

# **The Mermaid's Sister Study Guide**

**The Mermaid's Sister by Carrie Anne Noble**

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# Contents

<a href="#">The Mermaid's Sister Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1 – 6.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7 – 12.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 13 – 18.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 19 – 25.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 26 – 31.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>



## Plot Summary

“The Mermaid’s Sister” is a young adult historical fantasy novel by Carrie Ann Noble which follows the efforts of Clara and O’Neill’s efforts to get Clara’s sister Maren, a mermaid, to the ocean before she dies. When the novel begins, Clara and Maren, both 16, live on Llanfair Mountain in Pennsylvania with their guardian, Auntie Verity, and their pet dragon, Osbert, in the year 1870. Auntie says that a stork delivered Clara to her, while a clam delivered Maren to her when both girls were just babies. The girls at first believe that Auntie’s stories are just stories, but when Maren begins turning into a mermaid, both girls are stunned. Maren looks forward to life as a mermaid, while Clara cannot imagine life without Maren.

Scarff and O’Neill, two traveling merchants, visit the mountain. Scarff is Auntie’s longtime boyfriend, while O’Neill is his adoptive son. O’Neill was found in a churchyard cemetery under an apple tree by a priest, after which time Scarff thought to bring the baby to Auntie to raise. It was only then that Scarff decided to raise the baby himself. Years later, O’Neill has become Scarff’s business assistant. Their visits to the mountain are relished by Auntie, but especially by Clara and Maren. Clara is secretly in love with O’Neill, while Maren is outwardly in love with O’Neill. From all appearances, O’Neill seems to favor Maren which makes Clara jealous. Nevertheless, she loves Maren, and does not want her to turn into a mermaid. O’Neill promises Clara they will find a way to stop Maren’s transformation before he leaves to continue on business.

As the winter sets in, Auntie purchases a massive bathtub for Maren since Maren must now be touching water because her changing is progressing faster. Maren is made weak by the changes. Clara and Auntie realizes that Maren must be taken to the ocean or she will die. O’Neill sends Pilsner the messenger raven to Clara, saying he will return in March. When Scarff and O’Neill return in the spring, O’Neill agrees to accompany Clara to bring Maren to the ocean. It is then revealed that Scarff and Auntie are not just a couple, but married. Having immigrated from England years before, they came across Llanfair Mountain which angered the dark witch living there, who accused them of wanting to steal her territory. She then put a spell on Auntie and Scarff, forbidding them from being together for more than 13 days in a year, during which time Auntie would be forced to live on the mountain. Only when many things were in place, such as a raven coming to the mountain, would the spell be broken. Scarff now plans to make his home on the mountain.

Clara, Maren, O’Neill, Osbert, and Pilsner set off for the sea in a caravan wagon. However, an obsessed admirer of Maren’s, Simon Shumsky, follows them and sets the caravan on fire. He kidnaps Maren, but is stopped by Dr. Phipps and his traveling medicine show. Dr. Phipps, his wife, Madame Soraya, and their son, Jasper, save the lives of Clara and O’Neill. They say a debt has now been incurred, and Clara, Maren, and O’Neill will now have to perform in the show. Clara and O’Neill panic as the show heads north toward Canada rather than East toward the ocean. Maren weakens rapidly. They are also alarmed to learn that Jasper is a murderer, and has killed countless people forced into the show in the past. However, the Phipps end up fighting one



another, with Dr. Phipps revealing that Jasper truly runs the show, and that he has covered for Jasper long enough. Osbert attacks Jasper, throwing Jasper into the air where a larger dragon eats him. Clara and O'Neill rush to the ocean with Maren.

At the ocean, O'Neill begs the Sea King to let Maren remain human, but the Sea King explains that Maren has always been a mermaid, and must now live among her kind. O'Neill believes he has failed Clara, but Clara insists he has not. She feels bad for him since he was in love with Maren and now cannot have her. But O'Neill reveals he has truly loved Clara all along, and his efforts to save Maren were to make Clara happy. Clara is delighted. On the way home, she and O'Neill are married by the priest who found O'Neill years before. Back on the mountain, Scarff and Auntie are thrilled to have them home.



# Chapters 1 – 6

## Summary

Chapter 1 – It is 1870 on Llanfair Mountain, Pennsylvania. 16 year-old Clara considers the words “Wishing gets you nothing” that have been carved into an old tree by an unknown person years before. There is a clear, freshwater pond on the mountain into which visitors have tossed pebbles for hundreds of years as payment for the water sprite for wishes. Clara’s sister, Maren, swims in the pool. She is turning into a mermaid. The sisters live with their guardian, a folk healer Auntie Verity, on the mountain. Osbert, a friendly wyvern (dragon), keeps a close watch over things. Maren hopes to one day make it to the sea where she will live in the water forever with other mermaids. Clara wishes this wasn’t so, and wishes that Auntie could reverse the process, but it seems impossible. To calm both girls, Auntie tells the exaggerated story of how a stork and a clam brought Maren and Clara to live with her.

Chapter 2 – Most people on the mountain and in the world no longer believe dragons exist. Scarff and O’Neill, merchants who live and operate out of a caravan, come for a visit. They believe in dragons. Clara, Osbert, and Maren are thrilled to see them. The girls especially like O’Neill, who is not much older than they are. Indeed, they are both in love with him. Auntie Verity has been in a decades-long relationship with Scarff. O’Neill shows the girls some new products acquired from Anatolia. Maren laments that she will never see such a place. As they head to go swimming, O’Neill promises Clara he will find a way to cure Maren.

Chapter 3 – People from all over come to see the wares that Scarff and O’Neill have brought. Auntie plays the violin for the local children who gather around a campfire. O’Neill and Clara dance, during which time O’Neill restates his promise to find a cure for Maren. Clara is secretly in love with O’Neill. As the evening ends and the visitors all go home, Maren asks to hear the tale of how she and Clara were almost triplets. Scarff tells how priest from the nearby church asked him to take in a baby found under the apple tree where the priest’s brother was buried, and how the baby bore the same scar on the chin as the brother had. That baby became O’Neill. But rather than giving the baby to Auntie, Scarff decided to be a father himself.

Chapter 4 – Scarff and O’Neill return to the road in the morning. O’Neill leaves Clara to remember his promise. Clara is sad that he is gone, and hopes to see him again before the winter sets in. Gretel Goodling, a sweet 13 year-old girl, comes to ask Auntie to come and see her brother, who is ill again. She also brings word of a traveling show that is going to set up in the Pinkneys’ fallow field. Clara is cautious about the idea, but Maren is thrilled with the thought. Auntie gives the girls permission to go. The show gets underway. The host, Dr. George Wilhelm Hieronymus Lewis Balthazar Phipps, introduces the acts, including Jasper Armand on the violin. Phipps also advertises the cheap medicines and products the traveling company sells. At the shop tables, Madame Soraya sees Maren’s hands. She insists Maren meet with Phipps who can be of help.



Maren refuses. She and Clara then receive a ride home in the carriage of Simon Shumsky. Going to be that night, Maren says she wishes she was more sensible like Clara, while Clara wishes the medicine show would hurry up and leave the mountain.

Chapter 5 – September comes on. Maren is changing more rapidly. Part of her must always be touching water while her voice is fading away to a whisper. She is weak due to her body's transformation. She and Clara will both be 17 soon, and hope to see O'Neill before the winter.

Chapter 6 – December comes on. Simon arrives to ask Maren to the Christmas dance, but Maren must refuse because she is so ill. Simon is in love with her, and is determined to marry her no matter what. While Auntie may have a tea cure for infatuation, there is no cure for love.

## Analysis

"The Mermaid's Sister" is a young adult historical fantasy novel by Carrie Ann Noble which follows the efforts of Clara and O'Neill's efforts to get Clara's sister Maren, a mermaid, to the ocean before she dies. From the start, the reader can discern how critical the theme of family is the plot, and how critical family is to Clara. Having been abandoned as babies, Clara and Maren have no idea who their parents truly are. (Simultaneously, this brings to the fore the theme of Mystery, one which will continue through the novel. Some mysteries will be solved; others will go unanswered.) Clara and Maren have only one another, and Auntie. Because of this, they value one another even more. This is especially true in the admiration and love that Clara and Maren have for Auntie. She took them in when no one else wanted them. The love she has given them matters tremendously to Clara and to Maren.

Having grown up together as though they were blood-related sisters, Clara and Maren are essentially best friends as well. They do everything together from sharing a bed to chores to swimming. But Maren's transformation into a mermaid proves to be jarring to the relationship between Clara and Maren. It is the one thing that separates them that cannot seemingly be overcome. Different parentage is one thing, but different species is another. The depth to which Clara loves Maren and considers her a sister is expressed through Clara's panic at Maren's transformation. She does not want Maren to transform. The reader should also note that there is a difference between the girls as to how they approach life in general. Clara is more conservative and reserved, while Maren is outgoing and rebellious. This leads to Madame Soraya seeing Maren's condition, something which will come back to haunt Maren much later.

Love also factors into this section of the novel. Love will be an important ongoing theme throughout the course of the novel. Clara and Maren are both in love with O'Neill. It has been this way for years. The girls are thrilled by his rare visits to the mountain. Likewise, Auntie looks forward to Scarff's visits to the mountain, for the two themselves have long been in love. Their love for one another brings mystery to the fore again as the reason why the two are not married is unknown.



Another mystery presented early in the novel concerns the true parentage of O'Neill himself. The reader should note that the parentage of all three teens is unknown. Usually, a child's identity is determined heavily by who his or her parents may be. In many ways, the true identity of Clara, Maren, and O'Neill is unknown, but is something they discover as they learn they are who they are, and not what anyone else says they are or wants them to be. Their identities will become clearer and more focused as the novel progresses and as they discover and learn more about themselves in the process.

Additionally, faith also makes a subtle appearance in this section of the novel. Faith in the novel consists not only of belief in God, but in belief of things like mermaids and dragons as well. Anything is possible in God's world. As it is noted, not many people believe in dragons anymore, but Osbert's existence proves that such things do exist. Likewise, it should be noted that O'Neill is found in a churchyard cemetery, where the dead are buried. O'Neill's appearance and discovery by a priest as a living baby among the aged dead is important because it means that O'Neill has a greater purpose than death in the world. Such a purpose may be monumental, or it may be unnoticeable. Nevertheless, O'Neill will come to play an important part in events as they unfold. Churches, places of faith and hope, also prove to be the cause of why O'Neil has so much faith in God and in hope.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do Clara, Maren, and Auntie look forward to the visits of Scarff and O'Neill so much? What are these visits like? How do these visits affect the girls?

## Discussion Question 2

How are Clara and Maren similar, and how are they different? How do these similarities and differences affect their relationship as sisters? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

What is important about the fact that the true parentage of Clara, Maren, and O'Neill is unknown? Does the fact that these three do not know who their parents are bother them? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

rustle, wyvern, provoked, trespassing, behemoth, blatant, accost, blather, tapestried, sumptuous, roguishly, chortles, unchaperoned, bawdy, adequate, consolation, impeccably, infatuation



## Chapters 7 – 12

### Summary

Chapter 7 – On Christmas morning, Maren is doing well after a cup of crushed shark's tooth, powdered mussel shells, and dried kelp. It is snowing outside. Auntie, Clara, Maren, and Osbert are all in a very good mood. Scarff and O'Neill send Zedekiah the horse to live with Auntie, Clara, and Maren. They promise to visit in the spring. Zedekiah also bears other gifts, including a golden locket with an apple tree engraving for Maren, an illuminated book of herbal recipes for Auntie, and a small painting done by O'Neill for Clara. Clara is jealous of Maren's locket, though she does like her painting. Auntie reminds the girls to be grateful for all they have in their lives. A private letter for Clara has been written by O'Neill. In the letter, he explains that Scarff is unwell, that he hopes to see Maren before the transformation is complete, that a local healer named Madame Vadoma has sent along a recipe for a tisane that should help to slow the transformation and that he will dance in the apple orchard in the spring with Clara. Clara cannot wait for this to happen. She then gives Maren a Christmas gift and letter from Simon. It is a tiger's eye rock, which is claimed to have pain-relieving properties. Clara knows that by next Christmas, Maren will be living in the sea.

Chapter 8 – Clara has a nightmare where she trades her life for Maren's to a merman. Simon arrives to bring Maren to the dance, but Auntie explains to Simon that Maren is not well enough to go. She explains that Maren has an incurable condition that will deform her. Simon is stunned and leaves heartbroken.

Chapter 9 – On New Year's Day, Mr. Peterman and his son Henry Donald, who run the general store in town, arrive with a special order for Auntie, a bathtub. It is a luxury not many people have but one that is necessary for Maren. She must now spend every moment in water mixed with salt. Clara struggles to keep hope that Maren might somehow be saved. She and Auntie wonder about bringing Clara to the sea since Auntie cannot leave the mountain. If Scarff and O'Neill do not return by March to take Maren, then Auntie will consider allowing Clara to bring Maren. She says there is no cure for being who someone truly is. A message arrives from Scarff and O'Neill, carried by Pilsner the raven. The message says that Scarff is doing better and that they will be back by the first of March. Maren wishes that Clara was a mermaid. Clara does not know how to answer.

Chapter 10 – Auntie and Clara are worried because by the second week of March, Scarff and O'Neill still have not arrived, and because Maren is shrinking in size. Scarff and O'Neill finally arrive. Clara is jealous of how much attention O'Neill pays to Maren. Scarff confesses that he and Auntie have actually been married for years, but lost their first child crossing the ocean from England. Why they have lived apart is a mystery that Scarff promises to explain in good time. As bedtime nears, Clara becomes jealous of how lovingly O'Neill looks at Maren. That night, Clara dreams of becoming a stork. It frightens her.





Chapter 11 – Clara wakes up to discover that O’Neill has slept on the floor beside the bathtub. She curses herself and feels humiliated that O’Neill might ever want her instead of Maren. O’Neill awakens and agrees that Maren is shrinking each day. He also agrees that she must be taken to the ocean, and go with Clara to take Maren. He hopes that the merfolk will have a way to restore Maren’s humanity. Clara realizes that Maren is happy as a mermaid, and happy that O’Neill is by her side. She realizes only true love can do this. She feels bad for them both because she knows their time is short. Scarff explains that he and Auntie became the traveling companions of the elderly and widowed Willie Brady, who died not long after meeting. On coming to Llanfair Mountain, a dark witch felt Scarff and Auntie were moving in on her territory, so she hexed them: Auntie could never leave the mountain, and Scarff could only visit 13 days each year until the horse, raven, and three rubies come to the mountain, and until Scarff’s hair turns white. Having recently acquired the three rubies, the curse is broken.

Chapter 12 – Two days after Easter, Clara and O’Neill head into town for supplies for the journey to the sea, including salt for Maren and licorice lozenges for Osbert. The trip to the shore will take some two or three weeks. Scarff will stay behind with Auntie Verity. In town, it is learned the Simon has since married Tabitha Gorse. Simon is disheartened to learn about Maren’s change. That night, Clara sees a heartbroken Simon looking in through the window at Maren and O’Neill before rushing off.

## Analysis

As the winter comes on, Maren’s condition worsens. Great steps are taken to make Maren’s transition easier, such as the purchase of a massive bathtub in which Maren begins spending all of her time. Clara continues to worry about Maren as the theme of Family remains prevalent. Clara not only tends to Maren but prays and hopes there will be a way to reverse the transformation. Her sister means too much to be lost forever to the ocean. This speaks volumes about Clara’s identity and character as a person, especially given the fact that of the two girls, it is Maren who O’Neill seems to be in love with.

Clara’s love for O’Neill remains unabated, yet his obvious preference for Maren hurts Clara deeply. Clara believes she has no chance against someone as beautiful as Maren, but still she holds out hope. The golden locket that Maren receives becomes a source and symbol of jealousy for Clara who keeps her jealousy mostly in check. Clara is especially heartbroken to see how dutifully O’Neill has slept on the floor beside Maren’s bathtub. As bad as Clara feels for herself, she feels even worse for O’Neill and Maren because she knows their time together is fleeting. O’Neill himself hopes that the Sea King will have a way to restore Maren. His faith in saving Maren is noteworthy, especially as matter relating to the theme of faith. Clara’s own faith in finding a cure for Maren dwindles with each day, but still she holds out hope.

This hope is given a renewal by the fact that Scarff and Auntie have had their curse broken. Indeed, the breaking of their curse lays at least one mystery to rest, namely, why they couldn’t live together as a married couple on Llanfair Mountain. With the true



identity of Scarff and Auntie now known, the mystery of the true parentage of Clara, O'Neill, and Maren still remains. Additionally, the greater mystery of whether or not Maren can be helped remains. It will be a mystery that will remain through the climax of the novel. Interestingly enough, the reader should note that while Clara is unhappy with Maren's transformation, Maren seems perfectly happy with the transformation.

The love that Simon has for Maren also appears unabated by the fact that Maren is becoming a mermaid. Clara feels bad for Simon as well, knowing what he is going through as the love he has for Maren is not returned. However, whereas Clara's love for O'Neill is genuine love, Simon's love for Maren is more obsession as will be demonstrated in coming chapters. Simon will alter the course of events in the novel in unforeseen ways, which will prove grave for Maren.

## Discussion Question 1

Despite her jealousy regarding the apparent love between Maren and O'Neill, Clara still longs to help Maren. Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Even though Clara feels horrible that O'Neill is apparently in love with Maren, she feels even worse for Maren and O'Neill. Why? What does this say about Clara's character as a person?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Clara feel so badly for Simon during this section of the novel? What is her reaction to Simon's discovery that Maren is a mermaid?

## Vocabulary

burglarized, capsized, harrowing, illuminated book, arrhythmic, beseech, pantomimes, celebratory, embellish, harrumph, fervent, harlot, subaquatic, bereft



## Chapters 13 – 18

### Summary

Chapter 13 – Scarff will tell everyone in town that O'Neill, Maren, and Clara have gone off to visit relatives. Meanwhile, final preparations for the trip are made. Down the road, Clara discovers that Osbert and Pilsner have stowed away in the wagon. A few nights later, Osbert flies off and comes back with a scrap of fabric from a pair of pants belonging to Simon, confirming to O'Neill that Simon has been following them since they left. They believe he is mermaid stricken, which occurs when a person becomes almost hypnotized by the beauty of a mermaid. O'Neill reveals he has a tattoo which wards off mermaid enchantment. He, Maren, and Clara encamp for the night at an abandoned farm. O'Neill performs a variety of tricks, such as juggling flaming batons, to entertain Clara and Maren until Maren falls asleep.

Chapter 14 – Clara, O'Neill, Maren, Pilsner, and Osbert are now six days into their journey. O'Neill thinks it might be possible to bargain with the Sea King, trading something else for Maren's restoration. He believes Maren's happiness as a mermaid is merely part of the enchantment. Clara does not think so, saying that Maren has always loved the water. She also reminds O'Neill that Maren could swim incredibly well even before the age of three. She believes that Maren has actually always been a mermaid. O'Neill will not accept this. Clara herself worries she may become a stork. She also worries because Pilsner has flown off to scout but not yet come back. O'Neill tells her not to worry and kisses her cheek. He tells her he would be hopeless without her. It excites and saddens Clara. O'Neill goes on to call her brave.

Chapter 15 – The caravan wagon's wheel breaks. O'Neill, Clara, and Maren must make camp for the night. They hunker down inside as a storm comes on. They awaken to their caravan on fire and strangers pulling them from the blaze. One of them is Jasper. He says that there is no one else in the caravan besides Clara and O'Neill. Clara realizes that Maren is gone, and suspects Simon of causing the fire and kidnapping Maren.

Chapter 16 – Clara awakens hours later. Jasper's mother, Madama Soraya Phipps, wife of Dr. Phipps, reveals that Maren has been found and is alright, and that things did not end well for the kidnapper. She also reveals that O'Neill is alright. She says that Maren will be well-cared for, since she has dealt with Maren's kind before. Soraya explains that Maren is adjusting to her new habitat.

Chapter 17 – Clara talks with Jasper. He is boyish in appearance, so she cannot tell if he is 20 or 30. He tells Clara he hopes she, Maren, and O'Neill will stay with them after they are all recovered. Clara thanks him but refuses, saying they have previous plans. Clara wants to see Maren, knowing they will have to travel with the Phipps show until Maren is sufficiently recovered. Clara is refused the chance to see Maren until the show is on the road. O'Neill tells Clara to relax, that everything will be alright. Clara does not



believe so, especially when Madame Soraya says they owe a debt for having had their lives saved. It will be up to Dr. Phipps to determine how long Clara and the others must remain with the show to pay off that debt. Clara realizes they will have to escape.

Chapter 18 – In the next town, Jasper brings Clara to see Maren. Maren has been placed in a massive glass jar. She has no clothing on, which causes Clara to try to obscure the view Jasper and O'Neill have. Jasper finds Clara's propriety amusing and laughs about it. Clara realizes that Maren is not their first mermaid. Clara secures a white scarf for Maren to wrap around her breasts. Maren does not want to wear it, but Clara insists. Maren finally relents, asking Clara to tell O'Neill she loves him. Clara agrees.

## Analysis

Simon's love for Maren is revealed to be obsession due to mermaid enchantment in this section of the novel. Simon follows Clara, Maren, and O'Neill from the very moment that they leave Llanfair Mountain. Somewhere along the way, Simon's obsession becomes deadly when he sets the caravan on fire in order to steal Maren away. Things do not end well for Simon, as the Phipps track Simon down and kill him in order to retrieve Maren. But Maren is not saved. She, Clara, and O'Neill are to be forced to pay off their rescue by being conscripted into the Phipps' traveling medicine show. Maren's life hangs in the balance, but the Phipps do not care that she is dying. Indeed, as the reader will remember, Soraya's past discovery that Maren is a mermaid has only worked against her in the present.

Clara's sole focus since leaving Llanfair Mountain has been to help her sister. The theme of Family remains strong in this section of the novel as Clara's first thoughts following rescue and imprisonment are about her sister's welfare. Even Clara's envy of the love between Maren and O'Neill does not sway her from wanting to make sure that Maren is all right.

The reader should note that the Phipps would provide a convenient demise for Maren, in that Clara could consign herself to being helpless and believing she has no choice but to watch Maren die. That in turn would give her a chance with O'Neill. However, Clara is a genuinely selfless person who would never even consider this. From the very first moment Clara finds out she is trapped, escaping to get Maren to the ocean becomes her primary focus. Family comes before romance. The reader should note the scene where Clara obstructs the view Jasper and O'Neill have of Maren's breasts by first standing in their line of sight and later securing Maren a scarf.

Interestingly enough, Clara comes to discover that O'Neill has an anti-enchantment tattoo, meaning that his feelings for Maren must be genuine rather than obsessive. Yet, Clara has also come to realize that while Maren has feelings for O'Neill, Maren desperately longs for the water. Maren, Clara realizes, has been a mermaid all her life and is only now undergoing the change. Nothing can be done to make Maren human again because Maren has never been a human.



O'Neill, however, refuses to accept this and holds out tremendous hope that Maren can be restored to a human state. This causes Clara to be heartbroken for O'Neill rather than envious. However, the theme of Mystery returns here as the reader is now confronted with the question of whether Clara or O'Neill is right. This also brings to fore the mystery of whether Clara herself will transform into a stork and just what her true identity is.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How does Simon's obsession with Maren ultimately come to negatively affect Maren, Clara, and O'Neill? What becomes of Simon? Why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What causes Clara to believe that the love between Maren and O'Neill, unlike the love that Simon has for Maren, is utterly genuine? How does Clara respond to this understanding? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Even with being taken captive by the Phipps and the love between Maren and O'Neill unabated, Clara continues to help, protect, and take care of Maren. Why?

## **Vocabulary**

promptness, bestows, obscene, chaste, iridescent, indispensable, expletives, nomadic, providential, condescension, languidly, apothecary



# Chapters 19 – 25

## Summary

Chapter 19 – Clara insists that Maren be taken to the ocean. Jasper says the solution in which Maren swims will keep her healthy for years. They are given dinner and tea laced with poison. Jasper sadly explains the poison, once introduced into the body, must be taken each day or death will follow. Many have died trying to escape. Jasper has tattooed his leg with the names of those people, including his wife Zara and their son. Clara realizes they have no immediate hope of escape. O'Neill is especially devastated, but does his best to keep hope. It helps to see Osbert flying overhead. Clara later learns that dinner consisted of raven meat from Pilsner. After the show that night, Dr. Phipps warns against escape and orders everyone to bed.

Chapter 20 – In the morning, O'Neill and Clara go to see Maren where she has been set up in the Gallery of Wonders tent. They notice she is not wearing the locket anymore, and believe Soraya must have taken it. O'Neill and Jasper work on a new magic act. Clara is sent to wash clothes in the creek. Soraya later dresses Clara up like a Japanese girl. She will pretend to be an escaped princess and will stand in the Gallery of Wonders. As customers arrive, Clara is very uncomfortable to have so many people, especially boys and men, staring at her so openly. She feels even worse for her sister, believing she has failed to protect Maren.

Chapter 21 - Clara learns to become O'Neill's magician's assistant so that she will not have to be in the Gallery of Wonders anymore. Dr. Phipps reminds Clara not to attempt anything rebellious, or she will suffer the consequences.

Chapter 22 – While gathering firewood, Clara is visited by Osbert, who brings along a small suede pouch. Inside is a dagger. Clara tells Osbert to stay close but out of sight when Jasper approaches. Jasper warns her that Phipps is in a bad mood. He tells her and O'Neill to be extra careful. The show is packed up and moves on. As they travel, O'Neill gives Clara a small, freshly-picked daisy. Clara blushes. O'Neill vows to destroy the wish quote on the tree. Suddenly, they hear a horse screeching. O'Neill goes to investigate and discovers that one of the horses has broken its leg and has been shot dead, while Dr. Phipps has had a fit and is unconscious.

Chapter 23 – Clara commits to pretending to be Jasper's friend, hoping it will benefit her at some point. Jasper confesses to having feelings for Clara. Clara is uncomfortable about this. As she goes to bed that night, she realizes that no one is sick, yet they have not consumed the poison tea. It means someone has been lying to them. O'Neill feels perfectly fine when she awakens him just before dawn. They hear Jasper sneaking up on them, so O'Neill kisses Clara. Jasper acts as if he knew there was something going on between them all along. Clara is both thrilled by the kiss, but heartbroken because O'Neill says it was just for show. She now feels robbed of her first kiss, and hates O'Neill for it.



Chapter 24 – With Madame Soraya’s attention on Dr. Phipps, Maren is being neglected. She is shrinking again and is very unhappy. O’Neill seeks to talk to Clara about the kiss, asking for forgiveness. Clara forgives him for Maren’s sake and explains she intends to brew a sleeping potion which will be given to Soraya and Jasper. She begins stealing the ingredients from Soraya, but cannot find scarlet truffle, the last ingredient needed.

Chapter 25 – After the next show, Clara and O’Neill talk about how urgent it is that they make their escape, for Maren is fading fast and Jasper clearly wants to force himself on Clara. Clara manages to find what she hopes is scarlet powdered truffle. O’Neill urges caution because Jasper is growing suspicious and carries a pistol. He tells her to keep up her hope.

## Analysis

Despite the love that Maren has for O’Neill, and despite the seeming hopelessness of their situation, Clara’s primary focus remains Maren. She will do whatever she can whenever she can for Maren, from pressing Maren’s case with the Phipps to checking up on Maren in her tank. This is often done at great risk to Clara, especially when Jasper reveals that his parents will kill performers and captives on a whim. The danger and cruelty of the Phipps is reinforced by the fact that they serve up Pilsner for dinner. This makes the threats of the poison tea all the more potent, but as it is later discovered, the poison tea is an abject lie designed to instill obedience and fear.

Clara’s insistence on pretending to be Jasper’s friends to curry favor and gain greater influence backfires as Jasper becomes obsessed with Clara. He makes plain his sexual desires for her, desires which are only curbed briefly by O’Neill’s intervention. O’Neill kisses Clara under the idea that it will help to keep Jasper away. Clara’s initial happiness with the kiss is undone to devastation when she learns that it was done merely for show. Despite the nature of the kiss being a means to protection, Clara feels robbed of the true romance of a first kiss. Her love for O’Neill remains, but she hates him just as much for robbing her of her first real romantic encounter.

As the days pass, it becomes more and more apparent that Maren’s life will end very soon if nothing is done for her. Clara decides the best chance for escape will be to brew tea with sleeping draught, giving it to the Phipps and making possible getting Maren to the ocean. Clara risks her very life by secretly obtaining the ingredients necessary for the tea.

Despite Clara’s focus on Maren, it appears that O’Neill’s focus on Maren is slipping slightly. His gift to Clara of a daisy, and the extra attention he has been paying to her besides the kiss, all cause Clara to alternately hope that she might somehow win O’Neill’s heart. Yet, the kiss brings her back down to Earth. She comes to grudgingly accept that the love she has for O’Neill will always linger and will always be unreturned.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Clara feel happy, then devastated and angry when O'Neill kisses her? How does she handle O'Neill afterwards? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

What causes Clara and O'Neill to realize they stand a better chance of escape than they previously imagined following Dr. Phipps' fit? How do they respond to this realization? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you believe O'Neill is justified in kissing Clara to protect her from Jasper? Why or why not? Do you believe Clara is justified in her reaction to O'Neill? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

incarnate, taxidermied, douse, brute, gorgon, mercilessly, vehemence, fallacious, maligns, advantageous, frolicking, inevitably, rebukes, impetuous, ineffectual, pacify, pilfering





# Chapters 26 – 31

## Summary

Chapter 26 – Jasper sets a course for Canada with a detour to the apothecary who brews and bottles all of Phipps's formulas and medicines in the town of Edgemere. Clara pleads with Soraya to help stabilize Maren, but Soraya refuses. While out in the town, Clara goes to a dressmaker for new clothing. The dressmaker explains the dagger that Clara carries is a healing blade. Anything it cuts, it heals. Back at the wagons, O'Neill tells Clara she looks very pretty in her new dress.

Chapter 27 – O'Neill tells Clara that he has an intuition that something is going to happen that night, and that they will escape. After dinner, Clara brews her sleeping tea while Jasper gets drunk. Phipps suddenly regains enough consciousness to accuse Soraya of poisoning him. He attacks and kills Soraya. O'Neill tries to intervene, but Jasper wounds O'Neill in the attempt to kill Phipps. Clara realizes the names of the dead on Jasper's legs are kills by Jasper, not Phipps. Phipps is enraged that Jasper would try to shoot him. Jasper claims he was trying to protect Phipps. Phipps does not believe him and attacks Jasper, claiming he has done so much for Jasper by washing the blood from Jasper's hands. With a flaming torch, Phipps begins destroying everything in the show, including Maren's tank. Clara, O'Neill, and Maren prepare to escape, but are confronted by an armed Jasper. Osbert suddenly swoops in, and throws Jasper up into the air where a very large dragon eats Jasper. The terror of the situation gives Phipps a fatal heart attack. O'Neill urges Clara to use the healing blade on Maren. Clara knows that without O'Neill's help, she'll never reach the sea. She uses the blade on O'Neill.

Chapter 28 – O'Neill recovers. On horseback, he, Clara, and Maren race East toward the ocean. Maren is now small enough to fit in a two-quart jar of saltwater. Clara is heartbroken for Maren and for O'Neill. At last they arrive at the shore and approach the ocean. The Sea King, Varun, and several mermaids are already waiting. He says that Maren has always been a child of the sea, and that she was never intended for the land. He gives Clara and O'Neill gold coins in thanks and as a way for them to get home safely. In the water, Maren is fully restored to her true size and beauty as a mermaid. O'Neill begs to be taken instead, but Maren tells him gently to return home. She says her goodbyes, then swims away.

Chapter 29 – Clara is desperately sad to have lost Maren, even though she knows she will see Maren again someday. O'Neill believes he has failed Clara, but Clara assures him this is not so, that Maren always wanted to be a mermaid and with her own kind. O'Neill reveals that while he has always loved Maren like a sister, he has been in love with Clara, which is why he worked so hard to save Maren because he knew Maren meant so much to Clara. He explains he had turned down Maren's romantic advances for a long time. Clara and O'Neill kiss. He asks her to marry him, but she says she will not since she may turn into a stork. O'Neill reveals that the full name of Scarff is Ezra



Corraghrian Scarff, with Corraghrian being Scottish for “stork”. Scarff found Clara abandoned on the steps of an orphanage, O’Neill reveals, and brought her to Auntie. O’Neill tells Clara she is his hero.

Chapter 30 – In the next town they come to, Clara and O’Neill ask the priest, Father Patrick O’Neill, to marry them. It was Father Patrick who found O’Neill years before. He is delighted to see how well O’Neill has turned out and readily agrees to marry them.

Chapter 31 – Mr. and Mrs. O’Neill Scarff return home with news of Maren’s safety and their marriage. Scarff and Auntie are overjoyed. The next morning, O’Neill shows that he has changed the saying on the tree by the wishing pond to “Swishing gets you nothing.” Clara then goes swimming.

## Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, many mysteries are finally solved, but others still remain. As it turns out, Maren was never truly a person at all, but has always been a mermaid. There is nothing that anyone could do to stop her coming into her own as a mermaid. Maren’s true identity is thus revealed and embraced by Maren. However, Clara is saddened because she will lose the constant companionship of her sister to the merfolk. Despite the knowledge that Clara will see Maren again someday, Clara is still heartbroken at her loss. Maren has been her one constant companion, and has been one-third of her family.

However, as Maren exits the picture, O’Neill steps in. O’Neill, it is discovered, has secretly been in love with Clara all along. The attention he paid to Maren was out of kindness to her, and his desire to save Maren was because he knew how much Clara loved Maren. Clara is elated to learn the truth of things. The mystery of O’Neill’s true love and loyalty is thus revealed. The faith that O’Neill has had in everything turning out alright has also come to pass.

O’Neill’s compliments toward Clara—that she is courageous and his source of hope—help Clara to understand her own identity as a person. She realizes she is worth holding onto and is worthy of love. This is borne out when she and O’Neill are married in the church by the priest who first found O’Neill. It can be argued that O’Neill has a deeper faith than most given his discovery in a near a church, a House of God. However, O’Neill’s true parentage is a mystery that remains unsolved by the end of the novel. The same is true of Clara’s parentage, though her identity as a human girl rather than a stork is firmly established.

O’Neill’s identity as someone meant for something more than death is clear when he marries Clara, and the two decide that a simple life with family is the way to go. Their return to Llanfair Mountain is met with great joy by Scarff and Auntie. Rather than their family diminishing in size, it has now grown and will grow when Clara someday becomes a mother. Despite not knowing who their own birth parents are, Clara and O’Neill consider Scarff and Auntie their true parents. They feel as though they belong to



one another and belong with Scarff and Auntie. It is a sense of belonging that helps give both Clara and O'Neill an identity. They are confident in who they are, and know where they are going.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the truth about Maren's identity? How do Clara and O'Neill react to this? Why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

O'Neill reveals he has been in love with Clara all along. How does O'Neill explain the appearance of love between him and Maren? How does Clara come to view this? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Can O'Neill be faulted for giving the impression (intentionally or unintentionally) that he was in love with Maren? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

furtive, hastened, irritating, pardon, unorthodox, dispensation



# Characters

## Clara

Clara Warren is the 16 year-old main character and narrator of the novel “The Mermaid’s Sister” by Carrie Anne Noble. Clara is the adoptive sister of Maren, and the adoptive daughter of Verity. As she later learns, Ezra is her adoptive father. Her biological parentage is unknown. Clara is a sweet, pretty girl, who is very conservative and reserved in her lifestyle. She is sensitive and deeply compassionate toward others, especially Maren. Clara is secretly in love with O’Neill, but is dismayed to learn that O’Neill seems to be in love with Maren. Clara is also heartbroken with the knowledge that Maren is achieving her true form as a mermaid.

Together with O’Neill, they set out to bring Maren to the ocean but are abducted by the Phipps. Disunity among the Phipps allows an escape, during which time Clara and O’Neill bring Maren to the ocean. There, they learn beyond a shadow of a doubt that Maren is actually a mermaid, and nothing else can be done for her except to let her live among her own kind. Clara is heartbroken by this but happy to learn that O’Neill has secretly been in love with her all along. By the end of the novel, she marries O’Neill and returns to Llanfair Mountain.

## Maren

Maren Warren is the 16 year-old adoptive sister of Clara, and the adoptive daughter of Auntie and Scarff. She is described as being incredibly beautiful, qualities made all the more apparent by her transformation into a mermaid. She is much more outgoing and social than her sister, which comes to get her in trouble down the road when Madame Soraya recognizes that Maren is a mermaid. Maren is hopelessly in love with O’Neill though O’Neill never returns these feelings.

Maren delights in being a mermaid, embracing her true nature and identity. However, the transformation leaves her weakened and in serious need of being brought to the ocean. Clara and O’Neill endeavor to do this, though all three are taken captive by the Phipps. Maren is put on display in the Phippses’ Gallery of Wonders, though she continues to weaken and shrink. Only when she, Clara, and O’Neill escape to the ocean is Maren’s health restored and her life saved. She is heartbroken to be without O’Neill, but goes on to live happily among the Merfolk.

## O’Neill

O’Neill Scarff is the adoptive son of Ezra Scarff, and Auntie Verity. O’Neill is described as tall, thin, blonde, and handsome, but his age is never given. It can be surmised he is in his late teens, somewhere around the age of Maren and Clara. O’Neill is brave, kind, optimistic, and patient. Found in a cemetery under an apple tree and named for the



priest who found him as a baby, O'Neill was originally intended to be raised by Auntie before Scarff decided to raise O'Neill himself.

Given his origins in a churchyard, O'Neill relies heavily on God, faith, and hope. O'Neill travels with Scarff around the country buying and selling goods, and visiting Llanfair Mountain every few months. O'Neill is secretly in love with Clara, and is determined to move Heaven and Earth to save Maren. When Maren must be taken to the sea, O'Neill believes he has failed Clara, confessing his love to her in the process. Clara assures him he did not fail her, and the two end up marrying by the end of the novel.

## **Auntie**

Verity "Auntie" Amsell is the guardian and adoptive mother of Clara and Maren. She is endlessly patient and wise. She is the wife of Scarff and a resident of Llanfair Mountain where a dark spell has been placed on her forbidding her from leaving until a number of important things occur, such as a raven coming to the mountain. Verity is known around the mountain and in the town below as a folk healer, and her medicines and treatments are famously and regularly relied upon. She agrees and consents to Clara and O'Neill bringing Maren to the sea, but remains behind on the mountain during the journey.

## **Scarff**

Ezra Scarff is the husband of Verity, and the adoptive father of O'Neill. Scarff is a good man who does well in his business as a traveling merchant. Scarff has been unable to live with Auntie since a curse was put upon them years before, so he spends much of his time traveling securing the cure for the curse, which he achieves by the spring.

## **Osbert and Pilsner**

Osbert the wyvern (dragon) and Pilsner the raven are the wild creatures-turned-pets of Clara and Maren. They are both kind, protective, and loyal creatures who stowaway aboard the caravan as Clara, Maren, and O'Neill travel to the ocean. When discovered, they both act as lookouts and guardians of the journey. Pilsner is unfortunately caught by the Phipps and turned into stew. Osbert secures a healing blade for Clara, which becomes beneficial to her escape. Osbert later grabs hold of Jasper and throws him up into the air as a mean for a much larger dragon. Osbert accompanies Clara, Maren, and O'Neill to the sea, then returns home with them.

## **Jasper**

Jasper Phipps is the son of Dr. and Madame Phipps. He is a sociopathically deranged, murderous man who is the true controlling force behind the Phipps medicine show. Only through killing and threats of force can he keep his parents and all the other workers and performers in check. Jasper is delighted to force Clara, Maren, and O'Neill into



captivity as performers. He especially zeroes in on Clara, making his sexual desires for her clear. He is ultimately attacked by Osbert, and eaten by an unidentified dragon.

## **Madame Soraya**

Madame Soraya Phipps is the mother of Jasper, and the wife of Dr. Phipps. Soraya is a cruel and callous woman who is psychotically deranged, varying between both hating and loving her son and husband, and showing callous disregard for Maren. She is ultimately killed in a family scuffle when her husband chokes her and Jasper seemingly shoots her.

## **Dr. Phipps**

Dr. Phipps is the husband of Soraya, and the father of Jasper. He is a cold, angry man who has long covered for the sins of his son. By the end of the novel, he has had enough and attacks his wife, believing her to be in league with Jasper. Phipps ultimately dies of a sudden fatal heart attack when he sees dragons above him.

## **Father Patrick O'Neill**

Father Patrick O'Neill is the priest who discovered O'Neill as a baby in a church graveyard beneath an apple tree. Father O'Neill is a kind, gentle soul who notices similarities between his deceased brother and the baby, believing it to be miraculous work. He gives up the baby to Scarff. Years later, Father Patrick is thrilled to see how O'Neill has turned out as a young man, and becomes the one to perform the wedding ceremony between him and Clara.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Pebbles

Thousands and thousands of pebbles cover the floor of the freshwater, clear wishing pond on Llanfair Mountain. Each pebble represents payment for a wish made of the water sprites that legend holds inhabit the pond. The pebbles demonstrate the faith and hope people make in the wishes they have, and become the background for the story in that Clara has two wishes. First, she wishes Maren will not change into a mermaid, and second, she wishes that O'Neill loved her instead of Maren.

## Caravan

A caravan wagon is driven by Scarff and O'Neill as they travel around selling and buying various wares, products, and artifacts. The caravan is drawn by horses, and is very cozy and comfortable inside, complete with beds and personal possessions, as well as the goods that are sold and purchased. The caravan is used by Clara, O'Neill, and Maren to reach the ocean, but is torched along the way by Simon in his effort to kidnap Maren.

## Golden locket

A golden locket engraved with an apple tree is given as a Christmas gift to Maren from O'Neill. The golden locket is symbolic of one's true roots and origins, as O'Neill himself was found under an apple tree in a graveyard. Ironically, O'Neill denies Maren's true roots as a mermaid in the hopes that she can be returned to human state to remain on land with Clara. Maren herself ironically wears the locket, symbolically denying her own roots in some small form until it becomes apparent that she can no longer deny her true mermaid self. It is at this point that Clara discovers the gold locket is gone, presumably taken by Soraya.

## Painting

A painting of the pond, an apple tree, a stork, and a conch shell is created by O'Neill and given as a Christmas gift to Maren. The painting is full of personal symbols—the apple tree for O'Neill's roots, the pond for wishes, the conch shell for Maren, and the stork for Clara—and is lovingly crafted. Clara is both thrilled and disappointed with the painting. She is thrilled to have such a personal gift from O'Neill, but disappointed it could not be more romantic like the locket.



## Salt

Dozens of pounds of coarse salt are purchased throughout the novel by Clara and Auntie. The salt is mixed into the water in which Maren must consistently soak. The salt gives the water an oceanic aspect, allowing Maren greater comfort and relaxing. Several dozens more pounds of salt are purchased by Clara and O'Neill for their trip with Maren to the ocean.

## Mermaid enchantment defense tattoo

A mermaid enchantment repulsing tattoo is inscribed upon O'Neill during his travels for protection against mermaid enchantments. In the present, O'Neill demonstrates that he has this tattoo while conversing with Clara. This causes Clara to suspect that O'Neill is truly in love with Maren, rather than merely obsessed with her the way Simon is. This makes Clara feel better, knowing that O'Neill is not under a spell, but also makes her feel worse because she knows O'Neill must have strong, genuine feelings for Maren.

## Beloved Bondage tea

Beloved Bondage tea is a brew mixed up by the Phippses and given to their captives, including Clara and O'Neill. The tea supposedly contains a poisonous agent that once introduced to the body requires the same poison to be delivered on a daily basis, or the person will die. As it turns out, the tea is a sham. Having missed a day of tea without realizing it, Clara and O'Neill discover there are no adverse effects at all and realize they have been lied to.

## Scarlet truffle

Scarlet truffle is a key ingredient needed to create a sleeping draught. Clara secretly begins collecting the necessary ingredients in order to put the Phippses to sleep so that she, Maren, and O'Neil can make their escape. Scarlett truffle becomes the one outstanding ingredient Clara needs, and she ends up stealing it from Madame Soraya's stores.

## Healing blade

A healing blade (its true source and origin unknown) is delivered to Clara by Osbert. The blade is identified as a healing blade by a clothesmaker in the town of Edgemere. Whatever the blade cuts or touches, it mends. Clara uses the blade on a gunshot wound sustained by O'Neill in order to save O'Neill's life.





## Gold coins

Gold coins are given to Clara and O'Neill by the Sea King for safe passage home and in thanks for the delivery of Maren to the ocean. The gold coins become a way for Clara and O'Neill to finance their return to Llanfair Mountain. They use the coins to buy horses, food, clothes, and supplies needed for the return journey.



# Settings

## Llanfair Mountain

Llanfair Mountain is located in rural Pennsylvania. While its exact location is not noted, Llanfair Mountain is described as rising above a valley town, and being a beautiful place in and of itself. The mountain is home to many families spread out across its length and width, including Auntie, Clara, and Maren. The mountain is often visited by townspeople, especially for its wishing pool. Auntie, cursed by the evil witch who used to guard the mountain, is compelled to stay on the mountain until the curse is broken. This involves a raven, a horse, and three rubies coming to the mountain, as well as Scarff's hair going completely gray. Llanfair Mountain is a refuge for Clara and Auntie, and ultimately becomes the home of Clara and O'Neill once they marry.

## Edgemere

Edgemere is a small town presumably located in New York, for it is encountered as the Phipps medicine show makes its way north from Pennsylvania to Canada. Edgemere is a beautiful place, and it is where Clara is given money to purchase a new dress. Edgemere is also where the clothesmaker reveals to Clara that the blade Clara carries is actually a healing blade. It is on the road away from Edgemere that events transpire to allow Clara, O'Neill, and Maren to make their escape.

## Canada

Canada is the target destination of the Phipps traveling medicine show. The rapid progress the show makes toward Canada seems to suggest that the medicines being sold by the Phippses are all shams, much like their Beloved Bondage tea. Angry customers in their wake will want to track the Phippses down, and their safe escape to Canada will protect them from old customers and give them a source of new customers.

## The Atlantic Ocean

The Atlantic Ocean borders the Eastern United States. It is two or three weeks' ride from Llanfair Mountain, and becomes the target destination of Clara, Maren, and O'Neill. The Atlantic Ocean is where they intend to set Maren free. However, when they are kidnapped by the Phippses, the journey east becomes a journey north. Only when Clara, Maren, and O'Neill escape the Phipps show can they travel to the Atlantic. There, the Sea King and several mermaids are happily awaiting Maren's arrival. It is at the Atlantic Ocean that O'Neill comes to realize that Maren has truly been a mermaid all along.

## England

England is the home country of Scarff and Verity. In England, Scarff and Verity meet, fall in love, get married, and decide to head to America. On the voyage from England, Verity gives birth to her first child, who dies not long after. England thus becomes a staple of a sad past, whereas America becomes the promise of a better future. There, Scarff and Verity ultimately come to raise Clara, Maren, and O'Neill.



# Themes and Motifs

## Faith

Faith is an important theme in the novel “The Mermaid’s Sister” by Carrie Anne Noble. In the novel, faith plays a crucial role as the plot unfolds and Clara and O’Neill struggle to save Maren’s life by bringing her to the ocean. Faith in the novel includes faith in God, in miracles and magic, and faith in a better future in that things will turn out alright. By far, the largest progenitor of faith in the novel is O’Neill.

As a baby, O’Neill is found in a churchyard cemetery by a priest. The lowly but faithful origins of O’Neill’s life predispose him to faith and hope, both in God and in a better future. When O’Neill learns that Maren is being transformed into a mermaid, he promises Clara that he will find a way to reverse the process during his travels. During his travels, O’Neill is unable to figure out a way to stop the process, but he doesn’t lose faith. He goes on to continue searching, coming to have faith that the Sea King may trade Maren’s life for something of value. O’Neill is so hopeful and so faithful that he can make things right because he is inspired by love of Clara. Saving Maren will make Clara happy.

Clara herself struggles with faith through the novel. She believes in God, and believes in magic and better times, but has a hard time believing in them for herself and for Maren. Clara’s faith in O’Neill—that he will fall in love with her—appears dashed by O’Neill’s seeming love for Maren. With Maren changing at such a rapid progression, and with nothing readily available that can even stop the process, Clara quickly loses faith and hope in a better future or a positive outcome. Nevertheless, she maintains just the smallest amount of faith and hope that will see her through everything to come. It is what keeps her going while in captivity under the Phipps medicine show.

Faith is also exhibited elsewhere by other characters as well. For example, Scarff has faith that he will one day break the curse that separates him from his wife on Llanfair Mountain. The process takes him decades, but his faith is well-rewarded when he perseveres and the curse is broken. Auntie too has faith that the curse shall one day be broken. She looks forward to the rare visits she has with Scarff, using those as a springboard for faith and hope in a better future. This helps to keep her going even when things get toughest, such as when Maren’s transformation means the family will be changed forever.

## Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “The Mermaid’s Sister” by Carrie Anne Noble. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support of individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the fashion of the traditional family unit. Family can be found consistently



throughout the novel, and family affects the plot of the novel in various ways. Family in the novel is represented by Auntie, Scarff, Clara, Maren, and O'Neill.

Though none of them are blood-related, Auntie, Scarff, Clara, Maren, and O'Neill live as similarly to traditional families as they can. Scarff and Auntie fill the role of parents, guardians, protectors, and teachers, raising Clara, Maren, and O'Neill to be morally upright, intelligent, resourceful, and independent young people. These qualities will come to help the three teens as they battle impossible odds to get Maren to the ocean.

Similarly, family means everything to Clara. She is unfailingly loyal to Maren, protecting Maren through every single step of the journey in every way possible, often at great risk to herself. For example, she risks punishment by speaking out against Maren's living conditions to the Phippses, and begging that Maren be taken to the ocean. Likewise, she steals a white scarf for Maren to cover up her breasts when on display in the Gallery of Wonders. Everything Clara does throughout the novel is primarily on behalf of Maren.

Clara has grown up with Maren. Maren is more than just her sister, but is her best friend as well. The girls have done everything together from sharing a bed at night to doing chores to swimming together. Both girls have even fallen in love with the same young man: O'Neill. Growing up, the sisters have really had no one other than each other, so their loyalty to each other is unbreakable. This is best demonstrated by Clara, who refuses to romantically pursue O'Neill even when she knows Maren cannot be saved in terms of her humanity. Only when Maren makes it to the ocean do Clara and O'Neill confess their love to one another at long last. As happy as Clara is to have O'Neill, she is also devastated by the leaving of Maren.

## Love

Love is an important theme in the novel "The Mermaid's Sister" by Carrie Anne Noble. There are many forms of love, but it is romantic love that the novel primarily deals with. Love is essential to the plot of the novel, affecting multiple characters, and the plot in various ways.

As the novel begins, the reader learns that both Clara and Maren are in love with O'Neill. Maren is very outward and obvious about her romantic feelings for O'Neill, while Clara secretly loves him. Clara keeps her love for O'Neill a secret at first because she is much more reserved than Maren, and later because O'Neill seems to have fallen for Maren. Maren herself spares no expense to make herself the center of O'Neill's attention, always seeking to spend time with him whenever he visits the mountain. Clara is jealous but refuses to confront her sister for O'Neill due to familial loyalty.

As it turns out by the end of the novel, O'Neill was never in love with Maren, but has always been in love with Clara. As O'Neill later explains to Clara, his attention to Maren was merely friendly, even though Maren wanted more. O'Neill goes on to explain that his efforts to stop Maren from turning into a mermaid were not out of love for Maren as they



were for love of Clara. O'Neill knew how much Marin meant to Clara, so he wanted to make Clara happy by saving Marin for her. Within a few days of confessing their love for one another, Clara and O'Neill end up marrying and returning to Llanfair Mountain.

Love is not confined to Clara and O'Neill alone. Great romantic love exists between Scarff and Auntie as well. Having been married and cursed for decades, Scarff and Auntie must live apart except for thirteen days each year. The only things that sustains them through these long years is the love they have for one another, and the faith they have in a better future when the curse is broken. Their love is one primarily of tragedy, as they are forced for so long to live without one another. Yet, the love they share is more than enough to bridge the distance in miles and in time between them. Ultimately, the curse is broken, and husband and wife are reunited.

## Identity

Identity is an important theme in the novel "The Mermaid's Sister" by Carrie Anne Noble. A person's identity, which includes their purpose and how they come to view and understand themselves, is essential to the plot of the novel. In the novel, Clara, Maren, and O'Neill struggle to learn more about themselves and who they are as people. In large part, this is due to the fact that their true parents are unknown to them. However, who they are as human beings beyond parentage is something that becomes much clearer to them over time. This is in large part helped by the adoptive parents they have, who are unable to have children of their own but take in the children of others who nobody else wants.

Clara has grown up believing she has been brought in the by a stork. Because of this, Clara fears that she may one day turn into a stork the way that Maren is turning into a mermaid. These fears are ultimately put to rest by O'Neill, who explains that Scarff's middle name, Corraghrian, is Scottish for "stork." It was Scarff who found Clara abandoned on the steps of an orphanage, and brought her to Auntie. Though Clara is pretty, she is more reserved and grows up in the shadow of the outgoing and radiantly beautiful Maren. Clara believes she can never compare and will never be loved. However, as Clara comes to learn from O'Neill, she is his hero, she is beautiful, and she is worthy of being loved. Clara's identity as a human being worthy of love is assured through O'Neill.

Maren's true identity is unknown for much of the novel. Outgoing, beautiful, and lovely as a person, Maren's transition into a mermaid is first seen as a curse by everyone else. They believe that Maren is meant to be a person rather than a mermaid. Reflecting on the past, however, Clara comes to believe that Maren has been a mermaid all along, and that that is her true identity. Maren herself is thrilled by her transformation, becoming more and more beautiful when she is in her element, the ocean. The Sea King himself ultimately confirms the fact that Maren has always been a mermaid.

O'Neill's own identity in the novel is uncertain as well. He has no idea who his parents are, or what his ancestry might be. He is content to be Scarff's son, but also wonders



about himself and who he is as a person. Having been found as a baby in a graveyard by a priest, O'Neill understands his faith and need to be morally upright are stronger as a result of his beginnings, and that he is meant for life rather than death. O'Neill struggles to do the right thing through the novel, wanting to be a good and decent person. This is exhibited through his love for Clara, and his desire to see Maren cured so that Clara will be made happy. By the end of the novel, O'Neill has found his calling in loving Clara and being her husband.

## Mystery

Mystery is an important theme in the novel "The Mermaid's Sister" by Carrie Anne Noble. Mystery—essentially the unknown—provides a constant measure of suspense and drama as the plot of the novel unfolds. Several mysteries are presented through the course of the novel. Some are solved, but some are left open-ended.

Mysteries alight upon the reader from the very beginning of the novel. The true origins and parentage of Clara, Maren, and O'Neill are all unknown to the reader. While Clara came to Auntie through Scarff, and while O'Neill came to Scarff through a kindly priest, their biological origins and true history are unknown. These origins are never actually revealed.

All three teens are in turn puzzled by mystery of the decades-long relationship that has existed between Scarf and Auntie, and why the two have never married or settled down. As the teens later learn through the solving of the mystery of Scarff and Auntie, a curse had been placed upon them which prevented them from being together for decades. Only Scarff's curing of the curse allows him to resume the married life he once enjoyed with Auntie.

The truth behind why Maren is transforming into a mermaid is also a mystery that remains so for most of the novel. Maren, by all appearances, seemed to have been a healthy, normal teenage girl. Her transformation into a mermaid has baffled everyone around her. Clara, Auntie, and O'Neill all scramble to find a cure. Whether or not such a cure can be found is a mystery that runs throughout the course of the novel. However, the mystery is solved by the end of the novel when the Sea King confirms that Maren has always been a mermaid, and that there is no cure against one's true nature and identity.



# Styles

## Point of View

Carrie Anne Noble tells her novel “The Mermaid’s Sister” in the first-person limited-omniscient narrative from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist, Clara. This is done for several reasons. First, the very title of the novel, “The Mermaid’s Sister,” indicates the story being told is very much the story of Maren’s sister, as well as Maren herself. It is only natural that Clara should tell her own story with the title referencing her directly. Secondly, the events of the novel involve both the familiar (history) and the unknown (fantasy). The first-person narrative mode allows the reader to directly experience the familiar and the unfamiliar as Clara herself experiences them. Third, the first-person narrative mode allows the reader to know the innermost thoughts and feelings of Clara. This is important because Clara is a reserved and conservative girl, who keeps her love from O’Neill a secret. The reader becomes Clara’s only true confidante. Finally, the limited-omniscient aspect of the narration adds a degree of suspense and drama as the reader only ever knows and learns about things as Clara comes to learn about, and discover them.

## Language and Meaning

Carrie Anne Noble tells her novel “The Mermaid’s Sister” in language that is formal but simple, and straightforward. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the target audience of the novel is young adults. The language employed by the writer is reflective of that demographic in terms of age and level of education. Secondly, the primary characters in the novel are all teenagers. The language employed is fitting to their age and level of education. Third, the formal aspect of the language is reflective of the historical setting (1870) of the novel, and lends an air of realism and believability to the characters and the plot. Formal versions of contemporary words are frequently used. For example, the word impetuous is used in place of rash, ineffectual instead of useless, and pacify instead of calm down.

## Structure

Carrie Ann Noble divides her novel “The Mermaid’s Sister” into 31 consecutive, linear, chronological, numbered chapters from 1 to 31. This simple and straightforward approach to the novel’s structure is common among young adult novels, and is reflective of the target audience of young adults. The simple and straightforward structure also allows the reader to remain focused on the plot, moving from one set of events to the next. The chapters themselves vary in length. Some are only a page or two, while most exceed 10 pages. Each chapter deals with a specific sequence of events or set of circumstances within the plot that the characters find themselves



confronted with. For example, Chapter 13 deals with Clara, Maren, and O'Neill setting out on their journey, while Chapter 31 deals with their homecoming.



## Quotes

Wishing gets you nothing.

-- Vandalism in an old tree (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** When the novel begins, Clara considers these words which have been carved into an old tree on the mountain where she lives. Wishes and dreams do not come true if people do not act on them to make them happen. This is in sharp contrast to the pond where people throw pebbles for payment to make wishes come true. Sometimes, wishes cannot come true.

She is changing. I am losing her. I wish I would not. But wishing gets you nothing.

-- Clara (Chapter 1 paragraph 22)

**Importance:** Some wishes may not come true. Clara must learn this the hard way with respect to Maren, who is turning into a mermaid. Each day brings new changes, as Maren transforms. Maren longs to live in the sea with her fellow mermaids, but Clara panics about this because she doesn't want Maren to leave her.

Worry-bird, do you not trust me to do as I have sworn?

-- O'Neill (Chapter 3 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** O'Neill here restates his promise to Clara that he will find a way to cure Maren. Clara is doubtful because she knows all of her wishes—and her research into the subject—have done nothing to help Maren. O'Neill, however, is determined to find a way to help Maren. Still, Clara isn't sure. She worries desperately for her sister.

Today is all we ever have.

-- Auntie (Chapter 7 paragraph 55)

**Importance:** On Christmas Day, Auntie reminds Clara and Maren to be thankful for everything they have. She reminds them that each day is truly all they have, for everything that happened the day before is now in the past, and everything in the future is uncertain. It is the last truly happy day the family will have together.

There is no cure for being who you truly are.

-- Auntie (Chapter 9 paragraph 59)

**Importance:** Here, Auntie speaks to the truth of a person's identity. Everyone is different, and everyone has things about who they are that they simply cannot change. For Maren, Auntie believes, the truth is that she is a mermaid, and nothing can be done to change this. It is simply how things are, and one should not try to change or fight one's true nature.

I pinch my arm hard, punishing myself for my continued foolishness, for feeling so unsisterly toward my almost-brother. For being stupid enough to think he could ever



choose me over Maren.

-- Clara (Chapter 11 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Here, Clara describes her humiliation at seeing how O'Neill has slept on the floor beside Maren's tub. Clara has long been in love with O'Neill, and has hoped that he might someday return her feelings. She comes to believe it could never happen, and curses herself for continuing to have feelings for O'Neill.

Nothing but love could make a person—or a mermaid—glow in such a way.

-- Clara (Chapter 11 paragraph 28)

**Importance:** In this quote, Clara recognizes that what exists between Maren and O'Neill must be love. She realizes that nothing but true love can make someone like Maren so happy. It both hurts and elates Clara. Clara is happy to see her sister happy, but is hurt because she believes that O'Neill has no feelings other than for Maren.

There must be a way to restore her. To change her back. We should not give up so easily. If the Sea King comes to meet her, we could strike a deal.

-- O'Neill (Chapter 14 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** As O'Neill, Clara, and Maren travel toward the ocean, O'Neill considers how Maren might be saved. In the past, he attempted to find some sort of cure but has failed. In the present, he believes the Sea King might have the power to restore Maren. It is possible that the Sea King might be willing to make a trade to this end. It underscores just how important Maren's restoration is to O'Neill.

I shudder, knowing such a debt can never be repaid. We are butterflies in a net, O'Neill, Maren, and I – and we must find a way to escape while Maren still lives.

-- Clara (Chapter 17 paragraph 69)

**Importance:** While on the road to the ocean, the caravan in which Clara, Maren, and O'Neill travel mysteriously burns. The three have their lives saved by the Phipps. The Phipps consider the saving of their lives to be a debt which must be repaid. The payment will consist of Clara and the others joining the show, but for how long is unknown. Clara knows she and the others must escape if Maren is to be saved.

We have no hope of escape.

-- Clara (Chapter 19 paragraph 35)

**Importance:** Clara and O'Neill are given dinner and tea laced with poison. Jasper sadly explains the poison, once introduced into the body, must be taken each day or death will follow. Many have died trying to escape, including Jasper's own wife and son. Clara comes to the heartbreaking realization that there may indeed be no chance of escape and getting Maren to the sea.

My sister is a mermaid. She is small enough to sleep within a two-quart jar of salt water.

-- Clara (Chapter 28 paragraph 16)



**Importance:** After escaping from the Phipps, Clara and O'Neill race East on horseback toward the ocean. They are running out of time. Maren is now small enough to fit in a jar of salt water, and is growing weaker and smaller by the day. Clara faces this truth by stating clearly and straightforwardly for the first time in the book that her sister is indeed a mermaid, and that she is running out of time. Before, Clara hoped something might save Maren, or that she might somehow be made human. While Clara has accepted before that Maren is a mermaid, this is the first time that Clara truly accepts it.

I love you, Clara.

-- O'Neill (Chapter 29 paragraph 41)

**Importance:** At long last, O'Neill declares his love for Clara. Clara is confused, because she thought O'Neill had been in love with Maren all this time. O'Neill explains that although he has always loved Maren, he has always been in love with Clara. It is why he worked so hard to save Maren because he knew Maren meant so much to Clara.