

The Murderer's Daughters Study Guide

The Murderer's Daughters by Randy Susan Meyers

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Plot Summary

The Murderer's Daughters is the debut novel by author Randy Susan Meyers. This novel centers around the main characters of Lulu and Merry Zachariah. When Lulu was ten and her sister five, their father murdered their mother in a drunken rage, leaving Merry with wounds to her chest and Lulu convinced that the entire episode was her fault. As the girls grow older, not only do they find themselves dealing with the fall out of their father's actions, but also with the abandonment of their remaining family and the dangers of an orphanage. As adults, the events of their childhood color nearly everything they do, including the way in which Lulu raises her daughters. The Murderer's Daughters is a novel that tells a story often overlooked by the fantastic newspaper headlines of our day and the aftermath of domestic violence.

Joe and Celeste Zachariah have always had a volatile relationship. When their children are five and ten, Joe and Celeste separate. Celeste tells her oldest daughter, Lulu, to never let her father into the house. Joey shows up at the door one afternoon and sweet talks Lulu into letting him inside. Lulu immediately regrets her actions, however, when Joey and Celeste begin to fight over money. When Celeste calls for Lulu to get help, she hesitates momentarily. Upon her return with a neighbor, Lulu finds her mother dead on the kitchen floor due to stab wounds, her sister stabbed on her mother's bed, and her father beside her with slashed wrists.

Lulu goes to live with her grandmother on her mother's side while her sister recovers from her wounds in the hospital. After a year, Lulu and Merry settle into a routine with their grandmother, but the death of their maternal grandmother leaves them at the mercy of their mother's sister, Cilla. Cilla cannot stand the idea of having the children of her sister's killer in her house and finally takes the girls to an orphanage to live. The orphanage is impersonal and the other girls filled with anger, making life their difficult for the Zachariah girls. The only bright spot for Merry is weekend visits to her paternal grandmother and biweekly visits to her father in prison.

Several years pass and the girls become more and more miserable, especially Merry who is being victimized by some girls in her age group. Lulu befriends a social worker and eventually convinces the woman to take her and Merry home. Although it seems like an ideal situation when Merry and Lulu go to live with the Cohens, in reality they are so afraid of doing something wrong and returning to the orphanage that they come to resent them. Lulu escapes the moment her chance comes, entering college and then medical school. Merry is left behind, however, and finds herself in an awkward position when Mrs. Cohen passes away, leaving her alone with Dr. Cohen.

Over the next few years, Lulu buries herself in her studies while Merry studies criminal justice and becomes a victim's advocate. Unhappy in her work, Merry begins to drink and indulges in dangerous relationships, including a love affair with a married man. As Lulu marries and settles down in a committed relationship, Merry continues to behave dangerously, including becoming a parole officer, helping dangerous criminals. Twelve

years pass and little changes except for the addition of Lulu's two daughters in their lives.

Lulu refuses to tell anyone, including her daughters, about her mother and the incarceration of her father. However, when Lulu's daughters are taken captive by one of Merry's parolees, Merry has to tell the truth in order to calm the crazed man. This act allows Lulu to face some of the emotional baggage she has carried around for so many years, leading to a confrontation with her father. Merry also confronts her own demons, making changes in her life that Lulu does not necessarily agree with, but which help Merry face the future with some hope.



Part 1: Chapters 1-3

Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Summary

This is the first novel by author Randy Susan Meyers. Randy Susan Meyers teaches writing seminars in Boston.

Chapter 1. Ten-year-old Lulu and her five year old sister, Merry, are supposed to be taking a nap but are quietly playing in their room. Their father, Joey, knocks on the front door and Lulu is first to respond because her mother, whose room is further from the front door, is also taking a nap. Lulu has been told not to allow her father into the house, but he sweet talks her into it. Lulu hides in the hallway and listens to her parents fight over money while Merry slips into the living room and then the kitchen. Their mother sends Merry into her bedroom. A moment later, their mother calls out during the increasingly violent argument for Lulu to go get help, claiming Joey has a knife. Lulu hesitates then goes and gets a downstairs neighbor. When they return, they find Lulu's mother dead in the kitchen from multiple stab wounds, Merry on her mother's bed with stab wounds to her chest, and Joey on the bed beside Merry with slashed wrists.

Chapter 2. Lulu has gone to live with her maternal grandmother. Lulu was not allowed to go to her mother's funeral and has not been allowed to visit Merry in the hospital. When Lulu pushes her grandmother, Mimi Rubees, to be allowed to see Merry, Mimi Rubees comes down with a migraine headache. Lulu sneaks out of the house after Mimi Rubees goes to lie down and goes to the hospital to see Merry, placed in the horrible position of having to tell her sister what happened to their mother and father.

Chapter 3. A year later, Lulu and Merry are present as their mother's headstone is uncovered. Lulu notes that her grandmother removed their father's last name from their mother's name on the stone. At the reception afterwards, the family discusses the murder and Joey's subsequent plea of guilty. Joey has been given a life sentence in prison. Cilla, their mother's sister, speaks particularly unkindly about Joey. Merry becomes angry and demands to be allowed to see her father, something she has not been allowed to do since their mother's death. Three months later, Mimi Rubees dies. Shortly afterward, Merry and Lulu are placed in an orphanage because Aunt Cilla refuses to have Joey's daughters in her house.

Part 1: Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The first three chapters of the novel are written in the first-person point of view of Lulu, the eldest of the Zachariah sisters. The author notes the date and the ages of the main characters, Lulu and Merry, to make sure the reader understands not only their ages, but the idea of how much time will pass as the plot continues to develop.

In these first chapters, Lulu describes her parents as young and irresponsible. The reader is left with the distinct impression that Lulu's mother was lazy and preferred to



perfect her own beauty rather than feed and care for her two children. The fact that Lulu's mother was still a teenager when she both became pregnant and married perhaps has a great deal to do with her behavior toward her young daughters. This might also explain why her husband is so volatile and reacts to her perceived infidelities with such passion. In any case, Lulu's parents have a dark and violent relationship that eventually leads to murder. The parents, so consumed by their passions, fail to think of the children when their passions erupt into the ultimate violence.

Lulu immediately takes on the role of caretaker, a role the reader suspects she has played since early in life due to her mother's inability or unwillingness to care for her own children. Lulu finds herself at the mercy of family members who are so filled with anger at her father that they take a great deal of this anger out on them. Where the grandmother was willing to care for the girls despite what their father did, the aunt is not and the girls are abandoned to an orphanage. Now the children have been abandoned twice, teaching them a lesson they will more than likely learn well.



Part 1: Chapters 4-8

Part 1: Chapters 4-8 Summary

Chapter 4. Three years after their mother's death, Merry and Lulu have settled into the orphanage. Merry and Lulu often visit their paternal grandmother, Grandma Zelda, who has custody of the girls but is unable to care for them due to failing health. Every other weekend, Grandma Zelda takes Merry to visit her father, but Lulu refuses to go along on these visits. The visits are difficult for Merry, but she feels as though it is her duty to visit her father. On this visit, like all the others, Merry and Grandma Zelda stop to buy candy. Then they take the Staten Island ferry to the prison before standing in line to be searched with all the other visitors.

Chapter 5. Merry finds herself telling her father lies in order to make her life at the orphanage seem better. When her grandmother excuses herself to go to the bathroom, Merry works up the courage to ask her father why he stabbed her. Joey tells Merry that he was so consumed with alcohol, drugs, and rage that he cannot remember completely what happened that day, but he is deeply sorry. It is a hollow apology, but Merry feels that she must accept it.

Chapter 6. Merry returns to the orphanage where she gets into a conflict with another girl, a bully, who steals crayons Merry and her friends are using in the art room. The next day, Merry wakes to find the bully cut off her ponytail during the night. Merry lies to a supervisor about what has happened. Lulu comes to see her later in the day. Merry expresses the fear that she might not survive the orphanage.

Chapter 7. Lulu and Merry walk to Grandma Zelda's apartment. Lulu dislikes the visits, but Merry looks forward to them. In fact, Merry rushes Lulu so that they will be on time to dinner. When they arrive, Grandma Zelda sends Merry to the store. Grandma Zelda forces Lulu to promise her that when she dies she will make sure that Merry and her father will always be taken care of. The next day, Lulu has lunch with her special friend, a high school student who volunteers to spend time with one of the orphans, at her home. Lulu begins to wonder what it would be like to be adopted by these people, getting her hopes up. However, Lulu's hopes are dashed when the family abruptly sends her back to the orphanage.

Chapter 8. Back at the orphanage, Lulu gets into a fight with a group of girls. One of the girls pulls a knife. Lulu gets the girl on the ground and begins to choke her. The fight is interrupted by a social worker who works at the orphanage on weekends. The social worker pulls Lulu aside and tries to talk to her. Lulu sees an opportunity and begins talking to the social worker about Merry. The social worker, Mrs. Cohen, takes Lulu and Merry out for ice cream a few days later. Lulu makes her think that they have no one to help them learn the ways of their religion, thus gaining them more sympathy. This leads to an invitation to the Cohen home for Chanukah.



Part 1: Chapters 4-8 Analysis

Chapters 4-6 switch to Merry's first-person point of view. Merry is now about to turn nine, three years after the death of her mother. Merry goes to visit her father in prison every other weekend with her paternal grandmother. At first Merry had wanted to see her father, but now these awkward visits have become something of a chore. Merry feels that it is her responsibility to play the devoted daughter because Lulu refuses to have anything to do with her father. However, Merry carries the scars from her father's failed attempt to kill her the same day he murdered Merry's mother. This leaves Merry with a great deal of conflicting emotions she is too young to know how to deal with. It is sad that it appears none of the adults in Merry's life seem to understand her need for emotional support.

Lulu also suffers emotionally from what has happened to her family. Lulu feels that not only does she have to protect herself, she needs to protect Merry as well. This task is made twice as difficult by the bullies at the orphanage, leaving Lulu with the understanding that she needs to find a way to leave the orphanage and preferably to be adopted by an outside family. Lulu gets her hopes up with her special friend's family, but this turns into a disaster, teaching Lulu that she cannot count on hope. This experience adds to Lulu's scars. However, she immediately finds another candidate in the weekend social worker at the orphanage. Lulu begins to manipulate the woman and is awarded with more hope. At the same time, however, Lulu has been forced to promise her grandmother that she will always care for Merry, which is a burden her young shoulders have already taken on. Lulu has no intention of caring for her father, but this promise will come back to haunt Lulu in the future.



Part 1: Chapters 9-12

Part 1: Chapters 9-12 Summary

Chapter 9. Grandma Zelda has died. Lulu and Merry attend the funeral in cast off clothes donated to the orphanage and a few items Mrs. Cohen got for them. When Lulu and Merry arrive at the cemetery, they discover that their father has been allowed to attend. They stand at the grave together. Lulu is distant toward her father, but Merry is happy to have him there. As Lulu tries to keep distance from herself and her father, she finds herself wishing she could feel his arms around her like in the good days of their family.

Chapter 10. A few months after Grandma Zelda's death, Lulu and Merry prepare to move in with the Cohens as foster children. On the day they move in, Lulu tells Merry they must act like perfect children so that the Cohens will not send them back to the orphanage. Lulu also asks Merry not to tell anyone at their new schools about their parents, but to instead tell everyone they died in a car accident. A year later, Merry finds it is still impossible to relax around the Cohens. Merry also feels as though the Cohens' grown daughter resents her presence. Merry still receives letters from her father, but has not been allowed to see him since coming to the Cohens.

Chapter 11. Two years after Grandma Zelda's death, Merry is still unable to behave like a normal child out of fear of being taken back to the orphanage. Merry helps Mrs. Cohen with the Thanksgiving Day preparations out of a sense of obligation, feeling more like a servant than a family member. Over dinner the Cohens push everyone to state what they are grateful for, making Lulu and Merry feel obligated to say they are grateful for the Cohens' generosity in taking them in. Lulu is rude and Merry becomes angry, finally exploding with her need to see her father.

Chapter 12. Four months after Merry's Thanksgiving Day explosion, Dr. Cohen drives her to the prison to see her father. At first Merry is happy, but then Dr. Cohen and her father argue over their separate roles in Merry's life. Merry feels obligated to take her father's side, promising he will always have her to care for him.

Part 1: Chapters 9-12 Analysis

Grandma Zelda has died, leaving Lulu and Merry without their one sympathetic relative. Lulu is shocked to see her father for the first time since the day of her mother's murder and increasingly shocked by her own desire to have him treat her as he once did. However, nothing changes for Lulu and Merry in the aftermath of their grandmother's death except leaving them on the mercy of the state. Luckily, the Cohens decide to take them in. This appears to be a great stroke of luck, but Lulu reminds Merry that the Cohens have not adopted them, therefore they can return them to the orphanage or

somewhere worse for any reason. This leaves Merry afraid to behave like a normal child, making normal childhood mistakes, leaving her pressured to be perfect.

Living with the Cohens proves to be difficult for both Lulu and Merry. While the girls are safe from bullies and have friends, they also have the pressure of the possibility that it could all be temporary hanging over them. It is a difficult time. Merry also feels as though she is letting her father down by not visiting him despite her deep-seated relief at having to not see him. Merry feels obligated to her father in the same way Lulu feels obligated to Merry. This is an obligation that will define Merry's life as she continues to age.



Part 2: Chapters 13-18

Part 2: Chapters 13-18 Summary

Chapter 13. Four years later, Lulu has graduated college and is now in medical school. Lulu arrives for her first day of Gross Anatomy class in which she teams up with three other students to dissect a human cadaver. Lulu is disgusted, but she hides her emotions and jumps right in to begin. Four months later, Anne Cohen has died. Lulu misses the funeral, but attends the final day to sit shivah. Lulu talks with Merry later and learns that she feels uncomfortable being forced to live with Dr. Cohen alone, but Lulu encourages her to stay for the final months of her senior year of high school. Lulu also invites Merry to visit her at school whenever she can. One weekend Lulu returns to her dorm after a weekend spent with her lover only to find Merry recovering from a weekend drug and alcohol binge.

Chapter 14. Three years later, Lulu is a resident on an ER rotation when she has a panic attack after seeing a patient who reminds her of her father's murderous rampage. The next morning, Lulu meets with Merry who is now a college student and struggling with both a drinking habit and promiscuity.

Chapter 15. The following spring, Lulu attends a party celebrating the final day of hers and her fellow classmates' residency. Lulu is exhausted from long hours of work, therefore she drinks to excess. When she wakes the following day, Lulu discovers she has brought a young artist from the party home with her. The young man is kind and gentle, caring for Lulu as she struggles with her hangover. Lulu finds herself so taken with this artist that she tells him the truth about her parents. Merry is unhappy when she learns this because she feels that Lulu is unfairly keeping her from sharing the truth with the men she dates.

Chapter 16. Two years later, Merry is a victim's advocate, but she is unhappy because she feels like she cannot do enough to help her clients. Merry continues to drink to excess and she is now having an affair with a married man. The relationship is volatile, but Merry finds it difficult to end it.

Chapter 17. Lulu comes over to help Merry pack for her bimonthly trip to visit their father in prison. Lulu constantly tries to convince Merry not to go, as she always does, but Merry is adamant. Joey asks about Lulu, forcing Merry to make excuses for her.

Chapter 18. Lulu marries Drew, the artist. Merry is the only family Lulu has and Lulu claims that she is okay with that, but they both feel some sadness at the situation even when faced with Drew's dysfunctional clan. Merry packs up her apartment while Lulu and Drew are on their honeymoon, planning on moving into the two family home Drew and Lulu have bought. Depressed by the state of her life and the pressure her father is placing on her, Merry has a one-night stand.



Part 2: Chapters 13-18 Analysis

In this section of the novel, the Zachariah girls go on to college and appear to be making a highly successful life for themselves. However, this is only on the surface. Lulu, who has cut herself off from the Cohens except for accepting their payment of her school tuition, has panic attacks and works too hard. Lulu also finds herself still caring for Merry, giving her money and trying to keep her out of trouble. At the same time, Merry has immersed herself in working with the criminal system, more than likely in a failed attempt to support her father in some way. Unfortunately, Merry hates her job. Merry is also drinking to excess and dating men who are emotionally unavailable to her.

As Lulu and Merry age, the impact of their mother's death and their father's actions continue to impact their lives and their behaviors. Lulu continues to force Merry to lie to people about their father, creating a web of lies that have entangled Merry and left her feeling as though she can never have a real relationship until she is free of these lies. At the same time, Merry continues to feel as though she has to see her father because Lulu refuses, making Merry the only family member who seems to care for their father. It is a difficult situation leaving Merry in a position in which she allows the past to control her future.



Part 3: Chapters 19-24

Part 3: Chapters 19-24 Summary

Chapter 19. Twelve years later Lulu wakes to her unhappy ten-year-old daughter. Lulu and Drew are still married and have an eight-year-old in addition to their older daughter. Merry continues to live in the apartment on the side of their two family home. Lulu works as an internist with a medical group in downtown Boston. Lulu specializes in older women. One of Lulu's favorite patients, an older woman whose husband recently died from cancer, comes to see her for an employment physical. Lulu is concerned about the results of the exam. That night, the night before Lulu's birthday, is the anniversary of their mother's death. Merry and Lulu watch a sad movie they think their mother might have liked.

Chapter 20. Lulu dislikes celebrating her birthday because it only reminds her of her mother's death and her failure to protect her family. However, Lulu's daughters, Cassandra and Ruby, like to make a big deal out of it. Lulu opens presents and discovers that Merry has gotten an onyx box from their Aunt Cilla for her, a possession their mother once cherished. This leads to a rush of questions from Lulu's daughters who have been told Lulu's parents died in a car crash. Finally Lulu and Drew are able to settle the girls down. Lulu becomes angry with Merry for the box while Drew and Merry suggest it is time for Lulu to tell the girls the truth.

Chapter 21. Merry is now a parole officer. Merry has a meeting with several clients, including a young man who nearly beat another boy to death for sleeping with his girlfriend. Merry is pushing the boy to get an education, convinced he is smart enough to get out of the streets. At home, Merry prepares for a blind date with a friend of Drew's who is a doctor who works with Lulu. The date does not go well, but Merry sleeps with him anyway.

Chapter 22. A month later, Merry goes over to Drew and Lulu's for coffee with a hangover. Drew warns her about her behavior and encourages her to call the doctor who has been hoping for another date. At work, Merry gets a message from the doctor hoping she will go with him to New York. Merry agrees, allowing the doctor to believe she has never been to New York since she cannot tell him about her father. While in New York, Merry goes to visit her father, but tells the doctor that she has gone shopping. The visit is difficult and when she returns to the hotel she takes it out on the doctor.

Chapter 23. Drew informs Lulu that Cassandra's teacher wants to meet with them due to some concern over her behavior in class. Lulu agrees to go with him after a small argument. At work, Lulu sees her favorite patient, Audra, who is now undergoing treatment for cancer. Lulu also argues with one of the administrators at her practice over the frequent appointments she has with Audra.



Chapter 24. Lulu arrives home late and is confronted by Drew and Merry. Lulu missed the conference with Cassandra's teacher. The teacher told Drew that Cassandra has become obsessed with being kidnapped, something Drew and Merry think stems from the lies Lulu has insisted they all tell her. The teacher has suggested therapy for Cassandra, but Lulu balks at the idea. Merry insists it is time to tell the kids the truth, but Lulu violently disagrees.

Part 3: Chapters 19-24 Analysis

Twelve years have passed. Things have changed in the lives of the Zachariah girls, most notably that Lulu has two daughters and Merry has become a parole officer instead of a victim's advocate. However, many things have not changed. Merry continues to drink too much and to have reckless relationships. Merry blames some of this behavior on Lulu because of Lulu's insistence that they not tell anyone the truth about their parents.

Lulu continues to deny her father. In doing this, Lulu forces everyone who knows the truth to lie about his existence. Lulu claims that her parents died in a car accident. This story she even tells to her own children who seem to be having difficulty with the lies. Lulu's denial is having a toll on all her relationships, including her marriage as well as her relationship with Merry. Lulu also continues to refuse to see her father, whom she has not seen since her grandmother's funeral twenty-seven years ago. This adds pressure to Merry who continues to be the only one to visit their father.

Merry is not married and she struggles with alcohol and loneliness even though she lives in the same building as her sister and brother-in-law. Merry feels as though the lies her sister forces her to tell are keeping her from growing closer to a man. To this end, Merry ruins a potentially good relationship with a doctor because she cannot tell him of her disastrous visit to her father in New York while visiting there with the doctor. It is a difficult situation for Merry that is only causing her reckless behaviors to grow. The reader suspects that this situation will eventually explode for Merry.



Part 3: Chapters 25-33

Part 3: Chapters 25-33 Summary

Chapter 25. Merry visits with Lulu the next morning and asks for forgiveness. Later, Merry has another visit with her young parolee and learns he is struggling at community college. That afternoon Merry contacts the doctor to ask for a second chance, but he refuses to see her. Finally, Merry invites her married lover to her house.

Chapter 26. In the aftermath of her night with her married lover, Merry vows to quit drinking and bad men. However, a letter from her father announcing his upcoming parole leaves Merry in a tailspin. Days later, Merry takes Lulu out to dinner and then shows her their father's letter over drinks. Lulu and Merry argue.

Chapter 27. Lulu tells Drew about her father's upcoming release. At work, Lulu continues to deal with the increasing drama over Audra's struggle with cancer. Audra's children refuse to let go of hope, but Audra is ready to stop the treatments that leave her weaker than the cancer. Over Thanksgiving, Cassandra, who has been seeing a therapist, peppers Lulu and Merry with questions about their parents. Lulu becomes agitated. Two weeks later, Drew asks Lulu to pick the kids up from school after work. Lulu agrees, but becomes embroiled in Audra's care, forced to ask Merry to pick the kids up for her.

Chapter 28. Merry has the kids in the new child care center at the courthouse, but goes to get them early so that Lulu will not know they were in there with the children of criminals and victims. However, moments after returning to her office, Merry and the girls are interrupted by one of Merry's clients. The man is drunk and afraid of returning to jail, becoming violent toward Merry and Ruby.

Chapter 29. Lulu is late arriving at the courthouse and is made later by stalled traffic. Lulu finally gets out of the car and asks what is going on. When Lulu learns that two children are being held hostage in the courthouse, Lulu rushes to the courthouse. When she arrives, Lulu learns that the hostages are her sister and her own children. Lulu is taken to the head detective where she watches Merry negotiate with her parolee. In order to calm the young man, Merry tells him about the murder of her mother and her visits to her father. By doing this, Merry tells Lulu's children. The man calms and the police are able to take him away. Merry, Lulu, Drew, and the girls go home for a night of family closeness.

Chapter 30. Merry reads an essay by her young parolee and discovers that he credits her with the changes in his life. Now the young man wants Merry to stop working as a parole officer and find happiness elsewhere. At the same time, Merry has been avoiding visiting her father.



Chapter 31. Lulu sits with Audra as she dies. A short time later, Lulu visits her father in prison. Lulu asks for an explanation of her father's actions, but does not receive a satisfactory response. Lulu then asks her father to stay away from Merry and tells him he cannot move to Boston. Finally, Lulu tells her father that she has deposited fifteen thousand dollars in an account for him.

Chapter 32. The following spring Merry goes to Brooklyn to visit her father in his new home. Merry also asks for an explanation of his crimes from her father, but like his response to Lulu, Joey has no explanation. A few months later Merry moves to New York where she begins taking classes to become a school teacher. Merry continues to visit with her father.

Chapter 33. Lulu retrieves all of her mother's belongings from her aunt Cilla. Lulu then goes to see Merry, whom she accepts has developed a new relationship with their father. Together they go through their mother's things, sharing their memories of her.

Part 3: Chapters 25-33 Analysis

Merry seems to be on a downward spiral that become worse when she learns her father is getting out of jail. While Merry spent her entire life visiting her father and supporting him as best as she could, she suddenly panics when he informs her he is getting out and wants to come to Boston to live with her. Merry asks Lulu for help, but Lulu is still struggling so much with her own feelings toward her father and her mother's death that she cannot help Merry in the way she needs her to.

Lulu continues to struggle so much with the past that she can barely function in her own family. Ironically this is fixed to some degree when Merry and her children are held hostage, leading Merry to tell the girls the truth about their grandparents. With the truth out in the open, it suddenly makes it possible for both Lulu and Merry to deal with the past. Finally they are able to heal.

Joey is released from jail, but is not welcomed by either of his daughters. Both daughters need to know why he killed their mother and attacked Merry, but they will never get a satisfactory answer because Joey is simply not capable of giving them one. Both Lulu and Merry learn to deal with this problem in their own way. While Merry never gives up her father completely, she allows her guilt and pain to stay in the past. Lulu continues to avoid their father, but embraces the past and remembers her mother with Merry, helping them both heal.



Characters

Louise 'Lulu' Zachariah Winterson

Lulu is the oldest daughter of Joey and Celeste Zachariah. Lulu takes on a caretaker role for her younger sister from young childhood because her mother is young and does not care for her children as well as she might. Lulu finds herself often forced to cook for her sister and herself as well as other parental duties. Therefore it does not seem unusual to Lulu when her mother instructs her to not let her father into the house after her parents separate. However, Lulu allows her father to sweet talk her into allowing him into the house. During a fight with Lulu's mother, Lulu's father stabs her multiple times, leaving Lulu with the guilt that she let him in, therefore she was responsible.

Lulu takes care of Merry all through their childhood, making sure she is safe. However, after securing a good home for Merry, Lulu allows herself to become a little more distant as she goes off to college and medical school. Lulu makes a strong career choice, caring for other people as she has done for her sister all her life. However, Lulu continues to struggle with her guilt over her mother's death and with her anger toward her father. Lulu refuses to see her father for nearly thirty years and discourages Merry from seeing him as well. In the end, Lulu continues to avoid her father but stops instructing Merry on how she responds to their father's need for a relationship with his daughters.

Meredith 'Merry' Zachariah

Merry is Joey and Celeste Zachariah's youngest daughter. On the day that her father murdered her mother, Merry was also stabbed in a failed murder attempt. Merry lives the rest of her life with scars on her chest, scars that she often hides from lovers and lies about when they are noticed. Merry also has a bad habit of rubbing the scars when she is agitated or upset.

Merry does not understand fully what happened the day her mother died, therefore she continues to beg for her father for months. Merry begins visiting her father at the age of six. However, when she is older and begins to comprehend what her father did, she no longer wants to see him but feels it is her duty to see him. On the occasions when Merry is not allowed to see her father, he sends her letters that leave her feeling guilty. For this reason, Merry continues to see her father throughout her childhood and her adulthood. These visits cause Merry a great deal of emotional distress, causing her to live her life in a dangerous manner.

Merry begins drinking and become promiscuous, often ending potential relationships before they can become lasting. Merry also finds herself attracted to men who are unattainable, like married men. Merry's life is a disaster and she is miserable. However,



when Merry stops hiding the truth and faces her past, she is able to put her life in some order and move on.

Joey Zachariah

Joey Zachariah is Lulu and Merry's father. Joey is madly in love with his wife throughout their marriage. However, Celeste is young, only sixteen when they marry, and impetuous. This causes Joey a great deal of jealousy and unhappiness. As a result, Joey and Celeste separate. During the separation, Celeste steals one of Joey's paychecks. Joey becomes drunk before confronting Celeste, leading to a fight that ends in Joey stabbing Celeste to death, stabbing Merry, and trying to take his own life.

Joey pleads guilty to the charge of murder and receives a life sentence. Joey's mother visits him frequently and often takes Merry with her. However, Joey's mother has poor health and she dies a few years after he enters prison. Merry continues to visit her father, however, and it is Merry he turns to when he learns he will be released on parole. However, Lulu will not allow Joey to move to Boston where she and her family live along with Merry. For this reason, Joey settles in Brooklyn, his old hometown, when released from prison.

Celeste Zachariah

Celeste is Joey Zachariah's wife. Celeste is only twenty-six when the novel begins. Celeste is a beautiful woman and has been told she should have been an actress. Instead, Celeste became pregnant at sixteen and got married. Now the mother of two young girls, Celeste is unhappy in her marriage and often entertains other men when her husband is not around. This leads to a separation. Then Celeste steals one of Joey's paychecks, leading to a confrontation that ends with Celeste's death. Although Lulu often had to take up the slack her mother left in her caretaking duties, Lulu remembers her as a kind, caring mother. Merry too has fond memories of her mother, but hers are closer to reality.

Drew Winterson

Drew is a young artist Lulu meets at a party at the end of her medical residency. Drew is a kind, patient man whose mother was an alcoholic, leaving him with an understanding of dysfunctional families but an intolerance for aggression. Drew plays a supporting role in Lulu's life, helping her through some of the emotional mess her past has left her with.

Grandma Zelda

Grandma Zelda is Merry and Lulu's paternal grandmother. Grandma Zelda has custody of the girls, but her health problems prevent her from taking physical custody. For this reason, the girls end up in an orphanage when their mother's only living relative, Cilla,



refuses to care for them. Grandma Zelda often takes Merry to visit her father, but Lulu refuses. Before she dies, Grandma Zelda asks Lulu to promise to care for both Merry and Joey. Lulu promises, but fails to do anything for Joey for more than thirty years. In the end, however, Lulu gives Joey a large amount of money in the days before he is released from jail, fulfilling her promise to her grandmother.

Mimi Rubee

Mimi Rubee is Merry and Lulu's maternal grandmother. Mimi Rubee is a fairly young woman when her daughter is violently murdered by her husband. For this reason, Mimi Rubee seems like a reasonable choice in guardian for her granddaughters. Mimi Rubee cares for the girls for a year, but then she dies of a stroke, leaving the girls to the mercy of their aunt, Cilla.

Aunt Cilla

Aunt Cilla is Lulu and Merry's maternal aunt. Cilla is an unhappy woman who blames everyone else for the bad things in her life. When Joey kills Celeste, Cilla is loud in voicing her dislike of Joey, not bothering to censor herself even in front of Joey's children. When her mother dies, Cilla blames Joey for her death as well, claiming the stress of Celeste's murder added to her mother's stress. For this reason, Cilla refuses to have Joey's children in her house and eventually sends them to an orphanage rather than deal with anything to do with Joey Zachariah.

Dr. and Mrs. Cohen

Mrs. Cohen is a social worker who works at the orphanage where Merry and Lulu live. Lulu manipulates Mrs. Cohen into a growing relationship with the girls that ends with Mrs. Cohen and her husband taking Merry and Lulu into their home as foster children. Mrs. Cohen is kind and spends a great deal of money on the girls, but they never grow a closer relationship because Merry and Lulu are too afraid that if they misbehave they will be sent back to the orphanage. In the end, Mrs. Cohen dies while Lulu is at medical school and Merry is in high school. Merry is unhappy being left alone with Dr. Cohen, a discomfort made worse when Dr. Cohen begins dating a woman much younger than his deceased wife.

Reetha

Reetha is a bully at the orphanage where Merry and Lulu live. One morning Reetha cuts off Merry's ponytail while she sleeps in revenge for an argument over some crayons. Later, Reetha cuts up a shirt given to Merry by her grandmother. Reetha makes living in the orphanage difficult for Merry, causing Lulu to find an alternate living situation become Merry can come to real harm.



Objects/Places

Knife

Joey Zachariah kills his wife with a knife from their kitchen.

Onyx Boxes

Celeste inherited multiple onyx boxes upon her father's death that she would occasionally take off the shelves and allow her daughters to dust. This is a favorite memory of Lulu and Merry and this leads Merry to procure one from their aunt Cilla for Lulu's forty-first birthday.

Tearjerker Movies

Every year on the anniversary of their mother's death, Lulu and Merry will watch tearjerker movies in her honor.

Letters

Joey sends many letters to his daughters during his years in jail. Merry reads all of them, but Lulu rarely reads any of hers.

Drawings

Cassandra, Lulu's daughter, makes several drawings that suggest death and kidnappings. Cassandra's teacher uses these drawings to suggest to Drew that Cassandra needs emotional counseling.

Expensive Clothing

The Cohens buy expensive clothing for Merry and Lulu, adding to their fears of being abandoned someday if they are not good.

Alcohol

Merry often uses alcohol as a tool to help her cope with the emotional fallout of her childhood.



Duffy-Parkman Home for Girls

Merry and Lulu live at the Duffy-Parkman Home for Girls for several years after the death of Mimi Rubee.

Richmond County Prison

Joey is incarcerated in the Richmond County Prison for more than thirty years for the murder of his wife.

Staten Island Ferry

Grandma Zelda often took Merry to see her father on the Staten Island Ferry, something Merry would forever associate with her afternoons alone with a beloved grandmother.

Brooklyn

The Zachariah family lives in Brooklyn up until the murder of Celeste Zachariah. When Joey Zachariah is released from prison for the murder of his wife, he returns to Brooklyn although he has no family left there.

Boston

Lulu moves to Boston to attend college. Later, Lulu attends medical school in Boston as well, deciding to remain there after her marriage. Merry also comes to live in Boston to attend college and to be near her sister.



Themes

Domestic Violence

The premise of this novel is the impact of the murder of Celeste Zachariah on her children. The murder itself is not of great importance in this novel, but the fact that she was murdered by her husband is. The children find themselves in a position in which they feel as though they are in some way responsible for what has happened to their mother and father. Many children who are victims of domestic violence often feel this way and will continue to feel this way even when assured by well-meaning adults that it is not their fault. This is what occurs in the case with Lulu and Merry.

As Lulu and Merry grow up, they find themselves not only orphaned by their mother in her murder and their father due to his imprisonment, but they also find themselves abandoned by the only family that they have left. This leaves Merry and Lulu alone to deal with the fallout of their father's actions. Domestic abuse is not only the violent act that takes place in the home, but also the emotional fallout of those actions. It is this that Merry and Lulu must deal with all their lives and this that they must learn to overcome before they can live normal, healthy lives. For this reason, domestic violence is an important theme of the novel.

Sisterhood

This novel presents three different examples of sisterhood. The first example of sisterhood that the author presents in her novel is the relationship between Celeste Zachariah and her sister, Cilla. Celeste is the beautiful, younger sister who seems to have the whole world at her fingertips. However, Celeste got pregnant at a very young age and finds herself in a marriage that does not make her happy. Celeste resents her husband and her children for the drain they create on her life. Cilla, on the other hand, is a pretty girl who has already begun to go soft in body after the birth of her single child. Cilla has a good marriage, but she is a bitter young woman who resents her sister's good looks and easier life. It is not until Celeste is murdered that Cilla suddenly becomes the devoted sister, determined to keep everything that matter to her sister in an attempt at holding on to her memory.

The second example of sisterhood the author presents in this novel is the most vital one. It is the relationship between Lulu and Merry. Lulu and Merry are much closer than the other sisters because of their shared tragedy and Lulu's determination to take care of Merry as her mother once instructed her. Lulu feels as though she allowed for her mother's death to take place by allowing their father into the apartment after being instructed not to let him in the house. For most of their lives, Lulu takes the leadership role, instructing Merry on how to live her life and how to respond to their father. Despite their constant conflicts, Merry and Lulu remain close, loving sisters all their life.



The final example of sisterhood the author presents in this novel is the relationship between Lulu's daughters, Cassandra and Ruby. Cassandra and Ruby constantly fight, constantly keep track of every wrong ever done against one another. However, when Ruby is placed in danger during a hostage situation, Cassandra is the first to offer comfort. This example of sisterhood is closer to one most people think of when thinking of siblings, a healthier relationship that reflects the healthier home life they share. However, there are still trouble in this relationship that also reflects the emotional struggle their mother continues to suffer as a result of her own rocky childhood.

Childhood Trauma

The main theme of this novel is childhood trauma. This book is about the trauma that shaped the lives of the two main characters, Lulu and Merry. Lulu finds herself living with guilt her whole life as a result of allowing her father into the family apartment despite her mother's express wishes to the contrary and her hesitation in going for help when her mother asked for it. Lulu feels that if she had behaved differently that day her mother might still be alive. Unfortunately, the reader believes that the volatile relationship between Lulu's parents more than likely would have led to disaster no matter what Lulu's role.

Merry was also attacked the day of her mother's murder. As a result, Merry spends a great deal of her life living with the idea that her father tried to kill her as well as hiding the truth of her injuries from every man who touches her life. Merry struggles not only with the memories of her childhood trauma, but with the physical reminders that remain on her body. It is difficult for Merry to deal with what has happened to her as well as relate to other people when her sister will not allow her to tell the truth. For this reason, and those mentioned previously, childhood trauma is an important theme of this novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view. The novel utilizes two narrators, with the author writing the name of the narrating character at the beginning of each chapter to alert the reader as to whose mind they are entering as the chapter begins. By telling the story in this way, the author allows the reader to understand both the main characters as well as to see the impact of the plot on both characters, both from an intimate view to a more distant view.

The point of view of this novel works well because it not only allows the readers to have an intimate relationship with the two main characters, but it also allows for the reader to see both characters from both an intimate view and a more distant view that allows some objectivity. This point of view is a new version of the traditional first person point of view that pushes its limits in a new and refreshing way.

Setting

The novel is set first in Brooklyn, New York in the early seventies. Brooklyn is a suburb of New York City that has its own set of traditions and its own culture. The characters see this setting as a comfortable place, as home, causing them some discomfort when the setting changes. Later in the novel, the characters move to Boston, an educated, sophisticated place where the main characters settle as they grow older.

The settings of the novel are important to the overall theme for several reasons. The first setting of the novel is Brooklyn, a place the main characters see as home. This is a place of comfort, a place where the girls know what to expect from those around them. However, after the murder of their mother, the girls are moved out of Brooklyn, finding themselves in a world they do not understand and do not feel at home in. Again the characters find a home in Boston, the town where they go to gain in education and to separate themselves from the past. This place works for them initially, but both girls struggle with the past in this new town just as much as they did before moving to Boston. In the end, both girls discover that the only way they can find peace is by going inside themselves and dealing with the past, rather than moving to a different setting, making the settings of this novel simple backdrop.

Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English. The author begins the novel in the tone of a young girl, keeping in touch with the main characters of the novel. As the novel progresses, the language begins to change as well. The characters grow older, gaining more education, and their language changes to reflect this.



The author of this novel uses strong language that supports her characters. While the characters are young children, their language is simple. Lulu becomes a college graduate and a medical doctor. Lulu's language changes to reflect these changes in her education. Merry also graduates from college, but her language remains rougher because of the people she spends time with as a parole officer. The author of the novel uses language smartly to support the authenticity of her characters, making the language work well with the plot and character.

Structure

The novel is written in three parts with thirty-three chapters. Each part is divided by important changes in the lives of the main characters. The first part of the novel contains the years in which the girls are small children. The second part covers the college years for Merry and medical school and internship for Lulu. The final part of the book covers a smaller piece of time, covering eighteen months between the fall before their father learns he will be released from jail to the Christmas after his release.

The novel has one main plot, but the story is told from two points of view. The main plot examines the impact of the murder of Lulu and Merry's mother on their lives. At the beginning, the girls react to the immediate murder of their mother, but later the impact becomes more subtle as the girls learn to bury their emotions and avoid dealing with their past. However, as the novel surges toward its conclusions, the girls come to realize they must deal with the past and learn how to do just that.



Quotes

"I wasn't surprised when Mama asked me to save her life. By the first week in kindergarten, I knew she was no macaroni-necklace-wearing kind of mother." (Part 1: Chapter 1, p. 4).

"Telling my little sister the truth seemed as mean as hitting her, but I couldn't imagine what lie to tell." (Part 1: Chapter 2, p. 19).

"Lulu said Daddy did it because Mama dated bad men. Mimi Rubee said the booze and pills made Daddy do it. Aunt Cilla said Daddy killed Mama because of him being an animal. I didn't know what to believe." (Part 1: Chapter 5, p. 43).

"Grandma's funeral felt like being in The Addams Family, except instead of Cousin Itt and Thin, Grandma's friends were the creepy ones." (Part 1: Chapter 9, p. 74).

"I'd hated her for yelling, for sending me to the store, for not making supper, for not being soft and understanding. For not knowing that I existed until she needed something." (Part 2: Chapter 14, p. 126).

"The next morning I woke up next to Nebraska." (Part 2, Chapter 15, p. 136).

"Doctor Cohen's sole manner of caring for me had lain in driving me to Richmond County Prison. He'd upped the visits from monthly to once every two weeks to weekly, and I hadn't known how to tell him it was too much. In some grotesque way, I think he'd believed he could off-load his fatherly responsibilities on Daddy." (Part 2; Chapter 16, p. 143).

"Lulu said domestic violence sounded too clean for what our father did. She didn't want to talk about it. Murderer was enough of a name for her. She said nothing else mattered." (Part 2: Chapter 17, p. 158).

"Adults should be able to offer themselves up for adoption." (Part 3: Chapter 20, p. 185).

"Osmosis. I thought how Mam forgot to buy us food, leaving out nutrition to Harry's Coffee Shop or to freezer-burned chicken potpies. By eight, I was throwing them in the oven. I knew Mama had been unhappy with us, with Dad, with our life. She didn't have to say anything. The potpies spoke for her." (Part 3: Chapter 23, p. 221).

"'He's getting out.' I didn't have to explain any further. There was only one he in our family." (Part 3: Chapter 27, p. 250).

"My father had robbed me of so much. My mother. My family. A life I wanted hovered in

the distance of my imagination, but being in his home, staring at his eyes, my eyes, I had neither the cowardice nor the courage to leave." (Part 3: Chapter 32, p. 290).



Topics for Discussion

How does Lulu describe her mother at the beginning of the novel? What kind of role does Lulu play in her family structure? How has this impacted Lulu's childhood up to this point? Why does Lulu's mother tell her not to let their father into their apartment? Is this the kind of thing a mother should ask of her young daughter? What happens when Lulu does let her father into in the apartment? Is this ultimately Lulu's fault?

Why did Joey kill Celeste? Why did Joey attack Merry? What was Joey's intention from the moment he came into the apartment? How does Lulu feel that she is the only family member not injured that day? What does Joey say when Lulu asks for an explanation of the events of that night? What does Joey say when Merry asks why he stabbed her? Are these responses satisfactory to either of the girls? Explain.

Why does Lulu and Merry go to live with Mimi Rubee? How does Mimi Rubee die? Who do the girls live with after Mimi Rubee's death? Why do they not go to live with Grandma Zelda? Who has legal custody of the girls? How do they end up in an orphanage? How do the girls respond to being taken to an orphanage? Why does Lulu scheme to get them out of the orphanage? For what reason?

Who are the Cohens? Why do they take in Lulu and Merry? How do Lulu and Merry act in the Cohen household? What lies does Lulu tell Merry to begin telling? Why does Lulu do this? How do these lies ultimately impact Merry? How do these lies impact Lulu? What is Lulu afraid of when it comes to the truth? How does she think people will treat her if they know the truth?

Why does Merry originally insist on seeing her father? Why does Merry continue to see her father throughout her childhood? Why does Merry feel guilty when she does not see her father? Is it fair that her father makes Merry feel guilty about seeing him? Why is it Merry's responsibility to care for her father? Why does Lulu not go to see their father? How does seeing her father impact Merry?

Why does Lulu make the decision not to tell her daughters about her father? How do the lies Lulu tells her children impact them? For what reason? How do Lulu's children finally learn the truth? How does this change the dynamics of the family? Why does Lulu go to see her father soon after her children learn the truth? What does Lulu tell him? Why does Lulu give her father money? Why does Lulu not tell Merry about the money? What does this say about their relationship?

How does Merry respond to the news that her father is getting out of jail? Why does Merry initially refuse to help him? Why does Merry later move to New York to be closer to her father? What is the relationship between Merry and her father? Does it work for Merry and if so, in what way? Does it work for Joey? What does Joey expect from Merry? What does Merry expect from Joey?