

The Mothers Study Guide

The Mothers by Brit Bennett

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Plot Summary

NOTE: The following version of this book was used to write this study guide: Bennett, Brit. *The Mothers*. New York: Riverhead Books. 2016.

In the aftermath of her mother's suicide, 17-year-old Nadia Turner finds herself lost in Oceanside, California, distant from the sympathy of friends and neighbors. While her father finds comfort by engaging regularly with God at the Upper Room Chapel, Nadia veers from place to place listlessly, waiting out her days before she can go away for college. While wandering about, Nadia finds herself visiting Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack regularly and spending time with Luke Sheppard, the pastor's son who had a promising football career derailed due to a leg injury. Their relationship is sweet and idyllic, with Nadia finding herself falling in love with him until she discovers she is pregnant. Luke's reaction is muted when Nadia reveals she wants an abortion. He provides the money but abandons her at the abortion clinic. After a while, she finds him at a house party where he is distant. Upset, she gets drunk and crashes her father's truck. Soon, the pastor visits the Turner home and offers Nadia a job assisting his wife at the chapel—a job she is forced to take by her father. While working there, she is treated with tempered scorn by the pastor's wife, Mrs. Sheppard, but also befriends Aubrey Evans, a quiet girl who is dedicated to the congregation and seems to have no other friends. It is revealed that Mrs. Sheppard paid for Nadia's abortion, which is her source of disdain for the girl.

As Nadia and Aubrey get close, Nadia learns that her friend lives with her sister Monique and her girlfriend Kasey because her mother has a penchant for moving around with her lovers. The last man, Paul, a police officer in Chicago, was abusive to Aubrey and her mother. Nadia is curious as to why Mrs. Sheppard cherishes Aubrey over her consistently. Luke carries regret over his abandonment of Nadia, but is beholden to his mother for providing him with the money for the abortion. As they spend more time together, Aubrey is revealed to be shy and a virgin, and Nadia decides to take her to a Cody Richardson party, where she previously confronted Luke. Aubrey gets drunk and Nadia babysits her, the former expressing her hope that Nadia will stay in contact once she leaves for university in Michigan. Before Nadia leaves the Upper Room Chapel, Luke confronts her, confessing he did want the abortion. Nadia considers telling Aubrey about her past with Luke but decides against it.

While in Michigan, Nadia feels out of place in the new environment, while also dating Shadi, a Sudanese-American who is outgoing and involved in numerous leadership positions on campus. Instead of returning home, she does a study abroad at Oxford and internships away from home during breaks. Luke tries to find some meaning in his life, aching to get back into football. He joins the Cobras, an amateur football team where he bonds with his teammates, especially Cherry. After a brief moment of intimacy, Luke is attacked by his teammates, who destroy his leg. During therapy, he is visited by Aubrey, who begins to take care of him. Gradually they begin to date, though physically Aubrey keeps her barriers. Luke proposes to Aubrey and Nadia is upset, trying to wrap her head around the issue while being accepting an offer from the University of Chicago Law School. She returns for Aubrey and Luke's wedding with Shadi, but is upset at her



father for removing her mother's pictures from their house. Nadia reveals that she was intimate with Luke in the past, and Aubrey kisses a Marine named Miller while spending time with Nadia at the beach.

During a lull in the wedding, Mrs. Sheppard reveals to Nadia that it was her who gave Luke the money for the abortion. While in Chicago, Nadia has to return home when her father is critically injured while lifting weights. Aubrey begins communicating with Russell Miller, conveying her unease over being unable to conceive. Under the auspice of studying for the bar, Nadia remains with her father and they bond. Luke begins to visit under the pretense of helping Nadia's father, and Nadia and Luke rekindle their relationship, meeting in secret. While visiting a fertility specialist with Nadia, Aubrey surmises that she is the one who Luke had an aborted child with. Breaking things off with Luke, Nadia becomes deeply involved with the church, helping the older women with their commutes and doing other chores. When Luke confronts Aubrey over her lunch with Russell Miller, she reveals that she knows about him and Nadia, and leaves as a result. She breaks off contact with both Nadia and Luke, eventually revealing to both that she is pregnant. Nadia's father learns about her pregnancy and abortion, confronting the pastor over the issue. Word spreads about the pastor's role in Nadia's abortion and the congregation's numbers dwindle as a result. Aubrey and Nadia have a terse final meeting. A news story is done on the pastor and his role in the abortion, the final nail in the coffin of Upper Room Chapel. Years later, rumors swirl about Nadia's occupation and travels, with someone from the community catching a glimpse of her years later near the chapel.



Chapter 1

Summary

In the opening of *The Mothers*, the reader is introduced to the main narrators of the novel. The Mothers provide a subjective perspective on the events of the story and interject with commentary on the themes and subjects that the novel explores. In Chapter 1, these Mothers, a group of older women who are part of the congregation of the Upper Room Chapel in Oceanside, California, talk about the various rumors they had heard over the years. One in particular that they remember is the one surrounding Nadia Turner, and how she had a relationship with Luke Sheppard, the pastor's son, during her senior year of high school.

The story then jumps to the relationship between Nadia and Luke, narrated from a third-person omniscient perspective, as they met after Nadia's mother's suicide. Wandering aimlessly, Nadia ended up at Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack, where Luke waited tables after the leg injury that derailed his promising football career. Luke gave her advice on what not to eat at the restaurant and they began to spend more time together. After her mother's death, Nadia grew distant from her friends and any adult offering sympathy while her father threw himself into serving Upper Room. While wandering about, Nadia ended up at a strip club, being mistaken for a runaway and receiving an offer to dance there.

Recognizing Luke from school, Nadia began to talk to him, admiring his charm and the manner in which he treated her without pity. Luke admired her intelligence, providing her support when she received her acceptance into the University of Michigan, a time when her father seemed too reluctant to engage with her, claiming it was difficult for him to provide her with the emotional support she needed. When Nadia revealed that she was pregnant, Luke was stunned and acquiesced when she declared her desire for an abortion, providing her with the money for the procedure, six hundred dollars. While at the abortion clinic, Nadia saw a variety of women, including a girl that was crying and an older woman who scolded the crying girl. During the sonogram, she thought of a story she heard where a 16-year-old girl attempted to abandon her baby but was caught. During the sonogram, she was told her womb was a perfect sphere and she saw the small, thumb-sized embryo. After the procedure, Nadia waited for Luke but he did not arrive, and she was comforted by the nurse who she accidentally called "Mommy" during her procedure.

Analysis

The chapter begins in the voice of a group of people, known as "The Mothers," who are older women within the black congregation of the Upper Room Chapel. They have lived long lives and have observed and reported on various people over the years, including the rumors that can arise within a group of churchgoing folks. They provide the initial



observation about Nadia and the circumstances surrounding her family, including her mother's death and her father's subsequent devotion to Upper Room, and then provide a comment on Nadia's relationship with Luke and how it was always dangerous for her since he was the pastor's son. Their voice is distant and omniscient, as they seem to be speaking from a place in time where they have the knowledge of the events surrounding Nadia, but their tone is conspiratorial, as they seem to indulge their role in engaging with rumors throughout Upper Room, so it becomes difficult to ascertain the validity of their view on the characters. Their voice remains consistent throughout the novel, almost like a collective black, female voice providing an intro to each chapter. Following their introduction, the narration turns into a more conventional third-person omniscient point of view, but their presence through the novel is consistent.

Nadia's isolation is paramount throughout the first chapter, as she becomes distant from the people around her in the aftermath of her mother's death. Unlike her father, who finds comfort in servicing the Upper Room Chapel, Nadia recedes into herself. Despite her grief, Nadia is not opposed to being approached, as is evident from her relationship with Luke, which has a physical attraction element but is primarily initiated because Luke treats her as he would anyone else. Despite the death of her mother, Nadia is not willing to confront the tragedy just yet. She is a teenager and would like to enjoy life, which Luke provides as a companion but is denied to her by everyone else, including her father, who treats her like a victim ready to shatter at any time. Her father is distant even when she is accepted in Michigan for college, while Luke provides the necessary support.

On a subconscious level, Nadia is also looking for a mother figure after the loss of her own. Her father has seemingly abandoned her emotionally, and so she searches for a maternal touch in her life, something that is compounded when she becomes pregnant herself. Her interactions with the woman at the strip club points to her need for at least a female figure in her life. This woman offers her the opportunity, albeit in her own manner. When the nurse at the abortion office is kind to her, she blurts out "Mommy," signaling that in a time of distress she longs for a maternal figure that can provide her comfort, something her father cannot provide even if he is more emotionally invested in her.

Discussion Question 1

How does Nadia question her own ability to possibly be a mother?

Discussion Question 2

How do Luke and Robert Turner contrast as male figures in Nadia's life?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Nadia's perfect womb?

Vocabulary

sojourns, gimpiness, enshrouded, haggard, splotch.



Chapter 2

Summary

The Mothers talk about how they could have warned Nadia about Luke and how they have experienced over the years the trap of love themselves. They reveal the origins of the abortion clinic and how they went to protest outside, eventually stopping due to the threat of militant white protesters that could get them in trouble as well. At that time, ten years before his wife's death, Robert Turner was not committed but would help deliver protest signs. After his wife's death, the former Marine used his black Chevy pickup in complete service of Upper Room, providing it for use at any time for the congregation, and eventually realizing that he was welcome amongst them because they appreciated him, not just because they pitied him. Nadia remembers how Luke helped her celebrate when she was accepted into Michigan by taking her out to the water park, and how he desperately attempted to keep their relationship a secret.

While suffering from cramps, the physical aftermath of the abortion, Nadia asked her father for his cherished truck, promising to return it soon. He began to question her about her reasons for needing it, even though he normally never did. Nadia tried to find Luke at the restaurant where he worked but was unable to do so, his coworkers offering no clues. She eventually found him at a party at Cody Richardson's house; Cody was an adult white skater male known for throwing parties for high school students. There, she attempted to confront him but he brushed her off, claiming that he never intended to become involved in all the drama that their relationship brought about and that the money should have been sufficient on his part. Distraught, Nadia got progressively drunk and tried to drive back home but ended up crashing her father's truck into the tree in front of their house.

Analysis

The relationship between Nadia and her father, Robert, is expanded upon in this chapter. After his wife's death, Robert threw himself into serving Upper Room Chapel by using his Chevy pickup truck. The truck symbolically becomes a means of his integration into his society, as he wholly dedicates himself to using it to help people, and in the process, is able to transcend the relationship of sympathy that he had with the members of the congregation—a state that Nadia is unable to bear and resents. Notably, the Mothers talking about the abortion clinic and Robert's role in delivering protest signs using his pickup truck indicates something else as well. The passage illustrates the community's stance towards abortion, and Robert's as well. So, when Nadia asks for his truck, there is the fear that the vehicle, his tool of hope and Christian redemption, will be turned into something else by his daughter, a fear that becomes true.



Nadia carries the pain of the abortion in many ways, including physically and emotionally. Her cramps are a constant reminder of what she has done, and the gulf between her and her father is widened as she continually lies to him about the source of her pain, refusing any kind of help from him. Yet, the biggest pain is the one of betrayal and abandonment. In the absence of her father, Luke provides Nadia with the emotional comfort of intimacy, and even though they are never explicitly in love, their relationship sustains Nadia through a time when she does not know how to grieve for her mother. In light of their relationship, Luke abandoning her at the abortion clinic takes on a stronger connotation, as it continues a theme she has been forced to face throughout troubled times. While at Cody Richardson's party, her confrontation with Luke further exacerbates her sense of grief, as Luke seemingly dismisses the circumstances of their relationship, claiming that the money he provided should have been enough to atone for abandoning her. Even after she crashes her father's truck, they remain distant, as neither attempts to open up to each other.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Nadia carry the pain from the abortion?

Discussion Question 2

How does Robert Turner's pickup truck become an embodiment of the family's grieving process?

Discussion Question 3

Does Luke seem sincere in his justification? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

harlot, clods, buff, haunches, driftwood, frenetic

Chapter 3

Summary

The Mothers talk about their ardent devotion to praying and how they heard the rumors about Nadia crashing her father's truck. They felt bad about Robert Turner, who had had to deal with his wife's car after she committed suicide in it, not knowing what he did with the vehicle. They remember how they always noticed the spot where Elise Turner, Robert's wife, knelt before she killed herself.

The narrative then shifts to the past, where the Turners were visited by Pastor Sheppard, who asked about the accident and offered Nadia a job assisting his wife at Upper Room. While Nadia was hesitant, Robert was adamant that she work there over the summer and pay off the damages to his truck, while also saving for college. While driving to work, Nadia remembered the story behind her mother discovering Upper Room; along with a young Nadia while Robert was in the Persian Gulf, Elise found it a place of comfort. At four, Nadia saw her father for the first time in a long time and was hesitant to engage with him. By that age, Elise had made Nadia a smarter student by reading to her voraciously. She remembered the first lady, Latrice Sheppard, scolding her in the past and always being strict with her, having caught her kissing a boy once. She remembered her mother's cool demeanor in the aftermath, after learning that she was conceived when her mother was 17.

When Nadia met Latrice on the first day of her new job, the latter was polite but evidently cold throughout their exchange, relegating Nadia to trivial tasks. While working there, she avoided praying in the church but ran into Aubrey Evans, a modest girl who garnered constant attention from Mrs. Sheppard. Nadia was given a pair of plastic baby feet from the pregnancy center after her test came positive and she held on to the artifact. Latrice Sheppard, a strong and independent woman was indignant that her husband forced Nadia Turner as an assistant onto her. John Sheppard attempted to give a religious consolation but then reminded her that they owed her. Latrice recalled Luke coming to her and her husband for help after finding Nadia was pregnant, and they gave him the money that he gave Nadia for the abortion. Despite the religious conflict, Latrice forced the issue past John, who then offered Nadia the job as a means of private consolation, to which Latrice was indignant.

Analysis

The veneer of the Upper Room Chapel is undone in this chapter, as the Sheppard's role in Nadia's abortion is revealed. While initially it seemed as if Luke provided Nadia with the money himself, it was Latrice Sheppard who orchestrated the endeavor, forcing Luke and John to go through with it, despite both of them hesitating for their own reasons. The abortion conflicts with Upper Room's stance on abortion, as they previously protested the opening of the clinic. The events surrounding Nadia's abortion



point to Latrice Sheppard's character, as she is more concerned with preserving her face, the image of her family and that of Upper Room, than she is with being consistent with her religious convictions. Despite her decision to do so, John still attempts to atone for his sins by offering Nadia the job as Latrice's secretary, which draws her ire, as she feels she has already paid Nadia for the mistake her son made. When Nadia arrives on her first day, Latrice attempts to be civil but is barely able to conceal her own contempt, despite Nadia's subconscious desire to view her as a maternal figure, a role which Latrice extends to Aubrey Evans readily.

More background is provided on Elise Turner, as she is revealed to have originally been the one who found Upper Room Chapel as a haven from the tedium of her life raising Nadia by herself when Robert was serving overseas. For her, Upper Room was a place of comfort in the absence of her husband, something that Nadia remembers even after her mother is gone. When Robert returns permanently, the relationship between him and Nadia is strange, as she takes time to recognize him. While things eventually smooth out, the early state of their relationship sets the stage for how their relationship turns out after Elise's death. Without Elise to bridge the gap between daughter and father, the emotional connection becomes strained, as both have difficulty reaching out to each other. Elise's suicide in her car points to the importance of vehicles, as it becomes such a strong symbol of pain that Robert manages to get rid of it, as no one sees it after.

Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of motherhood evolve with the introduction of Latrice Sheppard?

Discussion Question 2

How does the background about Elise Turner inform Nadia's character?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do religious convictions begin to conflict with practical decisions in Chapter 3?

Vocabulary

intercessory, imbued, foyer, brusque, azaleas



Chapter 4

Summary

The Mothers remember the various deaths they have encountered over the years in Upper Room, none the same as Elise Turner, who chose her death. They still cannot wrap their heads around why she would do that and remember the night before her death when they witnessed her sleeping in Upper Room, mistaking her for a homeless person. They remember the conversation and wonder why she would choose death, as she was living as good as a white woman. Working at Upper Room, Nadia reminded people of Elise, their features similar enough to evoke explicit responses. As she grew lonelier, unable to intimate with anyone, Nadia began to wonder about her mother's death, trying to understand it. While working, she encountered Aubrey Evans, who revealed that she lived with her sister and her girlfriend, throwing off Nadia's expectations.

Aubrey Evans had arrived one day at Upper Room, crying and asking for a prayer, being immediately accepted into the congregation. Spending more time together, Nadia learned that her father was absent, and she did not get along with her mother, who moved around a lot whenever she met a man. Aubrey had learned about Upper Room during a news report about wildfires in Oceanside and was assured by John Sheppard's presence. John Turner found comfort in Aubrey's presence in his house, and Nadia wondered how it would feel to be in Aubrey's shoes, to be the one who left her mother. Nadia spent time in Aubrey's room, decorated ornately with a dream-catcher, and learned more about her family, including her relationship with Mo and her mother, who had not intervened when Aubrey was abused by Paul, her cop boyfriend. Nadia felt almost jealous witnessing the relationship between Aubrey and Mo. Aubrey recalled a small interaction with Elise Turner she had before her death and asked Mrs. Sheppard about the incident, thinking about how her mother failed to acknowledge when Paul began to rape Aubrey. Mrs. Sheppard circumvented the issue and warned her about Nadia, who Aubrey was already worried about losing once she was to go away to college.

Analysis

While Aubrey has been seen in glimpses before, this chapter provides a more detailed sketch of her character as she begins to spend more time with Nadia, who is initially hesitant to engage with her. After the departure of Luke, Nadia has become used to being by herself, even if she feels the emotional toll of being alone. Hesitating to engage with Aubrey, who she perceives to be a golden girl of sorts and adored by everyone in Upper Room and especially by Latrice Sheppard, Nadia finds the girl fascinating—a puzzle that she is unable to solve or understand. Aubrey ends up serving as a foil to Nadia, as they are both without mothers, though Aubrey is so out of her choice. Like Nadia, she is hesitant to open up, slowly revealing aspects of her life, including her



uneasy relationship with her mother and the abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother's boyfriend. Without a companion of any sort to comfort her, Nadia views Aubrey with jealousy, especially when witnessing her interact with her sister, Mo. This helps explain the increasing amount of time she spends with Aubrey at her house, as she is able to bear witness the strong relationship between the two sisters, the trio of Aubrey, Mo, and Kasey serving as a family, while her own house is empty. The presence of Aubrey does propel Robert Turner to become a bit more engaged, which enhances Aubrey's importance in Nadia's life.

Elise Turner's decision to commit suicide and its aftermath continues to be visited in this chapter. The Mothers start off the discussion with the change Elise Turner's death brought about in their community. As a community that is used to grieving, a suicide still manages to shock. There is an implicit judgment, especially in light of the last image they have of her sleeping in the pews. It is an image of deprivation and one that shows the emotional state of a person who is near the end of her rope. Her image is constant even after death in the features of Nadia, who is having her own troubles understanding her mother's death, a turmoil that is compounded when confronted with Aubrey's relationship with her own mother. For Nadia, it becomes a question of how one could leave a mother if they had one. Even Aubrey wonders about Elise Turner's death, having had a small interaction with her once, but one that was enough to make her ponder the question of why someone would take their life.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of the similarities and differences between Aubrey and Nadia?

Discussion Question 2

How does Aubrey help fill the void in Nadia's life and vice-versa?

Discussion Question 3

Why would Latrice Sheppard be more considerate towards Aubrey than Nadia?

Vocabulary

bashful, wrung, ebb, ornate, abstractly, synapses



Chapter 5

Summary

The Mothers talk about their youth and how the men differed then when courting women. They warn the dangers of an "ain't-shit" man, one who would drag a woman down with him. After abandoning Nadia, Luke had a hard time concentrating at work, breaking many dishes and being threatened by his boss as a result. Anytime he tried to concentrate, memories of Nadia flooded him. When he confided in his friend CJ, his friend told him he was lucky but Luke felt otherwise, harboring a secret desire to have kept the child. Despite not wanting to abandon her, he felt he had no choice and he felt shocked when he saw Nadia not bearing the signs of her "unpregnancy," a word he learned in relation to the church's opposition to abortion. Nadia began to spend more time with Aubrey, sleeping in her bed, prompting Robert to ask her if she was wearing out her welcome. She began to integrate herself in Aubrey's life with Kasey and Monique, volunteering with her and sharing with Aubrey her fears if her mother had had an abortion and possibilities of her mother's life if she had done so.

After a visit to Los Angeles, Nadia decided to take the virgin Aubrey to a Cody Richardson party, wanting to take the latter out of her shell. While at the party, Nadia remained sober while Aubrey got drunk, eventually asking Nadia if their friendship would continue after she went to Michigan. Luke was confronted by his mother about his unwillingness to receive treatment for his leg and to move on from Nadia, drawing her ire. Before her departure, Upper Room held an offering to help Nadia pay for her life at Michigan, as she was the first in their community to receive an academic scholarship. Luke confronted Nadia and revealed that he never wanted to kill their child, which prompted Nadia to think abstractly about the existence of Baby and what would Baby do if he were alive. Later while a bar, she wondered whether she should reveal to Aubrey everything between Luke and herself, wanting the comfort, but fearing judgment and the loss of Aubrey's friendship, she decided against it.

Analysis

Luke receives some focus in this chapter, his emotional turmoil being highlighted in light of the abortion. Despite the pressure surrounding him, especially by his mother, there is a sense of hesitancy in Luke as to whether or not he should have allowed Nadia to go through with the abortion, or that he should have at least put up more of a fight. The announcement of the abortion had driven him to the idea of being a father, and Nadia's announcement followed Latrice's determination put an end to any thought he had for a child. Even his friend CJ proclaims him lucky to have escaped the burden of a child at his age. His moral weakness and general inability to take control of his life is embodied in his injured leg, as it continues to hobble him throughout his life. In a manner, he is determined to not grow up, especially after the abortion, as the memory of Nadia allows him to remain stunted within his own routine, continually working his dead-end job. His



confrontation with Nadia forces the idea of a child to come out, as the conception of the Baby becomes real in Nadia's head, especially as a male child.

Nadia further enters into Aubrey's life, finding comfort in the family structure that is absent in her own home. The question of intimacy comes into play, as Nadia and Aubrey further bond. Aubrey provides Nadia with a place of comfort that does not involve judgment, and Nadia helps Aubrey break out of herself. Each needs the other, with Nadia wanting access to not only just Aubrey's life but also her comfort and her good opinion. Aubrey also begins to rely on Nadia, but is only able to truly express it once drunk, as she asks her friend if their bond will remain strong once Nadia goes off to Michigan. Despite their burgeoning friendship, neither is able to fully open up to the other. Nadia holds back on sharing information about her relationship with Luke and the subsequent abortion, while Aubrey rarely openly expresses the depth of her feelings for her friends, also not sharing her past history with Paul.

Discussion Question 1

How does Luke continue to hang onto the past? Why does he do so?

Discussion Question 2

What are the barriers between Nadia and Aubrey?

Discussion Question 3

Are Nadia's fears about losing Aubrey real if she discloses her abortion?

Vocabulary

swaggering, smoldering, contours, weathered, acacia



Chapter 6

Summary

The Mothers talk about leaving the world, an inevitability that becomes imminent in their old age. The more they hold on to the world, the more it tries to break them, whether by the decrepit age of their bodies or with the world turning against them.

While in Michigan, Nadia was exposed to the cold for the first time in her life. Her boyfriend, a Sudanese-American boy named Shadi from Minneapolis, provided her with some comfort in a place where she felt out of place amongst so many white people. Shadi was passionate about different issues and active on campus, something Nadia admired. With his encouragement, she applied for a study abroad in Oxford, where she received a break from the cold of Ann Arbor, but at least Michigan was distant from the pain at home. Whenever Aubrey asked if she would return to California, Nadia found an excuse to not go home doing internships in Wisconsin or Minnesota.

Two years after Nadia's departure, Luke found himself dealing with the difficulty of his life, being pressured by his father to find a career while also haunted by his desires to play football. He tried out for an amateur football team called the Cobras and was asked to come back again after his injury has healed. While he came up to speed physically with the help of CJ, he followed Nadia's life on Facebook, finding it a surprise that Shadi was interested in soccer, while the sight of a happy Nadia made him realize the stasis of his own life. Playing for the Cobras, Luke was able to find an outlet for his frustrations while also becoming part of a group that came to care for him. He struck up a friendship with Cherry, the wife of his teammate Fincher, who was Hawaiian and lent him an ear whenever he needed to commiserate about Nadia. Luke felt comfortable in her presence and they spent more time together, eventually coming upon a moment where Cherry caressed the scar on his leg. Fincher found out and attacked Luke with the other Cobras, further injuring his leg in the process.

Analysis

The contrast in settings becomes evident for Nadia in this section of the novel as she struggles to immerse herself in her new surroundings. Despite the isolation she had felt in California, the comfort of place was always present, as it was a place she had been familiar with her entire life and where she did not stand out. Now, in Michigan, the coldness of her surroundings makes her uncomfortable, as does her color. But she slowly manages to integrate herself in her environment, particularly by dating Shadi, the politically active Sudanese-American student. Since Shadi is from Minneapolis, he is more comfortable in the cold of Ann Arbor, and he provides a source of comfort through an ideal partner for Nadia, and also as someone who is similar to her in terms of looks. He constantly challenges her, and Nadia becomes more ambitious as a result, going to Oxford to study abroad while also doing various internships during breaks. But she also



does all of those things as a means of avoiding the dreariness and pain that is a permanent fixture in her home in California—something that she is not compelled to go back to even after dealing with the cold of Ann Arbor.

With Nadia and her success at escaping hanging over his head, Luke attempts to break out of the stasis of his life as well. He does this primarily by focusing on football again, which he pursues despite the injury. As he was never adept at anything else, it is only natural that he would fall back on the sport that he once showed promise in. But the pressure to succeed is paramount, as he is constantly reminded of Nadia and manages to view pictures of her life with Shadi on Facebook. In the face of that challenge, he goes out and tries to become involved in football again through the Cobras. While it is an escape from the dreariness of his life, it also serves as a community for him to grow since he is constantly berated at home by his father, who wants him to become practical about his future. But the best thing to come from the Cobras is his friendship with Cherry, who provides a maternal figure that is absent in his life, as he cannot go to his mother with thoughts about Nadia. Cherry provides a safe space for Luke, where he can finally let loose about his true feelings regarding Nadia. But what might come off as a platonic relationship is mistaken for something else and Luke ends up paying for it with the health of his leg.

Discussion Question 1

How is Luke's leg a symbol of his growth?

Discussion Question 2

How does Shadi contrast with Luke?

Discussion Question 3

Is Nadia truly able to escape the pain in her past by staying away from home?

Vocabulary

brash, lapping, manger, gummy, jabbering.



Chapter 7

Summary

In rehab, Luke attempted to get back his life with the help of a therapist named Carlos. While regaining his strength, Luke became friendly with the other residents at the facility, usually older people. While Carlos questioned Luke's motives for not pressing charges, with Luke claiming that he did not see the people who attempted to rob him, he also questioned what Luke would like to do in the future, pointing out that he worked well with the sick. Aubrey stopped by and began to spend time with Luke, helping him understand what it would take to become a physical therapist. Once out of therapy, Luke asked his father for a job working on the Upper Room Chapel grounds, which made his father happy.

Luke asked Audrey about Nadia, learning that his exaggeration of where she was travelling was misplaced. The more time he spent with Aubrey, the more he became attracted to her, noticing that she was a good person more so than anything. Despite their growing relationship, Luke respected Aubrey's physical boundaries, not going beyond caressing or huddling. When Aubrey asked for a secret, Luke revealed that he had impregnated a girl once while Aubrey talked about her super powers, through which she implicitly revealed her experience being raped by Paul.

Analysis

Luke's transformation as an individual begins to take shape after his accident while learning to walk again, with his leg regaining strength every day. His stay at the rehabilitation facility provides him with an opportunity to grow on multiple fronts. For one, for the first time he is able to let go of the past and think seriously about the future. The incident with the Cobras permanently destroyed whatever illusions he still had about playing football, and now he is able to consider his future in an objective manner. He is not defeated but has simply come to terms with his reality. As Carlos points out, he is good working with the sick, and that becomes a viable option which he explores with the help of Aubrey. Despite the injury being emasculating, he is able to accept it as a means of growth.

Leaving rehab, he is able to understand his options and finally have a concrete plan for the future, something that is very attractive to his parents, who appreciate the humility Luke exhibits in the wake of his accident. Aubrey ends up embodying the woman who is his better half. While initially he is still concerned about Nadia and asks Aubrey about her, he eventually becomes cognizant of her goodness, appreciating the calming affect it has on his life. Unlike with other women, he respects and appreciates her purity as a woman and acquiesces, not pushing her in a direction where she would feel uncomfortable. While their intimacy grows, it is still guarded, as they both partially reveal their biggest secrets to each other but never go all the way.



Discussion Question 1

How does Aubrey initiate Luke's transformation?

Discussion Question 2

In relation to Luke, how are Nadia and Aubrey different?

Discussion Question 3

Is Luke's growth viable or is he bound to return to his previous state of life?

Vocabulary

stout, pedometer, nimble, ushered, carousel



Chapter 8

Summary

The Mothers talk about forgetting Nadia over the years as she spent more time away from home, yet seeing the trail of a boy whenever she came to Upper Room and knowing then that she had been unpregnant. After taking the LSAT, Nadia was accepted into the University of Chicago Law School but was caught off guard when Aubrey told her that Luke proposed to her. Shadi found it strange that she was upset, and she remembered her shock when Aubrey first told her she was seeing Luke. Nadia became irritated at Shadi's hints about a future together, including his desire to accompany her to the wedding. While arguing about her decision to not attend graduation, she remembered her mother's desire to go to college, holding onto a course catalog once. Aubrey thought about the comfort she found in Luke's bed in his apartment, and her argument with Mo about inviting their mother to the wedding. Nadia assured her that she had the right to invite whomever she would like, and Aubrey found comfort in the stories Nadia related about her adventures abroad.

Nadia returned home a week before the wedding and was upset when she discovered that her father had removed the photographs of her mother from the house. At the wedding shower, Nadia observed the serenity of the Sheppard home and the effort Latrice had put into the event. For a moment Nadia wanted to tell Latrice of her adventures. While wandering through the house, Nadia passed by Luke's old bedroom and met Luke himself, who showed him Elise Turner's old Bible, something he had in possession for a long time. After finding her mother would not be arriving, Aubrey remembered her first visit to California, then begging Mo to stay with her. Having witnessed Luke and Nadia comfortable with each other in his room, Aubrey was full of inner turmoil and confronted her friend, who confessed to having hooked up with Luke in high school and nothing more. While at the beach together, both friends were approached by a couple of Marines, the older of whom displaying an interest in Aubrey. While playing volleyball, Nadia went off to swim with one of them while Aubrey kissed the other, Miller, in the restroom. She wanted to tell Nadia but got upset at her instead for not revealing her past with Luke.

Analysis

While Nadia has been distant from home, she is equally as distant from anyone that is close to her. The thoughts of a deeper intimacy with Shadi and of developing a life beyond their college relationship force her to hesitate and think about the future, finding her boyfriend to be a slight burden. The distance is no more apparent than in her relationship with Aubrey, who she fails to tell the truth about her past with Luke despite the upcoming wedding. Instead of being honest, she hides behind a fake wall of concern, one that is probably unfounded, as the relationship between Aubrey and Luke appears genuine, at least for the moment. Yet, she cannot understand the nature of



their relationship because as soon as Aubrey revealed it to her, she became indignant, privately, and closed off from her friend. Nadia has managed to complete a cell of isolation around herself, as she is distant from her best friend, never revealing her true self to her boyfriend, and even going as far as to not invite her father to her graduation. While immediately after her mother's death she had longed for intimacy, which is how she started her relationship with both Luke and Aubrey, moving to Ann Arbor has closed her off, the geographical distance inducing a sense of emotional separation as well.

Aubrey's awareness continues to grow through this chapter, as the burden of her upcoming marriage forces her to reconsider certain aspects of her life. Despite Mrs. Sheppard's pomp in throwing the wedding shower, Aubrey is hesitant to celebrate. Even though she does not show it, she is disappointed in her mother's lack of attendance. Mrs. Sheppard as a maternal figure is not enough, for her, Luke, or Nadia. Her consternation with Mo over inviting their mother prevents her from sharing her secrets with her. She would do so with Nadia, but after discovering her being comfortable with Luke, she recedes further in. Her feelings of betrayal are paramount but she has no outlet. Her means of release comes when she forces herself to kiss the Marine, Miller, at the beach. Despite her relationship with Luke, she does not have the intimacy that he and Nadia have due to their shared past—an intimacy that she bears witness to when she sees Luke hand Nadia his mom's Bible. The Bible exchange becomes a symbol of their past intimacy, something that refuses to go away.

Discussion Question 1

How has distance changed Nadia and Aubrey's relationship?

Discussion Question 2

What importance does Luke's bed play in this chapter?

Discussion Question 3

How does Aubrey compensate for her mother's absence?

Vocabulary

attuned, slyly, stucco, tentatively, muster, prodigal, brazen



Chapter 9

Summary

In the opening of this chapter, the Mothers talk about the wedding, its secrets they know, and the inappropriate girls that populate today's weddings, degrading their churches as a result. But none of those girls are like Aubrey Evans, who they recognize as one of them and feel a certain kinship towards. Aubrey is not a show-off but the kind of girl that falls in love slowly and surely, one that accepts the pastor's blessing for comfort. When Shadi arrived for the wedding, he and Robert got along instantly, annoying Nadia, who became upset at her father during dinner over his decision to remove Elise's photographs.

Nadia became emotional repeatedly during the wedding, remembering stories of her parent's cheap wedding, and when she went off to be alone, she ran into Luke. He avoided her questions by shrugging and she compared that response to Shadi, who would want to talk about his feelings. Luke offered Nadia whiskey and confessed that he loved Aubrey because she was not his type. Nadia experienced thoughts about Luke entering into her head despite her intention to move on. Mrs. Sheppard arrived and pushed Luke back towards the reception. She admonished Nadia for still wanting her son and revealed that it was she who paid for the abortion. Luke and Aubrey went to Nice, France for their honeymoon, with the congregation chipping in. There, Aubrey revealed to Luke that she knew about Nadia and him before she let him claim her virginity. Leaving California, Nadia envisioned the possible life of Baby one more time.

Analysis

A core revelation occurs in this chapter, as Latrice Sheppard reveals to Nadia that it was she who paid for the abortion that she had years ago. The news is disconcerting because it also conflicts with what Luke had told her earlier, that he had wanted to keep the child. In a sense, Nadia and Luke's relationship seems to have been manipulated by Latrice, with her decision to pay for the abortion standing in the way of Luke and Nadia deciding the fate of their relationship by themselves. The question then becomes what could have happened had Nadia and Luke been able to decide the fate of their own relationship, with one version of it containing Baby, who Nadia envisions living an actual life, the possibility of a different life.

The Mothers talking about Aubrey as the kind of girl that is different from them sheds light on her place in the current world. She is an old-school girl, known for her purity more so than anything. Yet, this is not always enough, and seems to be not enough as she deals with the knowledge that her best friend and now-husband seem to have a past together. How can she stand in the place of Nadia, Aubrey asks herself. She is admittedly not Luke's type and while he claims he loves her for that exact reason, she is and never will be a replacement for Nadia. Deep down inside she knows that as well,



and it is something that she seems to come to terms with as she finally opens up to Luke physically.

Discussion Question 1

What are some possible reasons behind Nadia's dismay at her father?

Discussion Question 2

How does Latrice Sheppard upset the balance of Nadia's life?

Discussion Question 3

Does Luke still carry feelings for Nadia? What indications show this or show that he does not in the text?

Vocabulary

calico, scampi, chumminess, incensed, brooch



Chapter 10

Summary

Waking in the middle of the night, Nadia received a call from the hospital, imagining her father was dead, only to find out that he had been seriously injured when the weights he was lifting fell on his chest. She was with Zack, a white liberal from Maine she was dating who only referred to race casually and only if it felt oppressing. She had broken up with Shadi and was stressed from her work in law school, where a casual relationship with minimal commitments, like the one with Zack, suited her. Before leaving for Oceanside, she was filled with guilt over the fact that she had kept minimal contact with her father over the years, only talking over the holidays. When she arrived at the hospital, he was weak and emotional at the sight of her, and she was comforted by Aubrey who arrived the next morning. She wondered what kind of wife Aubrey had become and what would have happened if the neighbors had not heard her father's cries in his backyard.

Robert was released after a week, and Nadia stayed to take care of him, claiming that she was studying for her bar exam. Falling into a routine, she monitored his health, trying to ward off any serious infections. Spending more time together, they talked and bonded, with Robert revealing that his father was an abusive gambler who was stabbed to death by his mother. He later joined the Marines and met Elise's brother, who introduced Robert to his sister.

Nadia confronted Luke about Latrice's revelation and Luke told her that there was no alternative. Aubrey was having difficulty conceiving and was concerned, sharing her thoughts with Russell Miller, the Marine from before her marriage. Nadia had given him Aubrey's email and they began a correspondence, as Aubrey felt lonely with Luke working longer days and her having difficulties with her pregnancy, which Nadia dismissed. Luke stopped by with food and while he and Nadia argued, he revealed his desire to take care of her, leading to them kissing and making love.

Analysis

The strain of distance that Nadia has put on herself, the refusal to be intimate with the people that she cares about, finally begins to take a toll on her. When the chapter begins, the phone call from the hospital leads her immediately to think that her father is dead, even though he is not but just severely injured. The reader gets a portrait of her life at the time, as she has broken up with Shadi and invested fully in law school, where she is involved casually with Zack, a noncommittal relationship that does not require the intimacy that Shadi expected and desired of her. But while that may be what she worked for, the news of her father's injury creates an emotional turmoil inside her that forces her to reevaluate the relationship she had with her father. The only person to whom she can speak is Aubrey, with whom her relationship has been minimal since the marriage.



Instead of keeping touch and learning firsthand, she forms a judgment inside her own head about the wife Aubrey might have turned into, instead of simply asking her.

Robert's injury turns out to be a blessing in disguise, serving as a catalyst for the change in Nadia's character. As a Marine, Robert is a consistently stoic character who relies on his own strength deal with the tragedy of his wife. If he needs a support of some sort, he turns to Upper Room. But then there is a void left between him and Nadia, as his strength and resolute nature of dealing with tragedy is not extended to his daughter, who needs to see him weak to be able to unburden herself. With his injury, that void between father and daughter is finally filled, as Nadia is finally able to see him in a weak state, letting his emotional guard down, to which in turn, she does the same. They begin to talk more, and she learns details about his life and how he met her mother. Their bond grows deeper as she sacrifices her time to care for his health, something that he normally would never had asked for.

The lack of communication between characters begins to show another ugly side in this chapter as well. Aubrey is revealed to be in touch with Russell Miller, the Marine she kissed at the beach before her wedding, mostly out of jealousy over learning about Luke and Nadia's past. But she is having difficulty conceiving a child, and in that pressure, she is unable to turn to either Luke or Nadia, both of whom are dismissive of her anxiety. In their unison, they are able to say that they have a child, something she cannot do, though she does not know that yet about them. And while Aubrey becomes more distant with her own secrets, Nadia finally lets her guard down because of her father's weakness and turns to Luke for intimacy.

Discussion Question 1

While Nadia and Robert live together, how does his injury open an opportunity for intimacy?

Discussion Question 2

How has Aubrey become so isolated?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Nadia dismiss Aubrey's concerns about her inability to conceive?

Vocabulary

wafting, hazardly, fawning, drudgery, catechism



Chapter 11

Summary

Nadia did not feel like she was having an affair, instead feeling her youth coming back again, her relationship with Luke picking up from where it left off. Aubrey visited a doctor to consult about her inability to conceive, remembering all the years prior where she visited psychiatrists when she first moved in with Mo. The doctor told her that everything was physically alright and to have some wine to relax, to which Aubrey got upset and drove to Mrs. Sheppard for comfort; Mrs. Sheppard told her the same. On her return home, she noticed that Luke and her had become physically estranged, remembering how sex was always painful for her, and how Luke complained that she did not initiate sex.

His affair with Nadia forced Luke to reevaluate his life, taking better care of his body for her. He worked out with her father's weights in the backyard and ignored the guilt she felt over their illicit relationship. When Luke tried to bring up the possibility of them having kept the child, Nadia shut him down but then thought of Baby again and how Baby would have interacted with his father. Aubrey visited a fertility specialist and took Nadia with her. Nadia became indignant when the doctor asked Aubrey about a possible abortion and Aubrey realized it was Nadia who had an abortion with Luke. On the way back home, she bought wine, getting drunk at home and seducing Luke. When Luke tried to take Nadia on a date, she confronted him about the immorality of their affair, and Luke realized he came back to Nadia out of guilt. He forgot his watch with her and when taking one of the Mothers, Betty, home, she left it on Mother Betty's desk.

Analysis

While on the surface, the idea behind the affair is that Luke and Nadia love each other dearly, certain aspects of their relationship under the surface begin to rise. Since they originally dated in the prime of their youth, they both have fond memories of each other in that state—images that are stuck in their heads. Luke does not know Nadia as a college student, and Nadia does not know Luke as a husband and physical therapy assistant. In the distance that has built up between them, the only way they can look at each other as equals is if they imagine themselves in their youths again. Nadia feels the bloom of her younger days returning, and Luke, recalling the shape he was in back when he was dating Nadia, begins to work on his body again.

Aubrey's struggles to conceive form the core of this chapter. Luke, Nadia, and Latrice Sheppard are easily dismissive of her inability to conceive because a child has been in their grasp in the past, and despite the abortion, it is still more than Aubrey can say. However, as the relationship between Nadia and Luke becomes stronger, the physical aspect of Luke and Aubrey's relationship begins to deteriorate as well, along with the emotional aspects. For Aubrey, sex is always painful, and thus, there is the element of



physicality that is missing from her relationship with Luke. Nadia provides him with his need, which instigates his desire to be younger, which is more desirable than the quaint routine of marriage. The only way for Aubrey to get to Nadia's level is to get drunk, and only then is she able to initiate the physical intimacy that is lacking in her marriage.

Aubrey's heightened sensitivity about her inability to conceive is what allows her to perceive the tone in Nadia's voice at the fertility clinic, leading to her correct assumption that it was Nadia who had the aborted child with Luke. In a sense, the betrayal is compounded because her best friend had been taking her issues lightly, simply because it was something that she was able to do so herself in the past. While Aubrey has to resort to fertility specialists, Nadia is able to sleep with her husband and have a past with him that includes a child.

Discussion Question 1

Could there have been another manner in which Aubrey would have found out about Nadia and Luke?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the primary motivations for Luke behind the affair?

Discussion Question 3

What importance does Baby have now that Aubrey is unable to conceive a child?

Vocabulary

tryst, banal, enticing, taut, gussied, teddies



Chapter 12

Summary

The Mothers talk about how the watch should have alerted them to the affair between Nadia and Luke, as only a woman who is sleeping with a man would have his watch. They noticed Aubrey and the sadness that emanated from her. Nadia began to chaperone the Mothers, many of whom had been prevented by the DMV from driving, especially Mother Betty. She did this as a means of penance and they approved her carrying her mother's Bible. Nadia learned from her father that her own grandmother was a preacher and would not allow a daughter to have a child without wedlock in her house, warning Nadia not to explore the option. When she asked, Robert revealed that abortion was never an option for her mother and Nadia was almost disappointed.

Luke began to speak to a therapist named Dave, who assured him that the abortion could have a traumatic effect on a man as well. Nadia threw herself into Upper Room, becoming involved in everything. During a Halloween party where Nadia did not wear a costume, Luke told her he had been talking to Dave and that their baby was in a safe place, to which Nadia felt happy because it assured him.

Aubrey was approached by Russell Miller after a sermon, which surprised her because she had previously ignored his email. He asked her to lunch, and after some hesitation, she agreed to go, opening up to him about her marital frustrations. First John, a member of the Upper Room congregation, witnessed the lunch and told Luke, who became incensed because of the two getting pie for dessert. He confronted her and she revealed her knowledge about his affair with Nadia. Luke, scared because of her calmness, realized the loss he would experience in his life if she left.

Analysis

Not going anywhere because of her father's injury, Nadia extends her stay in Oceanside and becomes more involved in the affairs to Upper Room, becoming a regular fixture as her father was once before his injury. Spending time around the Mothers, the idea of maternal figures comes back to her and she begins to wonder about her mother and her grandmother as well. When approaching her father, the revelation that her grandmother would not allow her daughter in her house after having a child out of wedlock strikes at Nadia's heart, as she wonders what the reaction would be from her parents regarding her own abortion. When Robert reveals that he and Elise never considered abortion, a secret shame seeps into Nadia, as she had secretly hoped that there might have been at least some debate that would have allowed herself to feel better about her own decision.

There is a weakening of the guard for Luke in this chapter. Similar to how his physical injury allowed Robert to finally open up to his daughter, the emotional injury of the



abortion finally catches up to Luke, who seeks out therapy as a means of dealing with his ambivalent emotional state. Despite years gone, Luke has never been able to truly confront his feelings regarding the abortion, but he is still not able to do so fully, as he only speaks to Dave over the phone, never approaching him in person even though he extends an invitation.

The arrival of Russell Miller proves to be the driving force behind Aubrey's eventual confrontation with Luke over his past and current relationship with Nadia. Miller is the only man other than Luke that Aubrey has been with, and he was the first man who Aubrey was physically intimate with. Their correspondence over email has allowed for an intimacy that she does not have with her husband, as she is able to talk about her marital issues with Miller, something she cannot do with either Luke or Nadia. In this sense, Miller is a bigger threat to Luke and Aubrey's marriage than previously imagined, as he has the confidence of Aubrey in more ways than one.

Discussion Question 1

What is the importance of Aubrey getting pie with Russell?

Discussion Question 2

What is the reason for Nadia trying to seek out her grandmother?

Discussion Question 3

Is the assurance that Dave provides to Luke a facade? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

emblazoned, envisioned, unblemished, kilter, gingham, broached



Chapter 13

Summary

The Mothers talk about Nadia's changing behavior, as she had become pricklier, and they also discuss the rumors surrounding Aubrey's departure from her home. Nadia thought about the day Aubrey arrived unannounced to her house, confronting her about the affair and leaving without stopping for Nadia's apology. For months, Nadia tried to apologize by calling and writing letters, finally going to Mo's house where Kasey told her to give Aubrey space. Months passed, and Christmas came and went with Nadia continuing her routine at Upper Room, taking care of her father, and thinking of taking the California bar exam as opposed to the Illinois one.

While going through a photo album, Robert pointed out a photo of Clarence, Nadia's uncle, to her. Mrs. Sheppard approached Nadia, asking if she had heard from Aubrey and revealing that she was pregnant. She left after condemning Nadia once again. Aubrey told Luke about the pregnancy and that was a girl, refusing his assistance at any point, saying she was not ready. Lying to Mo, Aubrey went back home and confronted Luke, asking if he still saw Nadia. When he responded with a no, she began to make plans for coming back at some point before leaving with the stack of Nadia's letters. Luke told Nadia that Aubrey took her letters, asking Nadia that she try to reach out and take the blame, to which she refused. After overhearing their conversation, Robert went through Nadia's room and found the small pair of golden baby shoes.

Analysis

The Mothers take on a bigger role in this chapter, as they provide some of the initial information to start off the events, informing the reader about rumors that are swirling amongst the Upper Room people. Word has been spreading that Aubrey has left home and that it might involve a woman on Luke's part. The Mothers are hawkish in how they observe the people surrounding them, and they offer a different, more subjective perspective on the events unfolding the trio of Aubrey, Luke, and Nadia. There is a time lapse that occurs after Aubrey leaves Luke, during which Nadia continues her routine at Upper Room but with considerably less enthusiasm, something that is noted by the Mothers. While earlier she seemed invested in her time in Oceanside, dedicated to taking care of her father, her plans are up in the air now. Even though she considers taking the California bar instead of the Illinois, her spirit has dampened, as her primary concern is to patch her relationship with Aubrey or at least offer some measure of explanation.

The revelation that Aubrey is pregnant with a girl is telling, as Nadia always imagined Baby, her possible child with Luke, as a boy. The birth of a girl marks the line between Aubrey and Nadia, as the former is finally able to live her life with Luke on her own terms, without the past of Nadia hanging over their heads. With Nadia behind her,



Aubrey looks to take a new step in her relationship with Luke, hinting at a slow reconciliation. Yet Luke is still struggling to move on from Nadia, as he asks her to take the blame for their affair. He still cannot own up to his own actions, and that potentially could be a problem going forward.

Discussion Question 1

Is there any hope of reconciliation between Nadia and Aubrey?

Discussion Question 2

Why would Luke want Nadia to take the blame for the affair?

Discussion Question 3

While Aubrey hints at reconciliation between herself and Luke, will they be able to raise a family together? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

nondescript, fraying, prenatal, trundles, frilly



Chapter 14

Summary

In the quiet of the Upper Room morning, Robert and Nadia visited Pastor Sheppard. Robert was upset and angry at John for doing what he did. He was disgusted at Nadia as well, who tried to defend herself, saying it was her choice, to which he responded that her mother did not take that choice. Before leaving California, Nadia, hesitating, visited Aubrey at Mo's house. She congratulated her friend, who confronted her about her lies. They wondered about their mothers and the effect it might have had on their lives, and whether Aubrey would be able to love her daughter. They had a tense moment where Aubrey lied to Nadia about having named her daughter, thinking that Nadia would have no claim on her life anymore.

The Mothers talk about how the rumor spread about Nadia's abortion, focusing on Betty who overheard the fight and could not keep her mouth shut. Once the word spread, the rumor took on a life of its own, mutating and changing as it went. Slowly, people from the congregation began to leave and a reporter stopped by to cover the story, with somebody from the congregation speaking to the media.

In the future, the Mothers visit Latrice who defends her action. They think about Nadia and the change in her life, as she has become a lawyer and travels from place to place, living a fulfilled life. They remember seeing her around Upper Room years later, wondering if the pink bag in her car was a present for Aubrey's daughter, but then seeing that she might be helping her father move. They imagine her entire life unraveling in front of them, remembering that she has become her mother's age.

Analysis

This is the chapter where the Mothers are most active, and have the most effect on the plot and characters of the story. Overhearing the confrontation between Robert Turner and John Sheppard, Betty begins to spread the rumors, though, as a collective voice, the Mothers are vague about where the blame should go to. But it is Betty who overhears the argument and spreads the word about Pastor John's involvement of an abortion. It is an act of self-harm, as the Mothers had relied on Upper Room and all the people involved in its operation, including Robert and Nadia, to take care of them and provide sanctuary. But their actions unravel the establishment of the chapel and eventually Upper Room is forced to shut down, with one of the older women speaking to a member of the media, leading to the news article that preceded Upper Room finally shutting down. Yet, their hawkish observation remains steadfast, as they notice years later Nadia's return, about whom they have been conjecturing and making up stories as to what has happened with her life.



Robert's confrontation with Pastor Sheppard is more than just a condemnation of his and his wife's actions, as he is also confronting Nadia's decision to go through with the abortion. He is disgusted by her actions, as he and Elise were faced with the same decision in the past but kept Nadia. Nadia's insistence that it was simply her decision and not something that was forced on her does not do much to quell Robert's anger and humiliation. Throughout the novel, Nadia keeps trying to find some measure of assurance that perhaps her mother had considered an abortion, mostly as a means of feeling better about her decision. But with Robert's final condemnation, she no longer has that protection.

Aubrey's final meeting with Nadia sheds light on the future of their relationship. During a tense conversation, Nadia asks about Aubrey's daughter's name, to which Aubrey responds that she has not decided on one yet. She has done so but feels that Nadia has no right to her life, and the only way in which she can have a clean break is if Nadia's shadow is gone from her life, including any possible involvement over her daughter in the future. While Nadia only gave her unborn child the name of Baby, a vague term to refer to someone that only existed in her imagination, Aubrey has a name for her child and plans to keep her away from Nadia. The conversation between Nadia and Aubrey over their mothers reveals a bit about their future as well. Aubrey made a choice to leave her mother, and she is making the choice to keep her child as well. Nadia had no choice in terms of her mother's death, and it can be argued that she did not have a choice with her abortion as well, considering Latrice Sheppard's involvement, who says to the Mothers that she gave Nadia her life by allowing her to move on from the child.

Discussion Question 1

Is John Sheppard's justification good enough? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

As Nadia and Aubrey discuss, how much effect have their mothers had on them?

Discussion Question 3

What could be the reason behind Aubrey withholding her daughter's name from Nadia?

Vocabulary

drudging, trouncing, tithes, flitting, flinted



Characters

Nadia Turner

Known for her beauty, Nadia Turner is also prominent for being the first person from the Upper Room Chapel congregation to receive an academic scholarship to a major university. She is known for her beauty and her brains, something that she holds onto in the vacuum after her mother's death. She displays remarkable strength for a teenager after her mother's death, as she does not explicitly reach out for help from anyone, including her father or Luke Sheppard, whom she begins to date. When faced with the option to keep the child or have an abortion, she decides to make her own choice and have an abortion. Despite standing by her choice, she seems to have doubts at times, including when Luke mentions he wanted to keep the child and when she learns her parents never considered abortion, even though she was conceived out of wedlock.

Emotionally, Nadia is a very contradictory person as she is faced with great inner turmoil but is deliberately cold outward. Even though her father does not do a good job of reaching out to her after her mother's death, she does not attempt to make a connection with him either. Even when dating Luke, she does not open up, or to Aubrey either, who discloses information about herself. When she is accepted into Michigan, Nadia uses the escape as an attempt to add more emotional distance between herself and the people close to her, as she makes excuses not to come home, and becomes even more distant from her boyfriend Shadi. Later in law school, a casual relationship with Zach is enough for her, as she is not looking for emotional intimacy.

As a friend, Nadia offers a basic portal of intimacy to Aubrey but does not reciprocate, hiding vital information from her about her past with Luke, even before Luke and Aubrey became a couple. This is primarily done so out of fear, as she fears Aubrey would judge her for having had an abortion and would become distant like all her other friends. Her reasons for being somewhat intimate with both Luke and Aubrey are that, after her mother's death, neither of her treats her with a distant touch.

Her reasons for having a relationship with Luke after his marriage are vague sometimes, as she initially feels as if he was the only one she ever loved. But eventually, she admits to herself that it is primarily done because she feels younger when with Luke, as the nostalgia of their time together before comes back to drive their current relationship. With Luke, she can be a teenager again and not have to deal with the expectations of being an adult, which she had to do with Shadi, as he desired her to be emotionally intimate.

After her mother's death, Nadia attempts to find a maternal figure in her life, as she realizes that her mother could not have been close to her since she does not understand her well enough to grasp why she could have committed suicide. She attempts to find clues to her mother's character in her belongings, trying to figure out if her mother's life would have been different and better if she herself had not been born.



After her death, there is a period where Nadia attempts to find a mother-like figure as a substitute, albeit unconsciously, as she seems somewhat attracted to the stripper at the Hanky Panky, while also harboring a desire for Latrice Sheppard to treat her like a daughter.

Luke Sheppard

The son of the pastor of Upper Room Chapel, Luke rarely fits into his designation as the first son. Growing up, he is known for his good looks and athleticism that landed him an athletic scholarship for football at San Diego State. His football career is halted when he suffers a severe leg injury, after which he returns to Oceanside to work at Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack, a low end job that does not pay well but allows him to continue in his state of spiritual malaise. Eventually he attempts to restart his football dream, at least partially, by joining the Cobras. There he is able to find an outlet for his frustrated dreams but he also finds a sense of community that was missing when he was not playing football.

Luke's relationship with his parents is mostly subservient, as he is not terribly concerned with the happenings at Upper Room, and is rather focused more on paving his own way in life. With a strong figure such as John Sheppard hanging over his head, it becomes difficult for him to leave that shadow and define himself. He attempts to do so through football but that dream is shattered. He also tries to defy his parents subconsciously through his relationship with Nadia, but that is blown in his face when his mother forces him to end the relationship after the abortion. While his mother attempts to come off as a strong maternal figure, she is more concerned with the image of the family, and Luke's feelings are lost in the shuffle. Without a strong maternal figure, he veers towards Cherry, his Cobra teammate Fincher's wife, but his relationship with her and his openness with her is taken in the wrong manner and he pays with the health of his leg.

In his relationships with women, Luke can be loving but also distant at the same time. Despite trying to hide his relationship with Nadia, he is kind to her and provides her with the emotional space she needs. Later, he regrets deeply for abandoning her, having been pressured into it by his mother, and expresses a desire to have kept the child. With Aubrey, he is initially kind and respectful of her desires to remain physically distant until marriage. Yet, like Nadia, he has a tendency to stay withdrawn emotionally and not divulge what is on his mind, including the fact that his mother paid for the abortion and later blaming Aubrey indirectly for their marital problems as opposed to divulging that the abortion has had an emotionally traumatic impact on him, even years later.

Aubrey Evans

A quiet girl, Aubrey is initially observed with distance by the major characters, including Nadia and Luke, the former thinking of her as just a church helper hoping to get into God's good graces. She is said to have been introduced to Upper Room by being the girl who cried when asked if she needed salvation on her first visit. She then is viewed



as the girl who is obsessively good and pure, involved in every church affair, helping after school and in all her free time. This persona of hers keeps people like Nadia and Luke away but she manages to endear herself to Latrice Sheppard, who finds her to be the very type of girl she would like to bestow her maternity upon, as opposed to someone like Nadia who is more frivolous and contemporary in terms of her femininity.

Despite initial appearances, Aubrey is revealed to be more dimensional than she appears, which the reader is only able to access when Nadia befriends her. She has a tense relationship with her mother, who moved around a lot because of her relationships, but is incredibly close to her half-sister, Mo. She reveals to Nadia that her mother's boyfriend, Paul, was physically abusive to her and her mother. But she does not reveal that she was sexually molested, and her mother did not act despite knowing about it. She does tell Luke, but in a very indirect manner, so it is unclear if he knows or not. But her past does explain her reluctance to engage with men physically. It explains why she had been emotionally distant for so long, especially from her sister after her arrival in Oceanside.

Unlike Nadia and Luke, Aubrey does find avenues of relating her internal turmoil, even if it is indirectly. She is more capable of sharing her emotions with Nadia than Nadia is, and when is having marital problems she talks about them with Russell Miller, who lends an ear when people like Nadia do not. But despite her image as a meek individual, she is the personification of strength. When she learns about Nadia and Luke's past, she is able to use that anger to become physically intimate with Russell, preventing Luke from being the first man to be so. Later, when Luke confronts her about her lunch with Russell, she has no problem moving out of their house and then seemingly ending her friendship with Nadia.

Robert Turner

Nadia's father and Elise's husband, Robert Turner is a Marine who is known for his stoic and quiet demeanor more than anything. After his wife's death, he throws himself into serving Upper Room instead of reaching out to his daughter. His emotional distance from his daughter creates a deep divide between them that is not filled until his injury, which prompts Nadia to come back and care for him. It is revealed that he met Elise through her brother, Clarence, and that he impregnated Elise before they were married, never considering abortion.

John Sheppard

The pastor of Upper Room Chapel, John Sheppard is well respected among his congregation. He offers emotional support to Robert Turner after Elise's death, and provides a job to Nadia after she crashes her father's truck, which he does so out of guilt. Despite his stature, he is forced to go along with his wife's plan to pay for Nadia's abortion, something he attempts to atone for but which is eventually blown in his face



when Robert finds out and confronts him, leading to the spread of rumors and the eventual closure of Upper Room.

Latrice Sheppard

A strict woman, Latrice Sheppard is also known as the first lady of Upper Room, which refers to her power within the workings of the chapel. She is very strong-willed and determined in every manner to preserve the honor of her family's name, including the hypocritical decision to pay for Nadia's abortion, as she does not want the stain of a child born out of wedlock on her family's name. She manages to strong-arm both her husband and son into going along with the decision. While she is kind and considerate to Aubrey, she is still distant and generally cold to people, especially Nadia.

The Mothers

The Mothers, led by Betty, are a group of older black woman who are prominent members of the Upper Room Chapel. They are not always solid as characters, as they sometimes interject as narrators, offering their experience as women who have been around for a long time and have learned their lessons about life and offering advice to the struggling women in the novel. They are not prominent as actual characters until the end of the novel, as the rumor mongering leads to the eventual disgrace and shutting down of Upper Room.

Monique

Aubrey's older sister, Monique is a nurse who is very protective of Aubrey. She does not get along with her mother, and is upset when Aubrey invites her to the wedding. She is fierce in her opinions, but is usually so because she cares deeply about the people around her, especially Aubrey, who is her half-sister.

Shadi

Nadia's boyfriend in Michigan, Shadi is known as an active and popular student on campus. He serves for Nadia as a departure from her life in Oceanside, including Luke. He tries to become intimate with Nadia and tries to learn about her emotional current, but is denied at every turn.

Russell Miller

A Marine that Nadia and Aubrey meet at the beach, Russell Miller is the first man that Aubrey is intimate with, which arises out of jealousy after finding out about Luke and Nadia's past. He serves as an emotional outlet for Aubrey when she is isolated in her marriage, eventually returning to spark Aubrey's departure from Luke.



Paul

Paul is Aubrey's mother's boyfriend who is a police officer. Initially Aubrey reveals him to be physically abusive towards her and her mother, although it turns out he was sexually molesting Aubrey as well.

Kasey

Monique's girlfriend, Kasey is caring and looks out for both Aubrey and Nadia. She is known to be a good cook.



Symbols and Symbolism

Abortion

Abortion serves as a symbol of internal distress and guilt for the various characters throughout the novel—something that continues to haunt the characters involved for a long period of time. Having an abortion, or not having one, hangs over the heads of characters forever, as Nadia, Luke, John, and Latrice all have to deal with the consequences of the abortion in which they were involved, eventually losing face in the community. Elise's decision to not have an abortion led to Nadia's birth and her questions of whether or not her mother's life would have been different if she had not been born.

Ford Truck

Robert Turner's Ford truck serves as his salvation after his wife's suicide, as he is able to rely on it as a means of helping the people of Upper Room. It becomes a literal vehicle for his inclusion into the congregation, something that is shattered when Nadia crashes the truck.

Michigan

As a place, Michigan serves as a symbol of escape for Nadia, who uses her admission in the university to escape the emotional turmoil that is associated in Oceanside. Michigan is cold, and Nadia becomes a colder person while living there, keeping her father at bay emotionally, as well as Aubrey. Even the proximity to Shadi is not enough for Nadia to open up.

Luke's Leg

Luke's dreams of success in life are embodied in the health of his leg. When it is injured, he is reduced to working as a waiter. Later, once his leg has regained some strength, Luke tries to live out his dream of professional football partially, but the dream is shattered once again with the literal shattering of his leg by the Cobras.

Upper Room Chapel

Upper Room Chapel serves as the religious and moral center of the community and its congregation, something that is undermined over the course of the novel due to the actions of people like Latrice Sheppard. The Mothers, Robert Turner, and Aubrey use it as a place of sanctuary. Its moral stance is embodied in its members protesting the



opening of the abortion clinic, which is then turned on its head by Latrice's decision to pay for Nadia's abortion.

Aubrey's Bed

Aubrey's bed is where the friendship between Nadia and Aubrey develops, at least on the surface level. Despite their physical proximity, there is an emotional distance between the two that is never closed, as evidenced by Nadia never telling Aubrey about her abortion and relationship with Luke.

Cody Richardson's House

This party house symbolizes nostalgia, and characters trying to live out their lives in different manners. It is the place where Nadia has memories from when she was untouched by tragedy, and also where she tried to confront Luke. She later brings Aubrey here as a means of opening her up, or at least injecting her with some of the youthful vigor that Nadia experienced there as a teenager.

Turner House

This place symbolizes death and how it affects the people left behind. After Elise's death, Robert and Nadia are unable to connect emotionally despite being close to each other physically. There are trinkets of Elise scattered around the house, and Nadia's memory is instigated by them constantly.

Elise Turner's Bible

Something that had been in possession of Luke for a long time, for Nadia, her mother's bible might possibly hold the secrets behind her mother's death. She flips through, trying to gain an insight into what kind of person her mother was in secret, and why she might have committed suicide. When Luke hands the Bible to Nadia, it connects them emotionally again.

Baby Feet

The golden baby feet given to Nadia by the abortion clinic embody her decision to have an abortion, a decision that follows her continuously. They occasionally prompt memories of Baby and are eventually how Robert Turner finds out about Nadia's abortion as well.



Settings

Oceanside, California

The hometown of the central characters, Oceanside is a city near San Diego. For the first part of the novel, it serves as the place that Nadia is desperate to escape and a home for Aubrey, who manages to find a sense of community here. It's proximity to Camp Pendleton makes it easier for Robert Turner, as he works there, and Elise Turner moved to Oceanside to be closer to him. Nadia eventually misses the warmth of the Oceanside once she moves to Ann Arbor, as she is not used to the cold.

Upper Room Chapel

The center of religion for a certain section of the black community, it has John Sheppard as its pastor. It is a place of community and comfort for people like Robert Turner, who is dealing with the death of his wife, and Aubrey, who has never felt at home anywhere and has been sexually molested in the past. The Mothers rely on Upper Room as well, as it is a place where they can be helped by people in the congregation during their old age. Its sanctity is eventually violated when the Sheppard's involvement in Nadia's abortion becomes public and it is eventually closed when the congregation dwindles.

Sheppard House

The home of the Sheppard's, this is where the two primary romantic relationships of the novel develop. In his parents' absence, Luke makes love to Nadia in his room, while he also spends a lot of time with Aubrey at his parents' home, but this time he does so openly and without engaging with her sexually.

Ann Arbor

The town where the University of Michigan is located, Ann Arbor is where Nadia leaves for college. It is the place that is supposed to be a salvation for Nadia, where she is able to escape from the tedium of her life in Oceanside after the death of her mother. While there, she is enveloped by the extreme cold, using the place as an excuse to create an emotional distance not just from her father and Aubrey in Oceanside, but also from Shadi, her boyfriend in Michigan.

Turner House

Robert and Nadia Turner's home, it is haunted by the memories of Elise Turner after her suicide. Despite their physical proximity, the house prompts an emotional distance between father and daughter. It is the place where Nadia loses her virginity to Luke and

where Robert suffers a serious injury, forcing an emotional bond between him and Nadia.

Monique and Kasey's House

This is the place that Aubrey calls home after she leaves her mother. Nadia and Aubrey spend a lot of time here, sleeping in the latter's bed and bonding as friends. The place serves as a sanctuary for Aubrey after she learns about Luke's involvement with Nadia.

Abortion Clinic

The place where Nadia received her abortion procedure, it is a site that attracted notoriety when it first opened, prompting protests from the Upper Room congregation members. While she is there, Nadia is left behind by Luke and she sees the isolation of women who have to deal with abortion.



Themes and Motifs

Loss of Youth

Characters throughout the novel deal with the loss of their youth and it impacts the decisions they make and how they go about with their relationships, including engaging in extramarital affairs as a means of reigniting a sense of youth. Each of the three main characters has not been able to fully experience the vitality of their youth, but not everybody tries to recreate or reach out for it again. The death of Nadia's mother sent her into a sense of depression that isolated her from everyone around her, including her father. That is until she begins dating Luke, who introduces passion into her life again, until she becomes pregnant. Faced with such a decision, she has to quickly grow up and deal with the situation as an adult, opting to get an abortion. With the loss of her mother and then her pregnancy, Nadia is never fully able to experience life as a teenager; the only moments she does is when with Luke before they go their own ways.

For Luke, his youth is embodied in his football career, the dreams of which are shattered when he breaks his leg. Throughout his youth, he was known as the player from the Upper Room congregation who had received an athletic scholarship to play for San Diego State University. But with the injury came the loss of that possible career, after which he begins to work at Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack, where he meets Nadia. For Luke, Nadia is more than just a romantic and sexual pursuit as he can again become Luke the popular football player because as a younger girl, Nadia still views him as such. With Nadia, Luke does not feel the loss of his leg but is able to feel young and strong again, something he takes advantage of.

Unlike Luke and Nadia, Aubrey never had a stable home, as her father left when she was younger, never to be seen again, and her mother was always on the move, chasing man after man. Living that kind of life, Aubrey was never able to consistently stay in one place long enough to make any friends or develop a strong relationship with either of her parents. She also loses the presence of Monique early on, as her older sister who was the only strong emotional presence in her life moves away. After her departure, Aubrey was forced to follow her mother wherever she went, eventually ending up with Paul. While she initially discloses that she was physically abused by Paul, it turns out he sexually molested her as well throughout her time there, and her mother refused to intervene despite knowing about the situation. Aubrey was never able to have a steady, stable home with two parents, but she also lost her innocence unwittingly. This created the demons that she has to deal with for the rest of her life.

Maintaining Appearances

At many points during the novel, various characters create an emotional facade that prevents people around them from understanding who they really are, thus preserving their image or sense of self. After the death of his wife, Robert Turner lives up to his



image as a Marine and remains stoic and resolute, despite the grief gripping him internally. He devotes his time and life to serving Upper Room. Yet, despite his outer strength, his relationship with his daughter is still lacking. Because he has not confronted his wife's death, in the sense that he is not fully aware of the emotional effect it might have had on his daughter, he is unable to truly come to terms with his own sense of grief as well. Despite Nadia's behavior at times and the growing emotional distance between father and daughter, Robert continues to maintain this image of strength.

As the first family of Upper Room, there is a certain name that the Sheppards have to live up to, and when that name and image are endangered, there are consequences, as demonstrated by Latrice's actions after finding out about Nadia's pregnancy. The threat that comes to the Sheppard name forces Latrice to go against the teachings of her husband, someone who had led protests against the opening of an abortion clinic in the vicinity. Now, she forces her own son to engage in the act, thinking it would be harmful for the family amongst the congregation if it was found that their son had impregnated a girl out of wedlock. Latrice gives her son the money for Nadia's abortion, and thus forces him to sever his relationship with Nadia. This allows the family to continue on living their life as exalted members of their community, only for their image to be shattered years later when they are undone by members of their own congregation.

Despite their significant past together, both Nadia and Luke contrive to keep the secret from Aubrey and maintain a surface level distance between each other. The truth only comes out accidentally, and in increments, forcing Aubrey to connect the dots for herself. Even though her best friend falls in love with this man and is ready to marry him, Nadia still manages to be engaged with her friend's marriage without showing that she has unresolved feelings for Luke, while he manages to do the same. Once they begin their secret relationship behind Aubrey's back, Nadia and Luke work to make sure that no one finds out, forming a routine through which Aubrey would not find out, and also acting like all is normal, with Nadia regularly meeting and having lunch with Aubrey while Luke still maintains the appearance of a loving husband.

The Deconstruction of Masculinity

By exploiting the image of strong men, the novel explores the issues and thoughts that exist beneath the surface for men who are used to typify various archetypes of men. Robert Turner is a former Marine who is dealing with the death of his wife, but instead of opening up in any form, he remains a strong figure on the outside, throwing himself into service for the Upper Room congregation. Yet, he is not a strong man, or at least a strong father, because he is unable to connect with his daughter emotionally after their mutual tragedy and also unable to provide her with the strength that he seems to be embodying. When Nadia moves away, the emotional distance between them grows until Robert ends up in the hospital after an injury. While there, he finally breaks down emotionally and is able to open up to his daughter. The physical breaking down of his masculinity is needed for him to finally open up emotionally.



Luke's masculinity is embodied in his leg, and his ability to play football. As a talented football player, his life is turned around when he seriously injures his leg, losing his athletic scholarship at San Diego State, after which point he is reduced to working at Fat Charlie's Seafood Shack. But he is still able to continue on being at least some part of his old self, as Nadia is attracted to him partially because he still gives off the aura of the old Luke, the talented wide receiver that was the pride of the Upper Room congregation.

The strength and image of Luke's masculinity are exploited in two ways. Firstly, Nadia's pregnancy leaves him at the whims of his mother, who gives him the money to pay for Nadia's abortion, circumventing his muted desire to keep the child. He manages to secede control of his future by giving the power to his mother, which is something his father does as well, letting himself be pressured to go along with the abortion even though it goes against his morals as the pastor and spiritual leader of Upper Room. But for Luke, there is some strength left in his leg, and he tries to revisit football with the Cobras, but that illusion is shattered when the Cobras attack his leg, destroying it further, to the point where Luke acknowledges the weakness of his own body and is forced to rely on other people's strength to support him both physically and emotionally.

Motherhood and Death

Tackling issues of suicide and abortion, the novel explores how questions of motherhood are expressed through a character's choices in life. The novel begins with Nadia losing her mother to suicide and dealing with the emotional void left after a parent's loss. While her father is inaccessible, Nadia attempts to look around and find a maternal figure that would perhaps take the place of her dead mother, which she initially does when she encounters a stripper at the Hanky Panky who offers to take her under her wing. While she leaves and does not consider it explicitly, there is the sense that Nadia is looking for someone to replace her mother, or at least provide the same sense of comfort that she had with Elise. She hopes against hope that Latrice could be that figure in her life, as she is always cold and daunting to Nadia. But while dating Luke, there is the hope that perhaps Latrice will provide that maternal role for Nadia, which she readily gives for Aubrey. Yet, Nadia is disappointed on that end too, as Latrice has nothing but contempt for her, perceiving her to be the kind of girl to trap her son and ruin the family name.

After Nadia goes through with her abortion, she begins to question her decision after she learns that her mother had her before she was married, and that the possibility existed that she could have had an abortion. She wonders if her mother had done so perhaps her life would have been different; she could have gone to college, and she would not have committed suicide. She questions her father on the issue and he is clear that abortion was never an option for them, but that does little to quell Nadia's guilt, as she is also trying to feel better about her own decision to have gone through with it. Later, when Robert finds out that Nadia had an abortion, he questions her judgment by holding up his and Elise's decision not to have an abortion and to keep Nadia.



Youth versus Age

There is a strong contrast between the actions of the older generation and younger generation in *The Mothers*, as issues such as abortion and careers are used to highlight the divergences that happen when younger people have to make certain decisions in their lives. Upper Room and its congregation constitutes the older generation who paved the path for people like Nadia, Luke, and Aubrey. There is a conservative streak to their life, as they believe strongly in their community and in the power of their faith to help persevere through tragedy.

On the other hand, the younger generation is much more individualistic, as the trio of central characters is forced to rely on primarily themselves to deal with their personal tragedies, circumventing social norms as they go about making their decisions in life. Nadia conceals her abortion from mostly everyone, dealing with the emotional repercussions on her own, and Luke does the same as well, only fully exploring his emotions with people who are not from his community and who will not judge him in any way. Even Aubrey, who came to Upper Room looking for salvation, conceals her past of sexual molestation and only reveals her marital issues to a stranger like Russell Miller.



Styles

Point of View

There are two narrators in the novel: The Mothers and the omniscient narrator that covers the trio of Luke, Nadia, and Aubrey. The Mothers are a group of older women who live in Oceanside and are part of the Upper Room Chapel congregation. These women are hawkish and provide a very subjective introduction to events in the beginning of each chapter, often commenting on the theme that is about to be explored. They derive their judgment from their years of experience of being black women in a world that disregards them, and they offer their opinion on every topic from abortion to romance. For the most part they serve as distant figures, but throughout the novel they make appearances, directly interacting with characters, especially Betty, who also serves to spread the rumor about Robert and John's fight.

The point of view then veers from the Mothers to an omniscient narrator that follows closely the thoughts and actions of the three main characters primarily: Luke, Nadia, and Aubrey. But the narrator also jumps to other characters at times, including Latrice Sheppard and Baby, the aborted child of Luke and Nadia. This omniscient, third-person narrator provides all the facts and emotions of the characters throughout, but manages to do so in an objective manner, not offering commentary on the plot and characters.

Language and Meaning

The prose used to narrate the events of the novel is basic and does enough to highlight the emotional complexity of dealing with issues such as teen pregnancy and abortion. The Mothers offer a more vivid prose, as they reflect their age and experience in their vernacular style of speaking. The religiosity of the characters, especially John and Latrice Sheppard, is reflected in their dialogue throughout the novel. For the sections that deal with Baby, the prose becomes a bit more surreal, as it is dealing with the imagined life of an aborted child.

Structure

The novel is divided into 14 chapters that follow the arc of Nadia, Luke, and Aubrey. The first five chapters focus on Nadia dealing with the emotional aftermath of her mother's suicide, her relationship with Luke and abortion, and subsequent friendship with Aubrey. All the events occur in Oceanside, Upper Room, and the surrounding areas. Chapters 6 through 14 are set after Nadia has gone away to college, focusing on Aubrey's growing relationship with Luke and Nadia's growing emotional distance from the people in her life that live in Oceanside. This second half of the novel deals with the adult issues of marital problems, issues with conceiving a child, betrayal, and extramarital affairs. In a sense, the first half of the novel covers the characters as teenagers, with the exception of Luke, who is older but is still stuck in a rut. The second half of the novel traces the

characters as adults, trying to build themselves as individuals in society. This divide provides different perspective on the themes of abortion and nostalgia that continue throughout the character's lives.



Quotes

All good secrets have a taste before you tell them, and if we'd taken a moment to swish this one around our mouths, we might have noticed the sourness of an unripe secret, plucked too soon, stolen and passed around before its season.

-- The Mothers. (One)

Importance: The Mothers highlight the importance of secrets and their subversive nature. The true impact of Nadia's secret does not take full effect until years later, when it destroys Upper Room. It takes time for events to develop, and for secrets to fully form.

The truck, Robert believed, had turned things around for him.

-- Robert (Two)

Importance: The use of Robert's truck in service of Upper Room has not only endeared him to the people of Upper Room, but also helped him move on from his wife's death, even if it is done so at the expense of his relationship with his daughter.

She wished he would rage when he was angry--it'd be easier that way, quicker--but instead, he coiled up tight inside himself, moving silently around her in the kitchen or avoiding her altogether.

-- Nadia (Three)

Importance: This quote points to Nadia's frustrations with her father, who refuses to engage with her emotionally, even after she crashes his truck.

A pretty black woman living as fine as any white woman. What did she have to complain about?

-- The Mothers (Four)

Importance: This encapsulates the mystery surrounding Elise Turner's suicide, as no one can understand how a woman with such a steady life could kill herself.

It wasn't hard to move into someone else's life if you did it a little at a time.

-- Nadia (Five)

Importance: With her own life at home full of boredom and emotional distance, Nadia enters Aubrey's life with Monique as a means of at least touching the emotional connection they have.

In Michigan, Nadia learned how to be cold.

-- Nadia (Six)

Importance: Having lived her entire life in California, Nadia has to face the extremity of cold in the Midwest while attending college in Michigan. But this also points to her



growing coldness as a person, as she becomes distant from the people she cares about.

Luke used to think he might be that type of man, the kind who never settled down, but what good did that do you when were eighty and alone at the rehab center?

-- Luke (Seven)

Importance: Faced with the unfortunate reality of his new life after the injury if leg, Luke reconsiders his life choices and the type of person he has been over the years.

Aubrey Evans's entire life boiled down to the places she'd slept.

-- Aubrey (Eight)

Importance: The bed is a physical and emotional space for Aubrey, as a bed is where she was sexually molested by Paul, a bed is where she became intimate with both Nadia and Luke.

She had hoped for a release.

-- Nadia (Nine)

Importance: At Aubrey's wedding, Nadia is still struggling with her feelings for Luke, and she was looking forward to witnessing their intimacy, in the hopes that she would be able to move on.

But in a mint green hospital gown, plugged into beeping machines, he just looked fragile."

-- Nadia (Ten)

Importance: This is the first time Nadia truly sees her father in a weak state, and the sight is unnerving to her, as her father is normally stoic and dignified no matter the situation.

Maybe if she was sexier, more enticing, she would be pregnant already.

-- Aubrey (Eleven)

Importance: Dealing with the insecurities that come with the inability to conceive a child, Aubrey wonders if her allure as a woman is lacking. There is also an implicit contrast to Nadia in this quote.

She wished her mother had at least thought about it.

-- Nadia (Twelve)

Importance: When she learns about her parents refusal to consider an abortion, there is a moment where Nadia wishes her mother had thought about abortion, just so that Nadia could feel better about her own decision.



The how of any betrayal was the hardest part to justify, how the lies could be assembled and stacked and maintained until the truth was completely hidden behind them.

-- Aubrey (Thirteen)

Importance: Aubrey finally confronts Nadia about her betrayal and secrecy and is having a hard time coming to terms with it, as she cannot wrap her head around her best friend having an affair with her husband.

We see the span of her life unspooling in colorful threads and we chase it, wrapping it around our hands as more tumbles out.

-- The Mothers (Fourteen)

Importance: Having seen Nadia after so many years, the Mothers regain their role as observers of people, as they have witnessed the life of Nadia Turner unfold in front of them and they are able to conjure it and think about it even after all these years.