

My Sunshine Away Study Guide

My Sunshine Away by M.O. Walsh

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Plot Summary

The following version of *My Sunshine Away* was used to create this guide: *My Sunshine Away*. M.O. Walsh. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2015.

My Sunshine Away by M.O. Walsh is a literary novel that reads like a memoir and incorporates a healthy dose of mystery. The unnamed protagonist and narrator tells the story of his difficult teen years as he struggles to understand love, responsibility and what it means to grow into a good man. Beginning with his admission that he was one of the suspects in the rape of his neighbor, friend and first crush Lindy Simpson and running through to the eventual discovery of the perpetrator 18 years later, the novel is filled with suspense, rich insights and often disturbing revelations about the residents of Piney Creek Road.

The novel begins as the narrator recounts the details of the night Lindy Simpson was raped on a dark stretch of Piney Creek Road within the Woodland Hills community, a suburb of Baton Rouge. He reveals that he was one of the four suspects in the case and asks for the opportunity to explain himself. The narrator's first recollection of watching Lindy was from behind his window shades as she rode her bike down the street. He also recalls a time when he made a picture of Lindy's form out of pieces of bark as he sat watching her work in her front yard. A third revelation is his foray into pornography. Having seen drawings done by a fellow student at school, the narrator became hooked on drawing pictures of Lindy in provocative poses and saying suggestive things. He drew as a way of working out his fixation on her and trying to learn what his sexuality was all about. The narrator then proceeds to provide detailed information on most of the other key residents in the community, including the Kern brothers, the Landry's and Lindy herself.

The Kern brothers were dealt with rather quickly. Duke Kern was the younger of the two and hung out with the group of kids playing in the woods behind the development. He developed a brief and rather secret relationship with Lindy following a game of King and Queen of the Woods that the kids played one day. Perhaps because of this tie, Duke was never considered as a suspect. But his older brother, Bo, was on the list. Bo had a mean temper and a violent personality. He was known to beat up people and smash things for no reason. He worked as a bouncer at a nearby bar and was issued a restraining order by a local college girl. Because of his behavior he is naturally considered a suspect, even by his distraught mother. In a front-yard confrontation between Lindy's father and Bo, he was finally dismissed as a suspect.

Mr. Landry is also introduced as the large and wild looking neighbor who scared all the kids. He often headed into the woods for hours in search of a stray dog. His adopted son, Jason, secretly fed and cared for the dog and then chased it away again in order to protect it from his abusive father. Jason became a suspect in the case as well, given his strange and somewhat abusive behavior toward others. He was kicked out of the Perkins School and often behaved inappropriately toward girls. Jason took the narrator into his house and showed him a collection of photographs that he had stolen out of his



father's secret locked room. Many of the women in the community were captured in the images, including Lindy. The narrator begged Jason to let him keep one, a move he later regretted. Following a failed fishing trip, an attempt at bonding with his father, the narrator's mother discovered his collection of Lindy memorabilia and pornography. She was horrified and began suspecting that her son might have been responsible for Lindy's rape.

The narrator also recalls when he first fell in love with Lindy. All the kids were gathered in the school for the launching of the Space Shuttle Challenger. When the tragic explosion occurs, Lindy threw up on herself and the narrator is impressed that she was such a sensitive person that the tragedy would make her physically ill. From then on he is smitten and makes an internal vow to protect her from whatever injustice may occur. He fails in this regard however when later in the story he purposefully tells the guys in the locker room at school that Lindy was raped. She is devastated and does not speak to him for the next year. She also begins attending therapy which really only serves to provide her with new information on ways to rebel and experiment with dangerous, unhealthy behaviors.

Lindy continued to struggle with the after effects of the rape. She became crude and very sexually oriented. Once she and the narrator began speaking again they continued their friendship. They had nightly phone conversations initially about the Jeffrey Dahmer case in the news. They played Truth or Dare over the phone and they both masturbated in their rooms while on the phone. The narrator wrestled with wanting more from his relationship with Lindy and he wanted to solve the crime for her. He finally got his chance when Jason gave him the key to his father's secret room and helped him to sneak into the house. He said that there was evidence in the room that would tie Mr. Landry to Lindy's rape. Although this was not the case, Mr. Landry was investigated for abusing the many foster children that had been in his care. Lindy had it out with the narrator in a very public scene as she yelled at him for trying to solve the crime. He finally understood that she didn't want to know who raped her, she just wanted to move on.

Sixteen years later, the narrator unexpectedly ran into Lindy and her husband following an LSU football game. Lindy was healthy and obviously happy. The narrator also stumbled across evidence that provided the answer to who committed the rape. Even though he finally solved the crime, he kept his knowledge to himself because he understood that Lindy did not need to know in order to heal.



Chapters 1-7

Summary

As the novel begins, the unnamed narrator states clearly that there were four suspects in the rape of Lindy Simpson and he wastes no time in recounting the basics of the attack. As darkness fell, a man, or perhaps a boy, had waited behind some bushes, holding a rope tied on one end around a tree, waiting to spring on an unsuspecting Lindy. He pulled the rope taut causing her to fall off her bicycle. He pushed her into the ground, gagged her and knocked her out. When she awoke, she stumbled into her home just four doors away, climbed the stairs, took a shower and collapsed on her bed. A short time later, her mother came looking for her and discovered blood stained underwear and her daughter unconscious. And because there was very little evidence at the crime scene, none of the four suspects were ever charged with the crime. The narrator then reveals that he was one of the suspects, but asks for a chance to explain.

He continues by describing the neighborhood in which everyone lived and the Perkins School, the private school where everyone attended classes. Every day in the summer, the narrator would lie on the floor of his living room and look out the window through the space just beneath the blind in order to catch a glimpse of Lindy. Like clockwork, Mrs. Morrison the piano teacher would leave Lindy's house and head for his, a few doors away. But in the short amount of time it took for her walk across the street, Lindy would come down her driveway, pull her hair into a ponytail and ride off down the street on her bicycle. The narrator lived for these few moments and dreamed that some day she would get off her bike and stop into his house. He also describes a time at school when some of the boys organized a race across the school grounds. Lindy wanted to join in, but the narrator backed out. He knew that Lindy was fast and wasn't about to embarrass himself.

Other neighbors introduced to the readers include the Kern brothers, Bo and Duke, Mr. Landry and his adopted son, Jason. Each one had their rough edges and reasons for them to be discussed in later chapters in greater detail. But here, the narrator tells how each one worked outside in the yard or on their cars, just like all the neighborhood kids and men. In particular, the narrator enjoyed watching Lindy as she helped in the yard, cleaned out gutters, pulled weeds or swept the sidewalk. One particular day, before the rape, he sat watching Lindy and was playing with strips of bark that had shed off the crepe myrtle trees. He found strips that resembled her body parts and created a figure of Lindy on the grass. Suddenly, his mother appeared and happily remarked that it was so sweet of him to make a picture of his mother. He comments that she simply did not realize how far off she was in her thinking.

The narrator continues describing the neighborhood kids and their activities. One summer day, Artsy Julie, Lindy, Duke Kern, and Randy Stiller, the narrator's best friend, were all playing in the woods behind the houses, gathering long strands of hanging moss. They built it into a long mound and Duke said it looked like a bed. He and Lindy



lay down on it and everyone pretended that they were the King and Queen of the woods. Duke said they needed an heir. Their play acting was interrupted by Mr. Landry, who burst out of the woods wildly asking if they had seen a dog. He told them to be careful because it was dangerous. Everyone was scared of Mr. Landry because he fought loudly with his wife and he seemed rather violent. After that afternoon, Duke and Lindy became something of an unofficial couple. The narrator reveals that Duke Kern was never one of the suspects in Lindy's rape.

However, Bo Kern, Duke's brother, was a suspect. He was a blocker for the school football team and was thrown out of an important game because he was excessively violent. He had a harelip that made him look extra tough. The narrator wondered if the harelip doomed him to be different from everybody and set him apart in a bad way. He wonders the same about another high school classmate, Chester McCready. Chester was accused by a female classmate of "feeling her up." From then on he was referred to as Chester the Molester. Ten years later at the high school reunion, Chester was still the talk of the school as he had just been accused of sexual harassment of a teenage girl at a local sandwich shop. The narrator continues to tell about Bo's roughness. He was irrationally violent, beating up people and smashing things. He had a court order issued against him by a local college girl. When the rape occurred everyone in the neighborhood suspected Bo, including his mother.

The narrator then explains how he learned about the word "rape." He was 13 years old and sitting on Randy's kitchen floor playing with a box of action figures. The boys knew they were too old to keep playing with the figures, so they made up a new game, throwing them against the wall and trying to break off their arms, legs and heads. Randy's sister's boyfriend, Robert, was hanging out with them. In talking about the score of the latest football game, he commented that the team lost so badly that they got "raped." Later, when the narrator was told by his mother and a policeman about Lindy's rape, he was confused. He asked who she was playing. His mother was relieved because his comment revealed that he didn't even know what a rape was. But the narrator states that somebody could commit the act without knowing the word.

In the final chapter of this first section, the narrator relates when he first fell in love with Lindy. The whole school was watching the liftoff of the Space Shuttle Challenger. Everyone was gathered in classrooms in front of TV carts. When the shuttle exploded, everyone was in a panic. The narrator looked across the room to Lindy and saw that she had thrown up on herself. A teacher, Mrs. Knight, quickly helped Lindy to clean herself up, but it impressed the narrator that someone could be so deeply sensitive that such a tragedy would make them physically sick. Later that day, the narrator and his mother watched President Reagan on TV talk about the sacrifice of the astronauts and that these things often happened in the process of exploration. His mother asked if he understood what the President had said, but he states that he understood nothing - it was his first day in love.



Analysis

The novel, *My Sunshine Away*, is a fictional crime mystery that takes place in the quiet, well-off community of Woodland Hills, a subdivision in suburban Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As such, the first chapter recounts the rape that befalls Lindy Simpson. The details are presented in a straight forward manner. The basic known facts are stated, including that the narrator himself is one of the four suspects. He asks for the chance to explain, and proceeds throughout the novel to lay out all the information on the neighborhood and its sometimes troubled inhabitants. What is somewhat surprising and refreshing in the novel's approach is that the author does not take a typical chronological approach to solving the crime. There is very little presented by way of the investigation by the police concerning gathering evidence or tracking down leads for weeks on end. By highlighting the characters, both the suspects, non-suspects and their family members, the author is able to not only present evidence that provides motive, but more importantly enables him to look at the impact that the rape had on the entire community. As he delves into characters rather than facts, the author is able to explore thematic issues of personal responsibility to others, abuse, forgiveness and overcoming adversity. It is also important to note that the author never reveals the narrator's name or his family's last name. Every other character is fully identified. Since the narrator admits to being a suspect in the case, it could be conceivable that his viewpoint is unreliable for communicating an accurate accounting of the story. But, the story is not meant to merely be the narrator's view of the story, or his quest to find the true perpetrator. By creating an impersonal distance between the reader and the main character, the story can become anyone's story. By observing what takes place in this one seemingly nice, normal community, readers can observe the interactions between neighbors and struggles within the community and wonder about the deeper issues that exist within their own communities.

The narrator begins this story by telling about his own obsession with Lindy. He watches for her to pass his window every day, and steals glances from behind a window shade, cracked just enough on the bottom for him to peer through. His fascination with the somewhat older, athletic girl is all encompassing. As he watches her while they are both outside working in their respective front yards, he starts playing with strips of shed crepe myrtle bark and forms a picture of Lindy in the grass using the strips. One strip resembles her brown hair, other curved pieces look like her breasts, and so on. This information does not help to clear his name in any way, in fact it only begins to build a case against him. As he states, "So it is true that I thought of possessing Lindy Simpson as furiously and as constantly as any 14-year old boy could that hot summer of 1989" (7). Furthermore, his mother is clueless as to how much her son is changing and beginning to wonder about girls and sex. When she sees the bark drawing, she assumes that it is of her and does not even consider that it could be of anyone else, let alone the cute girl across the street. Yet, this development is still in its beginning stages. When it comes to understanding the meaning of many sexual terms, the narrator is fairly uneducated, although curious. He describes one of his teachers as a "dildo" much to his mother's horror, but she is relieved when he clarifies by saying, "That lady is a pain in my butt" (25). So when questioned by his mother about Lindy's rape, he again



answers very innocently wondering who she was playing against in some sport that she lost so badly. His mother is relieved, believing that since he doesn't even know the meaning of the word, he couldn't possibly have committed the crime. But once again, this shows a bit of naivety on her part. Her son is curious about sex and thinking about Lindy all the time, he just doesn't have all the information about sex yet and does not understand what it all means. Here the author adds a bit of suspense to the novel. Suggesting that someone could commit the crime even if they didn't know what it was called, suggests that the narrator may indeed be a suspect. On one hand he is portrayed as innocent, yet a tension is created to keep him in mind as a suspect.

As the narrator continues, he describes the main characters on Piney Creek Rd. The kids all played together when they were younger, before life came along and people changed. He recounts a time when the kids were playing in the woods and gathering moss. When Duke Kern and Lindy lie down on the moss because it looks like a bed, it appears on the surface, at least to some of the kids, that this is all part of the game, playing King and Queen of the Woods. But there is a hint that Duke, Lindy and the narrator are seeing it as a bit more. From that time on, Duke and Lindy share their snacks and she drinks from his Gatorade bottle. They pay special attention to one another and although they are never an official couple, the narrator takes note of their interaction. He is not exactly jealous because he expects that they might get together since they are both "beautiful," (15) but he does wish that he could be closer to Lindy. It is perhaps because of this special friendship or relationship that Duke Kern is never suspected of the rape. There are no other details given as to why he is not a person of interest, but it may be because the two had something of a secret romance, something more like a dating relationship.

Bo Kern is revealed as the second suspect in the case. Due to of his violent nature and many public outbursts against people and property, Bo is a natural suspect. Even his mother is reduced to tears and fears that he may be the one who committed the rape (21). The narrator wonders if the violence that sprang from Bo could not be helped. Because of his harelip, a birth defect, his life has been set apart from others. He does not look like other kids and he doesn't fit into the cookie cutter middle-class, success driven community. The narrator questions to what degree the kids in the community and the Perkins school set Bo on this path themselves, just as he feels they may have done with another classmate, Chester McCready, who they nickname Chester the Molester. Years later, at a class reunion, the narrator discovers that Chester has followed a life of sexual molestation, and he feels that perhaps some of the responsibility for this life choice lies with his classmates, who somehow set him down that stream years before. This touches on a major theme in the novel as he raises the question of responsibility toward others. He is aware that unkind words and shaming behavior toward other students are strong influences and he considers the role that this behavior took in the kind of people Bo and Chester became. As kids they were like fragile paper boats set out on the water and set down a path. It is almost as if the course of their lives was determined for them by those who created their fragile identities early in life. When the narrator reads in the paper that Chester was arrested for sexual harassment, he feels vaguely responsible. As he states, "I felt an accomplice to the words as I read them that day and surprising pity for the man he'd become" (19).



As this section concludes, the narrator talks about falling in love with Lindy during the Space Shuttle Challenger launch and explosion. As the disaster happens, everything becomes chaotic. The narrator looks over at Lindy and sees that she has thrown up on herself and he is deeply affected. He is amazed that Lindy has reacted to the point of getting sick and wonders if all girls are this way, so deeply sensitive. It causes him to vow to protect her from that point on from any injustice that may come her way. "I suddenly felt it my warrant to defend this particular girl from there on out" (33). It is because of this secret, internal commitment that he later becomes both guilt-ridden for mistakes he makes and obsessed with finding out who committed the rape. And just as President Reagan shared with the school children of America on TV, in a metaphor for everything the Space Shuttle represents, painful things are going to happen in the process of exploration. With this firm resolve to be there for Lindy, the narrator is bound to encounter painful times as he explores the meaning of love. His relationship with Lindy literally crashes and burns and for a time it seems that all is lost with her. But he continues to pursue caring for her just as the space program continued to pursue its explorations. Ultimately, the narrator realizes as an adult that all the painful exploration and trouble was worth it because it made him into the man became.

Discussion Question 1

There are many characters introduced and names given in this first section of the novel, but the narrator remains unnamed. Why do you think we never are told his name?

Discussion Question 2

In these early chapters of the novel there is a lot of information about some of the primary characters in the neighborhood, but very little information on the crime investigation itself. Does this information help the reader solve the crime? Why do you think the author takes this character driven rather than plot driven approach?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the incident with the Space Shuttle Challenger make such an impact on the narrator?

Vocabulary

servitudes, accolades, romped, shard, docket, harelip, menacing, inconsolable, accomplice, cache, hardwired, pandemonium



Chapter 8-14

Summary

As the narrator begins this section he speaks of the many other boys at school who had crushes or fixations on Lindy. One boy, Clay Tompkins, always sat quietly drawing in a little notebook and no one knew what was in the book. But one day, he left the book unguarded at his seat while he went to the bathroom. The other boys began to look in the book and discovered a whole catalog of pornographic drawings featuring about 20 girls in the school, including Lindy. The book was soon confiscated by the teacher and Clay Tompkins never returned to school. This introduction to pornography hooked the narrator and he began to draw his own pictures, solely of Lindy.

Next, the narrator turns toward a description of how the South gets a bad rap from people who live elsewhere. He acknowledges the bad things like extreme heat and humidity, alligators, bugs and heavy rains and flooding, He also talks lovingly about the good things that make Louisiana special, like family mealtimes and backyard cookouts with corn and crawfish. But even in the bad things, there is goodness and joy. He remembers when after a period of heavy rain Old Man Casemore traveled up and down the street in his boat handing out food to neighbors stuck in their houses. He also remembers how the neighborhood always banded together to battle the white fly infestations that would hit the area and attack all the vegetation. When this happened during the summer of Lindy's rape however, the falling leaves on an oak at the end of the street revealed Lindy's blue Reebok which had been missing since the night of the attack. Mr. Simpson was so overcome that he took a chainsaw to the tree. The neighborhood men, who thought he was just cutting it down because he believed the tree to be dead, tried to stop him since they knew it would come back to life with new growth in the spring. But when they saw the shoe, they left Mr. Simpson to his work.

School began again for the kids and the narrator made a major mistake. In an attempt to be popular with the boys in the locker room, he let it slip that Lindy was raped over the summer. Soon the entire school knew about it and Lindy was humiliated. She was furious with the narrator and did not speak to him for the next year. She proceeded to try on different personalities, going from the extremely girly to the black Goth look. She cut her hair, wore drab colors, listened to dark music and became extremely thin. The narrator, in pursuit of Lindy, made all these persona changes as well. Later he learned from Lindy that she made all these changes and learned about all these different possible ways of being from attending therapy.

The narrator then moves on to introduce the third suspect in Lindy's rape, Jason Landry. Jason is the adopted son of Jacques and Louis Landry. Although the Landry's had a parade of foster children passing through, Jason was the constant child in their home. His behavior was strange. He was kicked out of the Perkins School and rarely played with the other kids in the neighborhood. He would steal the kids' go karts and tackle the



girls in strange ways when they were all playing football. He had dime-sized scars on his back.

One day, the narrator was sitting on a hill at the back of the Landry house with Jason. A stray dog came out of the woods and Jason called it over and fed it from a bowl he kept hidden. In the middle of the meal, Jason suddenly and almost cruelly scared and chased the dog away. Then the boys headed into the woods. They tracked through the brush and found a tree that they decided could be made into a fort. Jason made the narrator swear that he would tell no one about the location. The boys returned to the Landry's house because Jason wanted to show the narrator something. The house was cluttered and dark. They passed a padlocked room in the hallway on the way to Jason's room which Jason referred to as the "mother lode." In his bedroom Jason revealed a packet of black and white photos he had stolen from his father's secret locked room. The photos were all of various women and girls in the neighborhood, secretly taken while they were going about their business in their yards or driving down the street. Many of them were of Lindy and the narrator begged Jason to let him keep one.

The last two chapters relate information about some of the fathers in the community and specifically a memory of a trip the narrator took with his father. The fathers are described as birds, each one given a specific species. Mr. Simpson is described as a hawk, Mr. Landry as an owl and the narrator's father as a canary, since his father had flown the cage (left) and rarely saw his son.

As the narrator continued to swing through personality changes, his mother became concerned and called her ex-husband back to duty. He showed up at the house one Saturday morning, to spend time with his son and took him on a fishing trip. Once at the fish camp, however, his young girlfriend and her friends showed up at the camp as well and it became obvious to the narrator that his father really never intended to spend any quality one-on-one time with him. His father made weak attempts to talk with him about his own actions and made excuses for his behavior, but the narrator only half listened and pretty much dismissed his father as being "inconsequential." Following a night of drinking with his friends, his father drove the narrator back home the next morning. When they arrived at the house it was obvious that the mother had been crying. With a strained expression on her face, she tells her ex that she needs to show him something that she found in the narrator's bedroom.

Analysis

This collection of chapters deals with a great deal of backstory that provides insight to two of the rape suspects, Jason Landry and the narrator himself. A view into their early teen experiences with sexuality provides a basis for their possible motivations and actions against Lindy. The narrator begins by talking about the many boys at school who were infatuated with Lindy. Most were perfectly harmless in their intent, but one boy was not so virtuous.



Clay Tompkins draws pornographic pictures of many of the girls at school, including Lindy. He draws them in provocative positions in scanty clothing or fully nude. He draws pictures of anatomy as well. When a group of boys, including the narrator discover the notebook they are in awe of the contents and a whole new world is opened to them. The narrator is hooked on pornography from then on. He begins to draw pictures at home in his room at night, thinking of Lindy in new ways. He adds word bubbles making her talk about sex. These drawings eventually cause him trouble, as he mother finds them, once again raising her concern that he might be involved in Lindy's rape. But this foray into pornography is also detrimental to him in that it leads him down a path of thinking about Lindy in a strictly sexual way. His thoughts are increasingly about her body and his desire to be close and intimate with her. He previously has vowed to himself to protect and care for her, but his focus becomes more physical in nature. He has no thought about the internal struggles she may be having in the aftermath of the rape, and really no understanding of how damaging the act of rape is to a woman. He only has the mentality of lust and longing.

This desire is also seen as he acquires a photo from Jason, the strange neighbor who is the adopted son of the Landrys. Jason shows the narrator a set of photographs that he has stolen from his father's secret room. Although the photographs are of several of the woman in the community, even one of his mother, the narrator is most fixated on the ones of Lindy. He begs Jason to allow him to keep one. He only briefly questions why these photos exist and does not stop to comprehend the invasion of privacy that they represent. Mr. Landry's locked door is a curiosity to him, but the photo of Lindy usurps any deeper concern. He wants to take it home, because it is a way to have Lindy close and all to himself. This scene in Jason's home also introduces some information concerning the questionable activities taking place in the Landry home. The author uses foreshadowing to cast suspicion on Mr. Landry even though he is never a suspect in Lindy's rape. Another very strong bit of foreshadowing centers around the stray dog that Mr. Landry is always hunting. The narrator discovers that Jason is secretly feeding and caring for the dog. He is confused however, that Jason suddenly chases the dog away and is almost mean to it. After he kicks over a bowl of antifreeze which Mr. Landry had set out for the dog, Jason comments, "I just saved that dog's life." Still, the narrator is oblivious to the abusive environment in which the family exists. Additionally, the secret locked room, Jason's bed wetting and Mrs. Landry's ultra-submissive demeanor all hint at a family life that consists of abuse and excessive control. None of these issues are addressed directly however; the narrator only makes observations and recounts them in his story.

At this point, there seems to be an abrupt shift in the text as the narrator talks about the South and how it is so often misunderstood by people who do not live there. He speaks of the negatives that are so often what characterizes the South to outsiders. But he insists that there is a lot of goodness in joy that springs from these things. For example, out of the flooding that occurs in the community streets one summer, Old Man Casmore launches his boat from his carport and travels up and down the streets handing out food to his neighbors. It is a friendly, neighborly act that the narrator says is rarely seen or experienced in other places. Yet the stories of the South would be recounted elsewhere in the country that the kids in these places had to go to school in



boats while fighting off alligators and swamp rats (45-46). Even that summer of Lindy's rape, the community turns the problem of the white fly infestation into a united battle. Everyone works to eradicate the bugs, and despite the devastation brought on by the insects, they know that the trees and bushes will spring back to life the following year. When Mr. Simpson suddenly decides to take a chain saw to a tree at the end of the street, the other men initially go to stop him since they know that the tree is not dead, merely in trauma from the infestation. But as they see Lindy's blue Reebok hanging from a lower branch, they understand Mr. Simpson's rashness. The shoe is a stark, fresh reminder of the scourge that has been inflicted on his daughter and he wants so desperately to eradicate it. Chopping down the tree and carving it up is an outlet for him, a way to release some of his anger and frustration. He is unable to change what has happened, he cannot protect his daughter, he cannot solve the crime, but he can take it all out on this tree. This exploration of local culture reflects the author's love for the South but also highlights one of the novel's major themes, resiliency. At times the South can be a harsh place to live, but the occupants endure with grace and joy, embracing what is good and caring for each other. The several tragic events that occur in the story affect many individuals in the community in a ripple effect. But ultimately, the love of family and the resilient nature of the community helps Lindy and the narrator survive emotionally and develop into well-adjusted adults.

As school begins again in the fall, the narrator confesses that he makes a big mistake. In a desire to be popular among the other boys in the locker room, he lets it slip that Lindy was raped. Word spreads throughout the school and Lindy is humiliated. She discovers that the narrator is the one who leaked the information and is livid and stops speaking to him. She is also shocked and surprised that he even knew about it and he confesses that everyone on the street knows about it. This sends Lindy into a downward spiral. She tries on various personalities and becomes increasingly withdrawn. Her parents make her go to therapy which does not produce the results they hope for. Instead she learns about the myriad of other problems that exist in the world. She has previously never known about deep issues like cutting, bulimia, anorexia and abuse. Now she tries on these ways of rebellion. By attending weekly sessions with kids struggling with these issues her eyes are opened to the fallacy of the perfect life that Piney Creek Road seemingly represents. She now views her community as "obscene," and as the narrator states, "The lovely street was an ignorant joke. Therapy had taught her this, and she wore the lesson all over her face" (56). This revelation is perhaps the most clear reflection of the book's title. Lindy clearly sees that the world is not the perfect, happy, sun-shiny place she had previously believed it to be. Her "sunshine" has been taken away.

The last two chapters in the section focus on fatherhood and, in particular, the relationship that the narrator has with his own father. He begins by speaking of men metaphorically, that at some point all men apparently grow wings and become birds. Each one becomes their own species depending on their personality and issues in life. Mr. Simpson becomes a hawk, circling over Lindy from a distance away, keeping his watchful eye on her. He waits to see what danger might befall her and is ready to swoop in to protect and kill. Mr. Landry is the predatory owl always on the hunt. He quite literally searches for the stray dog that appears out of the woods, but he also secretly



preys on the innocent women and children in the neighborhood. Finally, using beautiful descriptive prose, the narrator portrays his father as the colorful canary that sprouted wings and flew the cage for a younger woman. "My father's feathered pair led him out of our picture window...where he perched on top of a cash register manned by a perky eighteen-year-old girl" (76). He continues to relate how his father was subsequently not involved in his life and maintained no meaningful relationship with him.

As the narrator moves through the difficult period of persona changes that mirror Lindy's experimentation, his mother calls his father back to dad-duty. He shows up at the house one morning and announces that he is taking his son on an overnight fishing trip. The trip does not produce any father/son bonding since Laura, the young co-ed, shows up at the fishing camp. The narrator becomes a third wheel and it is very obvious that his father never intended to take any real time with his son and provide any fatherly direction when his son so desperately needs some guidance. His father asks if there are any girls in his son's life. He replies that there is one girl, but she has some baggage. "All you need is the one, he'd said to me, his own son, a child of divorce" (80). The narrator views his father as someone who gives no thought to his words or the impact they have on others; he was an "inconsequential kind of man" (80). This incident further solidifies the emptiness of the relationship between father and son. The narrator feels unimportant and that for all practical purposes he is fatherless. He does not have a strong guide in his life and there is no one to offer him wisdom on how to navigate the complexities of women and relationships. The only example he has seen is one of betrayal and self-centeredness.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Clay Tompkin's notebook of drawings have such a powerful affect on the narrator? How did this get him into trouble later in the story?

Discussion Question 2

Why do the neighborhood men let Mr. Simpson cut down the tree at the end of the street once they see Lindy's Reebok hanging in the tree?

Discussion Question 3

Jason's behavior toward the stray dog may appear confusing. Why does he feed the dog and then meanly chase it away into the woods?

Vocabulary

virtuous, inexhaustible, middling, begrudge, misnomer, prodigious, chronicled, unmoored, cattily, nymphomaniac, cur, chasmic, oedipal, hospice, feigned, rueful, eviscerated, appraiser, zinger, inconsequential, posited, camaraderie, brothel, cuckold



Chapters 15-21

Summary

This section covers the details of how and why the narrator became a suspect in Lindy's rape. While the narrator and his father were away on their fishing trip, the narrator's mother discovered an unlocked box underneath her son's bed. Inside she discovered a cache of pornographic drawings of Lindy, items that used to belong to Lindy, condoms, the photo of Lindy taken by Mr. Landry, a pair of binoculars and Lindy's blue Reebok. All these items gave evidence to the narrator's obsession with Lindy and an extreme bent toward wanting to have sex with her. Most of the items he was able to explain away as a normal part of teenage sexual experimentation, but the binoculars and photograph held particular problems so he explains them in detail.

The narrator goes on to explain his relationship with Tyler Bannister, one of the Landry's foster kids. Tyler Bannister had been through many foster homes and was an unwelcome presence in Woodland Hills. He brought knowledge of drugs, sex and violence to the community. The kids didn't believe half his stories, but there was still a certain amount of intrigue to hear about all of his supposed sexual exploits. One day, before the rape had happened, the narrator was hanging out with Jason and Tyler in front of his house playing with a remote control car on the sidewalk. The talk turned to sex as usual and Tyler made a comment about seeing the inside of Lindy's room. The narrator can't image how Tyler had been in Lindy's bedroom. Tyler told him he must be really stupid and proceeded to show him the tree outside Lindy's house. They continued to play with the toy car so that they don't appear suspicious, but Tyler showed the narrator how easily the tree could be climbed and where there were places to sit up in the branches and easily peer into Lindy's bedroom. While they were standing on the sidewalk, Lindy came out on her bike as her father pulled his car into the driveway. They exchanged information about what time she would be home, a routine that was rehearsed everyday. Lindy exchanged rude comments with the boys and rode off. Tyler and Jason proceeded to spy on the fat lady up the street, while the narrator returned home. However, the incident gave him knowledge of a way into Lindy's world and he frequently visited that tree with his pair of binoculars. About a month later, Tyler left the Landry's home.

The narrator's mother was not sure how to deal with the other items in the box and especially the photo of Lindy. Over the months following the rape, she developed a friendship with Lindy's mother. They talk about their children and she tried to console Mrs. Simpson. She spent lots of time with her even attending therapy groups. All the while, she kept quite about her son's obsession with Lindy. The narrator's father, however, made more frequent stops by the house since he knew that his ex, Kathryn, had been very disturbed by the discovery. He sat his son down and told him that he was not worried about his son's behavior, but that it was difficult for his mother to understand. She suspected that he might have had something to do with the rape. The father however, knew that such an act was meant to be hurtful and that his son had no



such malice for Lindy. For a time, Kathryn began to think that perhaps her ex-husband might return to the family. They spent many nights drinking wine, watching old movies and dancing in the living room. One morning, the narrator noticed that his dad's car was still in the driveway and he hoped that maybe this "small piece of life fixed" (111). His father did not answer his questions about what was happening, but joked with him instead and walked out the door. Kathryn was crushed and spent the day in bed crying.

The crying and grief continued as Hannah, the narrator's oldest sister died suddenly in a car crash. People called the house looking for her throughout the day and relatives called looking for Kathryn. No one told the narrator what was going on but he sensed that something serious had happened. His mother, father and other sister, Rachel arrived at home and told him the news. Relatives and neighbors stopped in to visit. He tried to remember things about his sister who was so much older than he. He only really had a few memories of her - the night he spent with her and her fiance eating pizza at her apartment, an image of her trying on her high school graduation gown and a very particular memory of her joyfully exiting his room and tapping the top of the door frame. He described the affect of Hannah's death on his family. His mother spent hours crying alone in her room. His sister, Rachel, moved back home and turned to religion to find her comfort. His father became even more estranged from his remaining daughter and ex-wife.

The narrator however, felt that Hannah's death somehow brought him closer to Lindy. The accident happened around the time of the Spring Bash at school and Kathryn arranged for her son to attend the dance with Artsy Julie. Both of them complied, but once at the dance, Julie headed stage-side and spent most of the night dancing happily by herself. Meanwhile, the narrator enjoyed a certain amount of attention as people spoke to him expressing their concern for him in light of his sister's death. Lindy also showed up at the dance with Matt Hawk, a student from a local public high school known to be a rough place. The two spent the whole dance watching from the sidelines. The dance ended and kids traveled to an unchaperoned after-party at another student's home. Here the alcohol flowed and a live band played. The narrator decided to play the bad boy and looked for trouble. He drank heavily. In an attempt to gain Lindy's attention, he asked the guitarist in the band if he could take over playing. He played one of Lindy's favorite songs and was rather skilled at it. Everyone loved it including Lindy. The narrator was in his glory and everyone loved his stellar performance.

Later on during the party, Lindy found him and said hello. It was the first time she had spoken to him in a year. She was clearly drunk and told him that she knew that he watched her. She suggested that they go somewhere private since she also knew that he wanted to have sex with her. He stalled her and said that she was drunk. Lindy became angry and blew up at him for watching her all the time. Other kids in the room began to make fun of her and she stormed out. The narrator retreated to a bathroom where he freaked out internally about his missed opportunity. He finally left the room to find Lindy for another chance at talking. The party was winding down and he found her passed out on a chair by the pool. Her pushed aside the hem of her dress and discovered cut marks on her upper thigh. He moved her hair off her face and saw that someone had written "FAKE" on her forehead in black marker. Julie came out and told



him that their ride had already left and that she was walking home because a neighbor was calling the police. The narrator then carefully moved Lindy out of the pool area and hid her behind some bushes in a far corner of the yard. He ran home.

Analysis

The suspense and creation of suspicion toward the narrator continues in the opening chapter of this section. The evidence the narrator's mother, Kathryn, discovers in her son's room is certainly enough to make her worried. The pointed pornographic drawings of Lindy talking sexy, the photos of her cut out and pasted onto pictures from a porn magazine are perhaps typical enough. Her ex-husband considers it the typical stuff of teenage boyhood, but she sees the obsession as severe. He has collected items from Lindy's front lawn, items that are not in any way provocative, but belonged to Lindy and were simply lost. Even the Reebok, though a highly emotionally item for someone like Mr. Simpson because it is so strongly connected to Lindy's rape, is merely just another way for the narrator to have a small part of Lindy near him. It unfortunately makes him look guilty, but he takes it from the trash can only to have something that Lindy wore. When the narrator explains to his mother that he "loves" Lindy and that is why he thinks about her all the time, she emphatically responds that "What I've got in my hands is not love, son. What I've got in my hands is obsession" (105). It is the obsession that not only casts an appearance of guilt, but in some ways rings true. Spying on Lindy from the branches outside her bedroom window is an invasion of her privacy. She is aware of this and eventually confronts him in a drunken stupor at the after-dance party. She is fed up with it and finally says in effect, "let's do this, I know you want it." But the narrator does not simply want sex with Lindy for the mere sake of it. He desires to have something closer with Lindy, but all the influences in his life so far have had little to do with real relationships and everything to do with objectifying women and seeing how much sex can be gained from them. This is evidenced by the fact that his interest in spying is only directed toward Lindy. He does not have an interest in watching the lady down the street engage in sexual activity, so he does not go with Jason and Tyler. He is interested in Lindy. But, he is immature and at a loss as to how to achieve what he wants. For this reason, he stalls Lindy telling her that she is drunk and ends up missing his opportunity. Overall, the surface evidence points to possible motive and guilt, but on closer examination, the narrator's true attitudes are not malicious or harmful. As his father tells him in one of the rare moments of meaningful discussion between them, what happened to Lindy was not perpetrated by a man, but by an animal intending to cause harm (108).

Tyler Bannister is an important new character who appears in this section. Tyler lives at the Landry house for only a short period of time, but he spreads concern throughout the neighborhood. Many of the parents don't like him because of his tattoos, foul mouth, smoking and overall bad influence on their children. The narrator hangs out with him a little bit because he spends time with Jason. The two don't believe half of the stories that Tyler tells about all his sexual exploits, but they hear enough to wonder what might be true. The narrator gains access to his personality and crude behavior which he remembers years later. It is Tyler that has discovered the great view into Lindy's



bedroom window provided by the oak tree in the front yard. He tells the narrator about it to prove that he has indeed seen inside Lindy's bedroom. Sitting in the tree becomes a regular habit for the narrator as he enjoys the access it provides into Lindy's world and although he doesn't follow along with Tyler's other perversions, he is all too happy to know about the tree. The entire way in which Tyler shows the boys the trees reveals his deceitful and almost criminal nature. He tells the narrator to bring the remote controlled car along so that as they stand in front of the Simpson house they do not appear suspicious. He has them slowly drive the car up the side walk and motions to three o'clock where the tree is located. Everything is done very carefully and skillfully to avoid detection and highlights that he knows what is right and wrong, but chooses the latter and knows how to not get caught. This character profile is a foreshadowing that aligns with the narrator's later discovery of who committed Lindy's rape.

Also this tree and others throughout the novel suggest the importance of perspective and how one views the world. As children, the neighborhood kids loved playing in the big trees behind the houses. They were friendly places. As a teenager, the oak tree outside Lindy's window becomes a place of indecency for the narrator. It is here that he spys on Lindy and it is also the perch from which he unknowingly is aware of her rape as it occurs. The same tree is where Tyler Bannister invades Lindy's privacy. The tree fort in the woods becomes Jason's hideout later in the novel and his lookout for watching the community around him. The narrator also reveals in passing at the novel's conclusion that he is a botanist that studies trees, perhaps because of the intrigue they hold for him. He finds tree to be so interesting because sitting high in one's branches provides such a different perspective on the world. Up in the treetop, a person is an observer and not connected intimately with the world around them, but once out of the branches, a person must interact with others and become involved in their lives. It is only once Lindy moves away and the narrator gives up his treetop spying that he reintegrates with the community and begins to find healing in his life.

This section also brings another layer of tragedy to the community. When the narrator's oldest sister dies suddenly in a car crash, his family is devastated. The narrator himself is not too deeply affected directly as he was not that close to his sister and doesn't really have too many memories of her and their childhood together. But he is impacted by the changes in his mother and other sister. Rachel moves back home and becomes very religious as her means of coping with the loss. His mother retreats even further into a world of sadness and loss. In some ways this takes some of the pressure off of him concerning her suspicions of him in regards to Lindy's rape. The death also makes him temporarily an item of interest at the school. The attention he is shown during the Spring Bash gives him the courage to perform on the guitar at the after-party resulting in reestablishing communication with Lindy. Even though it does not go very well, the ice is broken and the narrator feels that they were drawn closer as a direct result of his sister's death.



Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator not go with Tyler and Jason to spy on the fat lady? Is his obsession with watching Lindy any different than the other boys' voyeurism?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the differences in the ways each person in the narrator's family copes with Hannah's death.

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator pass on Lindy's invitation to have sex at the party?

Vocabulary

incriminating, diatribes, empirical, perpetual, vagrant, antagonized, cliches, benignly, skank, implode, posterity



Chapters 22-27

Summary

The next section of the novel relates everyone's attempts to move forward following Hannah's death. Many family members came to the narrator's home to visit with his mother and lend their support. His mother was continually sad and withdrawn. His sister, Rachel became very religious. Uncle Barry, Kathryn's brother, showed up unannounced and stayed for the next month bringing something else to talk about. He told wild stories of his life and youth, joked with his sister and formed a special bond with the narrator. They sat on the porch, played with his Duncan yo-yo and talked about life and love. He gave his nephew advice on picking the right first girl, but also said that if he didn't do that, he'd be in with the majority of all other men. He realized that the narrator had a certain girl on his mind and encouraged him to talk about it. The narrator confessed that he simply did not know how to approach her or act around her and that he got all tied up inside. Uncle Barry counseled him to be himself.

At this point, the two heard a disruption a few doors down and saw Mr. Simpson storming the Kern's home, demanding to again question Bo about his involvement in Lindy's rape. He was convinced that Bo was the perpetrator mainly because of his violent and sometimes criminal behavior. Bo punched him in the face and knocked him to the ground and then returned inside his home. He yelled that he was tired of being accused and stated that he wouldn't want her anyway because she has such small breasts. Mr. Simpson lay on the ground crying, and asked how he was supposed to help his daughter. Uncle Barry told him to go home, have one drink and go to bed. He then told his nephew that what he just witnessed was what it meant to be a grown up and that he shouldn't wish to get there so quickly as far as love was concerned. The two return to their house and soon retreat to their own rooms. That night the narrator had a dream about driving a car without a steering wheel; there were only strings to make the car work. The next morning he learned that Uncle Barry had gone. He later learned that his uncle had been paying a private investigator to spy on his wife who he discovered had become pregnant by another man.

Soon after the fight on the Kern's lawn, Lindy called the narrator to apologize for her father's behavior. Apart from their brief encounter at the spring party, the two had not spoken in over a year. The narrator was thrilled to speak with her again. She told him that her parents were probably splitting up and that she might move away. The narrator was devastated by the news and began to think up ways to keep Lindy in the community. He was also thrilled that he got to speak with Lindy again and had a renewed hope that establishing a normal friendly relationship with her would clear his name as a suspect in his mother's eyes.

The narrator next called Lindy, this time on the premise of asking if she was watching the latest in the Jeffrey Dahmer case that was all over the news. Jeffrey Dahmer was arrested in Milwaukee after it was discovered that he had kidnapped, raped, murdered



and cannibalized seventeen victims. One evening in particular, Lindy and the narrator talked at length about the case and its many details. After they hung up, the narrator went into his living room where his mother sat watching the news and he noticed evidence that she had been throwing up into a nearby trash can. His mother asked if maybe it wouldn't have been better for the families of the victims if they had never caught Dahmer because now they were aware of all the gruesome details that their loved ones suffered. They talked about the difficulty of knowing. They also affirmed that they were there for each other in their own suffering.

Summertime phone conversations continued with Lindy as they talked every night. The narrator's heart lightened as he imagined a future that contained Lindy and he became helpful around the house and more positive in his relationships with his mother and sister. Expecting their nightly call to take priority he turned down an invitation to a party because he assumed that Lindy would also not go but stay home and call him. She however, went to the party. Upon her return he expressed his disappointment and realized that Lindy was living her own life and that it did not really include him. Lindy talked about many things like worshiping Hannah because she was so much older and had cool stuff. She mentioned that the narrator's mother had asked her to go to the spring dance with him so that he wouldn't be so sad. The narrator then reflects on the many times that he looked back on things in his childhood and only thought about how they affected him, not what situations really meant for other people.

The section concludes with the narrator and Lindy playing Truth or Dare over the phone. As they began to talk about the game, Lindy undressed by her window, knowing that the narrator was watching from his bedroom window. She challenged him to give her a dare and he asked what she was thinking. She said that wasn't a good suggestion and offered one instead - that he should come over and have sex with her. She continued by telling him about another classmate that she lusted after. Both Lindy and the narrator were masturbating while they talked and the narrator wondered whether this kind of intimate moment would continue regularly. But when Lindy spoke again, she said she wanted to blow her brains out.

Analysis

This section of the novel focuses on the narrator himself and many of the things he struggles with as he works through his fixation on Lindy. Everyone is trying to move on following Hannah's death and trying to adjust. Lots of family stop by to visit including Kathryn's brother, Barry. Uncle Barry is a bit of a mystery to the narrator since he barely knows him. But he takes an instant liking to this man who brings a distraction to the depressing scene. It is not clear whether Kathryn reached out to her brother for help or if he just showed up on the doorstep. He does however become a much needed source of advice and sounding block for the narrator. He has never talked to anyone about his feelings for Lindy, but his uncle opens the door for him to do so and he is upfront with him. The narrator talks about his insecurities and confusion about what to do about Lindy. He wants her to open up about her real feelings and be close to him. Barry tells the narrator that a first love is very important because she will always stay with you and



you will always love her in some way. Most of all he encourages the narrator to be himself and not try to be something that he is not. He tells him to listen to what she wants and not worry to about himself. Their conversation is open and honest and this is one of the few times that the narrator has some serious, positive input into his life.

Interrupted by a sound down the street, Barry and the narrator go down to the Kern house to see what is happening on the front lawn. The ensuing fight between Mr. Simpson and Bo Kern is unlike anything the narrator has experienced before. He is not sure what to make of Mr. Simpson lying on the lawn, bawling his head off and grieving for his daughter. After they return home, Uncle Barry gives his nephew one last piece of serious counsel. He warns him not to be so eager to rush into anything with Lindy. Real life and being grown up can be full of heartache and difficulty(as he has just witnessed) and he wants his nephew to take his time in getting there. That night, the narrator has a dream in which he is driving a car but there is no steering wheel, only strings for controlling the car. But the strings don't work and he is unable to control anything. Through the years he continues to have various versions of this dream, but there is always someone different sitting in the passenger seat and he can never control the car. As various situations come his way in life, he often feels out of control and unable to steer his course. This theme continues as he considers some of the previously unknown details of his uncle's life. The next morning, he learns that his uncle has left and pesters his mother for answers as to why. He is told that his uncle had been paying a private investigator to spy on his wife who he discovered had become pregnant by another man. Unable to continue to pay for the service, he skipped town and moved on. That knowledge and the scene he witnessed on the Kern's front lawn coupled to give the narrator a new awareness of the reality of adulthood. He realized that behind every adult is an invisible collection of ghosts, people who they've made mistakes with who still are tethered to them. They remain to "remind them of one thing: that life is made up, ever increasingly, of what you cannot change" (165). Uncle Barry's advice to go slowly seemed wise.

But the narrator pretty much loses sight of that come his next contact with Lindy two days later. She calls him to apologize for her father's behavior on the lawn and the two have a conversation for the first time in a year. When she mentions that her parents are most likely breaking up and that she might be moving, all the narrator can think about is how to keep her in the neighborhood. He thoughts are for himself and how everything will affect him. He decides to call her again a week later to talk and uses the Jeffrey Dahmer case as a conversation point. Lindy is very into watching the news about this and the two talk about it every night for hours. Their conversation covers not only the case but more personal matters as well. Lindy opens up about worshipping Hannah and almost going to the spring dance with the narrator because his mom had asked her to go with him. Both these revelations bring questions and analysis from the narrator. He doesn't really stop to listen to what Lindy is saying or evaluate what is going on inside her. He says, "All I was thinking was, Okay, so how does this affect me" (197). It is this self focus that ultimately prevents him from maintaining a healthy relationship with Lindy.



The narrator's mother has also been watching the news reports and she is extremely upset by what she sees. On the edge emotionally anyway because of her continued grief over Hannah's death, she becomes physically ill and throws up while watching the news. She questions whether it is a good thing that they caught Dahmer. She wonders if the family members would rather not know all the grim details. The narrator states that he thinks it is difficult either way. But, in his own mind, he still wants to be able to help Lindy to know who attacked her. He needs to know for himself and he thinks that it will help her. But he never really talks to her about it or understands if that is something she wants. In later years, as an adult, the narrator has done some research and learned that victims of violent crimes often become obsessed with similar types of cases as they are dealing with their own psychological and emotional struggles. But here, he is ignoring his uncle's advice. He is not listening to what Lindy is saying and is simply trying to move ahead and fix things.

The final chapters deal with the narrator and Lindy becoming strangely intimate over the phone. One night during their conversation Lindy challenges the narrator to a game of Truth or Dare. The narrator challenges Lindy to tell him what she is thinking when he requests a dare. Lindy says that's not a dare, but a truth. She then chooses the dare which is to have the narrator come over and have sex with her. Wanting to really understand what she is thinking the narrator presses her for her thoughts. She is thinking about lusting after another classmate at school. Both of them are masturbating at this point and talking about this other guy. The narrator is so lost in his desire to know Lindy that he is completely missing the point of loving someone truly. He hopes that this phone sex will become a regular thing as well, but is again shown that he is really far off. Lindy's main thought and comment as they hang up that night is that she wants to blow her brains out. The strange version of sex meant nothing to her and sharing it with the narrator meant nothing as well.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator seem connect with his Uncle Barry?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Lindy's reaction to the Jeffrey Dahmer case. Why is she so interested in all the details?

Discussion Question 3

How does the narrator's infatuation with Lindy blind him to the reality of his chances of having a real relationship with her? What does he not understand?

Vocabulary

alimony, venomously, abatement, pathetic, sarcastic, necrophiliac, excruciating, beneficent, chameleon-like, patchouli, hellacious, halitosis, masochist, anecdotes, philanthropic, finagled, atypical



Chapters 28-35

Summary

During this final section of the novel the loose pieces all begin to come together toward resolution of the crime. The narrator begins by drawing a compare and contrast between his hometown of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. He talks of the predictability of Baton Rouge and the popularity of New Orleans among other things. He also recalls the impact that Hurricane Katrina had on Baton Rouge as thousands of refugees fled the flood waters in New Orleans for the safety of the higher and drier city. His reflections on the aftermath of Katrina and the changes that came to Baton Rouge reminded him most of himself and Lindy. He was Baton Rouge and Lindy was more like New Orleans.

He then transitions to talk about the fourth suspect in Lindy's rape, Jacques Landry, who only became a suspect when his son Jason, disappeared. Mr. Landry was an extremely large man and a psychiatrist by profession. He had previously had some trouble with the law and his license to practice psychiatry was suspended on several occasions. As background, the narrator recalls his orientation day at school for the upcoming year. When he returned home he found his mother sitting in his room, crying and visibly shaken. She was holding the photograph of Lindy that the narrator had gotten from Jason. She asked her son to tell her about the photo and he recounted how it had come from the locked room in the Landry house. She was immediately concerned that the photo and all the others like it were taken by Mr. Landry and was fearful. They suddenly heard a noise outside and Kathryn immediately panicked, wondering if the front door had been locked. Mr. Landry's large shadow loomed across the doorway and he rang the bell and called out to them. Mother and son stood frozen and silent. After he left, Kathryn called her ex-husband asking what she should do because she saw something that greatly scared her. The narrator did not press her for answers about what was going on. A short time later, Mrs. Landry came to the door and quietly asked through the door if Kathryn or the narrator had seen Jason. He had been missing for a week and she was worried about what he might do. As the narrator's family sat in their living room that night, terrified that something else bad might happen that night, the narrator became convinced that he had to find out who raped Lindy and that he needed to be the one to do it.

Later that night, Jason appeared outside the narrator's bedroom window. Jason told him that he was about to create a bit of mayhem and get a little vengeance. He wanted to bring the narrator along because he thought he might want justice for Lindy. He told him that the pictures the narrator saw of the women in the neighborhood were just a small piece of what lay in the locked room. Jason then led the narrator deep into the woods to the tree they had selected years earlier. He had made a tree fort out of scraps of wood and had been living there. He had also stolen gas cans, bottles and lots of items from the garages in Woodland Hills. Jason directed the narrator to an envelope hidden in the fort. It was the key to a safe in Mr. Landry's locked room. Jason stole it the night he left home, and as Mr. Landry sat passed out, Jason unlocked the window in the room so



that someone could return and get inside the room. The narrator sat in the tree fort and noticed the Perkins School a short distance away. He was struck with how different it looked from above and remembered the difference in perspective. He climbed down from the tree and helped Jason to bury his dog. Earlier in the day Mr. Landry had captured the stray dog and put a bullet in its head. Accidentally, Kathryn has witnessed the event and had been seen by Mr. Landry. She became terrified and the moment jarred her memory to recall the strange photos and that they had come from the Landry house. After Jason and the narrator buried the dog, Jason poured gasoline into bottles and stuffed them with strips of cloth. He sent the narrator on his way to sneak into Mr. Landry's room and take what ever was inside the locked safe while he headed for the school.

Before relating what happened when he went to the Landrys, the narrator recounted a pleasant memory from earlier in his life. He remembered sitting in his living room with his mother, eating pizza and watching her favorite TV show. She loved Robert Stack, the actor who hosted the show. In her later years when she was suffering from the affects of a blood clot, the narrator was thankful that she remembered the days of the past and her fondness for Robert Stack. He was grateful for small moments that could be shared and enjoyed as loving moments from the past.

Next the narrator tells what happened when he crept into Mr. Landry's room. He discovered a cache of tapes, photos and other evidence pointing to the horrific abuse of the children the Landrys had fostered. While he was in the room, a police car arrived in the driveway at his parents' house a few doors up. His father came out of the house and the men crossed the lawn to the Landrys. The narrator's father confronted Mr. Landry and demanded to know the whereabouts of his son. The narrator looked out the window and witnessed his father fight for him and in that moment became convinced of his father's love for him despite his many failings. He also saw his terrified mother. He climbed out the window and revealed himself and began to explain his actions. He was put in the back of a police car. Lindy arrived on the scene and began to yell at the narrator. She told him details of the rape and how certain smells or sights continued to trigger horrible memories for her. She told him that her attacker was skinny, and could not have been the fat Mr. Landry. Mrs. Landry asked if the narrator knew where Jason was. Everyone could see the orange glow in the distance that turned out to be the Perkins School set on fire. Jason's whereabouts became known a few minutes later when the windows of the Landry house shattered as gasoline and flames consumed the Landry home as well.

The narrator saw Lindy again sixteen years later after a LSU football. She introduced him to her husband and they caught up on the details of life. She was healthy and happy. The narrator told her that he married Artsy Julie and they were expecting a baby. Later that night, the narrator told Julie that he wanted to tell her something about the past, but she asked him to consider whether it would make their life any better if she knew. If it wouldn't, then she didn't want to know. The narrator tells the reader however, that the night of Lindy's rape, he was up in the water oak tree. He saw the shadow of someone at the end of the street under the broken lamp, but did not slow down to see who it was because he did not want to be caught himself on the way to spying on Lindy.



Several years later, the narrator stumbled across a clue while reading his sister Hannah's diary. He figured out that the rapist was Tyler Bannister. However, he keeps the knowledge to himself and lays the case to rest.

Analysis

The final section of the novel focuses largely on the fourth suspect in the case and how the protagonist and Lindy eventually move on in life. Before the action gets going, the author spends an entire chapter on a compare and contrast between the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. This may seem like a strange sidebar to the novel, but it serves as a large metaphor for the personalities of the narrator and Lindy. Baton Rouge is the state capital, more reserved, and statistically predictable. The narrator, despite all the difficulties and heartbreak he encounters in his early years, is like his home town. He is fairly stable and really only acts out in an attempt to capture Lindy's attention. He desires to be the safe haven for Lindy, the one that she turns to amidst her struggles much in the way that thousands left the floodwaters in New Orleans for the safety of higher ground in Baton Rouge. Lindy on the other hand is more like New Orleans. She is wild and unpredictable. And just like the hurricane that swept into New Orleans and destroyed so much, the rape suddenly hit Lindy. So many took refuge in the capital city in the initial days of the hurricane but as the effects of the storm were so much more devastating than they originally thought many took up residency or moved on to other areas but never returned to their homes. Similarly, Lindy continued to struggle with her recovery and never quite was the same.

The unveiling of what lay hidden in the Landry house and the discovery of the depths of Mr. Landry's cruelty are laid out over the next several chapters. The narrator arrives home one day from school orientation to find his mother visibly shaken and crying in his room. She wants to know the details behind the photo of Lindy and the others that he saw in Jason's room months earlier. They both agree that Jason was not the one who took them. Thinking about these photographs causes Kathryn to become very distressed, particularly in light of what she had witnessed just a few hours earlier. Standing outside in the yard, trimming bushes she heard a noise just on the other side of the fence near the woods. She peers through the branches and sees Mr. Landry putting a bullet through a dog's head. She is horrified and frozen for a time, and in those seconds, Mr. Landry sees her watching him. She runs inside her house terrified of what this man might do next. She no longer sees the photograph as evidence against her son concerning Lindy. She realizes that it represents something far more sinister than a fairly benign teenage crush on a girl. She understands in her gut that the man who took these photos and shoots a dog is capable of even more disturbing things. The next several hours are filled with anxiety for Kathryn and her children as Mr. Landry comes to her door looking to speak with her, but also attempts to enter the home uninvited by trying the door knob. Those hours of true fear for their safety deeply affect the narrator. As he thinks of Lindy, he realizes on a personal level the fear that she must have felt the night of her rape and how it must often come back to her. From that moment on he is determined to seek out the perpetrator.



Jason apparently had finally had enough abuse at his father's hand and decided it was time to get even with him as well as the adult community that allowed Mr. Landry to continue in his perversion basically unchecked. He had been gone from the Landry house for a week and Mrs. Landry was worried. Her arrival at the narrator's home in search of Jason suggests that she was truly concerned for her son and the abuse he endured. Jason shows up outside the narrator's window that very night and convinces him to come along as he executes his plan for revenge and mayhem. Despite his mother's warning to stay away from Jason because he is probably dangerous, the two boys hike into the woods. In Jason's tree fort clearing, the narrator learns the truth about Mr. Landry. Jason believes that because of all the pornographic photos, drugs and sex toys stashed in his father's room he is most likely the rapist. However, Jason makes some assumptions, and although logical given the nature of Mr. Landry's abuses and crimes against his foster children, they are incorrect. As Lindy reveals a short time later, she knows that her attacker was a very skinny person because she could feel his boniness. There was no way it could have been Mr. Landry. But he was an abusive man and Jason is determined to punish him. He sets fire to the Perkins School and tosses around his father's business cards in a show of contempt for the system that was blind to the abuse that existed in the Landry home. Destroying the elite institution of learning became their punishment as far as Jason was concerned, a punishment that he also took to his father's home. Meanwhile, he convinces the narrator to sneak in the secret room by way of the unlocked window in order to look inside the safe and gather evidence for Lindy's case. Given his recent resolve to solve the case for Lindy, the narrator is ready to do it. While he does learn quite a bit about the extent of Mr. Landry's offenses, he also learns other important things that he carries into adulthood.

First, he becomes assured of his father's love for him. As the novel reaches its climax, the police, the narrator's family, and Mr. Landry all converge on the front lawn outside the window behind which the narrator is hiding. From his concealed position, he is able to see the fierceness in his father's face as he confronts Jacques Landry and he knows that his father is willing to fight for him. Despite his many failings as a father, he has proved his love for his son and family. It is a powerful, life changing moment for the narrator. His family has been deeply hurt by this man, and his sister Rachel really wants little to do with her father. But, because Glenn has proved his love in this way, the narrator forgives him and maintains a relationship with him into adulthood. He has always been aware of his father's shortcomings and assumes that he will have many of his own, but he is determined to be the best father he can be to his own son and always be sure that his son knows that he is loved.

Secondly, the narrator becomes aware of how deeply Lindy has continued to suffer the effects of the rape in ways he hadn't begun to imagine. Even though his desire was to help her, he never considered if she wanted to know her attacker's identity. He simply assumed that somehow "knowing" would bring closure to the incident in her mind. And he also wanted to unload his own conscience by solving the crime. Because he had nearly witnessed the crime by his presence up in the oak tree but didn't look closely at the figure at the end of the street and didn't check into the strange noise around the bend, he felt as though he himself was involved in the crime. So "I did not commit the act itself" but "I am guilty in the most specific sense" (296). Years later after he has



bumps into Lindy and has seen that she has come through well on the other side, he has matured enough relationally to act in Lindy's best interest. He finally comes to realize that "life isn't about easing my conscience" (302), but whether Lindy wanted or needed to know her attacker's identity. When he stumbles across the answer and solves the decades-long mystery, he keeps the answer quiet. He comes to understand that "knowing" won't make life any better for Lindy, her husband, Julie or himself, so he listens to his wife's wisdom and lets it all go.

And finally, he recognizes that the moments he shared in life with his mother and sisters and now with his wife and young family are the important things to hold onto. Prior to talking about entering Mr. Landry's room, the narrator states that he must first "remind myself of other, better, memories" (259). He has learned that memories serve an important purpose in life. They connect us to moments in the past through smells, words, and pictures and remind us how much we are loved. They remind us that "every moment is crucial" (265) and that these memories allow us to feel, regret and reminisce (265). A very special memory is given to him through Hannah's diary as he reads something she wrote when she was young. She had written "my new baby brother" on a "things I'm thankful for" list which makes him realize how important he was to her even before he was born. In this moment he has a new sense of being loved and finally feels forgiven for his "role" in Lindy's rape. He is able finally to move on and strive to be a good man.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Jason Landry sets fire to the Perkins School as well as his parent's house?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator first remind himself of something good whenever he thinks of the night he entered the Landry house? Discuss the importance of memories in keeping us healthy and plugged in.

Discussion Question 3

Julie does not think it is necessary to know everything about her husband's past. Is that a good decision? Discuss the question, will knowing a particular thing "make our life better?"

Vocabulary

comedic, gregarious, imbeciles, affiliates, catatonics, barbarian, etiquette, inconsolable, permutations, traipsing, cur, abominable, elicit, sporadic



Characters

The Unnamed Narrator

The narrator of the story never gives his name. He recounts the story of his neighborhood and the years surrounding the rape of one of his friends and crush, Lindy Simpson. Early on he admits that he is one of the suspects in the case and takes the opportunity to explain himself. He is a young teenage boy learning about his sexuality in a home with no father to guide him. He becomes involved with pornography and develops a crush on his neighbor, Lindy. He watches her from his window and wishes for so much more to happen between the two of them. However, Lindy doesn't speak to him after he tells the whole school that she was raped. He follows Lindy through her periods of personality changes, dressing as she does and listening to the same kind of music. He desperately longs for her to speak to him again and for them to be together.

The narrator also wants to discover who committed the crime against Lindy. He also wants to unburden himself to her about what he calls his role in it. He is motivated by caring for Lindy, but mostly by his own guilt for telling the entire school she was raped, as well as for what he had told no one. On the night of the rape, he may have been able to help Lindy, but he didn't because he was up in the water oak tree outside her window, waiting to spy on her.

The narrator learns about the horror of abuse and sexual deviation. He learns about forgiveness and what the expression of love truly looks like. And he learns that people can heal and move on given time. The narrator's experiences help to make him a wiser and more mature young man. He is better equipped to move into the next stage of life as a husband and father, having learned more deeply about love and forgiveness.

Lindy Simpson

Lindy Simpson is the beautiful girl down the street who is raped one summer evening at the age of 15. She was a runner for the school track team, rode her bike to practices, took piano lessons and enjoyed a playful relationship with her father. After everyone at school hears about the rape, Lindy changes dramatically. She tries on different personas, wearing varied clothing styles, hanging out with different groups of people, some of the from a tough crowd. She experiments with various behaviors like cutting and bulimia, mostly because she learns about them while attending a therapy group. She becomes increasingly alienated from her father who shadows her every move in an attempt to protect from further harm.

Lindy's relationship with the narrator changes as well. As children they played together, but now Lindy refuses to speak to the narrator since he leaked the word in school about her rape. She is aware that he watches her from across the street and that he wants things to be right between them. She restores their speaking terms following a fight in



front of the Kern house between Bo and her father. The narrator and his uncle have run down the street when they hear the commotion and help Mr. Simpson get up off the ground and send him home. After this, Lindy and the narrator talk on the phone every night, discussing the Jeffery Dahmer murder case in the news and sometimes masturbating. The tension still exists between the two as the narrator wants to relieve his guilt and solve the case, believing that Lindy would somehow feel better if her attacker was caught. However, she lets him have it the night that he is arrested for breaking into the Landry's house for trying to gather evidence. She lets him know that having more information or finding the perpetrator will not change anything; it won't make anything better for her.

Lindy and her mother leave the community to visit her aunt in Shreveport and never return. She finally returns to the town 16 years later, married and in a much healthier and happier state. Celebrating at a LSU football game, she encounters the narrator by chance and the two briefly catch up. She has moved on with her life and found happiness having never known the identity of her attacker.

Kathryn

Kathryn is a single mother doing her best to raise her teenage son on her own. She is not sure how to handle his shift into puberty, seeming personality changes, and the fear that he may know more about Lindy's rape than he lets on. She does not really know or understand her son; She thinks of him as still as young boy. Nevertheless, she maintains a good relationship with him and calls in her ex-husband and her brother as reinforcements when needed.

Personally, she is struggling with the loss of her husband, who left her for a young college co-ed. She goes on a few dates, but is really still in love with her ex. Her world is further shattered when her oldest daughter suddenly dies in a car accident and she spends much of her time crying and grieving. Despite the brokenness and heartache in her life, she is a strong woman who is always there for her family.

Glen

The narrator's father is a realtor who left his family for a young college co-ed. He became wealthy by the time he was 40, now lives life with people half his age and is not at all involved in his family's affairs. He is the absent father who has had no hand in raising his son toward manhood at a time when it really matters. As the narrator struggles with learning about girls, sexuality and relationships, he has a poor model in his father and no one to turn to for advice. When the narrator begins to go down the wrong path, drinking, dressing in Goth attire, etc., Glenn is called in to spend time with his son. However, despite his failings as a husband and father, he shows his love for his son during the very public confrontation with Mr. Landry, as he demands to know the whereabouts of his son.



Dan Simpson

Dan Simpson heads up this typical upper-middle class family. He has a "Daddy's little girl" relationship with his daughter and cherishes her. After Lindy's rape he is completely devastated that something so horrific could happen to his daughter. With his wife, he combs the neighborhood looking for clues and questioning everyone about what they may know about the crime. Mr. Simpson becomes so obsessed with protecting his daughter that he spys on her continually and actually drives his daughter farther away from the family as she struggles with her own identity. He is rash in his actions. One day he discovers Lindy's blue Reebok shoe, which went missing during the rape, hanging in a tree at the end of the street. He immediately takes a chainsaw and saws it down. He also violently confronts Bo Kern concerning the crime and gets into a fight on the Kern's front lawn. Bo punches him in the face and he is reduced to tears, wailing about his lack of ability to do anything to fix his daughter's life and his family.

Peggy Simpson

Peggy is a steadfast women, broken and devastated, but standing by her daughter. She considers leaving her husband because he has gone over the edge with obsessively protecting his daughter and his attempts to catch the perpetrator. Ultimately, she leaves Woodland Hills with Lindy in order to try to find healing for her daughter in a different place. Despite her own troubles and concerns, she is a good neighbor to the narrator's mother. The two women become good friends and comfort each other during their times of deepest hurt, especially when Kathryn loses her daughter suddenly in a car crash.

Mr. Jacques Landry

Jacques Landry is a large and frightening man in the Woodland Hills community. He frequently fights loudly with his wife. The arguments concern the neighbors who are able to hear the sounds coming from their house. A psychologist by profession, he and his wife provide foster care to children, who pass through the house somewhat frequently. He has an adopted son, Jason, who completely disrespects him. The neighborhood kids are all scared of Mr. Landry, partly because he is such a large man, but mostly because of his violent and erratic behavior. He will often be outside mowing the lawn and then suddenly stop and march off into the woods behind the development and be gone for hours. He stalks around in the trees searching for a stray dog that he claims is dangerous. He eventually finds the dog, captures him and shoots him in the head.

Mr. Landry also keeps a room in his house completely locked tight. Jason is able to sneak in one day and quickly snatches some photos from the desk. The photos reveal that Mr. Landry takes photographs of women and girls in the neighborhood apparently for his sick pleasure. The narrator later breaks into the room from the outside window and discovers a cache of photos, videotapes and evidence of sexual abuse of the many foster children the Landry's had in their home. Mr. Landry is investigated by the police



and loses his home as Jason blows it up with a Molotov cocktail in his final act of revenge.

Mrs. Louis Landry

Louis Landry is married to Jacques. Rumors abound about how she became his wife, some neighbors thinking she may have been kidnapped and brought to Louisiana. The couple fights loudly at times and Louise appears to be submissive to her husband out of fear. She fosters children in their home and tries to care for and show love to their adopted son, Jason. She secretly wishes she had the chance to start the married part of life all over again with someone else.

Jason Landry

Jason Landry is the adopted son of Jacques and Louise Landry. He is a rough boy who curses constantly and shows no respect to his parents. He secretly cares for a stray dog that lives in the woods, feeding it and then cruelly chasing it off, only to try to protect it from his abusive father. He tries to sabotage many of his father's plans and is careful to not get caught. He still wets the bed as a teenager and has dime-sized scars on his back.

Jason and the narrator occasionally played together as younger children and the two selected a large tree in the far woods where they planned to build a tree house. Secretly, Jason makes a fort of the tree and stockpiles gasoline cans, fuel and many other stolen items from the neighborhood. The fort is his command central for his plan of revenge on his abusive father. He tells the narrator about his father's locked secret room and that he needs to get in there to get answers about Lindy's rape. He also sets the school and his parents' house on fire in his final attempt to uncover his adoptive father's crimes and get the revenge against him that he so desires.

Bo Kern

Bo Kern is the oldest neighborhood boy on Piney Creek Road. He has a hare lip, is big and muscular and plays football at the school. He had an opportunity to be recruited to play football in college, but he was passed by due to his rough behavior and illegal plays during a game. He is frequently violent. He punched out a car window, ripped up a stop sign and frequently lashes out at people and gets into fights. He works as a bouncer at a bar where he was accused of harassing a college girl who issued a restraining order against him. She spoke of him as a "menacing figure." Bo is revealed as the second suspect in Lindy's rape, a suspicion also held by his own mother.



Duke Kern

Duke Kern is the younger of the Kern brothers. In the earlier years, he sometimes plays with the neighborhood kids. He is a good-looking, athletic young man and he has a bit of a secret relationship with Lindy when they are 12 years old. He is never a suspect in her rape.

Tyler Bannister

Tyler is a foster child at the Landry home. He is a skinny kid with a shaved head, blue tattoos and a vulgar mouth. He and the narrator briefly hang out on the street, but Tyler is only in the neighborhood for a short time. Tyler is the one who tells the narrator about the water oak tree and that it is a good place to spy on Lindy and see into her bedroom and masturbate. He also spys on other people in their houses, particularly a large woman at the end of the street who he watches masturbate with sex toys. Tyler moves out of the neighborhood, but the narrator believes it is he who comes back one night and rapes Lindy.

Artsy Julie

Julie is the only other neighborhood girl on Piney Creek Road. The kids all call her "artsy Julie" because her parents always referred to her that way when she did something creative and unusual like hold a wedding for her cats. Julie plays with the other kids and is part of the tribe, but somewhat unusual.

In a move orchestrated by their parents, the narrator and Julie go to the spring dance during their junior year. Julie immediately goes to the front of the stage and spends the night dancing by herself, but having the time of her life. She is a free spirit and does not really care about the opinions of others. The narrator admires this about her and wishes that he could be that way. Toward the end of the novel, it is revealed that the narrator and Julie have married and have started a family.

Uncle Barry

Uncle Barry passes in and out of the narrator's life fairly quickly, but provides some much needed camaraderie and adult counsel. During the period when the narrator is struggling with his identity and his intense obsession with Lindy, Uncle Barry is called in by his sister to come spend time with his nephew. The narrator is very comfortable with his uncle, more so than with his own father, and listens to what he has to say. Sadly, his uncle is going through his own difficult time as his wife has become pregnant by another man and he struggles with his own issues of fidelity. However, Uncle Barry gives powerful advice to his nephew and serves as one of the few positive role models in the narrator's young life.



Randy Stiller

Randy Stiller is the narrator's best friend. The boys play ball and roam the back woods together. Randy keeps the narrator's secret that he cried himself to sleep the night his father left. As the impact of Lindy's rape affects the narrator's personality and lifestyle choices, the two friends no longer spend time together, but their bond remains even into adulthood.

Clay Tompkins

Clay Tompkins is a student in the Perkins school that gets kicked out for making pornographic drawings of many of the girls, Lindy being one of them. While in the bathroom one day, the other boys see Clay's drawing book and begin studying it. The drawings are so graphic and extensive that the narrator learned things about anatomy and sex he had previously no knowledge of. This experience then sends the narrator down the path of drawing his own pornographic sketches of Lindy.

Chester McCready

Chester McCready, also called Chester the Molester, is a student at the Perkins School. He is accused by a female of student of trying to "feel her up," and is consequently given the stigmatizing nickname, which stays with him throughout high school. Years later, he is arrested for sexually harassing a local high school student at a sub shop.



Symbols and Symbolism

Sunshine

Sunshine holds two significant symbolic meanings in the novel. Lindy is the first representation of sunshine. For the narrator, Lindy is his sunshine. She is what gets him going and lights up his life as a young boy. His infatuation grows from innocent glances stolen from under the window blind to pornographic drawings and phone sex. He follows her through her persona changes, adapting his clothing, hairstyles and music choices to mirror whatever Lindy chooses. He has watched her change from the carefree, athletic girl down the street to a sullen, withdrawn and angry soul. He desperately wants to be closer to her and he very much wants to make things better following her rape. He believes that if he can solve the crime for her, she will be happier and perhaps acknowledge him as being "for" her.

On a larger scale, the Louisiana state song, "You Are My Sunshine," which is presented in the opening pages of the novel, represents the cultural and social climate within the Woodland Hills community. The neighborhood consisted of upper-middle class families who send their kids to a private school. Everything seems friendly and community oriented as families gather for cookouts, kids play together in backyards, everyone joins forces against the white fly infestations and life is generally good and sunny. But when Lindy is raped, the community is rocked and as the narrator reveals details about each of the main residents on the street, it becomes obvious that life is not all that sunny. As individuals struggle to deal with the aftermath of the crime there are definitely "gray skies" for the residents of Piney Creek Road. Revelations of child abuse, the death of a child, and troubled marriages all show the reality behind the sunny facade of the idyllic southern street.

Paper boats

On one level children are simply making and playing with boats folded from paper and watching them move through the water, but on the symbolic level, the very fragile vessels are set out to sail and may not hold up very long in the water. The narrator uses this analogy to refer to the way teasing or labeling of classmates affects them for all of their school years and even into adult life. Chester McCready is possibly falsely accused of trying to "feel up" a fellow classmate and is given the nickname "Chester the Molester." From that point on he is labeled and viewed as a creep who can't be trusted around girls. Years later, he is charged with sexual harassment. The narrator wonders if Chester followed down this path and actually tended toward this sort of behavior because that's how people defined him. In essence, he became what people said he already was. His classmates made for him a fragile paper boat and that action may be responsible for sending him down the wrong stream in reality.



Space Shuttle Challenger

The Space Shuttle Challenger's explosion symbolizes a loss of innocence for the narrator. The era of space exploration and the Challenger Missions was a big part of American life during the time that the story takes place. Watching the launching of the Space Shuttle was an important event in the life of school children all across America. When the Space Shuttle explodes and crashes, everyone is naturally distraught. The narrator and his mother listen to President Reagan that night on TV as he speaks about the tragedy that has occurred. He also explains to the children that as difficult as the accident was it is part of the process of exploration. "It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons" (35).

The Challenger incident also symbolizes the beginning of an era for the narrator. Launch day is the day he first falls in love. It is a new experience, and by all means a new "challenge" to acquire the attention of Lindy Simpson. The narrator is pre-pubescent and just beginning to learn about sexuality and relationships. There is much to learn through trial and error and exploration. Through the course of their friendship and border-line sexually intimate encounters during their teen years, Lindy and the narrator encounter many up and downs. The tragedy that happens to Lindy spirals their relationship and emotional health downward at times. But ultimately, they both come out on the other end, emotionally healthy and happy people. The narrator acknowledges in the end that everything he experienced during those years prepared him for a deeper and more intimate relationship with his wife and ultimately for becoming a good father.

Birds

The narrator creates interesting metaphors using birds to represent various types of fathers, the men in the neighborhood who sprout wings sometime in mid-life according to their situations and personalities.

His first bird is the hawk which symbolizes the ever-watchful Mr. Simpson. Following Lindy's rape, Mr. Simpson becomes extremely overprotective and watchful. He follows Lindy wherever she goes - to the mall, the track, the movie theater. He skulks in the shadows on nightly surveillance in an almost predatory manner in case some danger might be nearby. As there were no arrests in the case, he knows that the culprit is still out there and he is always searching for him and ready to dive in for the metaphorical kill.

The second bird, the owl, symbolizes Mr. Landry's strange lurking behavior. Mr. Landry is feared by all the neighborhood kids. His crazy stalking behavior in the woods, his constant hunting for the stray dog, and his violent approach to his family show him to be more predatory than familial. He often appears suddenly out of nowhere, disrupting an otherwise calm scene, much the way an owl might suddenly swoop down to snatch its prey (74).



The third bird, a canary, represents the narrator's father. Colorful and cheerful, a pretty package to the outside world, the narrator's father is the bird who "flew the very coop that he himself had made" (74). No longer restrained by a wife and children, Glen is able to live freely with his college co-ed love interest. For him, life is carefree and none of the troubles on Piney Creek Road touch him. Because of this desertion, the narrator sees his father as a man of no substance, just a flighty bird.

Lindy's Blue Reebok

The lost shoe represents Lindy's lost innocence that she was stripped of that night. The night Lindy was attacked, she returned home with only one shoe on her foot. The other blue Reebok sneaker was missing. Weeks later, Mr. Simpson finds the missing shoe dangling from a branch at the end of the street. He is so filled with anger that he takes a chain saw to the tree and cuts it down. As the shoe was stripped off her foot, so was Lindy's chance at normal sexual and psychological health.

Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina represents literally the winds and floods of change. Katrina is mentioned in reference to the contrast the narrator makes between the cities of New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Many residents of New Orleans flock to Baton Rouge to escape the flood waters of the powerful hurricane. As the refugees literally flood the city with thousands of people, Baton Rouge is changed. It must adapt, build and grow in order to accommodate its new residents. The long-standing residents of Baton Rouge do not always like this change that was forced upon them, but they must deal with it. Similarly, the rape brings changes to the residents of Piney Creek Road. Lindy is obviously forever changed, but so are her parents. Unable to reconcile his inability to protect his daughter, Mr. Simpson goes to extremes and becomes unglued. The narrator wants to discover the truth for Lindy. The unexpected death of the narrator's sister also brings grief to his family. The hard realities of life sweep in unexpectedly, unwanted, yet the residents must deal with them and push through if they are to survive.

The narrator's dream

Following Lindy's rape, the narrator has a recurring dream throughout his life that symbolizes his inability to gain control as life is always throwing curves that no one can predict.

The impact of the neighbor's interactions in the aftermath of Lindy's rape affect the narrator even subconsciously so that he has a dream that reoccurs throughout his life. Having witnessed a fight between Mr. Simpson and Bo on the Kern's front lawn, the narrator is deeply affected by Mr. Simpson's crying. He is completely emotionally broken as he accuses Bo of the rape, yet another time. He lays on the lawn, weeping, not knowing what to do. His little girl has been harmed, defiled and damaged irreparably and he simply does not know how to fix it. He is completely at a loss. The narrator



revisits this feeling in his dream as he sees himself driving a car that has no steering wheel. He is trying to direct the car by pulling on strings that are attached to the dashboard, but they do nothing to help him gain control. Throughout his life, within various dreams, the passengers in the car change, but never his inability to maintain control.

White Fly Infestations

The white fly infestations symbolize the devastation that occurs when the life is sucked out of the people. Every year the Piney Creek Road community band together to fight off the white flies that attack their plants and trees. The heavy influx of tiny creatures covers the leaves and sucks out the sap. Their excrement attracts a type of mold that in turn spreads over the vegetation and ultimately kills it (47). Similarly, whoever committed the rape ravaged many of the residents of Piney Creek Road, not just Lindy. The narrator spends years burdened by guilt for his "role" in the crime, Lindy suffers the emotional and psychological affects for years, her father becomes obsessively protective and her parent's marriage is ruined due to all the stress brought on by the situation. The single act spreads like a disease and eats away and destroys the peace and life for many.

The Jeffrey Dahmer Case

The Jeffrey Dahmer case symbolizes the discovery of the truth, and that the truth does always make things better. In the novel, the narrator tells about a news story that takes place about a year after Lindy's rape. Jeffrey Dahmer was a truly sick man, who kidnapped, raped, abused, killed and butchered 17 young men. As the narrator and his mother listen to the news stories on TV and hear all the horrible and graphic details of what the investigators were uncovering in the case, his mother wonders if it would have been better if he hadn't been caught - if the families had never known all the terrible details. "I don't know, I said. It's probably hard either way" (184). This incident reveals something about the community's own rape case. The narrator has never considered that it might not be good for Lindy to know the identity of her attacker. He is so convinced that if he could just solve the crime, if everything could get out in the open, then Lindy could put it all behind her. Mr. Simpson could have his justice and their family could get back to normal. But what the Dahmer case brings to light is that the crime happened and it was horrific. Knowing the details, sometimes makes it worse and it is just plain hard to cope with no matter how much you do or don't know. The lives of the living have been forever changed and knowing the truth doesn't make it better.

Trees

Trees play a significant role in the narrator's life not only because he spent a great deal of time in them, but also because they helped him to understand how people view life.



As children, all the kids in the neighborhood love to play together in the woods behind their houses. The trees are the friendly giants. Later, as a love-obsessed teenager, the narrator spends a great deal of time in the water oak outside of Lindy's bedroom window, spying on her and trying desperately to be a part of her world.

Out in the swampy woods with Jason, the narrator climbs into the tree fort Jason has built and surveys the community and the Perkins school in a new light. Here, he sees trees as having a special connection with humans. From the heights of a treetop, one can see the world from a different perspective. It is a lofty and distant view. The narrator believes it is how early man and the apes viewed everything. Now he questions at what point, man came down from the trees and begin to interact with one another on a face-to-face level and become "emotionally engaged" (247).

Eventually, the narrator realizes that he has been viewing Lindy from a distance as well. He has not really listened to her, understood between the lines of her words all of her emotional pain and suffering. As he matures into the man he wants to be, he follows through and engages emotionally with others. And it is an interesting detail that as an adult, the narrator becomes a botanist and makes his life's work studying trees and plants.

The Duncan Yo-Yo

The Duncan Yo-yo symbolizes the ability to unwind, and move forward differently.

Barry, the narrator's uncle, carries a yellow Duncan yo-yo in his pocket and plays with it all the time. As the yo-yo spins down and unwinds, it seems that the narrator is also able to unwind. Uncle Barry is the only person that he can really talk with about his relationship with Lindy. His uncle speaks with him about life and love, picking the right girl, and being himself. He tells him to not put on a false front, but to be who he truly is and that will serve him well in love. Years later the narrator's mother gives him his uncle's yo-yo which she had kept for him. It serves as a reminder of how his uncle helped him to unwind and helped him along the way.



Settings

Piney Creek Road

Piney Creek Road is a part of the Woodland Hills subdivision, a community in the Baton Rouge suburbs. Most of the story takes place in the homes and yards of this street where the main characters live. The narrator tells the reader all about the residents and the events that occur in the community from his childhood through teen years. It is an upper-middle class community with nice homes, but many secrets and difficult personal circumstances reside behind the front doors.

The Perkins School

The Perkins School is the private school that all the kids on Piney Creek Road attend. It is a stately building with beautiful grounds. Everyone who attends comes from upper-middle class homes. Behind the scenes the school culture maintains a fair share of illegal drinking and drug use at parties. The school is set on fire by Jason Landry and the narrator attends his senior year at the school amidst the rebuilding.

The Woods near Woodland Hills

Behind the strip of homes on Piney Creek Road is a large swampy woods. The neighborhood kids play here, gathering hanging moss, climbing trees and exploring. Deep in these woods the narrator and Jason Landry mark off a special tree which they talk about turning into a tree fort. The narrator doesn't think about it much beyond that day, but Jason follows through with building the fort, turning it into his secret hideaway from his abusive father. It is here that he builds a cache of stolen goods, bottles and gasoline which he later uses to burn down the school and his parents' home. These woods are also the sanctuary for the stray dog that Jason cares for. Because Mr. Landry is looking to kill the dog, Jason always chases him back into the woods to keep him hidden and safe.

The Louisiana Cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans

The story itself takes place mainly in a suburb of Baton Rouge, Louisiana's state capital. However, the narrator spends an entire chapter comparing the city to the glitzier, tourist-laden city of New Orleans, particularly in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. He describes Baton Rouge as a stately, cultured southern town and New Orleans as a life of the party type of city, one which gets all the fame and glory, despite its many negative statistics on poverty and crime. The narrator also talks about the affect that thousands of refugees from the flooded New Orleans had on his home city. The influx of people to Baton Rouge literally happened like a flood and as the city changed to accommodate



the sudden increase in population, the overall cultural dynamic of the city changed as well.

The comparison of the two cities and the impact of Katrina's aftermath on Baton Rouge reflects the impact of the many smaller tragedies that take place in Woodland Hills. Lindy's rape, the sudden death of the narrator's sister and the discovery of horrific child abuse on their street all shake and transform the residents of the quiet, southern community of Woodland Hills.

The contrast also is a metaphor for the personality differences between the narrator and Lindy. He describes himself as being the steady, predictable Baton Rouge and Lindy as being more like New Orleans, wild and unpredictable.

Cocodrie, Louisiana

Cocodrie is a fishing village in southern Louisiana near the gulf of Mexico. The narrator and his father go on a fishing trip to this camp after his mother's request to come spend some time with their son. She is worried about his behavior and changes of hair styles and personas. Once at the camp, his father's girlfriend shows up with a group of college-aged friends. The narrator realizes that his father was not really interested in spending any time with him and just played along to appease his ex-wife. The father makes half-hearted attempts to explain away his adulterous behavior, but the narrator simply sees his father as a self-absorbed, inconsequential man.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

My Sunshine Away is a coming of age story where the protagonist develops into a mature man and responsible father despite the lack of a positive role model and angst-ridden adolescent years. The novel follows the narrator's progression from a pre-teen into adulthood.

As a younger teen he plays with the other kids on the block and has a low level crush on his neighbor Lindy. He loves to watch her run, play football and ride her bike. He notices with longing the special attention she gets from another boy in the neighborhood following a pretend game of King and Queen of the forest. As he gains a sexual education from a boy at school, the narrator's desires develop. He begins to draw pornographic pictures of Lindy and his fantasies expand. Personally he continues to search for his own identity. He mirrors Lindy's persona changes and tries different styles of clothing, hair and music. He is not sure who he is or even if he stands for anything.

He gets no guidance from his parents through all this transition. His mother is still reeling from her divorce and the betrayal of her husband. While she is as supportive of her son as she can be, she is not quite sure how to handle him or how to talk to him about these changes. When she realizes that he doesn't know what the word rape means, she is relieved, but realizes that he probably should learn something about sex. Rather than talk to him about it, she puts a pamphlet and some condoms in his room (28). And when things get too tough, she calls her ex back to duty.

The narrator's father really offers no help in how to be a good dad. He left his wife and children for a girl the same age as his oldest daughter. When he supposedly takes his son on a fishing trip to spend time with him, the trip fails. He has invited his girlfriend along and spends all his time with her and her group of young friends. The narrator is left feeling unimportant and cheated. And yet, he doesn't really expect much more from his father. All this time he has not been close to him and he can only really remember the hurt that his dad has caused his family. "I didn't know what he thought of me in those years and I didn't know what to think of him. I only knew that he'd hurt my mother and sisters, and that he'd hurt me" (77). In the end, however, the narrator is able to reconcile with his father. When his parents believe that his life may be in danger from Mr. Landry, he sees the look on his father's face as he demands to know the whereabouts of his son and in that moment he knows that despite all his father's failings, he truly does love his son.

The best advice he gets from any adult comes from is Uncle Barry who at least talks to him about girls and love. He tells him to pick a good first one, but that's the one that will always stick with you in your mind. And after Mr. Simpson breaks down on the Kern's front lawn, crying inconsolably over his daughter, Uncle Barry gives the narrator some words of wisdom. "I know that girl over there makes you want to be in love and get



married and be all grown-up, but what you saw just now, that's what being grown-up is. That man out there crying on the lawn" (162). From Uncle Barry, the narrator begins to learn that love is not about sex and longing, but about caring for another person and what happens to them. It is all about them and not about your own desires.

So, as the narrator moves on years later, he has matured and gotten away from his Lindy obsession. She has moved away and he has graduated from college and has become reacquainted with a childhood friend, Artsy Julie, with whom he falls in love and marries. And as the details of the crime surface once more and he unexpectedly discovers who committed the rape, he no longer feels compelled to tell Lindy who did it. He sees her happy and married. She has healed and moved on and he has matured enough to know that she does not need to have all the answers. He has moved from needing to unload his conscience to loving someone else enough to put their needs first. And because he can now put others first, he is hopeful that he can be a good husband and father.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is found in the novel as the years move on and characters mature, heal from their wounds and let go of their pasts. Much of the forgiveness surrounds the central character and narrator. For much of his teen years, the narrator has been upset with his father because he left the family for a younger woman. The narrator felt hurt and angry and didn't have much connection to his father emotionally. But in the moment when his parents are fearing for their son's life and his father confronts Mr. Landry outside his home, the narrator knows in an instant that his father truly loves him. "I also knew that big and important parts of him were sorry because I knew that he was willing to fight. What more could I ask for? I will never apologize for loving him back" (273). In this moment, he forgives his father and opens a way for them to have a continued relationship down the road.

The narrator also learns to forgive himself. For many years he has carried the burden of guilt for what he calls "his role" in Lindy's rape. He would frequently climb into the water oak tree outside Lindy's window and spy on her as part of his obsession of her. He certainly did not want anyone to know that he did this. The night Lindy was attacked, he was headed for the tree. He saw the form of her attacker and heard a strange noise from the end of the street - the muffled sounds of the attack itself. But in his desire to remain anonymous, he did not leave the tree to see what was going on down the street. For years he felt guilt about not stopping the attack. It is only when he reads his sister's diary, years after her death that he comes to forgive himself. She wrote that she was so thankful for the gift of life she had in her little baby brother. In that statement, the narrator finds value in his life and the belief that he could be a good person. She saw it in him then, before he was born, and it gave him hope for the future. He could forgive himself and move on.

And finally, forgiveness comes from Lindy. When Lindy and the narrator had last seen each other she was yelling at him and he was crying in the back of a police car. She



was hurt and angry and still very damaged from the rape. But when the two run into each other at a post football game celebration, they are friendly and happy to see each other. Lindy is healthy, married and happy in her life. She has found a good man who "behind his easy smile was a man in love with a woman who had struggled in life and that he was aware of this" (287). She is thrilled that the narrator has married their mutual neighbor Julie and they all spend some time celebrating together. She didn't need to say any words, but by her actions and especially by her positive life, she had forgiven her old friend for whatever ways he had wronged her.

Power of Memories

Memories in the novel serve not merely as recollections of past events, but as powerful representations of love in the important relationships of life. In one sense the entire novel is a memory as it recounts the events following Lindy Simpson's rape. The story provides memories of words, actions and histories for many of the residents of Piney Creek Road during the years the narrator grew up in that community. But the novel delves deeper into power of memory as it affects the actions and emotions of those who hold onto them.

One way that memory is powerful is through the development of guilt. Throughout the novel the narrator maintains a secret that he only reveals in the very last chapter. He alludes to it in several places, but he does not come clean until near the end. Frequently, he refers to "my role in it" hinting that he was somehow involved in Lindy's rape. Yet, because he is so interested in finding Lindy's rapist, the reader knows it could not have been him. The narrator's revelation that he was nearby when the rape occurred, that he saw the figure at the end of the street and that he heard a noise provide the answer. The memory of that night in the oak and the memory of his inaction haunt the narrator for years. He wishes he could change what he did and didn't do, but obviously cannot. Instead he must learn to live with the memory and deal with his guilt. Once he sees Lindy years later, healthy and happy, and after he receives a loving message from his deceased sister from out of her journal, he finds forgiveness and is released from his guilt.

Another way that the novel uses memory is to focus on the love we are given in the simple everyday moments of life. The narrator has many specific memories that come back to him and remind him of the love of his family and that every moment of life is to be cherished. While hiding in Mr. Landry's locked room, desperately hoping to remain undiscovered, the small sliver of light coming from under the door reminds him of Christmas nights when he and sisters would lie in bed and wait for Santa. He recalls his mother and father dancing in the den, his sister Hannah leaving his room with happy skip and jumping up to touch the top of the door frame, and he remembers the deep love of a father (Mr. Simpson) for his daughter as he lay sobbing in the grass (265). The narrator knows that these memories come back to help us through the difficult times. They are meant to make a way to "look back and understand and feel and regret and reminisce and, if we are lucky, cherish" (265).



Triumph Over Adversity

Despite the novel's serious subject matter it provides hope by the story's end and shows that the characters are able to triumph over the difficulties they have faced. The residents of Piney Creek Road encounter divorce, rape, child abuse and the unexpected death of a young adult child and the emotional effects of these tragedies are far reaching. Lindy naturally is deeply changed. Following her forced therapy sessions she learns many new ways to act out her frustration and hurt. She tries on various personas, experiments with cutting, becomes extremely thin and unhealthy looking and is very aggressive and coarse. She can't handle her father's oppressive overprotective behavior which is also impacting her parents' marriage. Her escape comes when she and her mother leave the community to visit her aunt in Shreveport and never return. The narrator loses contact with her, but seeing her years later he discovers that the time away has been very good for her. She has become a stylist and likes what she does. She has found healing and happiness over the last 16 years. When she talks about her old life she says, "I mean, it was weird, you know, and it took me a while before I started missing it. But now I think about the good times a lot" (285). Lindy is able to look back on her childhood and teen years and remember them fondly. Her husband echoes this sentiment as he comments on all the stories she has told him about their community, "What I don't get is that she tells me these things like it was the most exciting stuff that ever happened, like it was a good time" (287). A horrific thing happened to her, but Lindy is able to look beyond it and remember all the good times as well. She has come through on the other side as a healthy and stable adult with a promising future.

The narrator has weathered the storm of adolescence as well. He has dealt with his parents' divorce and growing up without a father present in his life. He carries the guilt of not being aware of what was happening to Lindy at the end of the street the night she was raped, while he was waiting to spy on her from his perch in the tree outside her window. He feels horrible about telling the school about what happened to her. And he later must deal with the untimely death of his oldest sister and the impact that had on the rest of his family. He grows up with neighborhood friends that are less than shining examples of manhood, but rather boys who turn out to be a rapist and an arsonist. Yet, despite the statistical chances of turning out to be a productive adult, the narrative beats the odds and gets set on a good path. He graduates high school and gets a college degree. He finds love and begins a family. He maintains great relationships with both his parents and remaining sister. Everything turns out well for him in the end. And ultimately, his triumph is not only the outward success that he achieves, but in the forgiveness that he is able to find for himself. Letting go of the need to tell Lindy that he didn't help her that night when perhaps he could have and not telling her his newfound information about the rapist's identity is his greatest triumph. As he says, the love from his family made him realize that "life is not always about me and the unloading of my conscience" (302). He is finally able to let it all go and move on to being the best husband and father that he can be.



Responsibility to Others/Truth

The issue of taking responsibility for outcomes in other people's lives is a theme that provides mixed answers throughout the novel. The author first brings up this idea as he discusses Bo Kern and his harelip and another student Chester McCready. He wonders whether the two boys struggled in life the way they did in part because of the difficulties they had to deal with personally and the stigmas placed on them by others. Bo was always looked at differently because of his physical deformity, and the author suggests that perhaps this was some of the reason for his extreme aggression. He also feels that he and his classmates were perhaps responsible for the path that Chester McCready follows since they gave him the nickname "Chester the Molester." The author sees it as the "inevitable end we had sent him to in our youth" (18). While ultimately, these individuals are responsible for their own actions, the narrator strongly suggests that they really just become what everyone has already determined them to be.

The author's biggest source of angst is over the responsibility he feels for what he calls "his role" in Lindy's rape. Because he confesses that he tells the school about her rape, readers may think he is referring to guilt over this alone. However, he continues to refer to his role several more times throughout the novel, in a way that suggests another meaning. Only near the conclusion of the story is that additional role made known. As the narrator reveals that he was sitting up in the water oak tree the night of the rape, that he saw someone down at that end of the street underneath the broken street lamp and that he heard some strange sounds coming from around the corner, he also speaks of his feeling personally responsible for allowing it to happen. He did not go to investigate what was happening around the corner because he was not supposed to be out and certainly not hiding in a tree to spy. Concern for getting caught outweighed any other thoughts. He had no way of knowing that something sinister was taking place, but his guilt still exists. He perhaps could have done something, but his self-concern eliminated the possibility of helping Lindy. That moral tension remains a struggle for the narrator throughout the novel until years later when he is finally able to forgive himself.

Another area of responsibility for others comes in the form of the narrator's father and his care for his family. Throughout the novel, the father has been a poor example of fatherhood. He leaves his family for his own pleasure and does not participate in the development of his son into a responsible and stable young man. Yet, in the moment when his son's whereabouts and possibly his life are at stake, the father comes through. His intensity in questioning Mr. Landry is so strong that the narrator no longer questions his father's love for him. Although he has been extremely irresponsible as a father, at the most extreme moment he pulls through. It is significant for the narrator in that he more fully understands the importance of making sure that his own son will know the depths of his love for him.

The final example of responsibility for others comes in the uncovering of Mr. Landry's abuses against his many foster children. Jason Landry has suffered at his father's hand and has most likely witnessed these abuses perpetrated against the many foster children that passed through the Landry house. He wants to exact revenge against Mr.



Landry and the authorities that allowed these abuses to continue unnoticed. Jason knows that the narrator cares for Lindy and that he wants to solve the crime against her. Although his suspicion that his father committed the rape is unfounded, he is correct that he has been invading the privacy of all the neighborhood women for years. For this reason, he gets the narrator to help him break into the locked room and uncover the truth of what he keeps in the safe. Many people who were supposed to have protected these children have failed and Jason wants to punish them and get revenge. The school should have suspected that things were not right in the Landry home and perhaps started an investigation. Although not stated as such, perhaps this is the reason that Jason burns the school. It is more clear that he wants his father to suffer for all his crimes, so he also sets the house on fire. He seems to know that there are those who are clearly responsible for the care of others and when they fail, he believes they should be punished.

Styles

Point of View

The author has written *My Sunshine Away* in the first person point of view with the protagonist filling the role of narrator. He never gives his name and this allows him a bit of anonymity. Perhaps because he is a suspect in a rape case this seems to make sense. However, on a literary level, this fills another role. So much of what the narrator shares is about his infatuation with his neighbor, his learning about and experimentation with sexuality during his teen years and the effects of loss and grief within his family. These experiences are common to the human condition and as such most people can relate to his experiences in some way. The lack of a name, allows for an even closer identification as the narrator's position could be filled by anyone, living on any street in suburban America.

The narrator tells his story as he looks back over his life and relates what happened on his street many years prior. He relates conversations he had with friends and neighbors and provides in depth physical descriptions of his community and its inhabitants. From this singular point of view, the reader also gains a perspective on the issues in the community. For example, the narrator is aware that the Landry's fight. He observes the strange behavior of Mr. Landry in the woods and he knows from his interactions with Jason that the stray dog is an issue between father and son. He also observes Jason's hatred of his father, he describes the round scars on his back and he questions what lies behind the locked secret room in their house. But his knowledge is limited, so the reader along with the narrator can only guess what lies behind each of these facts. As the narrator has more information revealed to him, the reader gains knowledge as well.

The first person point of view also provides an opportunity for the author to not only tell a story, but to provide a look into what it meant to the protagonist. Throughout the narrative, the main character shares his internal struggles and what he is learning. He gains wisdom and matures into a stable young man despite the many adversities that come his way. His shared experience adds richness and depth to the novel making it much more than a crime mystery to be solved. The novel takes on characteristics of a memoir, highlighting important moments in his emotional development and thinking. He shares not only his personal history through his failures and triumphs but also the breakthroughs of others as they move on with their lives in the wake of life's adversities.

Language and Meaning

Despite its serious subject matter, *My Sunshine Away* is filled with beautiful prose and authentic language to support the novel as a work of southern fiction and mystery. As Walsh writes about many of the subtleties that define the culture of the south, his language is rich and descriptive. Of a backyard cookout he writes, "And from this grows a spread several tables long, covered in newspaper, with long rows of crawfish spilled



steaming from aluminum pots, a bright splash of red in the blanketing green of your yard. It is food so big it must be stirred with a paddle" (44). He also brings to light that many non-southerners do not understand or appreciate this richness of culture. He writes of a friend's disgusted reaction to such a meal, "All I saw were drunk and sweaty people, sucking on the heads of dead insects" (45). Throughout the novel similar language is used to add color and depth to the story. Of childish fear he writes, "The oak branches beneath the moon were now monster arms, a curved shadow before me a snake, the canal below an abyss" (239).

The novel is also dialogue rich. Conversations are authentically reproduced as they would have happened. The many teenagers in the novel often speak crudely and curse frequently. For Bo Kern, Jason Landry, Tyler Bannister, and to some extent Lindy, this foul language comes naturally and fits their personalities. They are the roughest sort of characters and good manners and speech are the farthest thing from them. However, when the narrator curses, it seems that he chooses to use the words so that he fits in with his friends. For example, when Lindy and the narrator are discussing the Jeffrey Dahmer case, Lindy is going on about how the police made so many mistakes and could have caught him sooner. She believes the cops to be worthless. The narrator says, "I was nervous. I agreed with whatever she told me. 'Fuck the police,' I said" (178). And later as she continues to curse he asks, "Do your parents let you cuss like that?" (179). The speech of others conveys their position as well. Kathryn speaks like the hurt and sorrowful woman that she is and Mrs. Landry speaks in a manner that conveys her fear and quite submission.

Walsh also effectively uses cliffhangers as an element of suspense. Many of his chapter endings leave the reader wondering, "now what?" Chapter 1 concludes with, "I should tell you now that I was one of the suspects" (3). From this moment on the narrator's potential guilt floats around in the reader's mind. Phrases like, "until she found a reason to suspect me" (28) and "You need to see what I found in his room" (88) keep the possibility of the narrator's guilt in the forefront. The author also keeps the story moving by using brief one-liners to end one chapter and then begin the next, often connecting them seamlessly. For example, at the conclusion of Chapter 22, Uncle Barry says, "Talk about her. I'm listening" (154) and then the narrator states as he begins Chapter 23, "It is easy to gloss over agony" (155). And near the conclusion the narrator is speaking of good memories and their importance throughout life. The last sentence of Chapter 32 states, "And this is not so bad" (265) contrasting with the Chapter 33 opener, "Unfortunately, some things are so bad" (266). Not only do the chapters flow together, but the juxtaposition of opposing ideas provides a sharp contrast between holding on to good memories and the sight of what the narrator is about to see as he discovers what is inside Jacques Landry's locked room.

Structure

Positioned as a mystery novel, the narrative does not follow a typical mystery format. Often once a crime has been committed, the police are heavily involved in investigating the scene, questioning victims and witnesses and tracking down leads and pursuing the



perpetrator. But this novel contains very few of those elements. In fact the story is not plot driven in the traditional sense. While the story does move forward as the reader acquires new information about the suspects in the case or about the neighbors in the community, it is not delivered in a chronological manner. The actual timeline of events is not strictly followed.

Instead, the author chooses to provide in depth analysis on each of the suspects in the case. The narrator shares everything he knows about each person and relates any history that he has personally had with each person. Not only does he tell the reader who is a suspect, but he also reveals information on the neighbors that are not suspects. Filling out a full history for each resident of Piney Creek Road, creates a big picture of what is going on within the community and how individuals are coping with the aftermath of the crime.

The novel does contain one of the key elements of a good mystery. The author uses suspense very well to keep the reader engaged and moving forward with the book. From the very beginning, Walsh sets his hook with, "I should tell you now that I was one of the suspects" (3). He continues to create an element of suspicion for some of the characters. Bo is described as extremely violent, sometimes for no apparent reason, so maybe it was him. Mr. Landry is erratic and violent as well, so perhaps he had something to do with Lindy's rape. But the main thread of suspicion continues to surround the narrator himself as he make statements that keep the reader guessing. "Things were remarkably good between us for a while, until she found a real reason to suspect me. It was hard for her, I suppose, to realize that committing the act does not depend on knowing the word" (28) and "'You need to see something,' she told him, 'You need to see what I found in his room'" (88). These chapter endings and cliffhangers create suspicion around the narrator and keep the story moving forward.

Mechanically, the story is told years after the events have happened. The narrator is actually telling the tale to his unborn son because he wants him to understand the type of man that he was and who he has become. He wants his son to know how very much he loves him and how greatly he desires that they both be "good men" (303). From there, the narration jumps around a bit chronologically in order to focus on relating information about the characters. Once the groundwork is laid, the story climaxes with the uncovering of Mr. Landry's abusive crimes against all the foster children and Jason exacting his revenge on his father and the community that allowed him to exist within it. It would almost seem that Lindy's case would never be solved, but the story continues years later as the narrator stumbles across the answer quite by accident. The final chapters form a resolution to the troubled body of the story. The narrator has finally solved the crime and found his answer, but chooses to not reveal the information to anyone, especially Lindy. Because everyone has found a measure of healing and normalcy, he lets it go and then ultimately finds forgiveness for himself.



Quotes

I should tell you now that I was one of the suspects.

-- The narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 16)

Importance: This admission by the narrator sets a tone for the rest of the novel. He is openly acknowledging that he was one of four suspects in the rape of Lindy Simpson. This is the first of many statements by him giving clues or reasons for why he might, indeed, be guilty. His possible involvement continues throughout the novel.

Oh, honey," my mother said. "Is that me?" It wasn't her fault. She simply underestimated the distance already between us.

-- The narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 14)

Importance: The narrator is making a full-figure picture of Lindy out of bark strips as he is watching her do yard work across the street. He is thinking specifically about each curved body part as he is building the picture. His mother suddenly walks up behind him and he instantly feels "caught" and ashamed of what he is doing. But his mother stills sees him as an innocent young boy and assumes the picture is of her. She is completely unaware that is being to wonder about girls and sexuality.

Even as children, you understand, we set our paper boats on a stream. We watch them go.

-- The narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 13)

Importance: This statement is an metaphor for the course that each life takes dependent upon the influences upon every child's life. The narrator makes it in reference to a fellow student who is given a derogatory name, Chester the Molester, which sticks with him throughout high school. The narrator wonders whether labeling him with that name contributed to his subsequent arrest a few years later for sexual harassment of a teenage girl.

Things were remarkably good between us for a while, until she found a real reason to suspect me. It was hard for her I suppose, to realize that committing the act does not depend on knowing the word.

-- The narrator (chapter 6 paragraph 51)

Importance: The narrator's mother was newly relieved that her son could not possibly have committed Lindy's rape because he apparently did not even understand what the word meant. However, the narrator is alluding to the fact, which he details in the next chapters, that he was acquiring quite an education in sexual and pornographic matters from some of the boys at school. So in experimenting with porn and becoming immersed in graphic images, the narrator was learning about the act of intercourse, but had no real understanding about the deeper meaning of sex and how its abuse deeply impacts and scars people.



Ultimately, the scope of these ills made Piney Creek Road look obscene to Lindy, she said, the way the blossoms on our crepe myrtles bloomed. The lovely street was like an ignorant joke. Therapy had taught her this, and she wore the lesson all over her face.
-- The narrator (chapter 10 paragraph 39)

Importance: This statement shows that for Lindy and the narrator life has been changed by the events of the past year. Everything has been just fine and neighborly in their little community. But once the rape occurs and once Lindy becomes aware of the many deeper problems in the world, ironically through therapy, she views their quaint street as a big joke. She realizes that it is not the real representation of life. Piney Creek Road is sunshine and flowers, but the real world is not. Childhood was innocent and unmarred, but the rape changed everything, and the neighborhood and all of life is forever different.

Perhaps growing wings is what fathers do.
-- The narrator (chapter 13 paragraph 1)

Importance: Middle age seems to bring about a change in fathers, at least in Woodland Hills, according to the narrator. The men become something different than what they were meant to be. Using metaphors of birds, he describes several fathers and how they change as life unfolds on the street. The owl, the hawk and the canary all are examples of what the narrator does not wish to become as he considers his own future as a father.

How could I offer Lindy a dare bold enough, I wondered, to erase the errors I'd made with her since the Challenger fell into the ocean?
-- The narrator (chapter 27 paragraph 31)

Importance: The day the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded and fell into the ocean is the day the narrator says that he fell in love with Lindy. Every day after that it became a challenge for him to get her to see him as more than just a boy in the neighborhood with whom she played as a kid. He feels so much guilt over the many mistakes he makes along the way, before and after the rape. When he finally has the opportunity to share a somewhat sexually intimate moment with Lindy during a game of Truth or Dare over the phone, he is not sure what to say. He desperately desires for the moment to bring them closer together, but feels it may not be possible.

Even worse, though, is that we were spared the floods of Katrina.
-- The narrator (chapter 28 paragraph 13)

Importance: This seemingly strange comment is made as the narrator is contrasting the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. He laments that New Orleans gets all the glory in Louisiana even though Baton Rouge is the capital. When Katrina, the devastating flood of 2005, hits New Orleans, thousands of people evacuate to Baton Rouge. They are there for months, flooding the city's businesses, entertainment centers and roadways. The huge and sudden influx of people radically changes the city in many ways. The narrator is saying that these changes were unwanted and happened only



because they were fortunate enough to be literally "high and dry." The discussion about cities is important in the story because it serves as a metaphor for what happens to Woodland Hills following Lindy's rape. The crime brought many unwanted changes to the community and to Lindy. She is no longer the sweet track star from Baton Rouge, but behaves more like the wild, unpredictable city of New Orleans.

It is important for me, whenever I relive this night at the Landry's, to first remind myself of other, better, memories. This is how I keep darkness from winning. This is how I stay healthy.

-- The narrator (chapter 32 paragraph 1)

Importance: Before the narrator tells what happened to him once he enters the locked room in the Landry house, he remembers and relates a happier memory. The memory is of him and his mother eating pizza together once a week and watching a TV show. He believes memories serve the purpose of bringing people back to special moments with the ones they love and care about. Memories exist, he states, to keep us connected to and cherishing the people we love and ultimately to keep us sane in darker times.

He loved us. I also knew that big and important parts of him were sorry because I knew that he was willing to fight. What more could I ask for? I will never apologize for loving him back.

-- The narrator (chapter 33 paragraph 26)

Importance: The narrator is inside the locked room as the police arrive on the scene at the Landry house. His parents and several officers confront Mr. Landry outside on the front lawn. His father forcefully demands to know where his son is. At this moment, the narrator knows completely that his father loves him and would do anything to know that his son was alive and well. Despite all of his failings as a father and years of neglect, the narrator at this moment forgives his Dad and loves him.

I mean, it was weird, you know, and it took me a while before I started missing it. But now I think about the good times a lot.

-- Lindy (chapter 34 paragraph 38)

Importance: Lindy and the narrator have run into each other 16 years apart. Lindy is married, happy and celebrating life at the big LSU football win. She is able to look back at the old neighborhood and her life as a teenager and remember the fun they had as kids. Despite all the horrible things that happened, not only to her but to many other kids on the street, she can remember the innocence and fun of their earlier days and the friendships she had there.

So I am guilty in the most specific sense.

-- The narrator (chapter 35 paragraph 13)

Importance: The narrator finally confesses the reason for his inner turmoil in that he was hiding up in the oak tree outside Lindy's house when the rape occurred. He had seen a shadowy figure in the bend of the road, he had heard a noise, but because he



was afraid of being caught and discovered as someone who was spying on Lindy, he didn't do anything to investigate or help Lindy. He carried this knowledge and guilt with him for years and he believes that it is almost as bad as if he had committed the crime himself.