame proved too much to handle, and her use of drugs ultimately killed her. A biopic about her causes much of the trouble in the novel, especially for Elizabeth and Andrew.

Dave

Dave Goldsmith, formerly Dave Wolfe (when he was an actor), is a modern-day spiritualist and life guide. He establishes EVOLVEment to bring a contemporary kind of hippie lifestyle to interested patrons. Dave is careless with money and not business-oriented. However, in his heart, he is not a bad person. Dave becomes friends with Andrew quickly because he senses in Andrew someone who is lost and needs to be found. He invites Andrew to invest in his newest venture, a hotel, but he is later arrested for selling illegal substances through EVOLVEment. Dave denies knowing Andrew so Andrew will not get in trouble.

Darcey

Darcey Lemon is a gorgeous, young actress who very closely resembles Lydia. She will be playing Lydia in the biopic. Darcey is bright and bubbly, but she can also be ruthless and manipulative. For example, she allows Elizabeth to read Lydia’s journal, even though it could potentially destroy Elizabeth’s marriage.

Naomi

Naomi Vandenhoovel is a Hollywood producer determined to make a movie about Lydia. She appeals to Elizabeth, Andrew, and Zoe to sign over life rights to the song “Mistress of Myself.” She gets along well with Elizabeth and Zoe, but she must be confrontational with Andrew to force him to accept things.



Symbols and Symbolism

Mistress of Myself

“Mistress of Myself” is a punk rock song which symbolizes female empowerment and the past. Inspired by Jane Austen, Elizabeth writes the lyrics. She wants women to be able to control their own lives. The song's music was written by the rest of Kitty's Mustache. “Mistress of Myself” becomes the group's best-known song. Years later, the song is made globally famous by Lydia when she receives the okay to be allowed to rerecord and perform it.

In the present day, Naomi wants the rights to the song to film a movie about Lydia. This causes Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew to reflect on the past. Andrew, ironically, becomes the man who holds up the song and movie about female empowerment.

Rights to Mistress of Myself

Rights to “Mistress of Myself” symbolize the hidden past. Sought by Naomi for the production of a movie about Lydia, the quest for the rights cause Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew to reflect on the past. Andrew does not want a movie to be made about Lydia because it means his sexual affair with Lydia –long hidden –will be exposed and may potentially ruin his marriage.

Lydia Biopic

A Lydia Greenbaum biopic symbolizes contention. Planned by Naomi and set to star Darcey, the Lydia Greenbaum biopic –presumably which will be titled “Mistress of Myself” –causes Andrew to agonize over whether Lydia will be glorified or portrayed as the selfish jerk she was in life. Andrew's refusal to sign over the rights to the song for the movie causes great contention and several fights between himself and Elizabeth.

Photos of Lydia

Photos of Lydia symbolize how relevant the past is in the present and that parents have lives. While looking through Elizabeth's storage room, Harry and Ruby find photos of Lydia and Kitty's Mustache. They post the pictures on eBay. The photos exceed reserve bids . However, when Elizabeth and Andrew discover the listing, they take it off eBay.

When Harry and Ruby find the photos, they also discover and accept that their parents were once their age, had their own lives, and are not two-dimensional people.



Kitty's Mustache

Kitty's Mustache symbolizes female empowerment. It is the name of the punk rock band in which Zoe, Lydia, Elizabeth, and Andrew perform while they are in college. The name of the band is a metaphor for female pubic hair. The band is all about empowering females, especially through songs like "Mistress of Myself." Andrew's own presence in the band is a matter of irony, as he is a male raging against the patriarchy on behalf of women. Kitty's Mustache grows to have local fame, but it breaks up shortly after Lydia quits school.

Andrew's Forged Signature

Andrew's forged signature symbolizes marital difficulties and troubles to come. Frustrated when Andrew refuses to sign over rights to "Mistress of Myself," Elizabeth does it for him. This makes Andrew furious, and it causes him to call and threaten Naomi with a lawsuit. This leads to Naomi showing up at his house and the truth of Andrew's past with Lydia coming to light.

Lydia's Journal

Lydia's journal is symbolic of the uncovered past. It is used by Darcey to help her prepare to play Lydia. Also, it is used as a weapon against Andrew by Naomi for fighting against signing over the rights to the song. The journal reveals the sexual encounters Andrew and Lydia had while Andrew was dating Elizabeth.

Ring

A ring is purchased by Harry for Ruby, and it is symbolic of his love and seriousness toward Ruby. The ring, which Harry buys using his parents' credit card for \$25, is used to propose to Ruby. Ruby rejects the proposal, saying instead she is going to Mexico.

Newspaper clippings

Newspaper clippings symbolize the future. Newspaper clippings form the final part of the novel. Each clipping reveals a brief glimpse into the future of the characters of the novel. For example, Elizabeth returns to writing music while Ruby opens an American pizza place in Mexico.

Modern Lovers

Modern Lovers is the name of a novel Harry is writing, and it is symbolic of aging. Harry explains that his novel will be about how both the young and the old deal not only with love, but with getting older. Harry will draw, as inspiration, his own experiences with

getting older, as well as looking at how his parents and their friends have aged. Specifically, he will talk about reckless love, and how even older people feel such passions later in life.



Settings

Zoe's house

Zoe's house is where Zoe, Jane, and Ruby live. It is a large old Victorian home purchased for Zoe by her parents. It was formerly shared by Zoe, Elizabeth, Andrew, and two others when all were much younger. Zoe, believing she will soon divorce Jane, asks Elizabeth to begin the process of selling the house. The house brings back many memories for Elizabeth, as it does for Zoe. It is among the reasons why Zoe and Elizabeth begin to recall the past.

Hyacinth

Hyacinth is a restaurant owned and operated by Zoe and Jane a few blocks from where they live. It is where Ruby comes to work after graduating high school. Hyacinth is a popular place, and serves incredible food thanks to Jane. When the place is torched by Dust, Zoe and Jane decide to re-birth it the way they have re-birthed themselves like a phoenix from the ashes. Hyacinth becomes Hot + Sweet, a gourmet bakery.

EVOLVEment

EVOLVEment is an alternative lifestyle center owned and operated by Dave. EVOLVEment offers everything from shakes and health drinks to yoga classes and Friday night dance raves. Andrew, looking for something to do, wanders in where he meets and befriends Dave. Andrew volunteers to do some woodworking for the place, in addition to attending classes and raves. Andrew heads to EVOLVEment in order to escape the stress of his daily life, and to be among younger people wishing he himself was nineteen again. EVOLVEment is ultimately shut down when it is discovered illegal substances are being sold there.

Oberlin College

Oberlin College in Ohio is where Elizabeth, Lydia, Andrew, and Zoe first meet. There, they form the band Kitty's Mustache. They begin to gather some local acclaim for themselves. Oberlin is where Lydia and Andrew sleep with each other while Andrew and Elizabeth are dating. It is also where Zoe and Elizabeth almost become romantically involved. After Andrew and Elizabeth move in together, Lydia leaves school. Not long after, Kitty's Mustache folds.

Mexico

Ruby decides to go to Mexico, instead of to college. She originally goes to study and explore Mexico as part of a college-credit group trip. She ends up staying there in order to open an American-style pizzeria. Ruby remains in Mexico for years, where her pizzeria receives rave reviews from locals and tourists.



Themes and Motifs

Getting older is a natural part of life

Getting older is a natural part of life. No one is able to escape the aging process, but everyone handles the aging process in different ways. Some adjust to it well, while others simply cannot handle the stress and pressure of it. Sometimes, this often leads to a mid-life crises. This is true for the characters in the novel.

Harry and Ruby, ages 17 and 18 respectively, are just coming into adulthood. They are set either for college or charging headlong into life. As a result, their parents –including Zoe, Elizabeth, and Andrew –become nostalgic, and reflect on the past, as they were about the age of their children when they all met for the first time. Harry, growing into a man, takes the initiative by romantically pursuing Ruby. Ruby, who is old enough now to determine her own future, decides to forgo college for a trip to Mexico which paves the way for her American-style pizzeria.

In addition to their children getting older, the appearance of Naomi and the idea of a Lydia biopic also plunges Zoe, Elizabeth, and Andrew into the past. Elizabeth wonders what her life might have been like if she had decided not to marry Andrew, or had chosen not to marry Andrew so early. Elizabeth comes to accept that there is no use in wondering about these things for too long, because she is happy with the life she has. Zoe, meanwhile, thinks the past is irrelevant in the present, and as such, there is no use in looking back. People get older, but that does not mean life ends. Every day is a chance for a new start –and this is exemplified by her and Jane starting over after Hyacinth burns down.

Only Andrew comes to have a serious difficulty with getting older. The biopic, his professional detachment, and growing older cause Andrew to worry about the future. He believes that the only things ahead for him are old age and death. At the same time, the biopic means having to dredge up past actions for which he feels guilty (primarily sleeping with Lydia while dating Elizabeth), and this causes him to want to be nineteen again. Because of this, he comes to spend much of his time at EVOLVEment with teenagers and young people half his age. He is accepted among them, though he has no desire to sleep with any of the girls he encounters. He only wants to be young again. Behaving in such a way causes Elizabeth to realize that Andrew is indeed having a midlife crisis.

A marriage is not always easy, but it is worth the effort.

A marriage is not always easy, but it is worth the effort. In contemporary society, sex before marriage is common. Also, fewer people are deciding to get married, The author makes the case that marriage still matters. Ideas about marriage have changed (such



as about who can get married), but the basic idea of marriage –family, love, security, and stability –remain unchanged. Many believe that marriage will make life richer, fuller, and more fulfilling.

Straub presents two married couples to argue her case. The traditional idea of marriage is presented through Andrew and Elizabeth, while a modern marriage is presented through Zoe and Jane. Both married couples are fully committed to each other, respectively. Both couples have one child; and both couples are happy with their lives for much of their marriages. This changes by the time of the novel, however, as changing circumstances and situations have caused the marriages to be strained.

Andrew, in between jobs, feels listless and hopeless. He feels as though he is a drain on the family because he is not contributing anything toward it in the traditional sense (wherein the man would be the primary income earner). Now, Andrew is wholly dependent upon his wife. He struggles to provide an example of manhood to his son when he cannot even find a job. What Andrew only comes to accept later is that, in times of trouble, married couples have the ability to depend on each other, and to make up where the other struggles or leaves off. Elizabeth wants Andrew to find a job, but is not going to hold it over his head that he has so far been unable to do so. Elizabeth deeply loves Andrew and their son, and so does not mind being the sole income provider. Elizabeth realizes just how happy and full her life is for having Andrew and Harry in it, and this is among the many reasons why she refuses to divorce him when she learns about the past.

Zoe and Jane present a similar situation, in which they have simply grown apart with age. The marriage itself has grown stale. Yet, both know their lives are enriched and made more enjoyable by having the other in it. Because of this, they decide to see a therapist even though both are reasonably sure divorce is on the horizon. Because of help from the therapist, and because of needing to depend on each other through difficult times –from Ruby being rejected from college to the restaurant being torched – Zoe and Jane are able to repair their marriage and make it work. By the end of the novel, they have fallen in love with one another all over again, and they are very glad this has happened.

No one can tell how life will turn out.

No one can tell how life will turn out. The future is largely uncertain, even when the past and the present are largely known. The uncertain future makes people want to find some certainty in life in the present, or make sense of the past in order to influence the future. Even then, what the future may bring is unknown.

Events in the novel can be traced back through time. When Elizabeth and Zoe first meet at college, she does not know that she will almost have a romance with Zoe. When Elizabeth, Zoe, Andrew, and Lydia form Kitty's Mustache, no one has any idea that Elizabeth will begin what will become a hit song that Lydia will later use when she becomes famous. At the time, Elizabeth, dating Andrew, does not know that Andrew is



sleeping with Lydia, and Andrew never expects the truth to come out the way it does nearly three decades later.

None of them expect that a movie will ever be made about Lydia, or that it will require them to sign over all rights they have to the song so that the movie can be made right. Andrew never expects to be lost professionally, or that he will have a midlife crisis (in which he attempts to find himself in the present) which will make the truth of the past even worse for Elizabeth. Andrew never expects that his marriage will survive the drama, or that he will end up having to sign over the rights anyway when Naomi threatens legal action. At the same time, Andrew and Elizabeth do not expect their son to grow up so fast, or that Harry will begin sleeping with Ruby. Indeed, the situation is not something Zoe or Jane expect, either, and it throws everyone into chaos.

Ruby's parents, Zoe and Jane, never expect that Ruby will choose to opt out of college for real-life experiences. They never consider that their own marriage will end up on the rocks. Then, they never expect that they will reconnect and fall in love all over again. Harry, meanwhile, never expects that his proposal of marriage to Ruby will be rejected, and he never expects that she will never come home from Mexico. None of the characters at present can imagine what the future will hold for them.

Zoe and Jane, who do not expect Hyacinth to burn to the ground, do not expect their new Hot + Sweet to become an even bigger hit.

Ruby, who goes to Mexico, does not expect to remain in Mexico and open up a pizzeria.

Elizabeth does not expect to make a name for herself by getting back into music, while Andrew does not expect to find himself by mentoring kids in a big brother program.

Harry does not expect that he will use his experiences and the events of his life to write a novel.

Modern lovers are not bound by traditional considerations.

Modern lovers are not bound by traditional considerations. The characters of her novel are very much of their age. As such, they defy social and cultural traditions, norms, and stereotypes. This is also true of the love that these characters share. This is done so that Straub can illustrate the idea that there are no norms, standards, or traditional stereotypes among modern lovers.

Elizabeth, Andrew, and their son Harry present, at first glance, a traditional family unit. However, upon closer inspection, little is traditional beyond the married mother-father arrangement. Andrew –the man –is unemployed, and so Elizabeth –the woman –must be the one to provide financially for the family. Andrew, for whatever reason, is unable to find work, and so drifts through each day looking for things to do. He seems to be largely lazy and lacking in manliness (doing all he can to provide for his family and to



live up to his responsibilities) as he is more concerned with his own desires through most of the novel. It becomes dependent upon Elizabeth to keep the family going –and this in large part only adds to Andrew's unhappiness. As such, traditions and customs relating to marriage are upended as Elizabeth and Andrew are modern lovers.

Zoe and Jane present a very modern couple, in that they are lesbians and marriage equality throughout the world is a relatively recent thing. Yet, even Zoe and Jane, for all the struggles they have faced as lesbians, still face struggles among themselves in married life. This includes conceiving and raising Ruby (with questions ranging from where the sperm will come from to which mother will be the “mother” for Ruby) as well as working to provide for the family and overseeing household chores and tasks. Still, they manage to make things work because traditional roles and conventions are exchanged for fluidity among roles and expectations. As such, Zoe and Jane are very much modern lovers.

It is significant that Zoe and Elizabeth almost have a romance in college –evidence that traditional sexual preferences are fluid. Here, Straub argues that love happens with whom it happens with, regardless of things like a person's sex.

Harry and Ruby also present a class of emerging modern lovers. While Harry begins the romantic pursuit of Ruby –including by protecting her physically from Dust –which is the traditional male's role, Ruby soon takes the lead by initiating a relationship with Harry that quickly turns sexual. It is Ruby who begins calling most of the shots in the relationship. Traditionally, this is the male's role.

Although Harry undertakes the traditional male role of proposing marriage, Ruby breaks tradition by rejecting Harry and choosing a life apart from marriage. As such, she defies the conventions of even her own parents by refusing marriage for a life lived independently of another. Harry accepts things as they are, and moves on without any strings attached. Because of this, both he and Ruby are very much modern lovers.

The past does matter.

The past does matter. Although Zoe argues late in the novel that the past has no bearing or relevance on the present, this is not the case. Elizabeth believes that the past matters in the present based on her own experiences, and Straub provides evidence to support Elizabeth's argument throughout the novel. However, while the past influences, affects, and alters the present, it does not have to control the present.

Zoe and Elizabeth talk about the past in general terms after Elizabeth finds out that Andrew slept with Lydia while dating her some decades before. The past clearly does matter in the present because this revelation emotionally devastates Elizabeth and causes a rift in her marriage with Andrew, even though rift is soon after repaired. The past, likewise, matters very much to Andrew –not only because he wants to hide his past with Lydia to protect his marriage and his family in the present, and not only



because he is guilt-ridden about the past, but because he wants to make up for the past by proving he is worthy of his son and his wife.

The past also matters greatly when it comes to Zoe and Jane. Jane herself worries that there is something romantic going on between Zoe and Elizabeth given the past that Zoe and Elizabeth have had, stretching all the way back to college. Jane worries that this special connection, this pseudo-romance, is undermining her marriage to Zoe in the present. The past also matters greatly to Naomi and to Darcey, as they want very much to create an accurate biopic of Lydia for Hollywood. They draw on primary sources, such as her journal, to accurately construct her past so that it will be relevant to audiences in the present.

Indeed, the past that Andrew, Elizabeth, and Zoe share as part of Kitty's Mustache matters to them all very much in the present. The movie that Naomi wants to make will require them to sign over rights to the song "Mistress of Myself." This means the past has direct bearing on the lives of Elizabeth, Andrew, and Zoe in the present, as something that happened in the past now requires them to act in the present by either signing, or refusing to sign over rights. While Elizabeth and Zoe agree, Andrew opposes this –and regardless, all of them come to reflect and draw on memories of the past in the present.



Styles

Point of View

Emma Straub tells her novel *Modern Lovers* from the point of view of a personal, but unknown narrator in the third-person, omniscient perspective. The narrator draws together the sometimes different and sometimes similar stories of six distinct primary characters –Ruby, Harry, Elizabeth, Andrew, Zoe, and Jane. The narrator acts as a unifying voice which serves as a bridge between their lives. The narrator is very personal and intimate toward readers, indeed even breaking the fourth wall to address readers, such as on page 155 in Chapter 31. The narrator thus draws readers directly in to experience the stories and the lives of the characters in the novel, personally investing readers by making them relevant as involved observers. The omniscient perspective of the novel matters greatly, as the narrator must constantly unveil to readers the unspoken thoughts and emotions of characters in the novel, thus granting readers direct and unique insight into the motivations of characters. This also matters greatly as the narrator must constantly shift to the events of the past, and in so doing the narrator becomes omniscient as the narrator is privy to the past as well as the present.

Language and Meaning

Emma Straub tells her novel *Modern Lovers* in language that is casual and straightforward, much like the concept of modern lovers –romance without the strings attached, romantic storytelling without sonorous and poetic prose. The casual and straightforward language allows readers to easily navigate the complicated lives, relationships, and emotions of the characters of the novel. It also allows the reader to shift back and forth through time, as the narrator jumps between the past and present – sometimes multiple times –within single chapters. This is also important because Straub is able to clearly and succinctly explain things which need to be explained –such as the inner thought processes of characters or their immediate reaction to any given situation –such as when Elizabeth finds out that Lydia and Andrew slept together many years before, and orders everyone out of her house. The casual and straightforward language also matters for the sake of brevity, as a large number of primary and secondary characters populate the book, which itself is composed of over seventy chapters with primary and secondary plot lines. The simple language helps the reader to easily navigate the novel.

Structure

Emma Straub divides her novel *Modern Lovers* into four primary parts, with each part being broken down into numbered chapters. Each primary part, numbered and titled, deals with a specific set of situations, circumstances, or characters. For example, Part



Three, *Mistress of Myself*, features Elizabeth truly coming into her own –especially after learning about Andrew’s sexual affair with Lydia –and features Zoe finally taking charge of her marriage by romantically reconnecting with Jane. Each chapter within each part primarily deals with one or two characters particularly, and the events and situations that individual character (or set of characters) may find themselves in. This allows the reader to move through the plot character by character, rather than following the plot and running into characters where they may appear. This makes the novel primarily character-driven, as the characters themselves are vital to the overall plot of life and family.



Quotes

Someone is making a movie about Lydia, and they need the rights. Our rights. To the song, and to us.

-- Elizabeth (Four)

Importance: Early in the novel, Elizabeth reveals to Zoe she has been contacted by someone wanting to buy the rights to their old band's old song "Mistress of Myself," which made Lydia famous. A movie is being planned about her life. With their children growing into adults, it is only natural that Elizabeth, Zoe, and Andrew should remember the past. With the idea of buying out the rights, remembering the past becomes inescapable.

Elizabeth understood it completely: the desire to be in control, the need to speak the words aloud. No one in St. Paul, Minnesota, had ever truly been her own mistress.

-- Narrator (Six)

Importance: Here, the narrator explains the inspiration for the lyrics Elizabeth wrote to the song that would become "Mistress of Myself." It stems both from Elizabeth's reading of Jane Austen and from the traditional world in which she grew up in St. Paul. The song is about women taking charge of their own lives and being in control of themselves.

It was weird, knowing that your mother had had a life before you were born, but everyone had to deal with that eventually.

-- Narrator (Fifteen)

Importance: As Ruby and Harry grow older, they begin to delve into the past of their parents. Meanwhile, ongoing events cause their parents to look back into the past, especially because their children are becoming the age at which they first came into their own as young adults. This also underscores the important truth that parents are people, too. They are not only mothers and fathers. Though being a parent is a very important role, parents have had lives before their children are born.

There was nothing about youth that was fair: the young hadn't done anything to deserve it, and the old hadn't done anything to drive it away.

-- Narrator (Twenty)

Importance: While visiting EVOLVEment, Andrew comes to think about youth and old age. He realizes young people take their youth for granted—like he did—while older people, like he is now, have done nothing to deserve having their youth taken away from them. Andrew is regretting how quickly his own youth has disappeared. He realizes old age and death are in the future for him.

You wrote the words, yes." Andrew shook his head. "But you don't get to decide for the rest of us.

-- Andrew (Twenty-Two)



Importance: Elizabeth and Andrew have yet another discussion over the rights to “Mistress of Myself.” Elizabeth wants Andrew to sign over rights to the song, arguing that she wrote it. Andrew counters that she only wrote the lyrics, and that this does not mean she gets to decide for everyone else what happens. The fight leads to Andrew storming out. This tips the reader off that Andrew is hiding something beyond concerns he expresses audibly. Only later will this make sense.

This was not the face of propriety. This was not the face of marriage. This was one man, midlife, losing his shit.

-- Narrator (Twenty-Two)

Importance: After Andrew storms out of the house, Elizabeth goes to find him at the yoga place he says he has been attending. There, she finds a rave-like party going on. She sees her husband dancing and behaving like when he was nineteen, though he is not making out with any girls. She realizes her husband is having a midlife crisis.

Zoe wished that marriage were just the good parts, just the parts that made you happy, but it wasn't. Even she knew that.

-- Narrator (Thirty-Two)

Importance: As Zoe reflects on her difficulties with Jane, she and Jane come together to encourage Ruby about college. Zoe wishes marriage could only be times like this, when things are good and she and Jane are together and united on things. However, Zoe knows this isn't the case. Marriages sometimes require work.

Elizabeth had meant to tell Andrew about the movie, about signing his name.

-- Narrator (Forty)

Importance: Elizabeth learns that the movie about Lydia is being made. She has not yet told Andrew about it because of the Ruby-Harry situation, but decides it is finally time to do so. She worries how Andrew will respond, but knows the truth is better than continuing to lie.

It means that I signed your form. I signed your name,

-- Elizabeth (Forty-One)

Importance: Having had enough with Andrew dragging his feet and knowing the family needs the money, Elizabeth forges Andrew's name to sign over the rights of the song. Andrew is furious upon learning about this, telling Elizabeth it will make Lydia seem like an heroic figure in the film rather than the jerk she was in real life. This does not trouble Elizabeth until she begins to wonder how much of their own years in college will be in the film.

Andrew's first emotion had been relief. No one else knew, and now he'd never have to tell Elizabeth. The relief was the second thing he felt guiltiest about.

-- Narrator (Forty-Eight)



Importance: While seeing Elizabeth in college, Andrew also slept with Lydia a number of times. Andrew remembers being torn between the two and feeling relief when Lydia left school. Andrew feels guilty about feeling relieved. He feels even more guilt about sleeping with Lydia while dating Elizabeth.

He wanted to deserve his beautiful boy. He wanted to trust that their marriage was strong enough to vanquish old dragons.

-- Narrator (Sixty-Two)

Importance: After Andrew's past sexual liaisons with Lydia are discovered, Andrew rushes over to EVOLVEment. There, he learns that his investments into a hotel are for nothing because the rezoning needed for the hotel has been denied. This causes Andrew to become sick to his stomach. During this time, he can think only about how much he wants his marriage to survive and how much he wants to be deserving of having a son like Harry.

Does it matter at all, what happened a million years ago? Is it relevant?

-- Elizabeth (Sixty-Five)

Importance: After learning about the past between Lydia and Andrew, Elizabeth seeks out Zoe for comfort and advice. Zoe does not think the past matters. Elizabeth wonders the same, but she is obviously bothered by not knowing about Andrew and Lydia. In many ways, it does hurt her in the present/ However, Elizabeth finds it does not necessarily change anything –except allowing her to speak about the truth as well.