Operating Instructions Study Guide

Operating Instructions by Anne Lamott

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* was published in 1993. This work chronicles the first year that Lamott, a single mother, and her newborn son, Sam, spend together. Lamott records her thoughts about her unplanned pregnancy, the birth of her child, and the numerous and often challenging responsibilities of parenthood.

Operating Instructions also focuses on baby Sam's development, detailing his numerous achievements during his first year. Lamott explores her relationship with her child as deeply as she does her relationships with her friends (whom she now relies on more than ever) and her relationship with herself. She writes about the adventure of motherhood without losing a sense of herself as a unique individual, and without losing her unique sense of humor.

Author Biography

Anne Lamott was born in San Francisco, California, in 1954, the daughter of the writer Kenneth Lamott. She grew up in Marin County, north of San Francisco.At seventeen, she attended Goucher College in Maryland on a tennis scholarship, where she wrote for the school paper. However, she dropped out after two years and returned to the Bay Area,where she briefly worked for a magazine called *WomenSports*.

Lamott always knew that she wanted to write, and after moving to Bolinas, in Marin, she began to work on vignettes and stories. The discovery that her father was dying of brain cancer inspired her to organize these short pieces into her first novel, *Hard Laughter*, published in 1980 when Lamott was only twenty-six years old. Her next book, *Rosie*, came out three years later.

Lamott had been experiencing alcohol and drug problems, and in the mid-1980s, she quit using these substances, went into rehabilitation, and did not write for six months. When she returned to her craft, she produced the novel, *All New People*, whose publication she refers to in *Operating Instructions*.

With the birth of her son, Sam, in 1989, Lamott became a single mother. Although she had less time to write, Lamott's friends urged her to jot down notes about her daily life and her agent asked to see them. These notes eventually became *Operating Instructions*, published in 1993, which covered the first year of her life with Sam. The book's publication brought Lamott to national prominence.

Since then, Lamott has published both fiction and nonfiction writing. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* came out in 1994. This popular book provides a step-by-step guide on how to write and manage the writer's life. In 1999,Lamott published *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, which is a collection of her thoughts about her religious faith.

In addition to her novels and nonfiction books, Lamott was a restaurant critic for *California* magazine from 1988 through 1991 and wrote a book review column for *Mademoiselle* from 1990 through 1992. Until 1999, she regularly published her diary in the online magazine *Salon*. A former teacher at the University of California, she is also the past recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship.

Plot Summary

Pregnancy and Birth

Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year begins during Lamott's pregnancy. An unmarried, thirty-five year old writer, Lamott decides to keep the baby and raise it herself when the biological father makes it clear that he will not take part in the child's life. In the months preceding Sam's birth, Lamott faces her feelings of loneliness, as well as her joys and her fears.

1989

Sam is born on September 7, 1989. Lamott's best friend Pammy and her brother Steve are in the delivery room with Lamott. When Lamott holds Sam for the first time, she immediately becomes enraptured with her baby.

During the first month of Sam's life, Lamott is exhausted. Sometimes she feels so stressed that she needs to leave the room to get away from Sam. Throughout the long days and nights, Lamott records Sam's accomplishments: crying, losing his hair, smiling, laughing, sleeping through the night, and being introduced to her church. One highlight is Sam's baptism, which takes place when he is nearly two months old. One of Lamott's novels is published during this period.

1990

By January, Lamott notes that Sam is changing every day. She also notices changes in herself. She feels that it is easier to take care of Sam, and she also finds herself less worried. However, her journal entries show the variability of her moods. For example, just five days after writing an optimistic entry about how much easier it is to take care of Sam, she writes, "I'm mental and defeated and fat and loathsome and I am crazily, brain-wastedly tired. . . . This is maybe the loneliest I have ever felt."

Lamott also feels a great deal of financial pressure as her savings dwindle precariously. However, she is confident that God will come through for her, and toward the end of January, Lamott's miracle comes when she is hired to be the monthly book columnist at *Mademoiselle* magazine.

Pammy

In April, immediately after returning from a month-long vacation, Pammy discovers a lump in her breast. She is diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. Early in May, Pammy starts chemotherapy, and although Lamott writes that this first round goes well, Pammy becomes very nauseated and tired. In August, the doctor tells Pammy that her cancer

cannot be cured. Lamott is devastated by this news, but her journal entries show that she is gradually coming to an acceptance of Pammy's inevitable death.

Sam's First Birthday

Less than a week before his first birthday, Sam takes his first steps. On August 29, Lamott, Sam, Dudu, Rex, and Steve have a small birthday party; a larger one is planned for the weekend. On this day, Lamott reflects on the past year and Sam's birth, as well as thinking about what the future will bring and what kind of person Sam will grow up to become. In an after-note, Lamott reports Pammy's death two years later, in November 1992.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Operating Instructions is a series of diary entries made by the author, Anne Lamott, which chronicle the first year of her son Sam's life. The book begins with a preface that describes her feelings in the months leading up to her son's birth. The diary's initial entry is written approximately three months prior to Sam's birth and describes Anne's realization that she is quite pregnant and about to become a single mother. While she obviously has known for some time that a child is on the way, she tells us that the physical transformation her body has undergone in recent weeks has been very noticeable and that she now knows that this baby's birth is undeniable.

As she contemplates the many ways in which her life is about to change, she alludes to the fact that she has one specific overwhelming fear about becoming a mother, but doesn't initially elaborate. Instead, she tells us of all of the things she should fear but doesn't. For instance, although she knows it would have been perfectly normal to have been afraid of the amniocentesis, she was not. Similarly, while she went through the normal range of emotions while waiting for the results of this test, she tells us that overall, the fear of having a child that has some sort of birth defect isn't her biggest fear.

Anne also acknowledges that while the fact that she is having a boy is a little unsettling, it is not her biggest fear. Her biggest concern with having a little boy is that he will come equipped with a penis, and she wonders how her son will handle this responsibility. Finally, after contemplating some other things she should fear but does not, Anne tells us that her biggest fear about becoming a mother is that her child will have to endure the seventh and eighth grades.

In recalling her own seventh and eighth grade experiences, Anne speaks of the never-ending peer pressure, the quest for popularity and the constant feeling of being alone. These feelings were so strong that Anne spent a good portion of her adulthood trying to find ways to erase them from her memory, even resorting to unhealthy and dangerous amounts of alcohol, drugs, work and other obsessive behaviors. She tells us that she has recently experienced these feelings all over again, this time courtesy of pregnancy-related hormones. This has reinforced her desire to not subject her child to the same anguish. However, after some intense introspection, she finally comes to the understanding that she will never be able to totally make the loneliness go away. She will have to live her life as best she can while recognizing that, at least on some level, those feelings will always continue to exist.

Part 1 Analysis

Since this book is a diary written in the first person, we are provided with the insight of the author as she goes through the final weeks of her pregnancy and then the first year

of her child's life. In the book's introduction, we learn quite a bit about the author. At thirty-five years of age, she will be raising this child as a single parent. She has battled addiction, conquered fears and is now ready to become a parent. We also learn that she has a tremendous sense of humor, evidenced by the fact that her prose is peppered with sarcasm and wit.

The introduction also serves to set the stage for the remainder of the book. Aside from providing us with the opportunity to learn more about Anne's background, the introduction gives us glimpse into her feelings. We quickly see that, as she approaches the birth of her son, her feelings are not dramatically different from those of any woman about to give birth to her first child. She experiences a mixture of fear, anxiety and anticipation that seems to swirl around in her head and makes her simultaneously dread and eagerly await her son's birth.

Anne uses the experience of undergoing and then waiting for the results of her amniocentesis to illustrate the common experience of wondering if her child will be healthy. Similarly, she calls upon her own early teenage years to help us understand her fears regarding her child's emotional well-being. Clearly, her own experiences have shaped her into the person she is today, and she seems willing to do anything to spare her son some of the emotional pain she has experienced. Since she is ready to devote so much of herself to her son, we are provided with an indication that Anne may very well be free of the damaging addictive behaviors that peppered her past.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

The entries in this section of the book are made during the first month of Sam's life. The first entry is written a week after Sam's birth. Anne is accompanied by Pammy, a long-time friend. Although Anne is in labor, she is sent home by the doctor because she hasn't dilated enough. After spending the night timing her contractions and watching television, Anne and Pammy return to San Francisco the following morning only to learn that she still isn't ready to deliver. Rather than return home to Marin County, they decide to walk and then stop for breakfast. When they return to the hospital, they find Anne is finally far enough along to be admitted. Unfortunately, the hospital is filled to capacity, and so Anne and Pammy are forced to drive to another hospital.

When they reach the hospital, Anne is immediately admitted and then given an epidural. By this time, Anne's brother Steve has arrived, and together, he and Pammy coach Anne through the delivery. By the time Sam is finally born, Anne is overcome with exhaustion and has developed a fever. When the fever finally breaks, Anne nurses Sam for the first time. She describes her son as "the most beautiful thing I had ever seen."

In her next entry, Anne tells us that she is continually exhausted. In a strange way, she is happy that she is a single parent so that she doesn't have the added stress of keeping a husband satisfied. Overall, however, she wishes she had a husband to share this experience with and acknowledges not having a father will leave a significant deficit in Sam's life. She compares Sam's lack of a father to a friend whose son will be born without a left arm and wonders which is worse.

Anne also devotes an entry to Sam's first few days at home. She seems to live in constant fear that Sam will be hurt or become sick, particularly in the days following his circumcision. Although Anne says that she had no objections to the procedure, she admits to doubting her decision, particularly when Sam began to run a fever after it was completed. It also seems as though her cat isn't thrilled with Sam's arrival, particularly since the cat was witness to one of Sam's bowel movements, brought on by the insertion of a rectal thermometer. Fortunately, however, by the end of the day, the cat seems to have warmed up to Sam, and Anne, Sam and the cat spend the night sleeping together on a futon in Anne's living room.

After a nice solid stretch of sleep, Anne is up nursing Sam again. She is amazed, and a little disgusted, by the amount of milk her breasts produce. She seems to be at a loss as to how to control the flow. Anne regularly takes Sam to church with her. She found the church four years earlier when she was still drinking and began to visit it regularly. After she quit drinking, she found that she enjoyed attending the services and being among people, and so now she regularly attends. The congregants seem genuinely happy to see Anne and thrilled to finally meet Sam.

Anne describes one service she attends shortly after Sam's birth. The pastor shows a short movie that chronicles the story of a blind man who ran the Dipsea race, a grueling race that is held in northern California, on the arm of his sighted friend. Watching this movie makes Anne think of her own faith journey and how she came to accept Jesus as an important part of her life. She admits that she finds comfort in having something to turn to when she is troubled that helps to sustain her through rough times.

In Anne's next entry, we see evidence of some of the rough times. Sam is colicky and irritable, and if that weren't bad enough, her cat is irritable as well. Later that day, she receives a visit from her friend Emmy and Emmy's nine-year-old son who is also named Sam. Emmy spends time trying to soothe baby Sam while Anne tries to get some rest. Pammy also comes to visit, and she and Anne give Sam his first real bath, which he tolerates quite well. Anne says that she cannot imagine going through the experience of having Sam without Pammy by her side. Even though Pammy is happily married, Anne feels as though she and her friend are raising Sam together, almost as though they are a lesbian couple.

Anne has a little party to commemorate Sam's three-week birthday. As the weeks pass, she begins to accept that her body probably won't return to its pre-pregnancy form as easily as she had hoped. Sam is still struggling with colic, and Anne is having a hard time dealing with it. While she doesn't think she would ever hurt her son, she often finds that she must leave the room for a few moments to collect herself when his screaming episodes get particularly bad.

Sam's father is no longer part of Anne's life. Anne is angry about this and can't understand how someone can walk away knowing that they have a child. Their relationship wasn't just a casual fling. They were together for several months and even spent the previous Christmas together. When she informed him she was pregnant, his attitude changed, and their relationship quickly deteriorated. Although Anne is at a loss to explain why Sam's father left, she is sure she will eventually know the truth.

Sam's father insisted that Anne terminate the pregnancy, but she decided that she really wanted this child. She decided to put her decision in the hands of God and asked Him for some guidance. A short time later, her boyfriend's best friend appeared, and rather than try to convince Anne that she should have an abortion, he told her that he thought the pregnancy was a blessing. That night, she had a dream in which she rescued her baby boy from the freezing water. She tells us that when she awoke, she knew that having the baby was the right decision.

Anne is beginning to become concerned about money. Although She managed to save some money during her pregnancy, she is not sure how long it will last. She does receive $1,000 per month for writing a food review, but aside from that, she has no income. She has a novel that will be released in a few weeks, which has already received great reviews.

Meanwhile, Sam's colic worsens. The worst episodes occurs every night between 8:30 and 12:30. While Anne does her best to remain calm, she sometimes has trouble and is

alarmed to find that she has bad thoughts. Although she knows it's not true, she says the colic makes her feel like a bad mother.

Part 2 Analysis

Reading about Sam's birth and Anne's struggle to adjust to motherhood, we learn more about Anne's past and personality. Like any new mother, Anne has her share of doubt and anxiety. She struggles with his colic, with her own expectations and with her desire to raise her son as a gentle, compassionate person. There are times when she seems to be teetering on the edge of exhaustion, which causes us to wonder if she will make a fit mother.

In spite of all of this, Anne appears to be totally and completely in love with her son. Indeed, during the first weeks of Sam's life, she seems to have devoted her entire being to him and does little that is not directly connected to his care. We can tell that she has bonded with him. Her descriptions of their conversations show that she seems to truly enjoy being with her son.

Anne's writings also reveal that she is a deeply spiritual person. Because her father was an atheist, she was not raised with a religious background but despite this, she has always believed in God. She seems to have a particular devotion to the Virgin Mary, and she tells us that it helps her to look at herself through Mary's "adoring and gentle" eyes. Her decision to put the matter of whether or not to have Sam in God's hands gives us a better understanding of the depth of her beliefs. When she describes her financial situation to us, she tells us that she is not overly concerned about her lack of an income. She believes that "God hasn't brought me this far to drop me on my head now." These examples show that Anne has a strong belief in God as well as a fairly well-defined prayer life.

In fact, it is Anne's belief in God that leads to the book's title. Recall the entry in which she describes putting the matter of Sam's birth into God's hands. When asking God for guidance, she tells him that she will just wait for her "next operating instructions." Despite what one might initially think, the book's title does not refer to advice for caring for a newborn, but rather, it refers to how Anne relies on God's guidance to help her care for her newborn.

This section also provides some glimpses into Anne's past that help us to better understand who she is. She describes a visit to her therapist where she finally decides to take part in an exercise that involves arranging figurines into scenes and then describing the scenes to the therapist. We learn that Anne is afraid that Sam will not feel safe as he grows up. As we read the entry, we learn that this stems back to Anne's own childhood when, because of her father's fluctuating income as a writer, the family often had to go without many basic necessities. As we read about this period in Anne's life, we begin to see why she seems so very protective of her son.

Finally, Anne's trademark humor is evident throughout nearly every entry. Her ability to transform even the most mundane occurrences, such as Sam's reaction to the insertion of the rectal thermometer, into such humorous prose provides an indication of just how gifted a writer she is.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

The entries in this section of the book take place during the month of October. Sam's colic continues to worsen, and Anne is becoming increasingly frustrated. She has tried everything she can imagine, but nothing seems to soothe him. Because she still hasn't fully healed from Sam's delivery, she finds it difficult to hold him for very long periods of time.

Early one morning after Anne has nursed Sam and he has fallen asleep, she decides to try to get a few more hours of sleep as well. Since arriving home from the hospital, they have both been sleeping on a futon in Anne's living room. Just as Anne is falling asleep, she hears Sam whimper. Thinking he is about to wake again, she tries to hush him, but he continues to whimper. In an effort to soothe Sam, she reaches over to rub his back and is horrified to find he isn't there. She frantically looks around for him and a moment later, finds that he has rolled off the futon and is lying between it and the wall.

This episode reminds Anne of a time near the end of her father's life when his brain cancer was really beginning to take its toll. While out running errands together one day, Anne left her father in the car for a few moments while she went into the bank. The line was long, and so she kept walking over to the window to make sure he was still in the car. At one point, she looked through the window and saw that the car was empty. Within moments, however, she found her father safely wandering down the street and staring up to the sky, as if he was wondering if that was where his next "operating instructions" would come from.

In one entry, Anne describes her relationship with her mother. She recalls that when she discovered she was pregnant, she feared telling her mother because she was sure her mother was going to be angry. Instead, to Anne's complete surprise, her mother was thrilled. Now that Sam is here, Anne's mother comes over every chance she gets to see him.

Anne also marvels at the fact that her body is capable of producing the food that nourishes her son. She remembers being afraid that her milk wouldn't be good enough for her child, and she is happy that Sam seems to be thriving on it. As much as she loves breastfeeding, however, Anne hates expressing her milk. She describes the process as the "ultimate bovine humiliation" and finds it to be extremely painful.

Anne discusses her history with addiction in an entry in which she describes her visit with Sam's pediatrician. When she tells the doctor that Sam's colic is sometimes quite overwhelming, he suggests that she consider medicating him. Anne is reluctant to do so, and says that part of her reluctance comes from the fact that she doesn't trust herself to give him the right amount. She has always overmedicated.

Meanwhile, the colic continues, and Anne endures more sleepless nights. She seems to be near the end of her rope when one day, she discovers that Sam is beginning to smile. Shortly after this discovery, she also finds that when he cries, real tears fall. She says that between the smiles, the tears and the cooing sounds he is making, it seems as though he has an unfair advantage.

When Anne receives her copy of her new book, she can hardly believe that she is the author. Given the fact that there are days that she can hardly manage to brush her teeth, she wonders how she managed to complete such a Herculean task. To illustrate how overwhelmed she feels with her life, she tells us about a recent event.

The husband of the associate pastor of Anne's church visits her to do something for Anne and Sam. When he asks what one thing Anne feels too exhausted or overwhelmed to take on herself, she is reluctant to tell him. Eventually, she admits that she would love to have her bathroom cleaned, and so the man tackles the job for her. Although Anne feels a little guilty lying on her couch while he scrubs her bathroom, she is grateful that he came to do it.

One night during a particularly bad episode of Sam's colic, Anne telephones an organization that helps overwhelmed parents deal with the stresses of parenthood. She is connected to a nurse who speaks with her for over an hour and suggests that Anne eliminate wheat and dairy products from her diet. Sam eventually quiets down, and Anne is able to get some rest. When Anne realizes the next day that her book is now in the stores, she and Sam take a trip to town so that she can show him the books in the store windows.

When an earthquake hits the San Francisco Bay Area, Anne and Sam are at home. She is paralyzed with fear, and although she realizes that the books on her shelves could crush Sam, she is unable to move. When the earthquake subsides, she rushes to his bassinet and picks him up. Soon, her neighbor Julie comes to check on her. They turn on the television and find that there was a significant amount of damage in and around San Francisco. As her friend worries about the safety of her husband, Anne finds herself secretly worrying about how the earthquake will affect the sales of her just-released book. She knows her thoughts are selfish, and she wonders if Sam will grow up feeling as self-absorbed as she sometimes does.

After a few days of Anne's new dairy- and wheat-free diet, Sam's colic seems to be under control. While he still has his fussy time in the evening, it is manageable, and for this, Anne is grateful. He is sleeping for longer stretches at night, and so Anne is feeling better as well. As she realizes that perhaps there is a light at the end of the tunnel, she thinks back to her pregnancy and recalls how she wondered if she would ever truly love Sam. Now, she can't imagine life without him. Even so, she sometimes wishes that she had a husband or at least a nanny to share some of the burden. She also wishes that she could have a drink. Despite the fact that she has been sober nearly three and one-half years, she knows that if she starts drinking, she won't be able to stop and that she will lose Sam in the process.

One night when Sam is being particularly difficult, Anne finds herself running out of patience. Afraid that she might actually hurt her son, she leaves the room and prays for strength. Shortly after, she decides to take Sam for a walk. While they are out, they run into some friends. Before long, Anne begins to feel better. When they return home, she nurses Sam until he falls asleep, and she finally feels contented herself.

The colic is still under control, and Anne feels a little more in control of herself as well. She finds herself finally able to say "no" to people when she needs to, and she doesn't worry as much about hurting their feelings as she used to. She hopes that when Sam grows up, he understands that it is all right to say "no," especially if by doing so, he will manage to avoid destructive behaviors.

One of Anne's friends is married to a man who is in the Big Brothers program. When things don't work out with the child he is assigned to through the program, he asks Anne if he can be Sam's Big Brother. Anne readily agrees, and so Brian comes on a regular basis to spend time with Sam. Anne is grateful for the influence of Brian and other men who play a significant role in Sam's life. She hopes that at least at some level, it will make up for the fact that he does not have a relationship with his father.

With her own father dead and having no contact with Sam's father, when Anne learned she was pregnant, she decided to ask Rex and Dudu, longtime family friends, to be Sam's paternal grandparents. Having no grandchildren of their own, Rex and Dudu were overjoyed. Anne usually leaves Sam with them on Wednesday evenings so that she can go out with friends, but increasingly she finds that she does not like being away from her son.

The remainder of the month passes relatively uneventfully. Sam has "graduated" from the one-piece gowns he wore almost exclusively for the first month. Now he wears little outfits. Anne fears that he is going to grow up right before her eyes. They pass their time enjoying each other's company. However, knowing that she is eventually going to run out of money, Anne tries to get some work done.

Part 3 Analysis

In this section, Anne is beginning to settle into motherhood. This is not to say that everything is going smoothly, there are plenty of rough spots. Like many new mothers, Anne is trying her best to contend with Sam's colic with mixed results. While she thinks that her reactions are due at least in part to her struggles with addiction, the frustration, anger and sense of loneliness she sometimes feels is common among new mothers trying to cope with a high-needs baby. It is not surprising that as Sam's colic begins to subside and she gets more rest, these feelings begin to go away.

Anne mentioned her addiction in the previous section and does so again several times in this part of the book. In one reference, she shares that her reluctance to give Sam medication to relieve his colic is because she is afraid she will over medicate him. In a later entry, she tells us how she and her friend Peg used to do large quantities of

cocaine. She also discusses her desire to be able to relax with a drink. She knows that if she does drink, she will likely end up losing Sam in the process. Anne has a good understanding of her limitations and knows that she cannot give in to the temptations that she has worked so hard to overcome.

Anne seems to be in disbelief that, given her past, she has been entrusted with the life of a child. This is evident each time she describes her interactions with Sam, at least those that don't involve his colic. In one particularly poignant entry, she tells us that "there's so much joy and pain and love and wonder in my chest and behind my eyes." She is now responsible for this little life, and this seems to give Anne courage to avoid the things and situations that had previously led her stray. When she tells us she finally has the courage to turn down social invitations, she provides yet another indication of her emerging maturity.

She acknowledges the role that Sam has played in this transformation when she tells us that "I feel that he has completely ruined my life, because I just didn't used to care all that much." In this one sentence, she sums up her metamorphosis from a woman who has spent her adult life doing things only for herself to someone who is beginning to see the significance of her life.

One of the most striking characteristics of Anne's prose is her total honesty. She does not hesitate to write about her true feelings when her patience and stamina are being pushed to the limit by Sam's colic. Indeed, rather than put on a brave front, she tells us of the difficulties she is having and admits that there are times that she does not like her son very much. While these are very normal feelings, they are nonetheless feelings that most new mothers are afraid to verbalize.

Anne's ability to comfortably write about her feelings tells us that at least on some level, she knows that her emotions are normal. Another example of her blunt honesty comes in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, when she finds herself more concerned with how the earthquake will impact sales of her book than with the people who have been hurt. While she admits that her feelings are selfish and self-absorbed, she offers no apologies, which provides an indication that she has accepted herself for who she is.

We also see that despite the fact that Anne is a single parent, she has a large network of family and friends who seem to genuinely love and support her. She makes several references to friends who come by to drop off groceries, her pastor's husband who comes to clean her bathroom and others who occasionally drop by to give her a break. Even though Anne doesn't verbalize this, with her limited financial resources, this network is going to be critical to her future survival. Finally, Anne's ability to make light of even the most serious things continues to be evident throughout her prose. Her description of her distaste for expressing her milk is hilarious, as is her account of the first time she left Sam with a new babysitter.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

The entries in this section take place during the month of November. In her first entry, Anne tells us that she was unable to produce enough milk the previous day to feed Sam. Her neighbor suggests that they supplement his feedings with soy formula. Sam seems to enjoy the formula, which makes Anne wonder if he hasn't been getting enough to eat. She finally contacts the La Leche League, who suggests that she drink plenty of fluids in order to boost her milk production. She does this and is quite pleased with the results. Anne also writes that she has finally allowed herself to ask other people for help. While she admits that it is a difficult thing to do, she knows that for her sake as well as Sam's, she must allow others to help her. She acknowledges that she is tired and overwhelmed, and she yearns for time to rest and relax.

Sam laughs for the first time as Anne is changing his diaper. She writes that the experience reminds her of a Wallace Stevens poem. A few days later, she writes about a session with her therapist. She has been feeling badly about being a single parent and wonders if she isn't good enough to have a husband. Rita, her therapist, reminds her of five "rules" of the world that Anne once shared with her: "You must not have anything wrong with you or anything different; if you do have something wrong with you, you must get over it as quickly as possible; if you can't get over it, you must pretend that you have; if you can't pretend you have gotten over it, you should just stay home; and if you feel like you want to go out, you should have the decency to be ashamed." Reminded of these rules, Anne decides that she needs to "show up" for her own life and not be ashamed of her single-parent status.

A few days after Halloween, Anne decides to eat some leftover candy. She knows that doing so will likely have an effect on Sam later, but she doesn't seems to be able to stop herself. By dinnertime, Sam is colicky, and she instantly regrets her decision. Meanwhile, Sam continues to grow and develop. Anne is more aware of him actually hugging her and holding on when she carries him. He seems to be quite observant and takes in all of the activity going on around him. He is also becoming more mobile. Although not yet crawling, he manages to inch his way around on the floor.

In another entry, Anne writes about her fear of the world that Sam is destined to grow up in. She fears so many things: cancer, plague and child-snatchers. She believes that even good people are caught in a downward spiral and are losing their goodness. To illustrate her point, she writes about a woman she regularly sees in the grocery store who seems to enjoy gossiping about others and putting people down. Anne does not like this woman, but at the same time, Anne appears intimidated by her.

At three months of age, Sam finally sleeps through the night, and Anne seems to be invigorated by the extra rest. She is still worried about their financial future. Anne is not motivated to write but knows that she must in order to be able to provide for her son.

She is particularly worried because she has just learned that Sam's father has filed a petition with the court denying that he is the father. Anne decides she needs to fight this, partly because she wants Sam to know whom his father is and partly for practical reasons. Should his father die before Sam turns 18, the boy will be eligible for Social Security.

Anne also worries about what she will tell Sam about his father when he finally asks. Her friend Peg tells Anne that she has plenty of time left before she needs to worry about that. Even so, Anne can't help feeling anxious about having to explain Sam's father's lack of involvement. While she believes that God is in control of things, she wishes that He would let her in on his plans so that she doesn't need to spend so much time and effort worrying about how it will all turn out.

Part 4 Analysis

Within these entries, Anne spends a great deal of time reflecting on her status as a single parent. Indeed, she spends one session with her therapist discussing this very subject. On a number of levels, she wishes she had a husband. While she has a number of friends who regularly help her, Anne keenly misses being able to share Sam's growth and accomplishments with a spouse. This is articulated in her November 16th entry, in which she and her friend Deirdre watch Sam inch around on the floor. She writes, "...we watched him together for a while. I sort of felt for a minute like I imagine women must feel when they and their husbands watch their baby together. It felt really great, and then I got really sad."

It seems that despite her eclectic lifestyle and rebel personality, deep down Anne is a traditionalist who would prefer that her son be raised in a two-parent household. This is interesting, particularly since Anne's own parents have long been divorced. This theme resurfaces later when Anne learns that Sam's father has filed court papers that deny he is Sam's father. Anne spends a great deal of time worrying about how she will help Sam deal with the fact that he doesn't have a father. When she wonders why she was lucky enough to have Sam when her friend Pammy and her husband have been struggling with infertility for so long, she reasons that while she has a baby, at least Pammy has a husband. Based on these examples, Anne's definition of "normal" includes the presence of a husband and father.

Anne also continues to be plagued by feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. When she fails to produce enough milk, she instantly believes it is a sign that she is not a good mother. She also berates herself for eating candy when she knows that the effect on Sam will not be good. It seems that her addictive tendencies have gotten the best of her, but in an earlier entry she resists the urge to take to her bed with a gallon of ice cream. As with many new mothers, Anne's emotions are always changing and quite unpredictable.

Part 5

Part 5 Summary

The entries in this section were written in December. Sam continues to grow, and like all babies his age, he tests Anne's patience and endurance. Fortunately, her friends are still a constant presence, and they are invaluable in helping her to overcome the rough spots that she encounters.

In early December, Sam is baptized at St. Andrew's, the church he and Anne regularly attend. After the service, she has a party at Pammy's house, inviting "all the important people from all aspects of my life." Anne is overwhelmed at the outpouring of love and generosity from her friends and relatives and spends most of the afternoon with Sam in a back room of Pammy's house. Later, when looking at pictures taken at the party, she thinks that Sam was also overwhelmed by all of the activity.

She also reflects on how many people at the party seem to be impressed with her mothering abilities. This perplexes Anne because she believes she is not a very good parent. In addition to being tired all of the time, she constantly worries about money and wonders how she will support herself and her son. As she is lost in these thoughts of self-pity, she receives a telephone call from a friend who reports that a mutual friend's recently released book received less than encouraging reviews. Anne cannot hide her delight at this news and later admits that her jealousy is probably one of the worst of her personality traits.

On Christmas Eve, Anne and Sam have dinner with old family friends, which has been a tradition for nearly thirty years. As she gathers with her family and friends, she wishes that her father could have lived long enough to meet Sam. She recalls the last Christmas they spent together and regrets having spent the majority of his final months either drunk or high. On New Year's Eve, Anne hopes that Sam continues to grow and be happy and that she can somehow manage to stay "more in the now" rather than spending too much time worrying about what the future will bring or past failures.

Part 5 Analysis

The book's main themes continue in this section. Anne is preoccupied with the fact that Sam's father is not a part of their life. She also worries tremendously about their future. Even so, in this section her entries take on a slightly more optimistic tone, a development that is almost certainly brought on by Sam's newly acquired ability to sleep through the night. As the effects of sleep depravation begin to subside, Anne appears to be increasingly more levelheaded and rational in her thought processes. She celebrates the small things: Sam's increasing neck muscle control, his increasing awareness of the activity going on around him and his joyful noises.

At the same time, she is still battling her demons. Her father's death has affected her tremendously. As she reflects upon his last Christmas and shares her regret at having spent it dunk, we again see the extent to which Anne's various addictions have affected her life. Her decision to spend most of Sam's baptism party alone in another room is largely because she is still not entirely comfortable with herself.

Part 6

Part 6 Summary

In these entries, which were written in January, Anne finds motherhood increasingly easier. While she had been told that things would get easier after the third month or so, she had a hard time believing that would actually occur. She also has noticed that she is generally less anxious than she had been and doesn't worry as much. While she seems to be grateful for these changes, a part of her still wishes that Sam could remain in his current stage forever.

At times, Anne appears overwhelmed by her life. In one entry, she compares her current state with her experiences volunteering for the Special Olympics. The assistance she receives from her many friends and family members has helped her get through the first few months of Sam's life in very much the same way that she helped the mentally challenged runners cross the finish line.

One day while Anne is driving to the grocery store, Sam falls asleep. When they arrive, she tries to wake him, but when she has difficulty, she immediately believes that something is seriously wrong. Frightened, she slaps Sam's face, startling him. He begins to cry. While Anne is immediately remorseful, she is not fully convinced that he is fine. She spends the rest of the evening periodically making loud noises to startle Sam and wake him up.

Later that night, she comes across an old Polaroid picture she had taken at a time during her pregnancy when she was feeling particularly vulnerable about not having a husband. While at home one night, she taped a sonogram photo of Sam taken during the fourth month of her pregnancy along with two photos of her self, one at age 7 and one at age 35, on the wall under the crucifix hanging in her kitchen. She then took a photo of the entire thing and carried it with her for the remainder of her pregnancy. She referred to the items in the photo as her "family," and it helped her to remember all the things she had for which she should be grateful.

Meanwhile, Anne's financial problems worsen. She has $800 left in her savings account, and her only source of income is a from a food review she writes each month. She knows she needs to make at least an additional $1,500 each month in order to get by and has resigned herself to taking on more free-lance work. She writes note to God, asking if this is what He wants her to do. Then, she puts the note in her prayer box and waits for her next "operating instructions." A few days later, she receives a telephone call from the editor of a magazine offering her a monthly column at a salary of $2,000 per month. Anne is so happy that she is moved to tears. Her jubilation lasts several days, and although she is genuinely happy and relieved, she wishes her father were still alive to share in her joy.

In one of the final two entries for the month, Anne once again writes about her lack of a husband. She recounts a conversation with a friend who had a baby around the same time Sam was born. As the two women commiserate about the difficulties of raising an infant, Anne asks if it is easier having a husband with whom to share the burden. Her friend tells her that the only advantage to having a husband is that she can complain to him. When Anne finishes talking to her friend, she calls Pammy and asks if she could use her as her "husband" and complain to her. Pammy agrees and allows Anne to vent.

In her final entry for the month, Anne tells us that she has just reread a short story in which a young child dies. Reading the story again awakens her fear that something terrible is going to happen to Sam, and as she watches him sleep that night, she hopes that he will outlive her.

Part 6 Analysis

Like many new mothers, Anne continues to experience a wide range of emotions. While there are days when she feels completely in control, there are others when she feels powerless to control anything in her life. For example, when Sam begins to sleep through the night more often, her entire outlook is positive. When he is fussy or if she is worried about her finances, she retreats into the darkness and despair that characterized the early months of Sam's life.

Anne's devotion to Jesus also continues to be evident. Recall the entry in which she places her financial difficulties in His hands. When she later receives a job offer that will solve her problems, she is so overcome that she breaks into tears. Anne is a woman of deep faith who truly believes in the power of prayer. She also remains devoted to her deceased father's memory and wishes that he could be there to share in her success.

As bad as things seem, Anne seems to understand and appreciate all that she has. This is particularly evident in her January 9th entry. She compares her support system of friends and relatives to the help that she offers to athletes participating in the Special Olympics. She also conveys this understanding in her January 15th entry. She tells how some of the older women from her church, who themselves live on very limited incomes, still managed to find a few dollars to help Anne through her difficult times. She also describes the "family portrait" of her crucifix and photos of herself and her unborn child.

However, like many people who find themselves overwhelmed and frustrated by their circumstances, Anne still has periods of self-pity and anger. Her ability to reach out to her friends and supporters rather than retreating back to the destructive addictive behavior that had plagued her in the past is testament to how much stronger she has become.

Part 7

Part 7 Summary

In these entries, written during the February after Sam's birth, Anne describes her son's transition to solid foods. Like most babies, Sam is a messy eater. He is now crawling and can sit up by himself. As she watches him crawl, she can't help but wonder what his future will hold.

Anne seems to think that Sam is a happy baby, and she knows that he brings a great deal of joy to her friends and family. She is happy that her mother regularly gets to spend time with Sam. and she knows that in many ways, Sam's birth has helped to improve her relationship with her mother. In the final entry, Anne writes about her love of breastfeeding Sam. She begins to worry about the day when she will have to stop and seriously contemplates continuing until he begins kindergarten.

Part 7 Analysis

This section is one of the shorter ones in the book. The once daily entries have dwindled to once or twice a week, and while specific reasons aren't given, part of the reason may be that Anne has more fully settled into her role as a single mother. The entries in this section are also noticeably more introspective and spiritual, yet another indication that perhaps Anne more fully understands and accepts her life as it is.

When she tells us in her February 20th entry that Sam's birth has brought grace into the lives of her and her mother, she provides an additional indication that she has found peace and contentment in her life. Her February 23rd entry, describing Sam's newly acquired crawling skill, is also quite interesting because she notes that he is crawling backward, which is contrary to the many other ways in which he is moving forward in his life. Her conclusion that the action is much more important than the direction is symbolic of her own life. While she knows that she isn't always heading in the right direction, the fact that she is continually trying is what matters most.

Part 8

Part 8 Summary

It is now March, and Sam is six months old. Anne has been battling depression. She spends some time with other friends who are also in recovery and says it helps some. Even so, she still craves cocaine and alcohol. Rather than cave in, she calls her therapist, which helps tremendously.

Sam, meanwhile, has begun sleeping in a crib that Anne has placed in one of the bedrooms. While he usually goes to sleep readily, he seems to have a look of betrayal whenever she leaves him for the night. Anne often feels much the same way and sometimes finds herself intensely missing him when she goes out with friends for the evening.

In her March 16th entry, Anne writes that the routine and sameness of her life is beginning to wear her down. She is bored, but she cannot find the motivation she needs to move forward. While she really wants to learn to live in the present, she cannot help wishing she could once again experience the rush that comes with drugs and alcohol. She knows that she should just slow down and accept things as they are, but she can't help feeling compelled to run herself ragged in an effort to try to fix things. She knows that if she can manage to find a way to slow down, she will not only benefit herself but also Sam.

Anne also writes about her desire to find a man to share her life. She recently has a crush but decides to end the pursuit when she learns that the man is a Republican who is reluctant to have oral sex. When she makes this decision, she realizes that it is with Sam in mind, since if the relationship fails, she will not be the only one who feels the effects. Sam will also likely have an emotional stake in the entire ordeal.

Sam is finding his voice and seems to delight in making all sorts of noises, especially when he and Anne are in church. In one entry, Anne writes about a particular Sunday when she tries to express her gratitude for the blessings she has received in her life during a church service. She is constantly interrupted by Sam's noises and babbling. By the end of the month, he is crawling.

Part 8 Analysis

While the previous sections provide some hints that perhaps Anne is beginning to turn the corner in her emotional recovery, in this section we see that she still has quite a bit of work to do. She repeatedly refers to her depression and says that she is emotionally fragile. She also refers to her addictions and indicates that she still often craves a drink or a "hit." Based on these entries, Anne's experience is no different from that of many other recovering alcoholics and addicts. She will always be in recovery and will likely always be tormented by the lure of addictive substances.

Anne demonstrates that she is emotionally stronger than she thinks. While she mentions it frequently, she has so far resisted the urge to have "just one drink" or "just one hit." She knows that she will not stop at "just one" and that her ability to be a good mother to Sam rests on her ability to resist temptation. Rather than give in to her demons, she turns to her church friends or to one of the many friends and family members who have become her support system.

Part 9

Part 9 Summary

In this brief section, Anne writes about Pammy's discovery that she has breast cancer. The cancer is an aggressive form, and Pammy is scared. Anne is scared as well and forces herself to focus on Sam so that she does not fall into deep despair. Anne's thirty-sixth birthday comes and goes during this month, as does her deceased father's birthday. Even though it has been eleven years since her father's death, Anne still grieves and misses him terribly. She and Pammy spend the afternoon at the movies while her mother watches Sam.

Part 9 Analysis

The news that Pammy is facing breast cancer has hit Anne hard. Just as she has managed to use Sam to keep her from returning to her addictive behavior, Anne again turns to her son to keep her from becoming overly despondent with this news. As she writes on April 20, "I need to try and focus on Sam for a few days. Otherwise I am growing too sad." Her ability to keep her priorities in the forefront of her mind is commendable and again proves that she is emotionally stronger than she thinks.

Part 10

Part 10 Summary

Sam is now standing and being quite noisy. While Anne knows this is a normal part of his development, she often finds herself surprised at how vocal he has become. Meanwhile, Pammy learns that the cancer has spread to six of her lymph nodes. She remains optimistic and is spending a great deal of time researching treatment alternatives. Even so, she is clearly afraid that she won't be around to see Sam grow up, a prospect that makes both her and Anne quite sad.

Over the next few days, Pammy and Anne spend time together. Pammy's spirits remain high, and she even manages to joke about her cancer. She gets through her first round of chemotherapy relatively easily and decides that despite advice from well-meaning friends who suggest all sorts of alternative therapy, she will follow her doctor's advice and instructions. Eventually, she does try medicinal marijuana to help alleviate some of the chemotherapy-related nausea. Anne is worried about her friend and also worried about herself and Sam. Money is still a problem, and to Anne, it seems as though everything they own is second-hand.

Part 10 Analysis

In his section, Anne is trying the best she can to be a good mother to Sam as well as a good friend to Pammy. Even so, it seems as though Pammy is still taking care of Anne. In her May 12 entry, Pammy comes by to visit bringing some sorbet and a magazine. Anne recognizes Pammy's kindness and cannot imagine how she will be able to go on without her friend.

Given Anne's fragile state, we have to wonder about her ability to deal with Pammy's illness. Anne herself writes, "It would be much easier to think of losing her if she weren't so goddamn kind." This is the first indication that Anne knows that Pammy will eventually succumb to her illness. Despite the emotional turmoil, Anne's relationship with Sam continues to grow and strengthen. She seems to genuinely love him and enjoy the time they spend together.

Part 11

Part 11 Summary

It's June, and Anne and Sam are sick with colds for the second time in as many weeks. Pammy comes to visit and bring groceries, and she winds up getting sick as well. Anne feels terrible about this because she knows that Pammy needs all of her strength to endure her chemotherapy. Anne can hardly believe that her friend is going through all of this. The combination of her worry about Pammy, her anxiety about being able to support her family and her daily struggles with her addictions causes Anne to feel like she is barely hanging on.

Anne is reminded of a story one of her friends told her about a time when her toddler son locked himself in a room. The little boy wasn't able to open the door, and he was terrified. Rather than leave him so that she could get help, Anne's friend was able to maneuver her fingers under the door so that the little boy could touch them. This seemed to soothe him, and eventually he was calm enough to open the door. Anne says that the fingers she touches in her own life are those of the members of her church, her friends and her faith. Usually, it is enough to sustain her.

Despite this, Anne feels guilty having any type of fun when Pammy is so sick. One night, she forces herself to go out with her friends so that she can do a food review. As usual, this is just what she needs. Being with her friends usually helps her to break out of whatever slump she is in. It occurs to Anne one day that she and Pammy use Sam as a way to escape the terrible things that are happening to Pammy. At first, she compares this to using drugs, but then she realizes that while drugs generally take a person away from their reality, Sam is reality.

Aside from her two regular columns, Anne hasn't been feeling very motivated to write. As she reflects on this, she remembers a time from her childhood when her brother had procrastinated on a lengthy report about birds and needed to complete it. Feeling overwhelmed and incapable of beginning, he sat at the table unable to get started. Soon, Anne's father joined him and told him to "just take it bird by bird." This simple advice turned out to be one of the best pieces of writing advice Anne has ever heard.

Sam continues to grow and develop. Anne is in constant amazement at what he is capable of doing and says that it seems as though he is growing up right before her eyes. His memory is also developing, which is at times amazing and at others, frustrating. She thinks that he is close to taking his first steps, and he gets his first tooth.

Part 11 Analysis

The June 5 entry shows that Anne still needs plenty of emotional and physical support. Recall how she tells us that even though she is enduring chemotherapy, Pammy still makes regular visits to bring Anne and Sam groceries. By doing so, Pammy puts her

own health at risk. While we have known almost from the beginning of this journal that Anne is an emotionally needy person, the depth of her frailty isn't clear until now. She allows her friend to continue to do things for her although she is very ill, and this is representative of Anne's self-absorption.

The subject of Anne's addiction comes up twice in this section, once when she is describing her childhood love of swings and once when she describes Sam's role in her and Pammy's life as being similar to that of a drug. His presence helps them to momentarily escape the terrible things that are happening in their lives. Clearly, addiction is something that is never totally eliminated from a person's life. Rather, Ann continually attempts to control her addictions and live with them .

Part 12

Part 12 Summary

Anne marks her fourth year of sobriety during the month of July. She attempts to tell Sam what her life used to be like one night while she is nursing him. She recognizes that she is far from perfect, and that Sam's existence in her life is nothing short of a miracle. Pammy is tired, but otherwise seems to be doing fine. Anne, on the other hand, is an emotional wreck. When Pammy and her husband go away for a week, Anne is somewhat grateful for the break. When Pammy returns, she seems somewhat stronger and rejuvenated. She even tells Anne that she is happy to be in the moment and isn't particularly concerned about what may happen down the road.

Part 12 Analysis

In this brief section, Anne reaches a significant milestone in her recovery. four years of sobriety. She is still depressed and is grateful for the assistance of Megan, Sam's babysitter. This is yet another example of how Anne allows people to take care of her. It seems that even though four years have passed and she should be a little stronger, Anne is still very, very fragile. She constantly worries about Sam's health and wellbeing and imagines every little illness or injury will somehow develop into a life-threatening situation.

Part 13

Part 13 Summary

Shortly before celebrating his first birthday, Sam takes his first steps. Anne is overjoyed. On his birthday, she reminisces about the days and hours leading up to his birth. She recalls going out to breakfast with Pammy while waiting to be admitted to the hospital and driving to another hospital because the one where she was to deliver Sam was overcrowded. She remembers moments immediately following Sam's birth and her wishes for him on the night of his birth: that he will be compassionate; that he will work for peace, justice and mercy; and most importantly, that he will outlive her. Finally, she hopes that her son will grow up believing in God.

Part 13 Analysis

Anne concludes her journal in much the same way that it began, by describing Sam's birth. It is clear from her prose that even a full year later, she is still in awe of the fact that she has given birth to her son and that she has been able to take such good care of him for the first year of his life. Her wishes for Sam are simple ones, but they nonetheless reflect the essence of Anne. Her belief in God largely sustained her though some troubling times, so it is not surprising that she would like her son to be able to likewise draw his strength from the Almighty. As this journal ends, the reader is left to wonder how Anne will cope with Pammy's death, which occurs more than two years after the final entry is made.

Characters

Biological Father

Sam's biological father, whom Lamott does not name, takes no role in Sam's life. When Lamott first told him she was pregnant, he tried to convince her not to have the baby. When Sam is a few months old, he files court papers falsely swearing that he could not be the baby's father.

Brian

Brian, the husband of Lamott's friend, volunteers to be Sam's Big Brother.

Dudu

Dudu is Sam's surrogate grandmother. She and her husband Rex were Lamott's parents' best friends, and they have been part of Lamott's life since childhood. Along with Lamott's mother, Dudu visits often, and Lamott thinks the two older women compete for Sam's affection.

Anne Lamott

Lamott, a writer, becomes pregnant when she is 35. She is unmarried, the pregnancy is unplanned, and the biological father wants no part of the baby's life. Still, Lamott quickly decides to keep the baby.

Lamott's personality contains seemingly con-flicting elements. She is liberal but religiously faithful; she is irreverent but sentimental; and she is prone to mood swings. Lamott has published two novels and a third appears shortly after Sam's birth.The time and energy required to care for a baby by herself, however, renders Lamott unable to write anything except the reviews by which she makes her living and the journal that she publishes as *Operating Instructions*.

The entries in her journal reveal that Lamott undergoes the feelings and experiences that are common among new mothers: she feels fat; she finds her baby unbelievably beautiful and smart; she gets frustrated and wonders why she ever had a child; and she wishes she had a moment to herself. However, the first year of Sam's life also brings atypical circumstances. Specifically, her best friend Pammy is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and Lamott struggles to reconcile her joyful feelings and her sorrowful ones.

Sam Lamott

Sam is Lamott's son. In his first year of life, he reaches typical baby milestones: crawling, walking, laughing, smiling, grabbing objects, and other activities. He brings great joy to Lamott's family and friends.

Steve Lamott

Steve is Lamott's brother. He is present at Sam's birth. Although he remains an active presence in Sam's life, he is adamant about not allowing Lamott to make him a father figure.

John Manning

Manning is Sam's father's best friend, but he supports Lamott in her decision to have the baby. He remains a constant friend to the two of them. He is also the person who convinced her to jot down a few notes and observations each day of Sam's first year.

Megan

Megan, a former student in one of Lamott's writing workshops, is Sam's twenty-year-old babysitter. Lamott often considers Megan to be a lifesaver because her help allows Lamott to have a few much-needed hours to herself.

Mom

Lamott's mother lives nearby and spends a lot of time with Lamott and Sam. Mom babysits every Thursday afternoon so Lamott can have some free time.

Pammy Murray

Pammy and Lamott have been best friends since they were children. Pammy, one of Sam's godmothers, is present at his birth, and during the first year of his life, she visits almost everyday. Pammy and her husband are unable to have children, but Sam inspires them to plan to adopt a child. However, Pammy is diagnosed with cancer when Sam is less than a year old. She dies in November 1992.

Peg

Peg, one of Sam's godmothers, is a close friend of Lamott's from the days when both of them drank and used drugs excessively. Like Lamott, she now is in recovery. She helps Lamott with day-to-day activities, such as laundry and bringing over food.

Bill Rankin

Bill is a priest who is also a friend of Lamott's. She discusses any misgivings she has about her religious faith with him.

Rex

Rex is Sam's surrogate grandfather. He and his wife were Lamott's parents' best friends, and Lamott grew up half a mile away from them.

Rita

Rita is Lamott's therapist. Lamott maintains phone contact with her, as needed.

Themes

Single Motherhood

Lamott faces the trials of raising a child without a partner and Sam, though he is unaware of this, faces life without a father. Soon after the discovery of her pregnancy, she knows that Sam's biological father will be of no help to her. Even before Sam's birth, Lamott faces the difficult future as well as a sense of "aloneness." Although she acknowledges to herself that she will probably feel isolated for awhile, the issue of single motherhood remains of great concern to her.

Lamott often feels jealous of her friends who are raising their children with husbands. These women have someone with whom to share their worries, frustrations, and emotional ups and downs. She wonders about her ability to understand and raise a boy. She also worries about the ramifications for Sam of not having a father, which is "a huge thing not to have." She fears that Sam will grieve over his lack of a father. Since she is unable to change this circumstance, she can only hope that her friends and family will provide significant masculine role models for her son.

As a single parent, Lamott also experiences the stress of being responsible□emotionally, financially, and completely□for another human, particularly an utterly helpless one. Her confidence in herself wavers, for instance, in January, after she gets the *Mademoiselle* book reviewer's job. At first she is jubilant and believes that the worst of her insecurities are over, but by March she writes, "I'm just feeling stressed to the nu-nu's today, very tired and unable to keep the house and our life together. It's clear to me that we need a breadwinner." Throughout the narrative, Lamott reveals the range of emotions that she experiences from day to day.

Despite the lack of a husband or partner, Lamotthas an enormously helpful support system, including her friends and family. Pammy comes over almost every afternoon. Her mother lives nearby, as do her so-called second parents, Dudu and Rex. Her brother Steve spends a great deal of time with Sam, and her friend Brian volunteers to be a Big Brother. All of these people love Lamott and Sam tremendously, and while they cannot be a father to Sam or a husband to Lamott, they do play an important role in giving Sam the necessary sense of security and helping Lamott get through this difficult year.

Religious Faith

Lamott's faith in God and Jesus is a crucial component of her life and personality. Her faith stems from the simple decision, which she made a long time ago, to believe. For the past several years, she has found tremendous emotional support and love in her church. Her religious beliefs sustain her through difficult times and give her strength because she knows that God is protecting her. Although she acknowledges that

believing in God is "sort of ridiculous," she adheres to the conviction that God has a plan for her.

As an example of Lamott's faith, she believes that God will bring a solution to her financial worries, and she sees the *Mademoiselle* job offer as proof of her faith. She also is aware of the fact that whenever her faith wavers, something happens to make her believe again. She records her misgivings about believing in Jesus in her journal, but the next day a man from her church comes over, offering to help in any way. As further testimony to her faith, *Operating Instructions* closes on her musings about whether Sam will grow up to believe in God.

Friendship

The friendships that Lamott has developed throughout her life prove to be of crucial importance to her during Sam's first year, and she celebrates the "minuet of old friendships." She relies on her friends to help her in many different ways. Her friends watch over Sam so Lamott can take care of simple needs, such as bathing. They bring over food and do the laundry. Their most important function, however, may be as people with whom Lamott can share the wonder of Sam. Pammy, Lamott's best friend, particularly takes on this role. Lamott has a great deal of respect for Pammy, calling her "unquestionably the sanest, most grounded and giving person I've ever known," and she relies on Pammy's dependability and love. In many ways, Pammy fulfills the role of partner or husband, as epitomized by Lamott's statement, "Whenever Sam does anything new or especially funny, my first thought is, Oh, Pammy will love this."

Style

Humor

One aspect of *Operating Instructions* that many reviewers commented on, and which will likely strike many readers as well, is its humor. Lamott's reflections are witty, irreverent, and astute. She uses humor as a means of expressing her thoughts about life, which are often earnest and somber, without becoming pedantic or heavy. For example, in the book's first few pages she wonders how anyone can have a child knowing that eventually that child will have to go through the seventh and eighth grades. "The seventh and eighth grades were for me, and for every single good and interesting person I've ever known, what the writers of the Bible meant when they used the words *hell and the pit."* In the midst of her humorous ruminations about the difficulties of seventh and eighth grade, Lamott shares a simple truth: "But more than anything else, they were about hurt and loneliness."

Lamott also uses humor to convey beliefs that are important to her, such as her political beliefs. She tries to ensure that the newborn Sam will not grow up to become a Republican. On his one-month birthday, while watching the television news, she shares her feelings about President Bush. "Study that face for a second, listen to that whiny voice," she commands Sam, and then she rejoices in Sam's looking "intently at the TV for a few moments," before making the "loudest, most horrible fart I've ever heard." An intense liberal, she proclaims, "My hatred of American conservatives apparently sustains and defines me as much as my love of Jesus does, since I don't think I'm willing to have it removed." As she does in other instances, she uses this humor as an introduction to a more serious question; in this case: "Who would I be without it?"

Lamott revels in the fact that all of her friends also have "sick senses of humor" and acknowledges that for the past twenty-five years she and Pammy "have been so black-humored and cynical." This mordant humor particularly comes into play when Pammy gets sick with cancer. "All day Pammy has been asking me to do favors for her," Lamott writes. "Then she says that I have to do whatever she asks because it's her last wish." At the same time, Lamott uses humor to avoid the difficult feelings and worries brought on by Pammy's cancer.She feels her friend's impending death very deeply, as she writes in her journal:

Pammy came by with strawberry sorbet and the new *People* magazine. . . . She's so incredibly kind to us. It would be much easier to think of losing her if she weren't so . . . kind. Maybe I will talk to her about this tomorrow.

Narrative Structure

The narrative is structured as a chronological journal that reflects Lamott's thoughts and observations about the first year in Sam's life as they are occurring. Lamott's journal

chronicles typical events in the life of a baby, following Sam's progress as he lifts his head, rolls over, crawls, and eventually walks. The narrative structure also provides a very loose form that allows Lamott to reflect on her own past as well as think about what the future will bring to her and Sam. She includes many musings that have nothing to do with Sam's life, but rather have to do with the feelings that having a child engenders in Lamott. For example, she thinks about her own childhood, her political leanings, and her religious faith.

Writing

During Sam's first month of life, Lamott reflects upon her ideas about writing. She has already published three novels, and a fourth comes out shortly after Sam's birth. She remembers that her father, also a writer, said that their job was to entertain. She writes, "I think he believed that the best way to entertain the troops is to tell stories, and the ones that they seem to like the best are ones about themselves." This statement applies to Lamott's previous novels, all of which draw from her own life experiences. However, the creative writing that Lamott does during this period is primarily her journal, and she feels little interest in fiction writing. This partially stems from being too busy taking care of Sam, but she also feels that she lacks motivation to write because the "emptiness and desire and craving and feeling and need to achieve" are now gone. With Sam, the pressure to write has vanished. This statement reflects that Sam brings her a sense of serenity, which stands in stark opposition to the "rush" or the "hit of something, of anything" that she sometimes desperately craves.

Historical Context

The Bush Presidency

George Bush succeeded Ronald Reagan for the presidency in 1988. On the domestic front, President Bush launched the War on Drugs, which was an organized effort to end the illegal drug trade, both at home and abroad. While it included drug treatment and education efforts, it primarily focused on using law enforcement to put a stop to drug use. The U.S. government also offered legal and financial assistance to get foreign countries to arrest major drug smugglers. In December 1989, Bush authorized the military invasion of Panama to arrest the country's dictator, Manuel Noriega, for drug smuggling. He was convicted by a U.S. federal court in 1992. Bush also signed a bill to update the Clean Air Act, which required that the amount of emissions released into the atmosphere be reduced, and he approved the Americans with Disabilities Act, which guaranteed people with disabilities equal access to public accommodations, transportation, and employment opportunities.

Social Issues in the Late 1980s

By 1991, the number of children living in single-parent households had grown tremendously over the past twenty years. In 1991, some twenty percent of all white children, sixty percent of all African American children, and thirty percent of all Hispanic children lived with one parent, usually their mothers. Single-parent families were more likely to live in poverty, and many single parents faced serious financial burdens.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), which had come to prominence in the early 1980s, continued to baffle scientists. By the 1990s, this disease was spreading at an alarming rate. Despite efforts of scientists and researchers, no significant progress was made toward a cure. Some activists accused the U.S. government of responding too slowly and with too little money to the AIDS crisis.

The U.S. Economy

Not all Americans approved of Bush's handling of the economy. The stock market had experienced a significant drop in October 1987, and many people began to fear the start of another depression. This decline hit many savings and loans institutions (S&Ls) very hard, as many had made investments that lost a great deal of their worth. Many S&Ls had also made risky loans to real estate developers, and with the collapse of the real estate markets, these loans were not repaid. S&Ls around the country went bankrupt, forcing the U.S. government to pay out billions of dollars in insured depositors' savings.

The stock market decline, the S&L debacle, the costs of the Persian Gulf War, a recession, and a rising federal deficit all contributed to a faltering U.S. economy. By the early 1990s, the economy was seriously weaker than it had been in previous years. The

number of Americans who lived below the poverty line increased by more than 2 million in 1990.

America Abroad

President Bush presided over two important foreign issues: the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had been pushing for reforms that moved the Soviet Union toward democracy, movements which were encouraged by Bush. Gradually, some Soviet republics declared their independence. In November 1989, pro-democracy Germans tore down the Berlin Wall, which had stood since 1961. The following year, West Germany and East Germany reunified. The Soviet Union dissolved in December 1991, as more Soviets rebelled against hard-line party leaders. With the end of the Soviet Union, the Cold War was over.

In January 1991, an America-led United Nations force launched Operation Desert Storm in response to Iraq's refusal to withdraw its troops from neighboring Kuwait. Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, had long claimed that the oil-rich nation belonged to his country. After a six-week air offensive, the UN coalition launched a ground invasion, and within days, Iraq agreed to cease-fire conditions, including its withdrawal from Kuwait. President Bush's popularity rose after this successful Persian Gulf War.

Critical Overview

Reviewers lauded *Operating Instructions* for its humorous, poignant portrayal of new motherhood.*Publishers Weekly* called it a "glowing work" and applauded the "wonderfully candid" quality of Lamott's writing, as well as the "quirky humor [that] steadily draws the reader into her unconventional world." In a similar vein, Jon Carroll wrote in *Whole Earth Review* that the book "will make you laugh and cry." Dawna Lee Jonté, of *Belle Lettres*, commented favorably on Lamott's "hilarious accounts of new motherhood . . . [her] poignant affirmation of her newfound faith and sobriety, and heartbreaking acceptance of her best friend's terminal cancer." However, Jonté cautioned that the "pieces don't always work smoothly together; this book uneasily mixes humor and pathos."

Many reviewers found the people who populated the first year of Sam's life engaging, particularly Pammy, who responds to her terminal cancer with courage and dignity. These qualities drew parents and non-parents alike to *Operating Instructions*. As *Kirkus* Reviews pointed out, "One need not be a new parent to appreciate Lamott's glib and gritty good humor in the face of annihilating weariness."

Erika Taylor, writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, asserted that the best parts of the book are very funny, imbued with a "conversational style that perfectly conveys her friendly self-deprecating sense of humor." Taylor called it a "smart, funny and comforting read." Taylor, however, pointed out one significant flaw with the book: "Much of the writing is completely preoccupied with *her* traumas and *her* joy over her baby which, in spite of a lot of charm and wit, feels like spending hours looking at snapshots of a family you've never met."

Operating Instructions brought Lamott national acclaim. Since its publication, she has published two other works of nonfiction□*Bird by Bird* (1994) and *Traveling Mercies* (1999). Both of these works allow Lamott to further discuss issues important to her that she touched on in *Operating Instructions*: writing and religion, respectively.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she reflects upon the reality of Lamott's fears and joys.

As the title attests, Lamott's *Operating Instructions:A Journal of My Son's First Year* chronicles the first year in the life of Sam Lamott. The journal is filled with her son's accomplishments, her own responses to motherhood, and the other things that are going on in her life during this busy year. For most of her life, Lamott has chosen alternative paths, particularly in dropping out of college and deciding to support herself as a writer. Although before Sam's birth she sees herself as "much too self-centered, cynical, eccentric, and edgy to raise a baby," *Operating Instructions* proves these doubts to be unjustified. Lamott writes about her awareness of both her responsibility to Sam and to herself, a linked responsibility.

The main focus of *Operating Instructions* is Sam's first year of life. Sam takes the expected developmental steps, from lying in his crib to lifting his head, to rolling over, to crawling, to standing, and then to walking. He experiments with making noises. He touches things to learn about them. He develops emotional attachments. None of his actions are out of the ordinary, yet Lamott believes him to be the smartest, most beautiful, child that ever was born, a typical response. Lamott writes about Sam's new tricks as if they are signs of a baby genius. When, at the age of two months, he learns to "comfort himself without the pacifier by sucking on his hands and fists," Lamott declares, "He's very brilliant, this much is clear." She holds a party for his three-week birthday. She celebrates such important days as National Sam Lamott Neck Control Day by changing her answering machine message to reflect this momentous occasion.

Another response that Lamott shares with other new parents is feeling exhausted and worn out all the time. She jokingly questions why she had a child, even acting as if Sam were an item she purchased at the store, one that she could return if she decided it wasn't what she wanted or expected. "Sam sleeps for four hours at a stretch now, which is one of the main reasons I've decided to keep him," she writes when he is nearly seven weeks old. Other times, however, she records her trials less humorously. On October 14, she calls the Pregnancy to Parenthood 24-hour line. Writing with utter candor, Lamott records how she "told the person on the line that I didn't think I was going to hurt him but that I didn't think that I could get through the night." Such a statement illustrates the depth of the strain that Lamott undergoes in caring for her child. The fact that this hotline exists for worried parents shows that Lamott is not experiencing uncommon feelings.

December 1 in her journal depicts the variability of her feelings. The entry for that day begins bluntly: "It has been a terrible day. I'm afraid I'm going to have to let him go. He's an awful baby. I hate him. He's scum." Later that afternoon, however, she "fell right back in love" with him, and by midnight, she has concluded that the problem lies within herself, not Sam. She writes, "I don't think I like babies." In this progression, Lamott

typifies any overstressed, sleep-deprived mother□in other words, any normal mother. The changes in her feelings are not Sam's fault, but are based on the challenges that any new baby poses without meaning to do so. Lamott understands this, yet she still writes passages that sum up a new parent's conflicting feelings, such as this one from November 22:

I wish he could take longer naps in the afternoon. He falls asleep and I feel I could die of love when I watch him, and I think to myself that he is what angels look like. Then I doze off, too, and it's like heaven, but sometimes only twenty minutes later he wakes up and begins to make his gritchy rodent noises, scanning the room wildly. I look blearily over at him in the bassinet, and think, with great hostility, oh, God, he's raising his loathsome reptilian head again.

Lamott also records surprise at how quickly Sam is growing up□again, a typical parental reaction. By January, when Sam is nearly four months old, she notes that he is changing every day, and moreover, that she is losing her baby. "He's becoming so grown-up before my very eyes. It's so painful.I want him to stay this age forever," she writes.

Clearly, a four-month-old baby is hardly grown-up,but Lamott is speaking in comparative terms, as a four-month-old baby bears little resemblance to a newborn. A newborn seems to just sleep and eat, but a four-month-old baby takes many developmental strides, such as showing cognizance of surroundings, making noises for fun, and moving arms and legs on purpose. Lamott's reflection that she wants him to stay at this period in his life forever is typical, and one which she repeats throughout his first year. As she watches Sam grow and reach new goals and develop new awareness, she feels that she is losing him. In June, when Sam is almost ten months old, she writes, "I feel like he's not even a baby anymore. He's becoming a young adult." This statement reflects back to Lamott's pre-birth thoughts, when she already is worried about "that inevitable day when my son will leave for college." This running commentary illustrates a theme common to all parents□the knowledge that one day the child will become independent.

Another difficulty that Lamott faces□and that Sam increases□are financial problems. As a writer, she does not earn a great deal of money. Her only source of financial stability derives from a few ongoing magazine columnist jobs. At one point, she records that she is down to her last $800 in savings and knows that she may be forced to borrow money from Pammy. Despite these serious troubles, when she focuses on the financial drain that having a baby poses, she maintains a sense of humor: "I'm not suggesting he's a deadbeat," she writes, "but I must say he's not bringing in any money on his own. . . . it's so expensive and time-consuming to have a baby, you might as well keep hothouse orchids. At least you can sell them."

Also notable in these journal entries is how, through her relationship with Sam, Lamott develops a new sense of self and of what is important. One day she uses Sam as an excuse for getting out of a party. After doing this, Lamott feels little guilt but rather a

"tremendous sense of power." In this instance, being a mother to Sam has given her the courage and opportunity to be true to her own needs and interests.

Lamott also becomes more aware of her relationships with men, which is an important selfdiscovery for a woman who feels that the men in her past have actually held her hostage to her desire to make them like and need her. When the baby is two months old, Lamott writes that she is still "so taken up by Sam that I don't have to deal with men." To Lamott, this is a positive benefit of motherhood.The next time Lamott meets a man with whom she might have previously become infatuated, she holds herself back. She now recognizes that any romantic or sexual entanglements will affect Sam. "It would be one thing if I could leap into a disastrous romance and it would be just me who would suffer," she writes, "but I can't afford to get lost because Sam doesn't have anyone to fall back on." With this statement, Lamott demonstrates her comprehension that, as Sam's mother, she has a greater burden in the choices she makes. Her next comment□"And I don't have anyone else to fall back on, come to think of it"□shows a newfound maturity that has been shaped by having to take responsibility for the life of another human.

Despite its subtitle, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First year* is more a portrait of Lamott than it is of her son Sam. In October, when Sam is about six weeks old, Lamott writes in apparent wonderment, "I just can't get over how much babies cry. I really had no idea what I was getting into. To tell you the truth, I though it would be more like getting a cat." By Sam's first birthday, Lamott has changed significantly, learning more about herself and life through her relationship with her son.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

France is a librarian and teaches history and interdisciplinary studies at University Liggett School and writing and poetry at Macomb Community College near Detroit, Michigan. In the following essay, he discusses ways that humor, faith, family, and friendship fuel Lamott's resilient approach to life as a first-time mother and persistent writer.

In *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, Lamott employs a mixture of humor and pathos, witty observation, remembrance, and anecdote to carry the reader through her first year as a mother. She tells a compelling story that highlights her complicated life issues and resilient faith. Equally, she makes evident the charity and support of a wide variety of friends and relatives who help console and sustain her through many ups and downs.

The calendar structure of the book adds drama to the often-exhausting life changes inherent in the first year of a mother-child relationship. Each entry is dated and usually includes a brief account of baby Sam Lamott's growth and development. These entries are written in a way that allows the reader to gain considerable insight into Lamott's ever-changing feelings and responses.

Lamott, at age thirty-five, painfully but successfully faces the challenge of sustaining her life as a writer while becoming a single parent. Her decision not to have an abortion, but to follow her pregnancy through, results in Sam's birth and her own increasing sense of responsibility. She is not alone in this transition. By this time in her life, she has developed a sense of faith. She has already given up alcohol and drug addictions, and she now turns more energetically to a network of healing people, a sort of mutual aid society.

Lamott's willingness to ask for and receive help represents one of the main themes of the book. She refers to the people closest to her as her "pit crew" (race car terminology for the people who maintain and repair a driver's car and who look after the well-being of the driver, most crucially during the stress of actual races). She also uses the more general term "tribe," a religious and anthropological metaphor for people who help each other at a deep level, to describe other friends and acquaintances from her church and elsewhere. To appreciate how far Lamott has come by the end of the book, one may usefully consider where she came from. Lamott reflects in many journal entries about her past: this is part of her process of healing and living in a healthier, more hopeful way.

When the journal begins, Lamott finds herself pregnant and abandoned by the father of the child. This unnamed man, more than fifteen years older, is the latest and (she hopes) the last in her long string of relationships with men whom she characterizes as "crummy." But Lamott's complex set of problems and issues go further back than any of her boyfriends. They originated from her complicated and difficult family. Situated in the San Francisco area, Lamott and her brothers John and Steve lived in a somewhat

dysfunctional household with their parents, Dorothy and Kenneth Lamott. The children were exposed to a mix of left-leaning politics, intermittent Bohemianism, alcohol, drugs, and unconventional people. Lamott experienced many discussions and parties with her parent's friends and acquaintances, including atheists, artists, and political activists. Lamott retained the social consciousness of her parents, but, feeling empty without a sense of religious meaning, she became a practicing Christian after years of stubborn resistance and selfabuse.Her faith plays a major role in the raising of Sam, and many members of the St. Andrew Presbyterian Church of Marin City, California, help and encourage her along the way.

Despite the complications her parents gave her, Lamott did benefit in two very lasting ways. Her father was a strong role model for her as a writer. He kept at his writing regularly, a disciplined habit that Lamott picked up and, despite various addictive distractions and years of self-sabotage, adhered to. During Sam's first year, her novel *All New People* reached the point of publication and distribution.She also wrote a regular column for *California* magazine, kept the journal that became, in published form, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, and was contracted to write another magazine column.

Lamott's mother also provided a strong role model in one particular way: Dorothy Lamott refused to place herself second to anyone. She had gone to law school and had left the family for awhile and moved to Hawaii to pursue her own dreams. By the time Lamott began her journal in 1989, her father was long dead from a brain tumor and her mother was back in California helping with Sam. In the meantime, Lamott had increasingly turned to the rest of her tribe and pit crew to help her find her own way through life.

For many years, Lamott had turned to addictive behaviors to deny the sense of grief and loss brought about by her offbeat upbringing, her parents' divorce, and her father's death, and to avoid having to deal with internal loneliness and longing. Since the time she was a teenager, she had "tried everything in sometimes suicidally vast quantities□alcohol, drugs, work, food, excitement, good deeds, popularity, men, exercise, and just rampant obsession and compulsion□to avoid" facing herself. Finally, when she is pregnant, she faces herself and somehow manages to go on. Though she must do the heaviest work alone, she is consoled and helped by her many friends, one of whom, John Manning, is also a mutual friend of the man who abandoned her.

Three very important members of Lamott's tribe and pit crew include her therapist Rita, her brother Steve, and her long-time friend Pammy Murray. Rita helps Lamott come to terms with herself and discover forgiveness, including the ability to forgive herself for past excesses. A recovering alcoholic and addict, Lamott relies on Rita "mostly because I had so many variations on the theme of low self-esteem, with conceitedness marbled in, the classic egomaniac with an inferiority complex." Between sessions with Rita, the demands of raising Sam, and continuing at her writing, Lamott learns how to develop and protect her personal boundaries. She learns especially how to avoid distractions and how to be open to people who can and do truly help her. Lamott's brother Steve helps in practical ways, provides comic relief, and serves as a reminder that not all men

are "crummy." Of Pammy, her best friend, Lamott writes, "I could not have gone through this, could not be doing it now, without Pammy." When Pammy is diagnosed with cancer during Sam's first year, Lamott is devastated; still, because of Sam, Lamott persists. Though these three people stand out, there are many others who help Lamott persist.

Finally, in addition to faith and the familial community of her tribe and pit crew, Lamott keeps herself and others going with her biting jokes and sense of humor. When not making fun of herself and her neuroses, she devotes many of her sarcastic quips to belittling a range of "crummy" men, including ex-sexual partners, a potential republican boyfriend (she is a lifelong Democrat) from whom she decides to spare herself, and even George Herbert Walker Bush, the standing president during Sam's first year of life. Lamott describes Bush as reminding every woman of her first "ex-." Her passionate rage against Republicans is humorous as much for its excess as anything else. The diatribes against Bush also provide historical context for *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*. The San Francisco earthquake of 1989 does this as well. Lamott is able to see humor even during this disaster, for she recognizes and satirizes her obsessive concern for good reviews and sales of her writing even in the midst of the major earthquake.

Reflecting on her son's first year, Lamott realizes that one cannot and need not be in control of all of life's details. It is enough to have a grasp of the important things in life; beyond that, each day is a new adventure to be taken in daily terms. She paraphrases writer E. L. Doctorow's analogy comparing writing and night driving, adapting it to life.At night, one can only see as far as a beam of headlights permits, but if one is careful, that is enough to permit one to successfully drive all the way to one's destination. Lamott further contemplates and explores the main themes of *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year* in two subsequent nonfiction works: *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, and Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith.*

Source: Erik France, Critical Essay on *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Ozersky is a critic and essayist. In this essay, he discusses an overlooked aspect of Lamott's book its deep religious underpinnings.

Religion, on the face of it, would seem to be the last thing Lamott's *Operating Instructions* is about. Primarily, it's about a baby: his face is on the cover, and the book's subtitle is *A Journal of My Son's First Year*. Lamott is pro-choice, dislikes Republicans, lives in San Francisco, and is a single mother with liberal convictions. The book is packed with pop-culture references and profanity. Only rarely does the author explicitly talk about God, and then often in a facetious way. But a good case could be made for *Operating Instructions* being an essentially religious book.

To understand how, it's important to understand Lamott, both as an author and as a character in her memoir. Any author who writes about themselves,even if they are as truthful and transparent as possible, still creates a character for the reader. We do the same thing in daily life, every time we choose to speak in a way that we hope will create a favorable impression. Like T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, we "prepare a face to greet the faces that we meet." The character of "me" in *Operating Instructions* is far and away the most interesting and complex one the reader meets. The reader learns more about her, cares more about her, and is more involved with her than anyone else in the book.

Lamott's character in the book can be contradictory. She is ironic, skeptical, and tough-minded, but also emotional and moody. She is intensely loving□with Sam, with her friends, with her family□but seems to despise herself much of the time. Her tone is primarily a humorous one, with many snappy one-liners and pop-culture references, but the content of much of her writing is profoundly serious.

It is hard not to feel, as one reads the book, that Lamott is talking directly to the reader as the days pass. One begins to feel as if he or she is a part of her extended family□the network of friends, neighbors, and fellow parishioners who are helping her to muddle her way through Sam's first year.

But is this necessarily so? Surely there must be decisions that Lamott had to make. What does she choose to tell readers? What isn't she telling readers? Is there any part of her life that is being concealed? If so, why? And even if readers are getting the complete story, it's only the complete story as she knows it.

This is especially important when it comes to Lamott's religion. Her grip on her own identity is obviously very strong, even for a writer. And she has a laser-like focus on her son. But as Erika Taylor wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "At the base of Lamott's experience is a deep, hard-earned trust in her self and her God." But as with motherhood, religion is an ongoing learning experience. And this can be misleading.

Operating Instructions is definitely not a conversion narrative, like *The Confessions of St. Augustine or The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. In those books, the authors have

transcendent encounters with God, and are forever changed; the authors write from the point of view of people who have found the truth. Lamott's religion, on the other hand, is clearly more of a work in progress. She is beset by doubts. Some of the most revealing passages in the book, in fact, show her inability to take her own faith seriously. Referring to the crucifix, Lamott writes:

I believe in it, and it's so nuts. How did some fabulously cerebral and black-humored cynic like myself come to fall for all that Christian lunacy . . . It, my faith, is a great mystery. It has all the people close to me shaking their heads. It has me shaking my head.

Even as she makes these protests, however, Lamott stresses her belief in the fundamental tenets of Christianity: redemption, resurrection, and the movements of Providence.

Part of what makes her such an appealing narrator is that her faith, though strong, is so flawed and fallible, and wedded to what appear to be such unlikely non-religious beliefs. Lamott is an avid churchgoer, and considers doing Christ's work to be "the only operating instructions I will ever need." But she won't go out with an attractive man because she finds that he voted Republican.

Likewise, she is alternatively beset by a heady mixture of self-pity and self-loathing ("I'm mental and defeated and fat and loathsome and I am crazily, brain-wastedly tired. I couldn't sleep. This is maybe the loneliest I have ever felt.") and lifted up on the highest flights of rapturous love and gratitude ("Sam was baptized today at St. Andrew's. It is almost too painful to talk about, so powerful, so outrageous and lovely.").

In some of her other books, most notably *Traveling Mercies*, Lamott dwells more at length on her faith and how she arrived at it. In *Operating Instructions*, she dwells on it more as background, with occasional flares, both positive and negative. In that sense, Lamott's religion is more persuasively painted than if she spent the better part of her narrative discoursing on Christianity. It's precisely because she is so back-and-forth with her faith, because she is so preoccupied with her son and herself, and because the whole period is such a roller-coaster ride for her, that we get such a deep feeling of what it means to her.

What is that religion? It seems to vary with Lamott's emotional state. At moments of weakness or distress, she has the natural impulse of people in difficult straits□God as cosmic cavalry, coming to the rescue. Several times in the course of *Operating Instructions*, Lamott writes or prays to God to help her with specific financial or emotional problems□and is promptly, and positively, answered. This kind of religion is undemanding and innocuous, and seems at odds with the larger spiritual sense Lamott describes at happier moments: "I know we all only talk about God in the most flat-footed way, but I suddenly had that Old Testament sense of God's presence."

At other times, Lamott frankly doubts her own faith. She looks back on all the years when she was addicted to cocaine and alcohol. She feels helpless as a mother. She

feels neurotic and unstable. She feels unworthy of her friends. At these times, her faith in God doesn't so much waver as flicker in and out of the narrative. Some critics have taken Lamott to task for being so frustratingly indecisive and vague about God, about calling herself a Christian writer when she so obviously subscribes to no particular doctrine, and has such an undeveloped theological sense.

But this criticism is misguided, and misses the whole point of *Operating Instructions* as a work of literature. If Lamott's feelings and perception of God change as she changes, it isn't because she is weak-minded; it's because she's human. By being so candid and honest in this memoir, she opens herself to criticism of being unstable, flawed, an unworthy receptacle of divine inspiration. That's no problem; it's all true. But she never claimed to be a saint, or to speak for religious people everywhere.She is a religious person, and in writing about the things most important to her, she inevitably brings her ideas about God to bear on them. For a religious person, nothing of any importance can exist in a spiritual vacuum. And for a person who believes in an infinitely powerful deity, nothing of any importance can exist outside of the concept of God's love and will. It's an alien concept for many readers who don't share Lamott's deep-seated faith in the Christian God; but it's one that is bone-deep in her writing and informs every page of *Operating Instructions.*

Source: Josh Ozersky, Critical Essay on *Operating Instructions:A Journal of My Son's First Year*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Read one of Lamott's novels. Compare the style and focus of the novel to *Operating Instructions*. What similarities do you find? Do these titles share any themes?

Think about an important event in your life.Write a series of journal entries that you might have written at the time. Alternatively, start keeping a journal now, and write a few observations in it everyday.

Some critics have wondered how Sam Lamott will feel when he is old enough to read and understand *Operating Instructions.* How do you think he might respond? Explain your answer.

Conduct research into the growth of the singleparent family in the United States in the past few decades. Create a chart that illustrates your findings.

Lamott makes her dislike of the first President Bush quite clear. How do you think she responded to the election of Bush's son, George W. Bush, to the presidency in 2000? Write a journal entry that Lamott might have written.

Think about a challenge that you undertook that was very difficult but worthwhile. Were your family and friends supportive of your efforts? How did their reactions influence you and the decisions you made?

What Do I Read Next?

Ariel Gore's *The Mother Trip: Hip Mama's Guide to Staying Sane in the Chaos of Motherhood* (2000) is a collection of essays showing the highlights and the low points of motherhood. Gore, an outspoken urban mom, gives inspiration, encouragement, and moral support to realworld mothers.

Breeder: Real-life Stories from the New Generation of Mothers (2001), edited by Ariel Gore and Bee Lavender, is a collection of essays about motherhood from Generation X writers.

Mother Zone: Love, Sex, and Laundry in the Modern Family(1992) is the autobiography of Toronto journalist Marni Jackson. It portrays the drama inherent in mother-child relationships in a society that idealizes motherhood while devaluing its importance.

Perri Klass's collection *Love and Modern Medicine: Stories* (2001) focuses on domestic life as experienced by young couples and families.

Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994) drew rave reviews and was a national bestseller. It serves both as a practical guide to writing and as a glimpse into the mind and life of a professional writer.

Mary Morris's novel *A Mother's Love* (1993) portrays the artist as a single mother. The painter-protagonist of the story was abandoned by her own mother at birth and now must recreate her own life through her art.

Shadow Child: An Apprenticeship in Love and Loss (2000), by Beth Powning, describes a woman's experience giving birth to a stillborn child and how this tragedy affects her marriage and her future mothering.

Edith Wharton's novel *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) focuses on Kate Clephane, who abandoned her husband and infant daughter. She is summoned back to New York society by her grown daughter, who is intent on marrying a man that Kate once loved. The moral quandary that faces Kate and the ensuing drama startled readers of that time.

Further Study

Feinsilver, Pamela, "Anne Lamott: The California Writer Talks about the Birth of Her Son and the Rebirth of Her Career," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 22, May 31, 1993, p. 30.

This article presents a good overview of Lamott's life, work, and her inspirations.

Fisk, Molly, "Anne Lamott: One Bird at a Time," in *Poets & Writers Magazine*, Vol. 24, No. 5, September-October 1996, p. 52.

This interview with Lamott focuses on the success of *Operating Instructions* and *Bird by Bird,* as well as on ideas to help new writers.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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