

Our Kind: A Novel in Stories Study Guide

Our Kind: A Novel in Stories by Kate Walbert

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Plot Summary

Stories in this novel, published in 2004, take place over a period of years from early in the 1950's through the early 2000's. Historical dates are not as critical to understanding the stories as is the relative dates of each character's experiences. Stories told or shared with each other may be from an earlier or later time or period. The novel is set in a small northeastern United States town. Stories vary with seasons of the year, as in any northern climate. Within the town, characters in the novel create their own community through shared and socially expected experiences.

The plot of this novel groups several stories about experiences, like those of many similarly situated communities. The community of middle to upper middle class female friends develops over fifty years of sharing experiences. Most of them relocate to this town initially with their newly wed husbands. Shortly after arrival they begin sharing their lives as wives and mothers, while not yet about their memories of daughters and boyfriends. Still to come are their lives as lovers, divorcees and widows, middle-aging, old and golden aging, disabling, crippling, still trying and then finally dying.

This novel is the plot of life, or rather, it plots stories of several female friends' lives. They meet, remember, experience, reminisce and have children growing together and apart in virtually every community. Main Street is lost to the mall but for a few small shops. The friends find gathering places: The Club, Canoe's pool, Bambi or Barbara's, airport bar or craft class at Fleishmann's. The town has Bishop's orchard, the Center for Recuperating and the Hospice when no longer hoping. Nothing is grandiose or unusual about any of the friends. No one is famous, but all are heroic for no more than striving and surviving.

This novel combines the stories of ten women whose lives develop together. Many of them marry, have children, get divorced, become sick or old, and die - just as in any American small town. Each had, has or would have had husbands, boyfriends or girlfriends, children, parents, hobbies, lovers and failings they share with one another. As a group of friends they try not so much to understand, as simply to accept and care for each other. Most of them do what is expected since they are gender-consigned. They find, as they grow to know each other and themselves better, that they are not so designed.

Most of them meet in the 1950s after marriage when they move to town with their husbands. They bear children in their twenties, daughters who they raise just like Dr. Spock says. They share OBGYNs, baby photo shoots, teen craft classes, racquets and golf at the Club. They share stories of their lovers and have bursts of second chance creativity. They divorce in the 1970s, live through the malaise and memories in the 80s, maladies, memory loss and wheelchairs in the 90s. They share dreams now of what might have been.



The Intervention

The Intervention Summary

The intervention takes place over a couple days. The group of friends from a small town gathers together in late summer at the home of the crusading recovering alcoholic Canoe. Around her pool and patio area they make plans to intervene in the drinking lifestyle and habits of Him. Canoe is concerned that His blood not be on her hands. She fears He will kill himself within a month if they don't intervene. They plan to take Him to the Center and have Him admitted for alcoholism treatment.

He is a successful realtor they all know and love. He is a colleague of their ex-husbands, and known by them since they arrived in town. Canoe states she should not explain the intervention. She has Pips Phelp, the expert and a lawyer, do that. The female friends gathered together recognize He could drive up at any time. He often does that to them individually at their homes to assess their sales value.

Esther Curran explains how, after her husband Walter's death, He shows her a house. She is no longer a beautiful woman but He takes her hand and speaks of the possibilities. Normally she opposes intervening but consents to this one. Canoe tells Pips Phelp, who convenes meetings, she does not want to hear about Him wrapped around a telephone pole. He understands and plans to meet the next day for practice.

Interveners meet at the Safeway parking lot where Pips drives up playing His part. Pips explains how He will feel ambushed. One of them must drive Him to the Center to be checked in. The group drives up in Viv's Suburban. They get out to circle Pips' Buick, which he sits in with the motor running. Canoe calls out Pips' name, a sign to converge. He says Canoe's name, a sign to open his doors. She gets in and takes his keys. The interveners explain why they're there. Pips plays His part by objecting. The artificiality of Pips' acting Him causes them to laugh. Canoe suggests they start practice intervention over again.

Members of the group are a close-knit community since they moved there. Many of them share common life experiences of marriage in 1953, divorce in 1976, grown daughters and sons, agitating grandchildren and talent in racquet sports. They see many things and are averse to intervention, but He is someone among the few they love.

Next morning after the practice run they convene again at the Safeway. They nervously await Pips appearance to begin searching for Him. Canoe drives the group in her Jeep, and Pips follows in his Buick. They see His' BMW in recently widowed Louise Cooper's drive next to His sign: SOLD REALTORS in her lawn. Canoe parks the Jeep and gets out to execute the plan. The group waits for her to give the signal. Instead she shouts back that He must be in the house and calls to come on.



The group joins Canoe at the lead. She pushes through the open front door of Louise Cooper's house, which is similar to theirs. They listen and hear Him speaking in a low voice they all recognize as Him prospecting. They listen at the bottom of the staircase looking up at the hallway and bedroom doors but cannot locate Him. They climb the stairway and hear the familiar quiet sound of a woman weeping.

When they find Louise naked and crouching in the maid's room, she points to the back staircase. Esther leads as they hurry down the stair. They run barefoot out into the open leaving their shoes abandoned on the way. The group of interveners, Esther, Barbara and Mimi, Viv and Judy with Canoe in the lead, misses a chance to save Him. They recognize they must save themselves first.

The Intervention Analysis

Story begins with the group of female friends led by the sometime recovering alcoholic Canoe. They plan to intervene in the lifestyle of the local and highly successful realtor known as Him. They want to intercept Him but are not sure where. He regularly travels around town looking at and valuing houses that he may be able to sell. When they locate Him they will get in His car and take His keys. They will drive Him to the Center and commit Him for treatment as an alcoholic. They assume since He is or has been a friend that he will go willingly or at least not fight them. Pips Phelp is an attorney they know from the Club. He convenes the meetings using his expert opinion and guidance.

They meet at the Safeway parking lot in the morning to practice. Pips plays His part, but is a poor actor and so unlike Him they laugh and cannot continue. The second practice attempt is much improved. They agree to meet there the next day to begin searching for Him. He is slick, well-dressed and a salesman. He is charming, rich, has no family, is an alcoholic and makes a living always hustling the next deal. Pips is a common, ordinary, homespun man. Pips is educated and practices as an attorney, a good leader and a family man who deserves respect.

They find His' BMW at Louise Cooper's but do not confront Him. They do hear sounds of His seductive whispered voice and find Louise weeping and naked in the maid's room. She is vulnerable after her husband's sudden death. He has put her in a compromising situation. She points the way he went. They race off to catch Him but do not.

He is unnamed. He is an archetype of the males in the lives of these female friends. His features, habits and mannerisms, good and bad, reflect fathers, boyfriends, husbands, lovers, ex-husbands, sons and other male figures they know. Many friends in the group have an affair or flirtation, actual imagined or fantasized with Him.

Because He sells their homes, He has a sense of intimacy with each of them. They have to deal with Him when they are most vulnerable. Louise, just widowed, is now left naked by Him in front of her friends. He is the rogue, the bad boy in everyman. Pips is

the kind and caring family man. Pips, the good but boring man, helps them find and chase after Him, the bad but exciting raconteur.



Esther's Walter

Esther's Walter Summary

Esther Curran lives in a tumbledown house that became so after her husband Walter died. While he was alive, their house off the old Route 32 had been a showpiece. Its charm contrasts with his homeliness. Regardless, Walter is adored by Esther in life and now in death. Esther's invitation is prompted by the anniversary of Walter's death. He has long since passed away. She is seen only by chance since intervention, despite many invitations, declined. Curious then is this social event to be hosted by the reclusive widow. She is now as emotionally distant and tumbledown as is her once stately home.

Esther greets her guests who are carrying covered dishes at the door. She wears dried flowers behind her ears and no shoes on her feet. They remember previous parties here, especially for their children who were beloved favorites of childless Esther. She is proud of Walter's talent and shows his sculptures everywhere. Her guests fail to see the genius she sees in the rusted, twisted molten lead pieces he creates.

Guests at Esther's anniversary celebration for Walter's death recollect how they share similar separation from married lives, if not by death, by law. Unlike Esther they get past their loss, hold up, keep up their homes, draw together and establish new daily routines. Unlike Esther, their ex-husbands are not white knights who save them from being hit by a bus or from an alcoholic father. They remember Esther and Walter's previous parties they attended with their then husbands and daughters. They recall differences in dycor, dogs, taste and men while waiting, famished for lunch.

Esther finally announces lunch in the dining room. She beckons the guests to sit in a row facing Walter's portrait. He wants to see your faces she says. They look up at his picture and smile to humor her. Reminiscences continue about Walter's anthropologist mother Sydney. She records all their names in a ledger at an earlier party. Covered dishes for lunch at this celebration are still covered. Esther suggests they begin. Then she leaves the room to get drinks.

Assembled guests meanwhile make small talk. Each of them, Barbara, Mimi Klondike, Judy, Viv and Louise Cooper contribute stories about children, adopted and otherwise, ex-husbands and travel experiences. Esther returns to distribute the fresh drinks. Suzie and Barbara continue the tales begun by Mimi about her ex, Mike, and the beginning of their end with stories about Emilio and Charlie and beginnings of their ends while they eat.

Esther just sips from her drink and is not eating. She looks up at Walter's portrait to ask if he hears what they say. His picture hangs on the wall between black silk drapes. There is a row of stone elephants and other objects on the mantel below. These objects form the look of an altar for adoration of her devoted husband. Walter is dead now six or



seven years. At his gravesite burial she wants their beginning to end and the assembled guests remember holding her down from joining him then.

She bequests her goods to those friends. Esther holds up her glass in a toast. She looks up at Walter and gulps down the goblet of poison she prepared for herself. Canoe says we're toasting Walter and then without knowing its meaning says tonight.

Esther's Walter Analysis

Years after her husband Walter dies Esther still remembers him. She obsesses with thoughts of him and is depressed in his absence. She accepts few invitations from their group of friends. Esther is rarely seen except for chance meetings in the small town. On Walter's death date anniversary she holds a celebration to honor him. Unbeknownst to and in the midst of her guests she takes her own life.

Esther's personality and relationship with Walter has always been something of a puzzle. It is different from that experienced by the other friends and their husbands. Esther is totally devoted and worships him. He is a hero and she sees things, talents and features about him that no one else sees. They meet when he saves her from being hit by a bus and from her alcoholic father. That glow of heroism never wears off.

They both were artists, she in painting and he in sculpture. Some degree of eccentricity in lifestyle, decor and perception is expected and tolerated by the group. Relationship of Walter and Esther contrasts relationships of the guests and their husbands. Walter echoes the theme of a good man and is another counterpoint to Him in the first chapter. He is handsome, rich and showy, a ladies' man, successful in business, alcoholic and a cad. Walter has ugly features, is understated but devoted to Esther, a sculptor of no great fame but attentive to the home they share and a good man.

Esther's eccentricity continues and degenerates. She now lives a reclusive, apparently lonely life after Walter dies. The group of friends intervenes in His life but not Esther's. They do not intervene in her life again after they stop her from jumping into Walter's grave. They are surprised by her invitation to this anniversary celebration. Esther is their eccentric, slightly absent minded friend just honoring her dead, but still deeply cherished, husband. They do not know she has careful and thoughtful preparations to memorialize Walter and herself. This is the anniversary of his - but the reality of her death. She drinks the goblet of arsenic she prepared for herself and dies.



Bambi Breaks for Freedom

Bambi Breaks for Freedom Summary

Bambi, Judy, Barbara and others gather together as Bambi reminisces about Remington Jackson. He is an old boyfriend whose phone number she tries to locate at midnight. She recalls their meeting in 1945 when she is eighteen. Canoe stretches out and falls asleep. Now that Bambi has his number she proclaims here I go. She dials him while Barbara reminisces about Charlie, her ex, and their daughter, Megan.

Bambi begins these breaks for freedom in January of 2000 when she exclaims some drastic measures must be taken; something has to be done in a life. Esther is dead and their usual gathering place, the Club, is being renovated. So Bambi travels by Greyhound to Manhattan where she had lived. Unlike the others who study to be secretaries and dream of being Barbara Stanwyck, Bambi is a professional. She is accepted in the conservatory of music when they meet at the Ball with Renny, her escort.

Bambi makes the call to set up an arrangement with Renny Jackson for Saturday at four. Since he has a customer in the area, he says he can kill two birds with one stone and agrees to stop. Canoe wonders if he sounds old and hopes he still has hair since she can't stand it when they're old and bald.

The fateful Saturday arrives as the group eats brunch in Bambi's sunroom. Bambi speaks about Renny and their plans or rather notions of marriage. Canoe recalls what she thinks is a similar experience wanting Alan Chapman. She accepts Buddy's proposal because it comes in first, as opposed to risking spinsterhood. The group believes Bambi turns Renny down since she is committed to her musical career. They think she has no time for romance, family and affection. She asks if they really believe she'd give him up.

Renny split when he heard the diagnosis, she admits, but now she says they were children then. As the group anxiously awaits Remington Jackson's appearance, Bambi taps fingers of her good hand on the steel leg of her wheelchair. She fantasizes using that hand to perform in concert halls. They fantasize his appearance manicured, whistling and motion picture star image, ready to meet his next customer. They tidy up the house from brunch and play cards as time nears four. Bambi rolls from room to room on squeaky wheels.

Suddenly, feverishly, Bambi's hoarse voice states, "I've got to get out." Canoe says it's quarter to four. Bambi confesses he left a letter on her door when he knew she was in the hospital. It said he had his career to consider and that this would be awkward. Shall we leave a note for him, they wonder, as they hurry off to the Captain's Roost at the airport? Tough luck, tootsie, it would say, but there's no time. Bambi admits that he



broke her heart, tore it right in two. They hurry to the airport on a Break for Freedom, on the lam from a man.

Bambi Breaks for Freedom Analysis

The group gathers at Bambi's house as she is trying to find the telephone number of who they believe is just an old boyfriend. This is sometime after Esther's suicide. The friends are used to Bambi's occasional flights of fancy. They call them "Breaks for Freedom." In a wheelchair since stricken by polio as a young adult, Bambi begins to face the facts of her age and deal with some of the issues still unresolved in her life.

One unresolved issue is her old boyfriend Remington Jackson, as well as the perceived and assumed circumstances of their breakup. In a departure from the norm with women of her age, Bambi was assumed to have refused Renny's proposal of marriage. She was believed to be committed to her career as a professional musician. Bambi was born in 1927 and met him in 1945 when she was 18. In 2000 she was 73 years old, and is now in her mid-70s, a little older than her other friends in the group. She has already established herself as a professional musician when they meet each other and Renny.

Sometime later she is hospitalized, about the same time she breaks up with Remington. A direct connection between the two occurrences is never clearly made. The story that circulates is that she turned him down. She is too dedicated to her career to give it up for a husband, home, children and family.

The phone call and arrangement she makes for him to visit at four that afternoon is calmly awaited by the group. Bambi furtively confesses it was not for her career that she turns him down. The truth she finally confronts is that Renny rejected her. She got polio and he rejected her in a note pinned to her door. She was still in the hospital and he said her polio is too awkward. Bambi and the group make a combined break for freedom when they race out of her house just barely before he was to arrive.



Screw Martha

Screw Martha Summary

They were ending their day at Mustang Sally's, a karaoke bar. They strew Megan's ashes into the Memory Lane reservoir at midnight when they were trespassing. Charlie ships them by UPS to Barbara with a simple note, our Megan. It is May but cold and frosty as Barbara leads with the urn. Canoe, Mimi Klondike and Louise Cooper follow; Carmen and Suzie wait for Barbara's orders and the geese furiously flap away.

Pips Phelp leads a gathering at the Club to deal with the geese. They are determined to be a health hazard. He continues with other matters of the meeting, including accounting for the renovation and naming the newly elected members by Jeannie Yeatman, the oldest living associate. Pips read a prepared speech about the geese in his plea to rid the area of them by oiling their eggs.

Carmen finds a nest and describes it with her arms encircled as huge and stupendous. She is sitting at Suzie's table across from Barbara. She shows the mud-splattered egg hiding under her hard hat in a baby's knitted cap. The group silently reflects on the experiences they had where it was found, and since, with Megan. They agree it's sad.

They read that three hundred and twenty-six oiled eggs were returned to their nest. Barbara pitches Carmen's egg to Bambi. Canoe squeaks "Look, Ma, I'm flying." Bambi cracks the empty egg like a stick on her wheelchair. Nothing is to be done because death comes to all the living. Barbara cries, though we wish the display over.

Screw Martha Analysis

It is a sad and eventful day they end at the karaoke bar. Barbara assembles the group of friends to commemorate and help spread her dead daughter's ashes over the reservoir. The sadness of her death is made greater because Megan committed suicide. She hangs herself while visiting her father, Barbara's ex-husband.

The ever-present geese and Club's effort to destroy their eggs is a symbol of both fertility and destruction of the young. Megan is never happy. Self-destruction symbolizes her parents' divorce and Barbara's ambivalent feelings toward Megan and her role of mother.



Come as You Were

Come as You Were Summary

Canoe hosts a garden party on a steamy June 20th, the solstice, chosen because it's the longest day. She calls it a come-as-you-were party to remember their June bride's days. She is drinking again. This is a small party of friends. Canoe recalls past parties when there were many, including suitors and gardeners. Now with only Ricardo, who has no time after pool care, Louise suggests she fire him and hire a new one.

Suzie arrives at the party in her hand-sewn Belgian lace and tulle gown with Carmen wrapped in its train. She follows after her as they step down to the pool area where Ricardo serves drinks in a tuxedo with tails. Bambi arrives in her wheelchair. She dresses in what she calls concert black, sequins and a boa. Bambi is guided down the steps after Ricardo takes off his tails and dress shirt. Since it's Canoe's party, they agree, they should not let her get drunk. They have no choice when she calls Ricardo to serve her. They remember her fortieth when after she passes out; Buddy decorates and takes a photograph of her.

Day passes, and dusk sets. The partygoers gather around the pool where it's cooler and sit on the wrought iron furniture or flagstone border. They eat the pasta and sandwiches. Canoe falls asleep. They encourage Gay to tell about her wedding. She is generally standoffish, perhaps the occupational hazard of a reporter. After her nose surgery by their Dr. F., Gay, Burt begins to socialize with the group. She previously kept to herself doting on her ailing sister Katherine after she divorced Clark.

The group of perhaps friends, but at least the company of women who share a similar age and interests, listen to Gay's story of her wedding night to Clark. They know him to be boring and suspect he is homosexual. She tells of hiding in the armoire when left alone. The hotelwoman takes them to the fifth floor wedding suite with their bags. She can no longer hold her with tales of the reception and toasts. Nor does she tell of Katherine's Radcliffe acceptance and their dreams of writing books together and that Gay turns her down since she thinks it impossible to not marry.

He goes into the other room to use the bureau drawers and offers her the armoire. She curls up inside it and watches him return in pajamas through a crack in the door. He calls her name but gets no answer. He then opens the armoire door, sees her and asks if she is sick. They met six months earlier at a dance held by the resort where she and Katherine worked. He was a guest from the Midwest. She never saw him in pajamas and, hiding in the armoire, is still in her pink traveling dress.

He kisses her lips and neck while he slowly unzips the dress and lets it fall to the floor around her high heels. She feels uncomfortable standing there in her underwear and heels in a strange room and town she has never been. She misses Katherine and the room they share in Queens. Clark unbuttons his pajamas to reveal his hairy chest. Gay



recalls times she desires and fantasizes about this experience with other boys. Now that she is having that first experience with her newly wed husband, she does in fact feel sick. She excuses herself and goes into the bathroom, the first time of many. The next night Clark protests that he is not a criminal and this is legal similar to the way one would say that to a child or a deaf relative. Later she says he calls her frigid, which she looks up.

Dusk becomes dark. The heat and the sweet smell of evening flowers bring out the fireflies. Viv recounts her experience with Don who is amazed at her intelligence and incredulous at her lack of sexual sense. The heat of the evening and threat of rain in the air enhances veiled comments about their experience or lack of female orgasm. Mimi claims not ever, Barbara pleads ignorance, Louise remains still, and Mimi says Mike told her it is all in her mind that she couldn't relax. She says he is just lousy at whatever it was. Carmen and Suzie hold hands under their blanket despite the heat.

Barbara tells of making up a lover, Ted, and of her fantasies. The others of that age, where the word lover is not in their lives, listen raptly to her tale. Canoe, waking up, asks what they are talking about. Interrupted from her reverie, Barbara responds by saying sex and Canoe, laughing, says she'd rather work in the garden.

Canoe then recounts the story told by the mother of her grandmother, Nettle and Teddy Roosevelt. Her mother, as a little girl living in Georgetown, watches him ride his Arabian and wave to her. Once he is about to give her a ride. Grandmother Nettle stops him and says she could go for a ride only if she wears the yellow sash of a suffragette. He refuses to take her and rides off.

Shortly after, Canoe gets up unsteadily and tears off her dress. Clad in slip and brassiere she dares everyone to dive in the pool. In the dark they all follow, casting their white dresses on the patio furniture. They dive in paddling up and down in their underwear. Ricardo laughingly turns on the bright pool light. In the bright light they recognize how funny they look, fish too old to spawn, but desperate to swim back upstream.

Come as You Were Analysis

One of the shared experiences the group of friends has was their traditional marriages. Many of them are June brides, married in 1953. Later they move with their husbands to the town where they have children and later divorce. Canoe commemorates that experience forty or fifty years later by hosting a come as you were party. The guests wear wedding gowns and Ricardo in tails serves drinks, to her as well, around her pool.

This many years later, as is shown with Bambi, there is very little reason to maintain the illusions and stories of younger lives and healthier bodies. Youthful dreams and hopes of single woman careers are subjugated to a presumed greater good of marriage and family. Those ideas give way over the years to realities of marriage and family lost to divorce or widowed older women with no more time for careers and ailing bodies.



Another myth to suffer truth is Gay's presumed homosexual husband. She candidly admits now she was too young, scared and frigid. He was too old and perhaps too guilt ridden for either of them to transcend the pains of their relationship. No, Clark Burt wasn't homosexual, at least it didn't start that way, not until he married Gay. The other women admit their sexual misgivings as well, except for Carmen and Suzie who are gay. Louise won't say, and Canoe whose grandmother taught her mother other ways to spend the day, likes gardening.



Sick Chicks

Sick Chicks Summary

The group arrives early at the hospice where Bishop's orchard was. This is where they once brought their children to pick apples. The original plan was for it to be an office park. Vacant offices and marginal business in the office park suggests that the private venture could find a better use. The low gray building is better used as a state-of-the-art hospice with a swimming pool and general amenities. The front lawn is used for Easter egg hunts, grazing and other events that bring together children, adolescents, hospice guests and farm animals. One of Judy's jobs is to feed them at six in the morning from the bucket of grain she holds in her lap when Cookie, her attendant, wheels her out.

Some of the other guests sit around the pool smoking, smiling and appearing happy, since there are few regulations to follow anymore. Judy comments that Viv is early when she arrives. Judy reserves the Sunshine Room for this highlight of their month. She refers to herself and the other guests as sick chicks. They appreciate the different perspective Viv and the other visitors bring to their book club meetings.

Viv brings the meeting to order and begins the discussion of Virginia Woolf. Questions and lively interchange begin with Viv and the book club members of the hospice guests. Their initial subject leads to discussion of other authors and their works. Occasionally they lapse into philosophical observations. The moment, the present and states of mind and age are interrupted only if a llama wanders by the window. Viv guides discussion to the realm of ideas. She allows a moment of quiet. Barbara mentions a name she likes.

Viv muses silently about Professor Dipple, Cilla Whitney and what her life might have been and now is. The group comments on favorite names. A name Louise Cooper likes is Dahlia. She expresses her frustration that Henry insisted on Lizzie for their daughter. They remark about the histories of every word and the distractions when a line or word is read. Betsy comments on the musical then irrevocable nature of the word cancer. Viv suggests she may mean Big Ben and then boldly comments on it as a death knell.

The meeting ends and Barbara agrees to write up discussion points. Visitors look forward to hospice cookies and then leaving for lunch or golf at the Club with their minor aches and pains. They pause to look at the fountain. Judy reflects on the moment she held her daughter the first time and her hardening limbs. One of the guests, a book club member Mrs. Lowell, dies overnight. Judy expresses concern that she would have had much to say about her renowned Philadelphia family past and experiences. Mrs. Lowell's death does not make her sad.

Sick Chicks Analysis

Judy Sawyer's condition continues to deteriorate. She is now a guest at the hospice. Despite her illness, the group of friends stays in touch with each other. They simply



change their venue to meet at the hospice to include her. Judy maintains activities to stay involved. One of her jobs with Cookie is feeding the animals that graze on the grounds.

Another activity the hospice guests enjoy is their monthly book club discussion. Viv leads it. This gives her the opportunity to practice, and perhaps fantasize about, teaching. She believes she gave up that opportunity by marrying Don. She might have had that dream by following the example of Professor Dipple and Cilla Whitney. Barbara records meeting discussion points. They discover one of the guests at the meeting died overnight.



Warriors

Warriors Summary

Barbara places the babies, naked, aside one another on her imported leopard-skin fur stole for the photo shoot. None of them like it and their faces flush with rage. Character is an important trait the group of friends believes their children should have. They are avid devotees of Dr. Spock. A character-building practice to grow warriors according to him is to ignore momentary discomfort. That requires listening to their cries.

When the photographer that Barbara hires at the Stone Barn shines the light over their heads, they do stop crying. He clicks their pictures. Each of the mothers since giving birth has a sense of direction and purpose. Or at least they have something to do. Each one uses baby-talk to her cherub; Canoe's Anzie, Barbara's Meggie and Mimi's Katie, Ka-diddle. Each has a girl. Spock claims first girls are like a biblical Martha to keep things straight. Young now their first child and Christmas with holiday photos taken are being readied.

Barbara's house is the gathering spot and the silver bowl for her golfing skill is matched by a companion bowl celebrating marriage to Charles in 1953. Barbara, Mimi, Canoe and Judy do not like the photographer. But since he has left, there is little to say

They share Spock-isms and drink cider. There is a knock and Louise, who is pregnant, arrives with a covered dish. She is due soon and shows darkened skin of pregnancy around her eyes and nose as she totters in. Her doctor tells her she's dilated and could deliver any minute. They share memories that reassure or disquiet Louise and eat whiskey cookies.

The photographer returns for the light meter he forgot. He is charmed by the appearance of Louise. He asks if her coloring is real and if she minds some photos. He returns with his equipment and asks her to sit on the stool he's positioned in the kitchen. He asks her to remove her earrings and shoes and change into one of Barbara's robes. He begins the photo shoot of Louise while the others take care of the babies, drink bourbon punch and a foursome play cards in the living room. The photographer engages Louise in small talk about her age, birth city, parents, brother, husband and their life. She asks for a cigarette that he lights and gives her. The others have a routine their husbands expect. They break it to remain at Barbara's, apart from, silent, invisible but available.

It is dark and the photographer uses lighting equipment to continue the shoot. He tries out different angles that blind Louise as if she were onstage. He asks that she adjust the robe off her shoulders. She does but then it falls all the way off to show her full breasts and pregnant belly. The others watch and see a puddle of water on the linoleum beneath her. She holds herself where it hurts and realizes her water broke and she may deliver.



Warriors Analysis

The group of young women gives birth to daughters and Barbara arranges a photo shoot for their first holidays and baby pictures for their Christmas cards. The new mothers are devotees of child-rearing according to Dr. Spock. They follow his guidelines to raising babies. They gather at Barbara's with the new mothers' babies; Canoe's Anne, Barbara's Megan and Mimi's Katie and childless Judy who has not yet adopted Melissa.

Barbara hires the photographer, nameless but apparently British, at the Stone Barn. He agrees to take the pictures and then departs. Shortly afterward Louise arrives obviously pregnant and apparently ready to deliver any time. The photographer returns to get his light meter but then asks to photograph Louise, and she agrees, if the others don't mind.

The photo shoot of Louise is sexually charged. This experience is full of nuance. It reiterates an earlier chapter's intervention of Louise and Him and replay of an old boyfriend, Danny's experience with Louise as a young girl. Portrayal of Louise as the only truly sexual and sensuous female even in her pregnancy climaxes in this chapter. The photo shoot ends at dark with her blinded from the lights as if on stage, the others watching from the other room as she stands naked, her water broke and ready to deliver.



Back When They Were Children

Back When They Were Children Summary

Canoe is inspired to lead the group with their daughters to their new phase of creativity, as she puts it. In the thirties and early forties a paradigm shift often occurs she claims. The group plans to assemble at Fleishmann's for craft classes by Jean Weiss, the owner of Brush & Palette. She will even open her gallery for a special show like they attend for Esther's exhibits and last for what remains in her studio after her death.

Canoe brings the eight straw hats and decorations she bought. She proclaims one must express what one feels on the inside. Anne looks down, embarrassed or excited, by the birthday party and activity her mother plans. When they're done decorating Canoe drives them to town where Jean selects the winner. She is the fairest and not the mother of any of the twelve-year-old girls.

The mothers return to poolside at Canoe's so the girls can decorate and have their own privacy. The mothers wonder together just how much advantage they've taken of the privacy they already have. Canoe confesses this was the idea she had for her twelfth birthday, which her mother provided. Anne calls for her and Canoe returns to the girls. The group is reminded by the ric-a-rac on her skirt how she made it and remembers their starting class attempts at craft lessons with Jean and her mother Bettina.

Canoe calls the group. They trudge up the hill where the girls have been working to see and admire what they made. The mothers each compliment their daughters in turn: Barbara to Megan, Suzie to Linda, and Mimi to Katie. Katie's profanity exceeds Mimi's patience. She marches Katie off, apologizing and saying goodbye to Anne and Lizzie, her best friends. Canoe serves sandwiches they only pick at because of their diets. They eagerly devour the cake until she announces it's time for the judging she's arranged.

They all, mothers and daughters, get in Canoe's Woody and go to town. She parks on Main Street near the Brush & Palette, which is, until Fleishmann's closes, one of the few remaining stores open since the mall. Canoe leads them toward the Brush & Palette and then across the street to Fleishmann's. Jean is sitting at the lunch counter. The mothers anxiously remember when they presented Jean with their first craft projects.

The girls are introduced to Jean. She gets up from her lunch to greet them, exchange niceties, judge the hats and congratulate Anne for her birthday and for winning the hat competition. Canoe gives her a Japanese dime-store fan she got from Buddy and a hug. On the way back Canoe stops at a park for the girls to parade about in their hats. They run off to visit with the boys they saw. The mothers look on reminiscing about how they've grown since when they were children.



Back When They Were Children Analysis

Canoe leads the group of friends and their daughters in their developing urge to creativity in their thirties and forties. The daughters are in their twelfth year just before becoming teenagers. The mothers experience a last opportunity before losing their daughters to boys and then men. Her daughter, Anne, is just turning twelve. Canoe has a party for her, just like she wanted and her mother gave her.

Canoe provides hats and decorations for the girls to decorate the party. She then drives them to town where Jean, the town's art shop owner, will judge and award a prize, to the winning birthday girl of course. On their way home they stop at a park and run off to where the boys are foretelling what is ahead as they become teenagers and women.



The Hounds, Again

The Hounds, Again Summary

They are outside waiting for the foxhunt to appear. Canoe announces she hears the hounds again and recalls the petrifying effect their sound has on the geese. They often see them frozen and confused in the middle of old Route 32. Canoe comments they will rip the throats of children. Barbara comments that only the German ones from the war are dangerous and Louise asks if anyone is listening.

She tells of His plan to escape from the Center with a rope of the floral bedspread. They picture Him climbing down a rose garland holding his suitcase. They remember He's cornered all of them, not just Louise. Now they worry their daughters' maturing into womanhood will be discovered by Him when He's been drinking and their daughters are babysitting. Still now He looks at them not yet the daughters and draws them to Him.

The day is getting chillier as Gay gathers holly and the others empty the wine flask. She walks up in her boots exclaiming that she is freezing. They get back in their Jeeps, tired of waiting for the mechanical fox and hounds to appear. Then, as they drive away, they see them approach and stop to watch.

The holidays are coming. Since the children will be with their fathers this Christmas, they will have no tree, but the ornaments will be used at the hospice party. Each of them has ideas to decorate, along with discussing their favorite standards: Wonderful Life, White Christmas. Bambi swoons for Bing, Barbara corrects her, that's Jimmy but Bambi knows and still swoons. Suzie asks when they are expected since she forgot the time of Judy's raspy invitation to party with the sick chicks.

Louise goes on, sniffing with the story of His planned escape down the side of the Center resulting in a cracked neck. Barbara encourages her to let Him go. Judy tells her dream about Esther's blind happiness when toasting Walter as the handsomest, and the beginning of her and Dick's end on the day she kills the dog in Mexico. Cookie is feeding Judy, since they are there at dinnertime. Later in the Sunshine Room they put the blue artificial tree together. Bambi plays carols with her good hand on the warped piano. Canoe wears a red nose, antlers and has been drunk since noon. Cookie gets down to form a conga line and they snake around the room.

Canoe, the designated driver, drives Bambi's van home. She swerves off the road to the shoulder when she sees a flash of yellow eyes and fangs. The windows whiz down, the motor shuts off and they wait in the frigid dark night. They just wait with Canoe since they have all the time in the world.



The Hounds, Again Analysis

Hounds are a continuing image for Him and the other males in the lives of this group of women. The foxhunt is a metaphor for the chase of the female by the male. That the fox is now mechanical speaks to the artificiality of their relationships. Geese reappear not swooping down and threatening but vulnerable to the hounds that can rip their throats.

Louise echoes that vulnerability when she speaks of how He cracks His neck escaping from the Center. He finally ends up there despite the original unsuccessful intervention. The mothers grow increasingly concerned at the growing vulnerability of their daughters to an apparent endless parade of hounds, if not Him, then some others after them.

They are on an outing to watch the foxhunt and gather holly and other seasonal plantings they can use to celebrate Christmas at the hospice. They will spend Christmas with the sick chicks since it's the year their daughters spend with their fathers the ex-husbands. Visit at the hospice is melancholic with memories of previous years and experiences. Canoe is drinking again. Bambi plays carols with her good hand. When they leave, Canoe (designated as the driver) swerves to miss something in the road, a hound or a wolf perhaps, and they end up on the side of the road with the motor dead, hoping for help to come on the rarely traveled old Route 32.



The Beginning of the End

The Beginning of the End Summary

Viv reflects on how she might describe how she and Don experience the beginning of the end as the others have when her turn comes. That reflection leads her to remember experiences she had when meeting with Professor Dipple and Cilla Whitney the fateful day that she told them she was going to marry Don rather than continue her schooling and scholarship.

Professor Rebecca Westerlake hangs behind the Professor and Cilla as Viv meets with them. Though they plan to take a walk, the rain discourages that which was all right with Viv. She found herself, while walking idly, chatting and carrying on about nothing in particular and avoiding discussion of the issue at hand.

The Professor and Cilla wanted to discuss with Viv her career at Smith. Professor Dipple stated she became aware Viv withdrew her application for a graduate scholarship and waited for her response. Viv explained she thought it better she wait for a year, without mentioning her intended marriage. Abruptly then she stated the truth - that she decided to get married first, and looked down at her knees, fearing their response.

As if attempting to take back what she has just said, Viv explained she might take a few classes, and that Don is comfortable with that. They ask if she is pregnant, or is planning to become so, and whether she is using birth control. Their continued questioning leaves her uncertain and reassuring herself that she loves him and will marry him in less than a month. He gave her a ring last week.

He invites her to a movie, touches her bare knee and holds her hand. He invites her to a game and then after that to dinner, and sits with her on campus smoking cigarettes and talking of plans, and then, would she marry him. Her response was yes because, 'what else?' She reflects on the lives of her Aunt Sara, her grandmother and her mother and recognizes that they set the precedent. She must join them in their example. Then she can return to her Professor Dipple and Cilla, after all she is just deferring for a year or two.

Later, Professor Dipple dies and Viv takes a course from Gordon, a young instructor at the community college teaching adult offerings. She is the oldest in the class and he asks her to read aloud from her notebook. As she reads emotion fills her voice as she recognizes this is the way it is for all of them, herself, Canoe, Bambi, Mimi, Judy, Louise, Suzie, Barbara and Esther. But now much earlier, in the rain with Don, her fiancy, they kiss, already committed and she recognizes there will be no return since this bed she is making is hers to live in.

The Beginning of the End Analysis

Each of the women in the group of friends has a beginning of the end to their relationships. The last to reminisce about hers is Viv about Don. Their experience of the end is most significant in the overall theme of the novel. Their beginning of the end really began at the end of the beginning.

Viv really wanted to become a professor like Professor Dipple. She decided, as in what else she would do, to marry instead. Not that she was particularly in love, she barely knew Don, but marriage seemed like the thing she should do. She assured herself it would be 'just first,' not 'instead of,' since she planned to come back to school after a year or so. Viv's reflection finally brings together all the experience of the others into her own. One way or another, it's been the same with each of them in turn. The beginning of the end really began in the beginning.



Characters

Canoe

Canoe is a leader of the group and plans the intervention. She is a recovering alcoholic. She converts her temptations into campaigns by leaving pamphlets in the clubhouse next to the men's 19th hole. In addition to sometime drinking she also smokes and cracks her knuckles. When the group of friends travels, Canoe is the designated driver, even if she is drinking.

Canoe is the mother of Anne and her ex-husband's name is Buddy. She claims she might have married Alan Chapman, but Buddy asks her first. Canoe's home is a popular place to hold parties with its swimming pool and flagstone patio area. Lounge area furnishings include lounge chairs and wrought iron furniture. Steps lead up a slope to her house.

Canoe has a party for Anne's twelfth birthday with her friends and their mothers. The mothers lounge in the pool area. The daughters decorate straw hats around a table on the hillside. When they finish Canoe drives them to town for hat judging. Another party of Canoe's is a come-as-you-were party to celebrate their weddings. Most of the guests are June brides from decades earlier. They wear wedding gowns and Canoe drinks. Ricardo, the pool boy dressed in tails, serves Canoe and the others. They end the evening taking their gowns off and jumping in the pool.

Him

He is a character whom they all love; some may be His ex-lovers, and they can indeed avoid loving Him. He is an acquaintance of their ex-husbands. He is a handsome, successful man with golden hair and straight white teeth. He is a classy dresser with smooth leather shoes, argyle socks and a blue cashmere double-breasted coat. He leases and drives each year's latest model BMW with His special license plate SOLD.

He is a realtor who sells their homes, some to unsuspecting buyers despite his knowledge of undetected flaws. When prospecting he shows up unexpectedly to survey and assess the value of their homes. Catching them unawares, he causes unease, guilt and suspicion. He creates an intimacy by inspecting their homes as if peering into their souls. He stands close and smells earthy. He speaks in a low seductive whispering voice about the home's future value as He guides them through its rooms.

His habits, abilities, likes and dislikes are known. He is an alcoholic with unquenchable thirst, as well as other appetites. Some habits are disgusting yet they love Him because He is one of their own. He is their husband, their father and their son. Despite His scheming, cowardice, lying and betrayal they are unable not to love Him. He is ever-present, a male figure to whom the female friends orient their lives. He is there as they grow from being daughters to wives, mothers, lovers, divorcees or widows, then



grandmothers. He has no name and yet every name. He represents all that they see as good and evil, value and meaning in their lives till now, yet still they love Him.

Barbara

Barbara is also a member of the group of female friends who intervenes. She is the mother of Megan and her ex-husband is Charlie Elliot. Barbara, Canoe and Mimi have daughters for their first children. Barbara meets and hires the photographer to take their baby pictures. Barbara's home is a gathering place for the friends while they raise their children. They meet and share their understanding of Dr. Spock's child rearing lessons.

Barbara has mixed feelings about her daughter, Megan, as an older child. She is anxious for her to arrive home and misses her when not at home. Then when Megan does come home, Barbara leaves to go out. Megan is an overweight child and bigger than any of her friends. Barbara and Charlie divorce because Barbara says the sounds he makes when he clears his throat displease her. Megan shares time with her father and with her mother. Barbara notices that she is becoming depressed.

Megan is visiting her father when she hangs herself. Charlie sends Megan's ashes to Barbara by UPS. They are in an urn with a note "Our Megan." After grieving for some time Barbara and the group of friends meet to spread Megan's ashes over the reservoir.

Pips Phelp

Pips is a lawyer whom the ladies know from the Club. He is skilled as a leader and discussion initiator. Pips is responsible for convening the intervention meeting and the paperwork preparations at the Center to admit Him. He is the expert to whom questions are addressed, but an ordinary man, completely unknown outside his circle.

Pips drives a Buick, which contrasts with His' flashy new BMW. Pips is considered an honest, family man who can be trusted. His wife Eleanor is quiet and their children achieve beyond their skills. Pips' basic honesty and weakness makes his role as stand-in for Him in the practice intervention artificial and unbelievable. Pips Phelp is handy when working around the house, and he enjoys gardening but has no talent for acting or selling. He struggles to quit smoking.

Esther Curran

Esther is in the group of female friends who plan His intervention. She knows Him to be a kind man. He shows her houses and he shows her attention when she no longer feels like a beautiful woman after Walter dies. She is grieving and in pain from memories of her home with Walter. Years after he dies she accepts an invitation to join the intervention.



Although wealthy, she does not show her riches. She drives a Dodge and checks grocery prices at the Safeway. Esther is artistic and her eccentricities are overlooked. She still speaks of Walter as if he will shortly return from the store. Her gray, unkempt hair, nails and paint on her hands at parties are signs of depression. Esther's morning-wandering on old Route 32 wearing slippers and a robe is an obvious warning.

She lives alone in Walter and her house. Their house was a showpiece for the county but since his passing Esther lets it become tumbledown. Friends adore but don't understand her. After the intervention they do not see her for years except for chance meetings in town. Occasionally she wears his picture hanging with twine around her neck.

Esther trained at a finishing school in Switzerland and lived with her father, Harry, before she met Walter. He abandons her to Walter to go have a drink. Her father, an alcoholic and notorious drunk, dies alone in a restaurant choking on a piece of steak.

Walter saves her from the path of a runaway bus that would have killed her. He is totally devoted to her. She considers him her hero. He is the white knight that saves her from the bus and from her father. Walter is a homely man with physical conditions that exaggerate and discolor his features. He is a sculptor, but only Esther appreciates his work. His features and dedication to Esther, and hers to him, are significant. Their relationship is a contrast to his handsome appearance and sales success. Walter and Esther, alive or dead, present to the group of friends, and Him, a model of fidelity and marital commitment.

Friends keep her from collapsing into Walter's grave at the funeral. Since that day years ago, she declines invitations, stays to herself, becomes depressed and commits suicide at the funeral anniversary party she holds for him.

Viv

Viv is a significant character because she foregoes a graduate scholarship and career as a professor to marry. She is also one of the female interveners and reflects on her desirable career opportunity. When in college she was accepted into a graduate scholarship program. Viv was a protégé of Professor Dipple and companion Cilla Whitney. They lived together at Westerlake. Viv visited them one rainy afternoon to discuss changes in her life.

Although she was very excited about her career prospects, she was also dating Don. They shared a few dates together over a short period. He asked her to marry him and offered a ring. Viv agreed because she thinks her Aunt Sara and other female relatives expect that. She did not say she loved Don, or that she wanted to get married. Viv explains to Professor Dipple that she is just getting married first. She will return to her career after just a year break.

Viv leads the monthly book club meetings for Judy Sawyer, Mrs. William Lowell, Betsy Croninger, Cynthia Patrick, BeBe McShane and other hospice guests years later. Judy



is a guest also and refers to her and the others as the sick chicks. Don is her ex-husband and she takes classes from Gordon. She is the oldest student in his class.

Judy Sawyer

Judy is also one of the female interveners. Judy and Dick Sawyer spent many years trying to get pregnant. Eventually she decided she is infertile and they adopted Melissa. They later divorced and Dick is her ex-husband. Judy accepts invitations to parties at Canoe, Barbara and Esther's but does not host any during these earlier years.

Judy is symbolic of the effects of aging and the disabilities that occur over time. She is the victim of a disabling disease. Her mental capacities diminished, she overdresses and begins to drag one foot. Similar to Bambi, Judy uses a wheelchair. Unlike Bambi, her paralysis occurs late in life and she relies on Cookie, her attendant, for mobility and meals.

She spends her last days at the hospice. She has a degenerative throat disorder since her voice is raspy and her larynx is calcifying. One of her daily chores is feeding the animals with Cookie's help. Now confined to a wheelchair and the hospice, Judy becomes more active. She reserves the Sunshine Room for monthly book club meetings. She invites the group of friends to party with the sick chicks at the hospice for Christmas.

Mimi Klondike

Mimi is one of the female interveners. She is the ex-wife of Mike Klondike and the mother of Katie, a friend of Lizzie Cooper. The two daughters often serve drinks for parties and sneak the dregs from the unfinished drinks.

Mimi introduces the beginning of the end idea. She recalls how Mike wouldn't let her steal salt and pepper shakers on one of their trips. She teased him about smuggling a Pieta in a suitcase through customs. He didn't speak to her until they get to Naples where he pointed out an ugly ashtray she might steal. That was the beginning of the end for them. After the experiences of that trip she started traveling alone.

Louise Cooper

Louise seems to be the only one of the group who is fully sexual, sensual and accepts her life as a wife, female and mother. She is Irish, well adjusted and attractive, and she has a fair complexion. Her husband is Henry and their daughter is Lizzie. Louise is still married when the retired Henry dies suddenly while golfing. She is not one of the interveners.

Louise suffers His attention when she is found naked by the interveners searching for Him. He sells her house, stops by to place His SOLD REALTOR sign and visit. She



found herself in a similar situation years earlier at Barbara's. After baby pictures are taken the photographer returns and asks to take pictures of the pregnant Louise.

The photographer took pictures of her in a robe. It fell off to reveal her naked, pregnant and about to deliver, just as Dr. Wells warned. At the end of Canoe's come-as-you-were party, the group of friends express ambivalent feelings and experiences about female sexuality. Louise discreetly says nothing about her sexuality and experience.

Gay Burt

Gay joins the group of friends later and is not one of the interveners. She is accused of being frigid shortly after she and Clark marry. She marries too young and too soon after little thought, time and experience. Clark Burt, her husband, is thought to be homosexual, but Gay admits to being frigid at Canoe's party. Gay previously discusses with Katherine a career writing books and living with her sister, like Virginia and Vanessa did. She foregoes that dream to marry Clark Burt then develops her career as a reporter.

Suzie

Suzie is among the group of friends who also is divorced. She is related to the wealthy Du Pont family but exactly how is unknown. Her ex-husband is unnamed, but she wears her wedding gown to Canoe's come-as-you-were party. She runs off with a handsome polo pony trainer, Emilio Saldariagga, who is half her age. Few were not attracted by his black hair and his high boots. Suzie discovers he is after her money and identifies the beginning of their end by watching him get dressed. Emilio walks around in his dress shirt, sox, tie, no trousers and boxer shorts.

Suzie returns from Emilio with Carmen. She wraps up in Suzie's wedding gown train at Canoe's party. They apparently enjoy a lesbian relationship. Suzie and Carmen cuddle under a blanket at the party. They are quiet while the others discuss sexual experiences in the hot evening around the pool.

Bambi

Bambi already has a career as a professional musician. She is willing to forego that career for Remington. She uses the story of her dedication to that career as the excuse to turn down his proposal. Years later she admits that he dumped her because of her polio.

Bambi has been living with the disability most of the other friends only experience as they age. Stricken with polio as a young woman, she had by then already experienced the beginnings of a professional music career. She was known for her ability to play piano by ear. She lived in Manhattan and was not afraid to take off on her own by bus despite her disability. Bambi is confined to a wheelchair and has one good hand. She



does not have a named attendant as Judy does at the hospice. She is independent and gets along all right despite her polio. She has a van, which she may drive unless they've been drinking, in which case Canoe is the designated driver.

Bambi is socially active and organizes the clothing drive. She was rejected by Remington Jackson, ex-boyfriend and perhaps fiancy, when she contracted polio. He said it would be awkward and rejected Bambi by leaving a note. She subsequently sets up meeting with him, but ran off to the airport bar rather than face him.



Objects/Places

Canoe's Swimming Pool

The swimming pool and flagstone patio with deck chairs and wrought iron furniture at Canoe's serves as gathering place and lounging area.

His BMW

His leased, metallic BMW is new, the latest model, sporty and forest green, with blackened windows and a leather interior. The wheels are monogrammed, and the license plate reads, "SOLD."

Old Route 32

Old Route 32 is the rarely traveled road past Esther Curran's house.

The Club

The club is the country club golf course and racquet sport courts and meeting area.

Safeway Parking Lot

The grocery store parking lot is used as gathering spot for intervention.

Pips' Buick

Pips' car, which has good-cheer stickers on its bumper, is used as model for practicing intervention.

The Jeep

Canoe's vehicle has a carpeted floor and is used to regularly transport the group.

The Stone Barn

The Stone Barn is a local lunch spot that serves Manhattan clam chowder and grilled cheese, which He orders. This is the place where Barbara meets and hires the photographer.



Louise Cooper's House

Louise Cooper's house is the place where the group attempts to intervene. Her house is similar to the others', with a powder room off foyer, staircase, second-floor hallways, bedrooms, maid's room and narrow back staircase to the outside.

Esther Curran's House

Esther Curran has a tumbledown house off old Route 32, and it was a showpiece of the county when Walter Curran was alive. It was also the location for parties while he was alive, and Esther has her last party and drinks poison there.

Walter's Portrait

Walter's portrait is lifelike, a picture of Esther's dead husband overlooking the party, in an altar-like setting.

The Captain's Roost

The Captain's Roost is a watering spot near the local airport on the outskirts of town where Bambi and the others watch planes take off and land. They go there to avoid meeting Remington Jackson.

Mustang Sally's

Mustang Sally's is a karaoke bar found by Suzie and Carmen off Industrial Drive between Empire Noodle and Sheer Delight.

Megan's Ashes

Megan's ashes are shipped to Barbara by her ex, Charlie, in an urn. They are strewn in reservoir off Memory Lane.

The Geese

The geese are a nuisance and a health hazard, and they become the objects of a Club project organized by Pips to eradicate them by coating their eggs with oil to stop passage of oxygen through eggshell and thereby asphyxiating the goslings.



The Hospice

The hospice is a strange, low gray building with tinted blue windows converted from a vacant office park to a state-of-the-art hospice with a swimming pool and general amenities. It has the Sunshine Room, where the sick chicks gather with visitors to meet, have monthly book club meetings, celebrate Christmas and have other parties.

Barbara's House

Barbara's house is a gathering place where mothers met with their children for a photo shoot, and her kitchen is where the photographer took pictures of Louise.

Fleishmann's

Fleishmann's is a failing store/restaurant that offers craft classes.

Brush and Palette

Brush and Palette is an art gallery/supply store owned by Jean Weiss, who teaches craft classes.

Westerlake

Westerlake is a Georgian house at corner of Main and East shared by Professor Dipple and Cilla Whitney.



Themes

Male Dominance of Vulnerable Women

He typifies, and is a caricature and stereotype of, male dominance. The novel begins with the group of friends planning to intervene in His lifestyle. He represents all men and is perceived in their fathers, husbands, boyfriends, sons and other male characters. The novel opens with the female friends and Canoe in the lead planning to take the upper hand by intervention, but only for the best of reasons, so he does not kill himself. They do not want his blood on their hands.

The struggle is evidenced by just missing Him at the end of the intervention attempt. Louise is discovered naked and vulnerable again having been preyed on by Him in His attempt to "console" her. The irony of this situation occurs later when He attempts to escape from the Center and dies by breaking His neck in a fall from the flowered rope. Louise is saddened by His death and is told to get over it.

Harry the alcoholic father of Esther sees his daughter just saved from being hit by a bus by Walter and gets over it by heading to a bar because he needs a drink. Similar to Him, an alcoholic, he is always thirsty

The photographer with Louise exemplifies His lecherous nature. The photographer is not an attractive character. He is British and obnoxious. He is hired by Barbara at the Stone Barn where He hangs out. The photographer dominates and takes advantage of the much younger Louise by disrobing and taking pictures of her. The others approve, or at least don't mind, and look on as if she's onstage.

Remington Jackson rejects Bambi by a note on her door when she is most vulnerable, in the hospital having been stricken by polio. Her father stands by her side in the iron lung.

He is also contrasted with Walter, the ugly white knight and devoted husband of Esther, who, when widowed and most vulnerable, is taken advantage of by Him.

Female Subservience and Sacrifice of Career to Husband, Marriage, Family

An overriding theme which pervades *Our Kind* is female subservience to the goals, desires, whims, interest, expectations and customs dictated by others, often a male but also the society at large. Frequently masquerading as male dominance or initiative when contrasted with the female role, it can also be perceived as victimization.

In reality, 'what else would we do?' is expressed as the reason for marriage. 'They give us something to do' is expressed as a reason for children. Neither Canoe nor Viv



express any love for their respective ex-husbands. Canoe makes it clear she married Buddy because he asked first. She also was considering Alan Chapman, who it is said turned out to be an alcoholic. As to marriage and sexuality, she states she'd rather be gardening.

Unlike Canoe, Viv didn't have another beau besides Don. But she was offered a graduate scholarship. It is her female relatives, Aunt Sara, her mother and others that set the precedent in their question, 'what else would she be expected to do?' Viv had the option of a promising career with the scholarship offered by Professor Dipple and Cilla Whitney. It's just that Don asked and she could get married first, and pursue her career next year.

Bambi already has a successful career as a musician, which, so the story goes, she refused to give up for a husband and family. She is seen as the stalwart one who has overcome female expectations of that earlier time and chose her career over a man. Only years later does she admit the truth. She would give it all up for Remington but he never asked.

Gay's sister, Katherine, already has a Radcliffe scholarship and suggests they could spend their lives together like Virginia and Vanessa writing books. Katherine asks why in the world Gay would want to get married. But the older and apparently wealthy Clark Burt asks and Gay is as intrigued and curious as any late teens early twenties virgin would be with fantasies about sex. That is until ironically sex is legal and she has a ready, willing and able man to share it with. She hides in the armoire instead. Only after her wedding does she discover what frigid means.

Barbara and Charlie apparently enjoy each other and win trophies together. After they have Megan, Barbara shows ambivalent feelings about her role as a mother. Divorce from Charlie, and Megan's sense of rejection end, in Megan's suicide. Judy and Dick think they should have a child and try unsuccessfully. Judy finds out she is infertile, so they adopt Melissa. Louise never asks Henry about having a baby. Esther and Walter have no children. She dotes on him and is a favorite of the others' children.

Friends over Time and Aging

Members of the group share experiences from the time. They moved to town in the early 1950s, living there until early 2000s. During that time many of them marry, have babies and raise them according to Dr. Spock. They watch them grow and become teenagers. They get divorces and lovers, get old, sick and watch the death of their friends, parents and children.

They watch each other become alcoholics and teetotalers. They meet and begin as newlyweds and grow old with each other as divorcees with disabilities, aches pains and other infirmities. They share feelings of fantasy, Him, Ricardo, Emilio and others. They see pain and sadness. They see their children die. They share private feelings with each other about sexuality, homosexuality and frigidity.



Canoe, the drunk/designated driver, drives Bambi's van into a ditch trying to avoid what seems to be a wolf. She waits for help with Bambi, along with Barbara whose daughter Megan is dead, and Louise who pines for Him. Viv may also be with them since she leads the sick chicks in monthly book club meetings. Judy stays at the hospice where they were partying. Esther has rejoined Walter and Suzie and Carmen may be happily enjoying the holidays together.



Style

Point of View

Our Kind is presented by the narrative all-knowing We. The community or group of friends presents a common opinion or attitude. All members of the group are assumed to have a similar point of view. Some of the individuals may have distinctly different ideas, i.e. Esther, which may be at variance to the others.

There is clearly a We point of view which speaks for the group. Against the We, an individual character or characters may show a different point of view. The individual members may express their own individuality by what they say. Overall they are a cohesive group. They state a common perspective and history excerpted as follows:

"Close-knit community, lived here for years but no ancestors buried here, just the place we have all ended up, married in 1953, divorced in 1976, grown daughters pity us, grown sons forget us, have grandchildren to visit but they agitate, excel at racquet sports, not interveners-out of character, may visit therapists but as a passing phase . . ."

Each vignette occurs in real time or as a recollected time and experience. The character having the vignette may express her experience in the first person with feelings and fears.

Setting

Our Kind covers a period of small town community and individual female growth from 1950s through early 2000s. Stories occur in an unnamed northeastern small town. The town is a typical one with a Main Street and several closing or closed stores. Primary female characters in the group of friends have a middle or upper middle class lifestyles. Each has her own home, although they are not all visited. Each has, or had, one or more relationships with husbands, ex-husbands, lovers, boyfriends and significant others.

The novel progresses through chapters and stories within changing settings of the town. The novel begins with "The Intervention" at Canoe's pool where they plan the intervention, practice the next day at the Safeway parking lot and meet there again before searching. They spot His BMW at Louise Cooper's, but they miss Him as they run out her back door.

"Esther's Walter" is set at Esther's house, which she shared with Walter until his death. Stories are remembered about previous parties. Bambi's is the setting for the next chapter. They deal with old boyfriends and ex-husbands in "Bambi Breaks for Freedom." "Screw Martha" begins at the reservoir with Megan's ashes, then to a meeting at the Club, and ends at the karaoke bar and with Barbara crying. "Come As You Were"



returns to Canoe's pool for a June bride party and memories by Gay and the others. "Sick Chicks" return to the Bishops Hill area, which is now the Hospice where Judy is a guest and Viv leads a book club that the others attend. Barbara hosts the baby photo shoot in Warriors that turns into Louise's pregnant photo shoot.

"Back When They Were Children" is the story of Canoe's party for Anne's twelfth birthday party at the pool. They proceed downtown to Fleishmann's for contest judging and stop at a park on the way home. "The Hounds, Again" find the group watching for a foxhunt off old Route 32. They are out to collect decorations for the Christmas party at the Hospice, which Judy invites them to. On the way home, Canoe, the drinking - but designated - driver of Bambi's van, lands the group in a ditch alongside the road.

"The Beginning of the End" recollects the story of Viv's foregone career from becoming a graduate student to a young married woman. She is portrayed from years ago sharing that decision in the home of Professor Dipple and Cilla Whitney. The chapter ends with her taking a community college course for adults where she is the oldest student there.

Language and Meaning

Walbert uses a mix of direct language, symbolism and nuance to express the stories in this novel. Frequently the stories vacillate from one to another environment and between first and third persons depending on what is being expressed. The author uses a rich mix of words, double meanings and stories to explain the different attitudes and ideas each character shares.

A situation may occur early in the novel, which may in turn be tied back to other parts of the novel and make sense only many pages or chapters later. For example, He breaks his neck trying to escape from the Center. The interveners try to get Him in the Center to save His life. Presumably He dies from "cracking" His neck; but death is not stated, except that, toward the end of the book, Louise is saddened by the accident and is told to get over it. Reading the novel is a challenge to keep all parts of the various stories and characters in order so they come together at significant points much later in the novel.

Structure

Our Kind is divided into ten chapters. Each chapter is arranged around a common theme, which is also the chapter name. Within chapters several vignettes are presented. Each short sketch exemplifies or portrays a characteristic, feature, experience or event one or more characters have or may have shared.

Vignettes within a chapter are separated by short lines, which enable a clearer break and indicate a change in perception, experience or situation. The structure is challenging to follow. Within three or four pages a character may go from a current experience to an earlier impression as younger person, or to a later stage in life. Structure approaches a stream of consciousness, but is limited by lines separating

vignettes. Each vignette has a degree of internal consistency, albeit occasionally difficult to determine.

Quotes

"Know that we are a close-knit community. We've lived here for years, which is not to say that our ancestors are buried here; simply, this is the place we have all ended up. We were married in 1953. Divorced in 1976. Our grown daughters pity us; our grown sons forget us. We have grandchildren we visit from time to time, but their manners agitate, so we return, nervous, thankful to view them at a distance." *The Intervention*, pg. 10

"We know this and more: His bad back, His quenchless thirst. He is our faithless husband, our poor father. He is our bad son, our schemer, our rogue. He is our coward in the conflict, our liar. He has betrayed all He has promised. Still, we love Him." *The Intervention*, pg. 15

"We must find Him, we know. We must intervene. We do not want Him wrapped around a telephone pole. We do not want that blood on our hands. We must save Him, mustn't we? We must save Him, quick. But first, no. First, we must save ourselves." *The Intervention*, pg. 17

"Let it be said that we do not like to interfere. If a woman is willingly alone in a tumbledown house off the old Route 32; if trash has collected in the muddled ruts of her drive and the garden's yarrow grown to the height of a man, it is presumably, her business. If she has been found, once or twice, wandering in robe and slippers toward the Grange Hall, her hands kneading shreds of used tissue in her pockets, her fingernails dirty, she is perfectly capable, we'd agree, of pulling herself back up by her bootstraps. Lord knows we have all had our difficulties." *Esther's Walter*, pg. 23

"Of Esther Curran we knew this: Walter had whisked her off her feet, quite literally, saving her from a runaway bus that would surely have mowed her down in its path." *Esther's Walter*, pg. 26

"'Cheers!' Esther said, lifting the bowl of her drink higher. For a moment she looked as if she had just won a particularly difficult race and planned to douse herself with champagne, or gin, or whatever poison she held to her lips: a form of arsenic, we would later learn, a powder easily bought at the hardware store, intended for vermin. So like her to choose this way over waiting for the inevitable other, though we had not yet caught on." *Esther's Walter*, pg. 37

"But Bambi. Bambi! Of her we knew this: In those years before the onset, hum a tune and she could sit down at any upright and play. Her gifts! The conservatory, the famous one, accepted her in a heartbeat." *Bambi Breaks for Freedom*, pg. 44

"That right now, swollen feet shoeless and propped on scratchy wool, one of us could recite the Scotsman, Burns? And another, the shorn-gray cripple parked in the corner, once played any tune by ear." *Bambi Breaks for Freedom*, pg. 55



"The ashes had arrived weeks before by UPS, shipped to Barbara with a note from her ex, Charlie, that simply read, Our Megan." Screw Martha, pg. 59

"Florida, where word has recently come that Megan hanged herself in the garden shed of Charlie's beach house, no note of explanation, no warning, simply a girl whom we knew as a baby, dead." Screw Martha, pg. 67

"And no doubt we are a funny sight: a school of fish too old to spawn but desperate to swim back upstream." Come As You Were, pg. 94

"Mrs. William Lowell is dead by the next meeting. She disappeared in the middle of the night, Judy tells us; this is the way of most of them, as if the guest has had enough, will not bear another evening meal served on a plastic plate - everything expendable, To Go - and so has decided to board the night train to a better place." Sick Chicks, pg. 114

"If nothing else they give us something to do." Warriors, pg.120

"Then the robe, slipped or nudged, falls entirely off Louise's shoulders, and she is eclipsed by her enormous belly, one we cannot take our eyes off until we too see what she must feel - the water trickling down Louise's legs, puddling on Barbara's linoleum. Louise gasps and jolts up, her hands clutching the hurting place, her eyes huge within their mask, terrified." Warriors, pg. 138

"No matter. Here was the dawn of Something Big, Canoe said, a shifting of the paradigm. A creative burst! You couldn't not read about it: women in their middle years coming into their own, meeting second husbands, starting businesses, traveling around the globe. We could do any damn thing we liked, Canoe said, unfettered as we were, and we would, we knew just as soon as we thought what." Back When They Were Children, pg. 160

"We listen to Canoe and then we do not. It's Him we're remembering: Him we will return to: Louise not the only one. He's cornered us all, one after the other, at the children's swim meets, for example, His hair slicked as fine as Gatsby's." The Hounds, Again, pg. 164

"Come party with the sick chicks, Judy Sawyer rasped." The Hounds, Again, pg. 168

"And she had said yes. Because, what else? What possibly else?" The Beginnings of the End, pg. 187

"And there will never be a stepping back, nor a fork in the road, nor a deferral of what had been a clear direction. You made your bed, the women say, et cetera, et cetera." The Beginnings of the End, pg. 195



Topics for Discussion

Compare and contrast the perception of male and female interaction in the community of *Our Kind* relative to that of any similar-sized community.

How do the daughters' lives, perceptions and attitudes of *Our Kind* differ from that of their mothers'?

Compare and contrast the male characters and their relationship with women along a continuum running from cad to king.

Discuss how Gay Burt's wedding night experience with Clark might have been different if she had grown up after the 1960s?

How might the women's lib movement have affected the ladies of *Our Kind*?

How does female sexuality in the 2000s differ from female sexuality experienced by the ladies of *Our Kind*?

Compare and contrast the personal lifestyle habits, i.e. smoking, drinking, exercise, hobbies, etc exhibited by the characters of *Our Kind* in a contemporary setting.

Discuss whether it would be possible in contemporary society for a tight-knit social community to develop the way *Our Kind* did?