

Our Only May Amelia Study Guide

Our Only May Amelia by Jennifer L. Holm

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Plot Summary

Our Only May Amelia is a Newberry Award winning novel by writer Jennifer L. Holm. The novel is about a Finnish family that has settled on the Nasel River in Washington State. May Amelia is the only daughter in a family of eight children and the only girl among the Finnish families on the Nasel. For this reason, May Amelia tends to dress and play like a boy as well as cause the same amount, if not more, trouble than her brothers. Our Only May Amelia is a touching story of one girl's struggle to find where she belongs in her family, a story that many readers will find they can relate to.

May Amelia has seven brothers, all older than her. On her twelfth birthday it is Wilbert, her favorite brother, who brings her home after she decides to run away because of a squabble with her father over an impromptu trip to Armstrong's logging camp. May Amelia is convinced her father does not love her because he is constantly lamenting her behavior. Wilbert convinces her to come home. At home, May Amelia finds her favorite aunts and uncle waiting for her. One aunt gives May Amelia a store bought doll, the fanciest gift she has ever received.

When Aunt Alice returns to Astoria, May Amelia is allowed to go along with three of her brothers in order to do some shopping for her pregnant mother. At Aunt Alice's, May Amelia admires her aunt's fancy belongings and decadent food. May Amelia finds the city exciting as well, especially the unique mix of people she sees on the streets. When May Amelia returns home, there is excitement when one of the sheep breaks its back. May Amelia's brother, Isaiah, has named all the sheep after their neighbors and everyone mistakes his emergency call for the sheep as one for a neighbor's mother.

A short time later, Kaarlo, May Amelia's cousin who has been raised as her brother for the last seven years, learns that his family has died in an epidemic. Kaarlo runs away for a short time, but May Amelia talks him into coming home despite the fact that they have never really gotten along. Not long after Kaarlo returns to the family, Grandmother Patience comes to live with them. Grandmother Patience is a cruel, impatient woman who has a particular dislike for May Amelia. Grandmother Patience hits May Amelia when she believes she is being improper and one night breaks her doll for refusing to give in to her unfair commands.

May Amelia's mother gives birth suddenly one cold morning on the way home from church. May Amelia's mother becomes ill afterward, suffering from a fever that makes her unable to care for the infant. May Amelia takes over the care of the infant she has named Amy Alice. Grandmother Patience insists that harm will come to the infant in May Amelia's care, but everyone believes that May Amelia is doing a good job with the child. In fact, May Amelia has restructured her whole existence around the baby. Therefore, when the infant dies in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve, May Amelia is devastated. This devastation is made even worse when Grandmother Patience accuses her of killing the infant.



May Amelia runs away to Astoria and moves in with her aunt and uncle. May Amelia stays in the city all winter, making friends with a girl. May Amelia even allows her Aunt Alice to make her a dress so she can attend a dance. However, May Amelia is bored by the dance and sneaks away to spend the evening with another friend. Not long afterward, May Amelia's father sends word that Grandmother Patience has died from scarlet fever and Wendell is suffering from the illness as well. May Amelia finally agrees to return home, where she nurses Isaiah back to health.

When summer finally comes again, May Amelia has settled back in with her family. One afternoon, May Amelia plans to go swimming with Wilbert. Wilbert returns to the house to retrieve something, so May Amelia goes into the water with Bosie. When they are in the middle of the river, Wilbert comes running, screaming that the logs are coming. May Amelia freezes for a moment. However, Wilbert is able to get May Amelia and Bosie out of the water just in time. May Amelia thinks she will get into trouble, but instead her father, brothers, and mother are so relieved she is okay they smother her with affection.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The author of this novel, Jennifer L. Holm, was once given a copy of her Aunt Alice Amelia's diary from the year she turned twelve, 1900. Ms. Holm used this diary as the basis for this novel.

Chapter 1. May Amelia has seven brothers, all of them older than her. May Amelia's mother is expecting another baby and May Amelia hopes it will be a girl, even though her father claims he cannot handle another like her. Today is May Amelia's twelfth birthday and she is spending it hiding on Baby Island because her father yelled at her for going up to Armstrong's logging camp. Wilbert finds her there and convinces her to return to the house for the sake of her visiting relatives. May Amelia suggests they try to catch a fish first, but their dog, Bosie, tries to catch the fish himself and gets a hook in his cheek.

Back at the house, May Amelia is reprimanded for her wet, dirty clothing. However, she receives several gifts, including a sailboat from her brothers for her ragdoll, Susannah, and a store bought doll from her Aunt Feenie and Uncle Henry. At dinner that night, May Amelia learns that Aunt Feenie will be staying with the family and working at Armstrong's while Uncle Henry, who is a sailor, is at sea. In bed that night, May Amelia expresses a desire to move to the city with Aunt Feenie and Uncle Henry, but Wilbert insists they must stay on the farm to help with the work.

Chapter 1 Analysis

May Amelia is a strong-willed young girl who is the only girl among seven brothers and multiple Finnish neighbors. May Amelia is a tomboy, content to fish and swim rather than remain home learning to cook and sew. This sets up a situation in which May Amelia is often in trouble with her father, leaving her with the impression that her father does not love her. In truth, the reader suspects that the father is simply exasperated at his strong-willed, bullheaded daughter.

The setting of this novel is important. In this first chapter, the reader is introduced to the Nasel River and the valley surrounding it where this family lives among other Finnish farmers. It is 1899, a time period when there were few modern conveniences and minimal health care. This sets up a wilderness setting in which there are inherent dangers, touched upon by the father's berating of his daughter in this first chapter for going to Armstrong's logging camp after being warned of the dangers. The reader can expect that some of the dangers of this setting will be touched upon often in this novel.



Chapters 2-3

Chapters 2-3 Summary

Chapter 2. When Aunt Alice leaves for Astoria the following morning, she asks that May Amelia's mother allow some of the boys to come with her to fix her roof. Mother not only gives permission for the twins, Ivan and Alvin, to go, but asks May Amelia and Wilbert to go along to do some shopping. The following day, the children paddle a boat toward Knappton, where they will catch a ferry to Astoria. As they make progress down river, May Amelia asks that she be shown how to shoot. The boys paddle to shore at Olaaf Kuula's farm even though they have heard the rumors that Olaaf is crazy. As they show May Amelia how to shoot the gun, Olaaf comes out of nowhere and begins firing his weapon at them, insisting they are ghosts. The children manage to make a safe getaway, but Olaaf puts a hole in the boat they must now explain to their father.

In Astoria, May Amelia is fascinated with all the different people she sees, especially the pajama pants wearing Chinamen. At Aunt Alice's, May Amelia is fascinated with all her fancy belongings and the decadent food she serves them, including the cream on berries they have for dessert. All four children want more dessert and Ivan and Alvin fix it, giving May Amelia the bowl with the most cream. However, the cream turns out to be leftover gravy from dinner.

Chapter 3. May Amelia's father makes the children tend to the sheep on Sunday after church even though they would normally have the day to play. Isaiah adores the sheep, and he becomes angry at Ivan and Alvin for making fun of them. Mass confusion takes place when Isaiah screams that Mrs. Petersen has broken her back. Everyone assumes Isaiah is talking about their neighbor, but he is really talking about one of the sheep. Isaiah has named each of the sheep after their neighbors.

Aunt Feenie has been working hard at the logging camp, and she comes home with stories of accidents that have taken place there, leaving many to think the area is cursed because the Indians once buried their dead there. Isaiah takes May Amelia fishing on Baby Island the next day, but instead of fishing, they end up watching an Indian burial. In the middle of the ceremony, May Amelia accidentally steps in one of her brother Kaarlo's animal traps. An Indian comes and helps her out of the trap and then takes her home. May Amelia must stay in bed until her ankle heals. Isaiah brings her a kitten her cat Buttons has given birth to in the barn.

Chapters 2-3 Analysis

May Amelia proves her reputation as a troublemaker when her desire to learn how to shoot a gun causes her and her brothers to be shot at by a crazy neighbor. May Amelia then goes to the big city where she sees Chinamen. This touches on another part of history that supports the setting of the novel, the immigration of Chinese who worked on



ships as well as cheaper labor in factories and in the mining industry during this time period. May Amelia finds these people fascinating as any child her age most likely would, but she also sees them with the innocence of childhood, endearing her to the reader.

The author once again touches on the dangers of the logging camp that sits above the farm where the Jacksons live. Many in the area believe the woods there are cursed, touching on the culture of the people as well as the setting. This makes the reader aware that the logging camp is a source of danger to the characters in the novel and warns that something connected to the camp could happen as the plot continues to develop. However, from the actions of the Indians on Baby Island, the reader must assume that this danger will not come from the Indians themselves.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4. Matti, the oldest Jackson son, is eighteen and getting a great deal of attention from available girls within a hundred miles of the Jackson farm. May Amelia is annoyed by this and is thrilled with Matti confides in her that he has a girlfriend who is Irish. Their father does not like the Irish; therefore, this is a huge secret for May Amelia to keep. That same night, Father announces that Matti will be going to Astoria to live with Aunt Feenie and Uncle Henry. Kaarlo becomes angry because he has always wanted to move to Astoria.

Kaarlo and May Amelia do not get along. May Amelia likes to play tricks on Kaarlo, like dropping a fence slate that he is trying to hammer so that he misses and falls into the pigpen. A few days later, Kaarlo gets May Amelia back by making her believe the ghost said to haunt their Uncle Aarno's house is real. While the children are spending the night after helping Uncle Aarno repair his fishing nets, Kaarlo hangs a dummy on the veranda where the previous owner of the house supposedly committed suicide. Kaarlo has a big laugh when May Amelia is frightened by the dummy. The next night, however, Kaarlo is not laughing when he learns that his family has all died up in Canada, leaving him with no family but the Jacksons. Kaarlo runs away upon hearing the news. A few days later, May Amelia convinces Kaarlo to return home when she discovers he has been staying with the neighbor, Mr. Clayton.

Chapter 4 Analysis

May Amelia explains in an early chapter that Kaarlo is not her real brother. In this chapter, the reader learns that Kaarlo is the son of Pappa Jackson's sister and he was left behind when the family traveled to Canada with the understanding that they would one day send for him. However, the family has been gone seven years and has still not sent for him. This situation has set up some resentment on Kaarlo's part that has led to a great deal of sibling rivalry, especially between Kaarlo and May Amelia. Some examples of that rivalry appear in this chapter. However, when reality comes into the picture, when Kaarlo learns that his birth family is dead, May Amelia shows her true colors when she overcomes this rivalry to ask Kaarlo to return home to the family.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5. Father's mother, Grandmother Patience, comes to live with the family because she has grown too old to live on her own. Grandmother Patience is an unpleasant woman who does not like children or her son's wife. Upon her arrival, Grandmother Patience begins making waves when she refuses to sleep in the sewing room. Grandmother Patience insists on sleeping in May Amelia and Wilbert's room. Grandmother Patience also suggests that May Amelia is too old to be sleeping with her brother. However, Mother stands up for the children and simply has them switch rooms with Grandmother Patience.

Grandmother Patience has a cane that she often strikes out with when she is angry. One day she hits May Amelia on the shoulder for refusing to do her mending immediately. Wilbert gives her cane to the dog, but Grandmother Patience gets another made of a simple piece of wood. A few days later, Grandmother Patience asks May Amelia to make her a cup of tea. However, no matter how careful May Amelia is, the tea is never to Grandmother Patience's liking. After the fourth cup is refused, May Amelia refuses to make any more. Grandmother Patience becomes so angry that she smashes May Amelia's new doll with her cane.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Grandmother Patience comes to live with the Jacksons and proves to be an unhappy, bitter woman who truly dislikes May Amelia. May Amelia again shows her true colors when she takes a beating from Grandmother Patience without batting an eye. Wilbert shows the depths of his love for his sister when he tries to protect her by stealing Grandmother Patience's cane. It is a touching, childish thing to do and leaves the reader with a deeper understanding of the sibling relationship.

When Grandmother Patience destroys her one truly luxurious possession, May Amelia is devastated. Father reveals some compassion in this chapter when he apologizes to his daughter. The father is clearly stuck in a terrible position, forced to make the choice between his responsibility to his mother and the responsibility he has to his family. The reader can now see how good a man this father is and where his temper and difficulty showing affection comes from. Affection there clearly is, however, and the reader no longer doubts the father's devotion to his children.



Chapters 6-7

Chapters 6-7 Summary

Chapter 6. May Amelia feels like everyone is trying to force her into being a proper young lady. May Amelia would rather be a boy, however. When Wilbert gets a job as a whistle boy at the logging camp, May Amelia wants one too. Knowing they will not allow a girl to work for them, May Amelia has Wilbert cut her hair. When May Amelia goes to the camp to ask for a job, they recognize her and refuse to give her a dangerous job. However, they do agree to allow her to run down along the shore of the river and warn that the logs are on their way.

May Amelia and several of her brothers plan to go up to the farm of Lonny's cousin to help harvest cranberries. However, on the way they run into a cougar. It sounds like a baby crying in the fog, but May Amelia knows what it is even though no one will listen to her. They manage to escape when the cougar falls through some planks on the swinging bridge.

Chapter 7. May Amelia falls into the river one November afternoon on the way home from school when she steps between two of her fighting brothers. A short time later, the family learns that Matti has disappeared in Astoria and is suspected to have been shanghaied. A few days later the body of a young woman is found mutilated. It is suspected that one of the loggers killed her. A couple of days later, Bosie has a fight with a raccoon. May Amelia and Wilbert take her to Jane, the Chinook wife of a local farmer. Jane promises to try to help Bosie. That same week all the gillnetters use their nets to search the river for the body of Mary O'Casey, who is suspected to have drowned. Frustrated with her inability to help with any of the bad luck plaguing her family, May Amelia takes it upon herself to search for the logger who is thought to have killed the young woman, Nora. However, May Amelia finds herself forced up a tree by a bear when she stops to admire her cubs. May Amelia is forced to fix breakfast for all the men who searched for her through the cold night.

Chapters 6-7 Analysis

May Amelia is told to act more like a girl, but she finds it more exciting to act like a boy, to be like her brothers. The reader can imagine how much more appealing it would be to act like a boy when surrounded by them day and night. May Amelia is imaginative and strong willed. This comes through clearly when she has Wilbert cut her hair so she can get a job like the boys at the logging camp.

Bad luck falls on the Jacksons and their neighbors. A woman is murdered and another is presumed drowned. Matti disappears from Astoria and is assumed shanghaied. The reader must recall, however, when the reader hears the name of the drowned girl, that Matti's girl was Irish. Perhaps the two things are connected. The reader should make

special note of Jane, the Chinook who heals Bosie in this chapter. Jane's medicine could prove useful again later in the novel. The reader should also notice that the dangers of the logging camp are once again discussed in this chapter, suggesting once more that the logging camp could be a source of danger to one of the main characters later in the novel.



Chapters 8-9

Chapters 8-9 Summary

Chapter 8. On the way home from church late in November, May Amelia's mother goes into labor. Afraid she cannot make it home, Mother asks that they stop the boat immediately. May Amelia suggests the sauna on the Petersen's property. Mrs. Petersen delivers the baby and May Amelia names her Amy Alice. The baby is perfect and May Amelia becomes her caregiver when Mother suffers a fever in the aftermath of the delivery. Aunt Alice has come from Astoria to help, but she is so busy with Mother that she cannot care for the baby. Grandmother Patience insists that allowing May Amelia to care for the baby will lead to disaster, but Aunt Alice and Pappa both support May Amelia.

Chapter 9. On Christmas morning, May Amelia wakes to discover that Amy Alice has died in the middle of the night. The family buries the infant on Smith Island in the family cemetery established by Uncle Henry when he had his farm there. As May Amelia worries that Amy will be warm enough surrounded by Mother's worn velvet wedding dress, Grandmother Patience announces that it is May Amelia's fault the infant died. May Amelia runs away, jumping into a boat and paddling away. Wilbert follows, and when May Amelia begs him to take her away, he takes her to Astoria and the home of Aunt Feenie and Uncle Henry. Pappa comes for his children, but May Amelia refuses to leave and Wilbert refuses to leave her. Pappa agrees to allow them to stay for the winter.

Chapters 8-9 Analysis

Mother has the long anticipated infant, a girl. May Amelia could not be happier to finally have a sister to share the difficulties of life with. May Amelia immediately takes over the care of the infant when her mother suffers a postpartum infection. May Amelia does a lovely job, showing the reader once again not only how strong a character she has, but how the setting in which May Amelia lives causes a child to grow up much faster than in the modern world.

When the baby dies of what the reader can assume is SIDS, May Amelia is devastated as to be expected. Grandmother Patience, who has already proved herself to be an unpleasant, cruel woman, blames the infant's death on May Amelia. May Amelia is already devastated and this statement makes her grief that much worse. May Amelia runs away again, but this time she runs all the way to Astoria and has the support of her favorite aunt and uncle. This family is clearly broken and May Amelia's belief that her father does not truly care for her seems to be supported by his lack of action in this instance. However, the reader can guess that father is still struggling between his sense of responsibility to his mother and his family.



Chapters 10-11

Chapters 10-11 Summary

Chapter 10. May Amelia spends a great deal of time on the docks around her uncle's boat as well as at the tavern owned by a woman named Mariah, a woman who supposedly is responsible for many men being shanghaied, including her own husband. May Amelia finds nothing to support this gossip, however. Ivan and Alvin come to bring May Amelia and Wilbert their things. The twins ask May Amelia if she misses them or the other members of the family and are offended when she says no. Ivan and Alvin are forced to remain in Astoria for several days when a bad storm freezes the harbor. A few days later, the captain of a ship called Gleaner's declares that the harbor has thawed enough for him to get people out of the city. Other captains think this man is insane, but many people, worried about their families, buy tickets, including Alvin and Ivan. May Amelia and Wilbert rush to the dock that morning to stop the twins from boarding the ship. Later in the day they learn the ship sank outside of Knappton.

Chapter 11. Alvin and Ivan return home. May Amelia makes friends with a girl in Astoria named Emma. May Amelia suspects that Wilbert has a crush on Emma, but Emma has a crush on one of the workers on Uncle Henry's boat. May Amelia takes Emma to Aunt Alice's house. Aunt Alice reveals to the girls that she helped Matti and Mary O'Casey run away to San Francisco, where they married in secret. A few days later, Emma tells May Amelia there is to be a dance. May Amelia agrees to let Aunt Alice make her a dress. However, the dance is boring and May Amelia ends up spending the night with her friend, Otto, helping him smuggle newly arrived Chinamen to cannery where they will work under the supervision of Otto's father.

Chapters 10-11 Analysis

May Amelia finds a new life in Astoria, slowly coming out of the depression brought on by her sister's death. May Amelia saves the lives of her brothers when they nearly board an ill-fated ship. The reader will later learn in the author's note that this ship really did sink. This is a piece of history for the reader to learn that serves to enhance the setting of the novel.

May Amelia befriends a girl, the first girl she has ever befriended. This friendship shows May Amelia what it is like to be a feminine girl. May Amelia can see how she lacks the graces of a girl, and even though she tries, even allowing her aunt to make her a dress, she cannot quite drop a lifetime of mannerisms to become what everyone expects of her because of her gender. This underscores how unique May Amelia is and the fact that she is happy with herself even if no one else is.



Chapters 12-13

Chapters 12-13 Summary

Chapter 12. Pappa comes to Astoria in spring and tells them that Grandmother Patience has died from an outbreak of scarlet fever. Mamma needs May Amelia and Wilbert to come home and help care for Wendell, who also has the fever. This time May Amelia agrees to return home, even though she is still reluctant to return to the family she feels does not want her. May Amelia takes over the care of Wendell in his illness. As Wendell appears to grow worse, May Amelia decides to go to Jane and ask for a cure. Jane gives them a tonic that appears to have the desired effect. Wendell's fever breaks the next morning.

Chapter 13. May Amelia is sad now that she is home because everything reminds her of baby Amy. However, Wilbert points out that their neighbor Lonny, whose mother died of scarlet fever too, must be feeling worse. They go to visit and discover that Lonny is living in a terribly messy house. May Amelia cleans the house and invites Lonny and his father to dinner where Mamma loads them up on lots of home cooking.

A few days later, May Amelia and Wilbert decide to go swimming. While Wilbert returns to the house to get his sailing boat, May Amelia and Bosie swim out to the middle of the river. Suddenly Wilbert comes running, screaming that the logs are coming. May Amelia can see the logs and knows she is in danger, but she freezes for a moment. Finally May Amelia begins to swim to shore, but is afraid she cannot make it in time. Wilbert climbs into a tree and lifts May Amelia and Bosie out of the water. May Amelia thinks she will be in trouble, but everyone is so grateful she is alive they give her hugs instead.

Chapters 12-13 Analysis

May Amelia returns home at the news that Grandmother Patience is dead and Wendell is sick. Once again May Amelia takes on the adult role, taking care of Wendell and getting medicine from Jane to help him. Wendell gets better, but Lonny has lost his mother and May Amelia is faced with the constant memory of baby Amy. May Amelia once again proves her strength when she sets her own sadness aside and helps Lonny through his own grief.

May Amelia acts like an adult a lot of the time, but she remains a child. While swimming one day, May Amelia is almost crushed by the logs floating down from the logging camp. May Amelia manages to escape at the last minute. This near death experience finally proves to May Amelia how loved she is by her family when they all show pleasure in her safety. It is a touching moment that reestablishes affection in a family forced to put aside affection in favor of survival.



Characters

May Amelia Jackson

May Amelia Jackson is the only girl in a family of eight and the only Finnish girl born on the Nasel River in her current generation. This makes May Amelia a unique young girl. May Amelia spends all her time with boys; therefore, she is something of a tomboy. May Amelia's penchant for getting into trouble causes a great amount of friction at home, especially when May Amelia believes her punishments are unfair because the boys are allowed to do the very things she often gets in trouble for doing.

May Amelia has recently begun helping her mother out around the house more because her mother is expecting a new baby. May Amelia finds this work boring and would much rather be working with the animals or at the logging camp with her brothers. However, when May Amelia's mother gives birth to a baby girl, May Amelia feels all the hard work was more than worth it. Unfortunately, this baby girl dies in May Amelia's care, leaving her devastated.

May Amelia struggles with her emotions as a young girl, afraid her father does not love her because he often laments her odd behaviors. However, as the novel progresses, the reader sees why the father acts as he does and can see the deep affection he feels for his daughter. In the end, May Amelia comes to see this affection as well.

Wilbert Jackson

Wilbert is May Amelia's favorite brother of her seven older brothers. Wilbert is only a year older than May Amelia and is the one she spends most of her time with. In fact, Wilbert and May Amelia share a bed, a closeness that was common in their time and offered May Amelia some protection against unexpected events in the night.

Wilbert is a leveled-headed young man who dreams of one day becoming a great sea captain like his Uncle Henry. Wilbert loves to fish and enjoys a job at the logging camp the winter of his thirteenth year. Wilbert adores May Amelia above all else, and it is Wilbert who takes May Amelia to Astoria in the aftermath of Amy Alice's death so that she might grieve in peace. Wilbert is a good brother who cares deeply for his younger sister.

Aunt Alice

Aunt Alice is the sister of May Amelia's mother. Aunt Alice lives in a nice house in Astoria, although she is not married. Aunt Alice explains to May Amelia that she has a male friend who gives her money and provides the house for her. Aunt Alice is very feminine and May Amelia looks to her with questions of how a young lady should act, although May Amelia does not attempt to emulate her aunt. It is Aunt Alice who



eventually makes May Amelia a proper dress, but May Amelia only wears the dress once and she nearly ruins it by spilling food on it.

Mamma Jackson

Mamma Jackson is May Amelia's mother. Mamma Jackson is an older woman, perhaps in her late thirties or early forties, when she becomes pregnant for the eighth time. The pregnancy is hard on Mamma Jackson and she falls ill with a fever after the birth, making it impossible for her to care for the new infant. For this reason the care of the infant falls to May Amelia.

Mamma Jackson is something of a midwife and healer. Mamma Jackson has delivered most of the babies in the Nasel River valley. When Mamma Jackson becomes ill herself, and when her mother-in-law dies, many of the neighbors come out to help in respect for all Mamma Jackson has done for their families over the years.

Pappa Jackson

Pappa Jackson is May Amelia's father. Pappa Jackson grew up with a harsh and unforgiving mother. As a young man, Pappa Jackson moved from his native Finland to America and has made a home in the Nasel River valley with his own family. Pappa Jackson is clearly a kind and compassionate man as the reader can judge by his decision to take in and raise his sister's oldest child. Pappa Jackson later takes in his ailing mother, as it is tradition for the eldest child to do, despite his mother's cruelty against his own children. Pappa Jackson is often hard on his children, May Amelia in particular, but the reader never doubts his deep affection for them.

Kaarlo

Kaarlo is May Amelia's seventeen-year-old cousin who has been raised as her brother since he was ten years old. Kaarlo's mother is Pappa Jackson's sister. When Kaarlo's family decided to move to Canada, they could not afford train tickets for all their children. The family decided to leave Kaarlo with Pappa Jackson until they could afford to send for him. Seven years pass and the family does not send for him. When Kaarlo argues with Pappa Jackson about his desire to move to Astoria, Pappa Jackson tells him that his entire family died six months before in a fever epidemic. Kaarlo is heartbroken by this news, but eventually resolves to respect and remain a part of the Jackson family.

Grandmother Patience

Grandmother Patience is Pappa Jackson's mother. Grandmother Patience is an unkind and cruel woman. Several years before the year in which this novel takes place, Grandmother Patience insulted Momma Jackson in her own home, causing a rift that



was never resolved. However, Grandmother Patience has become old and frail. It is tradition that the eldest of the children take care of the mother in her final years; therefore, Pappa Jackson agrees to allow his mother to come live with his family despite the feud between her and his wife. This causes an upheaval in the home, especially when Grandmother Patience begins to treat May Amelia with an especially cruel type of discipline.

Grandmother Patience is selfish and she beats May Amelia for not dropping everything to do her mending even though it is time to make supper for the men working on the farm. Grandmother Patience also breaks a favorite doll of May Amelia's simply because the child stands up to her. When Amy Alice dies, Grandmother Patience openly blames May Amelia, causing May Amelia to run away from home for an extended period of time. Grandmother Patience finally dies in a scarlet fever epidemic, bringing relief and peace to the Jackson home.

Aunt Feenie and Uncle Henry

Aunt Feenie is Pappa Jackson's sister. Uncle Henry is a Scotsman who has run away from his own county and changed his name for some unnamed crime. When Feenie was a very young girl, Uncle Henry stole her away from her family and brought her to the Nasel River valley where he built a farm on Smith Island. The rest of Feenie's family soon followed. In time, Uncle Henry moved Feenie to Astoria, where he sails his ship from several times a year. Aunt Feenie and Uncle Henry are two of May Amelia's favorite people, and it is to them Wilbert takes her when her grief over the loss of Amy Alice becomes overwhelming.

Lonny Petersen

Lonny Petersen is a neighborhood friend of May Amelia's. Lonny Petersen is mentally slow. Many of the neighbors think that Lonny's problems stem from a time when he was a small boy and he was caught playing in the river when the logs were released up river by the logging camp. The boy suffered terrible injuries, but eventually healed except for his mental slowness. Toward the end of the novel, Lonny's mother dies in the scarlet fever outbreak. Lonny's grief gives May Amelia something to focus on and helps her overcome her grief for Amy Alice.

Amy Alice Jackson

Amy Alice is the baby Mamma Jackson gives birth to late in the novel. Amy Alice is named by May Amelia who chose her name because Amy is May mixed up and Alice is the name of her favorite aunt. May Amelia is very happy to have a sister to share her life with, tired of always having no one but boys around. May Amelia takes over Amy's care when her mother proves too sick to care for the infant. However, Amy Alice succumbs to what the reader can assume is SIDS only a month after her birth. May Amelia is already devastated by this loss when Grandmother Patience makes it worse by blaming May

Amelia for the child's death. It is because of Amy Alice's death that May Amelia spends the winter in Astoria and has a few adventures of her own before returning to the farm.

Objects/Places

Store Bought Doll

May Amelia receives a store bought doll for her birthday that she treasures up until the day Grandmother Patience smashes it in a fit of anger.

Susannah

Susannah is a rag doll May Amelia has had for several years. Wendell often helps May Amelia sew clothing for the doll, including a sailor suit.

Indian Dress

Jane makes a dress like her own for May Amelia's doll Susannah.

Cane

Grandmother Patience has a fancy cane that she often uses to hit the children in a fit of anger. Wilbert gives the cane to the dog after Grandmother Patience hits May Amelia, but Grandmother Patience finds a straight piece of wood to take its place.

Overalls

Rather than wear dresses, May Amelia often goes around in a dirty pair of overalls.

Cradle

Amy Alice sleeps in a cradle in May Amelia's bedroom. This cradle serves as a reminder of the infant's death when May Amelia returns from a winter in Astoria.

Sheep

The Jackson family raises sheep. Isaiah loves the sheep and has named each one after a neighbor or family member, causing some confusion when Mrs. Petersen the sheep is injured in the field.



Jane's Tonic

Jane, a Chinook woman married to a local farmer, gives May Amelia a tonic thought to help fevers when Wendell suffers from scarlet fever. This tonic appears to help cure Wendell's illness.

Jackson Farm

The Jackson family has a small farm in the Nasel River Valley where they raise sheep and crops.

Armstrong's Logging Camp

There is a logging camp up the valley from the Jackson farm in an area many in the Nasel River valley believes is cursed because the Chinook Indians once buried their dead there. The loggers move their logs by piling them up behind a temporary dam and then releasing them into the water where they are guided to the appropriate locations. Lonny was nearly killed by these floating logs and May Amelia has a close encounter with them at the end of the novel.

Astoria, Oregon

Astoria is the nearest large city to the Nasel River Valley. Aunt Alice, Aunt Feenie, and Uncle Henry all live here. May Amelia spends the winter in Astoria after the death of Amy Alice.

Nasel River

The Nasel River is a river that runs through the lower half of Washington State. The river was named for a royal family of the Chinook Indians.



Themes

Coming of Age

This novel is a coming of age novel. May Amelia is a twelve-year-old child when the novel begins. May Amelia lives in a place where living day-to-day is a difficult existence. May Amelia has adapted well to her environment and knows what to do when danger presents itself. Despite her knowledge and the adult tasks May Amelia is often asked to do despite her age, she is still a child in the beginning of the novel who often has temper tantrums, such as running away to Baby Island at the beginning of the novel.

As the novel progresses, May Amelia does many things to get into trouble with her father and to attempt to prove her independence. One of these things is to have her brother cut her hair short so that she might be able to get a job like the boys. With the birth of her baby sister, however, May Amelia begins to experience some events that catapult her into an adult world whether or not she is ready. May Amelia cares for the baby as though Amy were her own, bathing her, feeding her, and rocking her at night. May Amelia sees her sister as an extension of herself, a new female to share things with and to watch grow up.

When Amy Alice, the baby, dies, May Amelia is devastated. This grief is compounded when Grandmother Patience accuses her of being responsible for the infant's death. May Amelia has suddenly found herself a mother and now a grieving parent. May Amelia reacts to this by running away, something that may seem childish in the beginning, but is actually a healthy, adult-like thing to do. May Amelia takes herself out of the home in order to give herself time to heal. In the end, May Amelia comes back to her family with a clearer understanding of what has happened and the adult wisdom to see when someone else is grieving deeper even than she.

Grief and Hardships

Living in the west in 1899 was a difficult thing to do. There were no modern conveniences, no fancy farm equipment or indoor plumbing or even iron stoves to cook on. The families in this novel were often victims to floods, famine, and disease. The Jacksons and their neighbors have learned to deal with these circumstances, but continue to face the worst in survival.

May Amelia makes note of unhappy things that happen around her in this her twelfth year. A woman is murdered, her brother is thought shanghaied, sheep are lost, and a girl is believed drowned. Few of these things touch May Amelia personally, but there are all terrible events that in modern times can be avoided. To May Amelia, these are everyday events.

When Amy Alice is born, a miracle all in its own, May Amelia is thrilled to finally have a sister. However, Amy Alice lives only a month before succumbing to what appears to be



SIDS. The death of this infant touches May Amelia in a way that none of the other hardships around her has. May Amelia is so devastated that she leaves her home to grieve away from the memories of the infant. However, when May Amelia returns, she realizes she is not the only one touched by grief. May Amelia's good friend Lonny has lost his mother to scarlet fever. Grief is everywhere in the world where May Amelia lives and it has only served to help her grow.

Family

In the world where May Amelia lives, family is everything. The family works the farm to help make the food and money necessary for survival. The family acts as protection, as doctors, as providers for everyone else. The family provides everything a child might need growing up in this difficult world.

May Amelia is of the opinion that her father dislikes her because he is often yelling at her and saying that he hopes the new baby is not a girl because he cannot handle another like May Amelia. As the novel progresses, the reader learns that May Amelia also is often at odds with her older brother Kaarlo, a brother who is in reality a cousin. These struggles make May Amelia feel unloved and an outsider. However, at the end of the novel, May Amelia soon realizes that she is deeply loved and it is this deep love that causes these conflicts.

Family is of deep importance in this novel, not only because of the setting, but also because of May Amelia's position within her family. This importance increases when Amy Alice is born and dies a month later. May Amelia is devastated and this is because Amy Alice was her only sister and because her Grandmother Patience blames her for the unexpected death. In this one event, family is both everything and the source of pain for May Amelia, making family a major theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written as though it is the diary of a young girl. There is no dialogue, though the author does present words written as a person might have spoken them. The author presents her novel to the reader as though May Amelia has written it all down, using direct statements and drawing out scenes for the reader, but not writing it all as a novelist might do. There are no quotation marks and many statements are written in capital letters to stress the anger or importance behind them.

The novel is written in the first person point of view. This point of view often restricts the reader to just one viewpoint and therefore one narrow view of events. The novel also presents all that the main character sees, giving the reader clues to the motives and actions of other characters that the narrator herself does not appear to understand. This novel is written in a unique style that may be jarring for the reader at first, but proves to be humorous and poignant.

Setting

The novel is set in the Nasel River Valley in 1899. The setting of the novel is primarily the Jackson farm in this valley, but also moves into Astoria, Oregon, the nearest large city to the river valley. May Amelia has several relatives who live in this port city and she spends a winter there during the novel.

The setting of this novel is important to the overall plot of the novel because it is the hardships inherent in this setting that create characters like May Amelia and some of the events that take place in the novel. If not for this setting, May Amelia might not have been chased up a tree by a bear while looking for a murderer or been nearly killed by floating logs in the river. The setting of this novel also allowed for May Amelia, a twelve-year-old child, to take charge of a newborn infant. It is the death of this infant that is the catalyst for the climax of the novel; therefore, it would be an entirely different novel if set in a different time.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written for young readers, so much of the language is simple. The main characters are Finnish, but there are few words in the text of that language. The novel also contains characters from the Chinook tribe of Indians, but there are very few foreign words in the text that could cause confusion for a young reader.

The language of this novel is simple. The main character who narrates the novel is a twelve-year-old girl, so this simple language accurately reflects the way in which she might act and talk. The language is also simple because the intended audience is young

readers, readers who would easily speak in a manner similar to the young narrator of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into thirteen chapters. Each chapter has a title that reflects something that takes place within the text of the chapter. The novel is written as though a diary written by a twelve-year-old child. For this reason there are no quotation marks around the dialogue and a great deal of the language of the novel reflects the way in which the narrator understands what is said to her rather than the way in which it was most likely intended.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot involves the exploits of the main character, May Amelia, as she goes about her daily life on a farm in the Nasel River Valley. One subplot describes the superstition about the woods above the river valley where a logging camp sits. Another subplot deals with May Ameila's uncaring and cruel grandmother. All these plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"My brother Wilbert tells me that I was the first ever girl born in Nasel, that I was A Miracle."

Chap. 1, p. 1

"Now that Mamma has a baby in her belly she is worn out all the time so I have to help her a lot around the house with the cooking and just about everything. That is why I hope the new baby will be a girl. Then all the hard work will be worth it."

Chap. 1, p. 5

"Mamma says that when Alvin and Ivan were born it was like a miracle. Imagine having two whole babies where there was only supposed to be one."

Chap. 2, p. 29

"The stars are so high in the sky that I imagine the angels themselves are holding them up and that this must be a miracle."

Chap. 3, p. 51

"There's not accounting for luck, especially luck in getting brothers."

Chap. 4, p. 63

"It's a bad time indeed to be a Jackson child."

Chap. 4, p. 85

"It seems like everyone is conspiring to make me a Proper Young Lady."

Chap. 6, p. 109

"Young Ladies don't look for work at logging camps and cut off their hair, Mamma says. Mamma is real upset with me."

Chap. 6, p. 118

"I can hardly believe that the baby is finally here. It has taken just about forever for it to decide to get born!"

Chap. 8, p. 157

"I ended up naming her Amy because it's MAY all mixed up."

Chap. 8, p. 161

"I say, Wilbert, I will never go home. I will never forget what happened on the Smith Island. Never."

Chap. 9, p. 185

"They both agree that I am A Sorry Girl Indeed."

Chap. 11, p. 217

"And he was right. I was the only May Amelia Jackson they had."
Chap. 13, p. 247



Topics for Discussion

Who is May Amelia? Why has she run away in the opening chapter of the book? What is this day? What is special about it? Where has May Amelia run to? What happens when May Amelia attempts to catch fish for dinner? Why is May Amelia's father angry with her? Who is waiting at home for May Amelia when she returns? What gifts does May Amelia receive?

Who is Lonny Petersen? What happened to him when he was a small child? What has this accident done to Lonny? What caused it? What does this accident predict as the novel progresses? What happens to Lonny toward the end of the novel? Why does May Amelia decide to clean his house? How does this act help Lonny? How does it help May Amelia?

Who is Kaarlo? Why does Kaarlo want to live in Astoria? Why does he claim Mamma Jackson is not his mother? Why does Kaarlo run away? Why do Kaarlo and May Amelia often fight? Why does May Amelia believe Kaarlo is filled with anger? How does May Amelia convince Kaarlo to return home? Why does he return? How has he changed?

Who is Aunt Feenie? Where does she live? Why does she come to stay on the Jackson farm? What job does she do while she is there? What stories does Aunt Feenie tell the family that stem from her job? What does Aunt Feenie tell the children about the stories Uncle Henry often tells them? Who does Aunt Feenie blame when May Amelia runs away to live with her? Why does Aunt Feenie allow May Amelia to remain with her over the winter? Was this the right thing to do?

Who is Aunt Alice? Where does Aunt Alice live? Where does Aunt Alice get her money? Why does May Amelia admire Aunt Alice? What does Aunt Alice make for May Amelia to attend a dance? What is important about this item? How does May Amelia feel about this item? Does May Amelia want to be like Aunt Alice? Explain.

Who is Amy Alice? Why does May Amelia care for her? Where is Amy Alice's mother? What does May Amelia feed Amy Alice? For what reason? Who does not think May Amelia should care for Amy Alice? Why? What happens to Amy Alice? What impact does this have on May Amelia? Is anyone to blame for this event? Explain.

Why does May Amelia believe her father does not love her? Is this true? How has May Amelia gotten this impression? What does father do during the events of the novel that makes the reader doubt May Amelia's impressions? How does father finally prove to May Amelia that he loves her? What is May Amelia's reaction to this event?