

A Place at the Table Study Guide

A Place at the Table by Susan Rebecca White

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Contents

A Place at the Table Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue.....	6
Part One, Chapters 1-2.....	10
Chapters 3-4.....	14
Part Two, Chapters 5-6.....	17
Chapters 7-8.....	19
Chapters 9-10.....	22
Chapters 11-12.....	24
Part Three, Chapters 13-14.....	27
Chapters 15-16.....	30
Part Four, Chapters 17-18.....	32
Chapter 19.....	35
Characters.....	38
Symbols and Symbolism.....	45
Settings.....	49
Themes and Motifs.....	51
Styles.....	54
Quotes.....	55



Plot Summary

"A Place at the Table" by Susan Rebecca White, spans many generations, beginning in 1929 North Carolina. The place is called Emancipation and is a small town founded and run entirely by former slaves. One of the founding members is Granddaddy Stone. He and his wife, his daughter, and his daughter's two children live together on a farm where they raise hogs.

James and Alice Stone are a little more than a year apart in age, but they are very close. James, the older of the two, is often instigating games and adventures. One game is where they would place the flats of their feet together while they were sitting on the floor. Then, Alice would write a word on a chalk board, and her brother would draw a picture of the word on his chalk board. This type of telepathy is something that they keep hidden from the adults in their lives, who don't understand it.

When in the woods James and Alice come across a young African American boy who has been lynched. They take the boy's body down after the hunters leave, and then run home to tell their grandfather. He warns them to not become involved. This doesn't sit well with James. A few years later, Grandfather has to send James away to live with relatives in New York because James continues to challenge the dual standards between whites and blacks in the South. At the time that he leaves, Alice wonders how it is that James' skin is so light. In certain angles and in certain light, he could pass for white, she thinks.

The timeline jumps to the mid to late seventies, in Decatur, Georgia. The focus is on a family, whose last name is Banks. The father, a pastor in a local Baptist church, his wife, Edie, a homemaker, and their three children, Troy, Hunter, and Bobby. Troy is the studious child, while Hunter is the athlete. Bobby, however, is shown to be more sensitive and effeminate. He is clearly his mother's favorite child.

Hunter, resenting his brother and the attention that he gets, often takes the opportunity to pick on him. Once, after returning home from MeeMaw's after a weekend sleepover, Bobby brings back frosted cupcakes. The frosting is pink and Hunter calls Bobby a sissy for the span of a week. A few years later, the torture has escalated and Hunter is now teasing him at school, spreading rumors about him, and sticking notes with the word "FAG" on it in Bobby's books. To make him stop, Bobby captures some bees and puts them in a jar, which he threatens to loose in the house if Hunter doesn't stop. Hunter is deathly allergic to bees, so he readily agrees. But it isn't over.

Hunter takes the opportunity many months later to get his revenge. On the day of their mother's grand luncheon, where she will be hosting a celebrity homemaker, Hunter hides his mother's undergarments in Bobby's drawers, along with a pornographic picture of a naked man. Hunter makes sure that their mother finds them. Bobby's heart is broken when he hears his mother agree with Hunter that he is damaged and sick in the head.



After this incident, Bobby's mother is distant and cold toward him. Bobby starts spending most of his time in the woods. While in high school he joins the track team and meets Pete. He and Pete declare their love for one another one night at Bobby's house, and they sneak into Bobby's room to have sex. Bobby's father and mother catch them in the act and threaten to send Bobby to military school. Horrified, he runs to MeeMaw's, who takes him in so that he can finish out the rest of his high school career.

MeeMaw gives him money to start his life over upon graduation from high school. She urges him to go to New York where he might find people who are like him and will accept him for who he is. Bobby leaves but shortly afterward comes home for MeeMaw's funeral. He never goes home again after that.

In New York, Bobby begins working for Gus Andres at the Cafe Andres. It's co-owner, Alice Stone, had written a cookbook and it is from this that most of the recipes are pulled. Alice, Bobby is told, has long since left the restaurant business and gone to raise organic vegetables with her husband. Bobby is introduced to Sebastian, another gay man. Sebastian is a producer of Broadway plays. Sebastian's family accepts their son's life choice, and is welcoming to Bobby. Bobby can't help feeling despondent about his own family's lack of support. In Sebastian he finds a soul mate and someone to share his life with. Sebastian contracts AIDS several years later and dies, leaving Bobby heartbroken and depressed.

Walking along the sidewalk one winter he hears sounds from a Catholic Church. He goes in and takes a seat. Then, when communion is offered, he goes forward to partake, but the priest, who is on oxygen, refuses to give him communion because he is gay and not a Catholic. Humiliated and hurt, Bobby runs from the church. On his way home he runs into Alice who makes him agree to come to her apartment to help her cook. Honored at the offer, Bobby agrees. She makes him feel better about the incident at the church.

Meanwhile, in Connecticut, Amelia, the niece of Alice Stones' editor (Kate) is having a life crisis of her own. Her husband of 20 years is unhappy in their marriage. He is verbally abusive and Amelia simply takes it, trying to just calm him down. It doesn't work. They sleep apart, and then Amelia learns that Cam, her husband, has been having an affair with a younger, prettier woman. She is devastated and calls her Aunt Kate, who advises her to leave Cam immediately. Amelia wants to think about it and not act rashly.

Amelia has her decision made for her when Cam comes back to the house and tells her that Parrin, his mistress, is pregnant with his child. Amelia signs the papers, then moves to New York to live with Kate and work for her publishing company. Her Aunt gives her the task of working with an amazing young chef named Bobby Banks. Bobby and Amelia work together with Alice on taste testing the recipes. They all get to know one another.

It is while Amelia is at Alice's home that she begins looking at photo albums and sees a picture of her father as a young boy...as a young African American boy. She calls her



father up and he confesses that he is of mixed heritage, as is she. Amelia is upset that he never said anything at all. He tries to explain that things were different during the time in which he grew up, but Amelia won't hear of it. She tells Alice, and Alice's reaction is worse than her father's. She says that her brother died and won't discuss it further. She throws Amelia out of the house for bringing it up.

A week or so later, Alice asks Amelia to come back to the apartment. She apologizes and tells Amelia the story of her brother and how she'd come looking for him when she was a young woman. She found him but he'd rejected her on the street because he looked white and she was decidedly black. It had been so hurtful she'd decided he was dead to her. However, she realizes that it was unfair to have treated Amelia the way that she had. She acknowledges that Amelia is her niece.

Bobby and Amelia have found a church to belong to. The priest is a reformed hippie, but still sports his ponytail. During a blessing of the animals, a proud peacock enters the church and it is when the peacock unfurls his feathers that Amelia knows that she will embrace her own new dual heritage with pride.



Prologue

Summary

Prologue

The prologue takes place in 1929 in North Carolina.

The reader is introduced to an African American family. James, older than his sister, Alice, by 15 months, has developed a game for him and his sister to play. Since they always seem to be 'of one mind' as their grandparents have said on more than one occasion, they want to test it. Sitting on the floor, the flats of their feet touching, each holds a chalk board. Alice writes a simple word, and James will draw what comes to mind. They are right every time. However, when they excitedly go to tell their mother about their new game, she becomes angry with them and tells them to stop conspiring with the spirits. They children continue to play the game in private nonetheless.

The family lives with their mother's parents, because their father has died. James is 14 and Alice is 12. James is very stubborn and has a way with animals. Alice is caring and enjoys chasing after her brother. They all live in Emancipation Township, a town owned and run completely by 'Negroes.' They own their own pig farm and their meat is highly sought after. Their secret is to feed their pigs acorns a few months before buttering.

While out in the forest checking their animal traps the children encounter a wild sow. James wants to track her to her litter and shoot them so that they can have more meat for the winter. Alice goes along with him, but wonders at how different the wild sow is in comparison to their domesticated pigs. Alice is also struck by the difference in her and her brother's coloring. His skin is the coloring of peanuts, she says, while hers is darker like her mother's.

As they track the wild sow it is evident that James is very skilled at being in the woods. His footsteps barely make a sound. Alice tries to tell him that they should turn back as they are very deep in the woods, but James wants to get the wild sow and the piglets to make his grandfather proud. As go around a bend in the woods, they see three white men with dogs and guns. Alice says that there's something that looks like a snake coiled up and hanging from a red-headed man's belt.

As they draw closer Alice can hear the men talking about some action they've taken against a "coon." Their references indicate that they've killed the coon, will come back to show him off to their friends the next day, and they laughed about how much the coon squealed when they'd killed it. After the men pass by without seeing the children, Alice dares look over at her brother. He looks terrified and has wet himself. Alice doesn't understand.

Without saying anything she follows James further into the woods where they find a young African American boy hanging from a tree. Chicken feathers have been stuffed



into his mouth. James climbs the tree and cuts the boy down. Then, the children run home to get their grandfather.

Their grandfather is terrified that they've been spotted by the white men, but the children assure him that the white men didn't see them. James tells his grandfather that if he'd know what they'd just done, he'd have shot them dead with his gun. His grandfather grabs James up and shakes him and tells him that he can't go messing with a white man's killing, though it isn't right. It is a hard truth and one he needs to learn, his grandfather says sternly. He tells them that the old slave owner, Hortican Stone, whose last name they all have, had been involved in a continual sexual situation with Grandfather's mother.

Hortican Stone, confused from injuries sustained in the war, thought that Grandfather's mother was his dead wife, and continued to treat her as such until he died. When he died the entire ownership of the land belonged to the African American Stones. They had founded Emancipation shortly after. Now it becomes clear to Alice as to why her brother's skin is so light. White blood can hide under dark skin only for so long, she thinks to herself. Though Grandfather calls James 'son' several times, a term of endearment that he seldom uses, James now doesn't seem to care that he's said it. Something has changed for James.

They go to the store in the neighboring county the next day where Mr. Hicks the owner of the store (and the main purchaser of the Stone's meat products) refuses to sell James the beautiful fabric that Alice has always admired. Alice wonders what he's doing because she knows he doesn't have the money. Mr. Hicks refuses to sell it to him because that material is for whites only. James tells Mr. Hicks that he didn't know that his money was a different color, too. All of a sudden Alice's mother starts speaking so countrified that it shocks Alice. She apologizes to Mr. Hicks and tells him that James has been ill. They leave the store quickly. Just as they're leaving Alice sees the red-haired hunter enter the store.

Alice shares that only one other time had she seen her Grandfather so angry. It was because of James that time, too. When entering Hicks's store, coloreds had to enter from the back, then could freely walk to the front of the store. However, the front entrance was for whites only. James, on a dare, had decided to walk right in the front door one day. Because his skin was so light, Hicks didn't see him or say anything, but when Grandfather found out about it, he'd taken a horsewhip to the boy. Now, with this newest indiscretion, and because of his age, Grandfather thinks that they need to send James away. They have family in New York.

In the meanwhile, they feel that they need to hide James. In the root cellar they empty a potato sack, cut a hole in the bottom and tell James to get into the sack. They then fill it with potatoes as much as possible. He's to stay like that until they can get him out of town. Meanwhile, Grandfather rides two counties over to have friends send a telegram to their relatives in New York so that they will be waiting for James.



That night Alice goes to sleep and dreams about the wild sow and that she captures it and strangles it with her bare hands. The morning that James leaves, he is allowed out of the sack long enough to say good bye. Alice is stricken by how white he does actually look.

Analysis

The game that the children play is used as a device by the author to indicate how closely Alice and James are connected. This is done so that when the relationship is severed the impact is felt keenly by the reader. This early event between the two children also demonstrates the theme of Family.

The theme of Family is also demonstrated in Grandfather's insistence that they not become involved in the young boy's lynching. He is terrified that they've cut the boy down. The reader learns that James is stubborn and that both Alice and James have above average IQs. Education and cultured learning are at the core of their family's values.

While out in the woods, the children begin to track a wild sow with piglets. Alice envies the wild sow because she hasn't been tamed, hasn't been made to conform like the sows on the farm. Later, in life, Alice embraces many of the same qualities that she admired in the sow.

There is an early foreshadowing that takes place in this chapter as well toward Alice and James' heritage. Alice wonders about James' peanut-colored skin and often says that she believes that he could pass for white if he wanted to. Later, he will do just that. Their grandfather explains to them that his mother was used sexually by her white owner and that many of her children were of mixed heritage. That is why some of their kin are extremely white skinned.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Family as it is appears in this section.

Discussion Question 2

Compare Alice to James. How are they similar? How are they different? Why do you think they are so close?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it so important to Grandfather that his grandchildren have a good education?

Vocabulary

lounging, slain, stickball, headstrong, temperaments, emancipation, menacing, contraption, shushing



Part One, Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1

This chapter takes place in 1970. A young, as of yet unnamed, boy longs for a best friend. He talks about belonging to a Christian boy scout group called the RA (Royal Ambassadors). He has a lisp and his older brothers tease him about it. The boy's mother graduated from the University of Georgia as did her best friend, Betsy Meadows. They discuss child rearing and the boy overhears them. He comes into the room and starts playing with his mother's hair. She calls him Bobby, and the reader finally has a name. She says he was the easiest baby, of all her children, and she tells him that she's glad that she had him instead of the girl she had been praying for.

Bobby shares with the reader that he helps his MeeMaw and his mother cook in the kitchen. His MeeMaw's pound cakes are a hit in the town and she makes more than ten of them to sell each week. She always sells them all. The reader learns more about Bobby's family, of which he is the youngest. His oldest brother, Troy, is the bookworm, making all good grades in school. Hunter, his next oldest brother is the athlete and is impetuous and often in trouble. Hunter is also severely allergic to bees and wears a whistle around his neck to blow in case he is stung. It is also evident that Hunter is dyslexic.

Bobby goes to his MeeMaw's house for a spend a night time. They do this once a month. They bake cakes and pies, play with MeeMaw's kittens and just have QT time (which Bobby says is quality time). One time, he shares with the reader, they made cupcakes with cream cheese frosting. He likes cream cheese frosting because it can be dyed any color of the rainbow. One time he'd chosen to make it pink and when he'd taken the cupcakes home. His brothers called him a sissy for days and it upset him so badly that MeeMaw told him that from now on they'd only do pink when they were at her house.

The cake at MeeMaw's is too warm to frost, so Bobby goes for a ride and makes a new friend. The girl, Keisha, is smart mouthed, Bobby shares. And she's got a temper. When another boy on the street suggests that Keisha doesn't know who her father is, she attacks him and starts punching him. Keisha's mother pulls the girl off of the boy, apologizes, then sends her to sit on the porch. Though she's in the third grade, Bobby shares, she's crying. Bobby joins her on the porch. She tells him that she has a secret church. If he wants to meet her the next morning, she will show it to him if he wants to see it. Bobby does. He thinks that maybe God has answered his prayers by sending Keisha to be his new best friend.

The next morning the two meet, get on their bikes and start riding. Bobby learns that Keisha's mother is actually her auntie. Keisha doesn't care for her, either, and tells



Bobby that if she really did ever beat her, she'd kill the woman. Bobby tells her that she must not be much of a Christian. Keisha takes him to an old farmhouse that has been deserted for a long while. Bobby knows this because his mother has his older brother mow the lawn so at least the rest of the street will look nice. Keisha takes Bobby around to the back of the yard where there are wild strawberries growing in a forgotten raised bed.

Keisha tells Bobby that they should pretend they are in the Garden of Eden. Bobby is agreeable, until Keisha starts pulling off her clothes. Bobby makes her stop and says he will only take his shirt off and that they can put the berries in that. Keisha puts her clothes back on, they pick the berries and go back to his MeeMaw's home. They stay there and have breakfast until Hunter comes to knock at the door. Their father is in the car listening to a Braves baseball game. The reader learns that they are in Decatur, Georgia. All three of the children walk to the car, then Keisha gets on her bike and begins to ride off. Hunter asks Bobby loudly why he is friends with "a nigger girl." Bobby sees Keisha stop briefly on her bike before continuing down the road. Bobby is upset and begins to cry.

In the car his father asks why Bobby is crying and he tells him what has happened. His father is very angry and Bobby knows that Hunter is going to get the belt when they get home because they don't use the 'N' word at their house, ever. Hunter shoots Bobby an evil glance, but Bobby doesn't care.

Chapter 2

It is now 1975. Edie, Bobby's mother is fretting because the house needs to be especially clean and straight. She's hosting a very important luncheon for a former Miss America and the papers will be covering it. The reader learns that Edie has written a book on entertaining, and is particularly excited to be able to show off and promote her book, too. Bobby helps her clean. She's worried about what she will wear and she and Bobby enter into a discussion about the various outfits that she has. The reader learns that Bobby, in secret, has been reading his mother's Vogue, and other fashion magazines.

The problems between Hunter and Bobby haven't mellowed with age, but have worsened. Troy, the oldest, is in his second year of college at Duke. The day of the big luncheon, Edie can't find the new bra that she purchased to go with her outfit. Soon, she confronts Bobby with the bra saying that his brother Hunter found it in his drawer along with some of her underwear and a nude photo of a man. None of these things, aside from the picture, were anything that Bobby had taken. Bobby knows that Hunter has planted the bra and underwear in there, and most likely found the picture, too. As Edie hands the items to Hunter, who is standing and smiling smugly, Bobby tells her that those things aren't his. His mother, to his shock, doesn't believe him. Hunter interjects that Bobby is sick, that he's a "fag." Edie tells Hunter that she knows that Bobby is sick. She must focus on her luncheon, and will deal with Bobby's problem later.



Bobby goes into the woods and thinks about the look in his mother's eyes when she saw the man's picture. He'd found it in the gutter when he'd been out riding his bike and had kept it. He wishes now that he'd thrown it away, or left it in the gutter. His secret is out and he's terrified. He wonders how hard it would be to die, tries to imagine how upset everyone would be. He can't do it, though. All he can do is picture Hunter dead, instead.

Analysis

The irony in the statement by Bobby's mother, Edie becomes evident in a few chapters. The mention that she's glad that she had Bobby instead of the daughter that she'd hoped for foreshadows the fact that Bobby is, in almost every way, female. However, she is not able to look past the social norms of her day and age to accept him.

The theme of Family is continued in these two chapters as the reader is introduced to MeeMaw. In his grandmother Bobby finds unconditional love and acceptance. The use of food as a vehicle for something more is also introduced through her pound cakes. The reader is told about how good the cakes are and that people buy them from MeeMaw each week. Bobby often helps her. During one of his stay overs with his MeeMaw they make cupcakes with pink frosting. The color had been Bobby's choice. When he took them home, however, he was teased mercilessly for many weeks. The reader is shown this incident as foreshadowing to the fact that Bobby is gay.

The theme of Prejudice is introduced when Hunter sets up Bobby by planting their mother's underclothes in Bobby's drawers along with a gay porn picture. Though the porn picture was Bobby's (something he found lying in the street one day) none of the other stuff is his. However, his mother begins to view Bobby as damaged goods, and becomes distant. She tells the rest of the family that Bobby is sick. Bobby is so despondent that he thinks about killing himself. This entire incident underscores how prejudicial his own family was towards him when they finally suspected that he was gay. When Hunter calls Keisha a 'nigger' it upsets her so badly that she never plays with Bobby again. This hurts Bobby as she was his only friend. Bobby witnesses first hand how harmful racial prejudice is.

The theme of Love is also introduced, subtly, in this section, as Bobby seeks love and acceptance from many places, finding it only with his MeeMaw. And, making friends with Keisha gave him a friend, but that was lost when Hunter called her the 'N' word.

The theme of Religion is introduced here as well. It can be seen that Bobby, and his family, are very involved in church activities. Even at church Bobby is shy and sensitive and likes to stay close to the youth leader, who is an ex-marine. For Bobby, religion and the church are a way for him to excel at something. This is why he takes whatever his leader says as 'gospel.'



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Prejudice in these two chapters.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Hunter feel that he is justified in picking on Bobby?

Discussion Question 3

Compare MeeMaw and Edie Banks in regards to their relationship to Bobby.

Vocabulary

orphanage, sorority, chores, condensation, ottomans, plummeting, lingerie, husking, allergic, epinephrine, pleated, christened



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3

The year is still 1975 and Bobby is still dreaming of ways to kill his brother. School lets out and the summer looms long and large for Bobby. He has started doing the chores around the house as asked, and then as fast as possible leaving to go play in the woods for the rest of the day, away from everyone. He takes out the pocket knife that his father gave him and cuts himself, shallowly on the inside of his arm. There are other similar marks on his arm. A bee flies by where he is and he follows it to the hive. Here is his revenge.

He catches three of them in a jar and waits until they go to bed. Once he's certain that Hunter is asleep, he climbs to the top bunk and puts the jar under the covers. He doesn't take the lid off yet, but shakes his brother awake. Once Hunter is awake, he tells him that he has three bees and will release them if Hunter doesn't agree to leave him alone. Hunter, suddenly terrified, whips the covers off of the bed, dislodging Bobby's hold on the jar. The jar hits the floor and breaks open releasing the bees into the room. Hunter is trembling and crying in the far corner of the bed. Bobby secures an agreement from his brother that he will stop calling him a fag in front of people at school, leaving notes in his books, and making him look bad in front of their mother. Hunter agrees and Bobby opens the windows to let the bees out.

Chapter 4

It is 1977, now. Bobby is part of the track team and has a friend on the team, named Pete. It is evident that Bobby has a crush on Pete. Pete's mother is divorced and they both attend the same church as Bobby. Pete doesn't like coming to church and tells Bobby that he's an atheist. They have long-ranging debates on the existence of god. Bobby shares that he turns down the offers of pot and beer from Pete, not because he doesn't want them, but because he doesn't want to lose control around Pete and do something that would get both of them in trouble. But he confesses that he's in love with Pete, and even sober he has a hard time not reaching over and touching him.

Bobby's other friend is a girl named Shawna. She and Pete are sort of an item, or so she says. So, in order to hang around Pete, he has to tolerate Shawna. This is not a bad thing because she is one of the lucky kids to have her own vehicle, a pick-up truck. Bobby shares that his mother must not have told his father about the incident a few years previously regarding the stolen underwear and bra. He also shares that his mother hasn't been the same towards him since. It makes him very sad. Shawna and Pete honk the horn outside and Bobby leaves to go hang out with them. Down the road Pete takes some beer out of a cooler and hands one to Shawna, who is driving, and



opens one for himself. As usual, he offers one to Bobby who starts to decline, but then agrees to take a sip. His friends cheer.

They arrive at the park where there will be a laser light show. They find a spot in the clearing along with the rest of the spectators, eat Kentucky Fried Chicken, and play the game, 'I Never.' Pete produces a flash of bourbon which he pours into their ice tea. They play the game, and then Shawna leaves to go to the bathroom. The two boys are left alone and for a while, Bobby imagines that it is just the two of them there as a couple. He feels a combination of excitement and shame and vows, not for the first time in his life, to one day fix the faulty wiring in his brain. Shawna returns and he's glad that she makes it socially acceptable for him to even be on the same blanket with Pete. The drive back takes longer than they figured and Shawna is worried that she's going to miss curfew. Pete tells her to just drop him off at Bobby's house, that he'll stay the night there.

They are both very inebriated when they go up to Bobby's room. Bobby has planned to stay in his brother's old room since Hunter is staying over at his friend's house already that weekend. But, when he comes back from the bathroom, Pete is in his bed instead. They sit on the bed together and before Bobby knows what's going on, Pete is kissing him. Bobby tries to justify what they are doing, that maybe they are practicing for when they have their own wives later on in life. But, then, he doesn't care. Suddenly, he is aware that the ceiling fan has stopped going and a thin stream of light has fallen across the bed. He can see his mother's form in the doorway.

Pete jumps off of Bobby, and then Bobby's father, who is now a pastor in a local church, begins to preach to them about the wages of sin and that they are damning their souls to an eternity of damnation. Edie has gone to call Pete's mother. She arrives quickly and she and Pete leave. Pete gives Bobby a small smile when they leave. Bobby's parents assure him that they will get him some help so that they can get rid of whatever sickness has gotten in to him. His parents go to bed. As soon as they are gone and he's sure they are away from his room, he jumps out of the window and runs to his MeeMaw's house.

MeeMaw is still awake, claiming that she had been thinking about him and she just knew that something was wrong. She asks him if something has happened. Bobby nods. She goes to make him his favorite mug of warmed milk with vanilla. She asks him if he is in trouble, and he tells her that he is. She asks if it is about the boy from the track team, Pete. Bobby is shocked that his grandmother knew. She says she doesn't begin to understand the attraction, but that she does know that he is a child of God and a good person.

Bobby starts to cry. He tells her that his parents are going to send him to military school. His grandmother tells him that he can move in with her. He tells her that they caught him doing something really bad, but she won't hear of it, telling him that she knows how to handle his father. She promises to keep him loved and safe. Bobby says something loosens in his chest and he falls into his grandmother's arms, sobbing.



Analysis

The knife that Bobby uses to cut himself with is symbolic in nature. This is the knife that his father gave to him on his tenth birthday, telling Bobby that it was a rite of passage for all the males in the family. However, with his parent's rejection of him, the knife is no longer a symbol of solidarity or belonging, but cuts and wounds him, literally and figuratively. The theme of Family is also implied in this gesture, but ironically, he is only considered a part of the family when he conforms to their idea of who he is supposed to be...which cuts deeply.

The theme of Love is explored in both of these chapters. The reader sees Bobby trying to resist the urges that he has towards Pete, feeling that Pete won't surely reciprocate them. He continues to long for his mother's approval and does not get it. His father avoids him and so Bobby spends most of his time in the woods when he's not doing chores.

The accolades that he receives from his parents for being a part of the track team are short-lived when they find him with Pete, removing them further from his life. Pete is another attempt to find love and acceptance, and for a very short while he has it. However, because of the way that he has been raised he feels as if he has forfeited his eternal soul because of his feelings for Pete.

Lastly, the reader sees another aspect to the theme of Family in these chapters. MeeMaw takes Bobby into her arms and tells him that he is not a mistake, that he is not sick, and that he is a child of God the same as everyone else. In his grandmother, Bobby finds the love and acceptance one would expect from a family.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Family in these two chapters.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Love in these two chapters.

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of Bobby's knife? What do you think it symbolizes?

Vocabulary

energetic, inflate, camisole, brassiere, quivers, exaggerated, dissolves, plumb, cocked, prissy, beforehand, monogrammed



Part Two, Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5

It is 1981. Bobby is in New York and is staying in a residence hotel in Manhattan. He writes his grandmother faithfully, and the chapter opens up with his letter to her. He talks about his friend, Mike. He says that no one cares who Bobby Banks is in New York and he finds that liberating and lonely. It becomes clear that his MeeMaw has passed away and he's writing the letter to her without any intention of mailing it. He has a roommate named Alex, but he never sees him much. He thanks her, once again, for leaving her some money. He writes that he was able to get to New York and live comfortably for a few months, but that now he's going to have to try and find a job. He writes that he knows that she made all of that money making those pound cakes, nearly five thousand dollars. He writes that he wants to make her proud.

Chapter 6

It is still 1981. Bobby realizes that he has to find a job or he'll be headed home soon, something that he definitely doesn't want to do. He goes into Macy's to see if they have an opening. He would love to get a job in their bakery, but he is turned down. In fact, he is turned down in virtually all of the places he applies. Despondently he walks home.

On his way back to the residence hotel he passes a sign he hadn't noticed before for a small café. They are hiring so Bobby goes down the stairs, opens the saloon style doors and enters into a restored vintage speakeasy. He is overcome with the lush fabrics, dark woods, and the obvious atmosphere of the place. There are only a few customers there when he walks in. The owner comes out and asks if he might seat Bobby, but he tells him that he's there for the job. The job has just been filled by a man named, Jose. Bobby feels as if his birthright has just been stolen. He's certain that he was destined to work at this restaurant. The owner, Gus Andres, is even as gay as Bobby is, Bobby tells himself.

As if seeing his disappointment, Gus tells him to sit down and he brings him a sherry and a dish of chocolate mousse. He tells Bobby that he will interview him anyway. They discuss Bobby's arrival in New York, and Bobby lies to Gus telling him that he's a trained chef. It is evident that Gus is cultured and loves the history of his bar. The interview concludes and Bobby gets up to leave. Gus has gone over to speak to one of the patrons but meets Bobby at the door as he is leaving. Bobby basically offers himself to Gus for the job. Gus arches a manicured eyebrow and tells him that he needs to learn some subtlety, but that he appreciates his level of willingness to have the job.

He tells him to come back the next day and he will put him to work in the kitchen as an assistant to Jose. He hands a magazine to Bobby to read as it has an interview in it



about Gus and the bar. He tells Bobby that he needs to know the history of the bar so that he can speak with the customers about it when they come in. Bobby practically skips all the way home.

Analysis

In these two chapters the reader sees Bobby struggling to make it on his own in New York. The love of his grandmother, demonstrating the theme of Family, comes back into play in Chapter 5 when the reader learns that she has left him a large sum of money to relocate and start over in New York. He's taken her advice and is in New York, but is almost through the money that he inherited. This is forcing him to try and find a job, but without any actual skills he's having a hard time. It is quite by chance that he happens upon the Cafe Andres.

For the first time, in New York City, Bobby is not experiencing the level of prejudice that he did when he was in Decatur. It still exists, but in general, he's meeting people who are just like him. His friend Mike in the residence hotel introduces him to others like him. Even Gus, the owner of the cafe, is gay. Bobby is able to better embrace who he is because he now knows that there's nothing wrong with him, that he's not sick, and that he isn't alone.

The money that MeeMaw leaves him is not only a hand up and way to liberate himself, but it is also representative of her belief in him and his abilities. She knew that he would never be happy living in the South, and that his family, aside from her, would never accept him. This was her way of continuing to take care of him after her death.

Discussion Question 1

Talk about MeeMaw's gift to Bobby and what it meant to him.

Discussion Question 2

How did Bobby end up getting the job at Cafe Andres?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Family in these chapters.

Vocabulary

petit fours, grittier, evangelicals, naive, exploits, drastic, tandem, slack-jawed



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7

This chapter begins with the article that Bobby was tasked with reading by Gus. The article states that Café Andres has been open in one form or another since 1946. Its claim to fame is that nearly every artistic personality from World War II to the start of the McCarthy trials passed through the café's front door. The reader learns that Gus is 72 years old and bases all of the café recipes on an old cookbook given to him by the former co-owner of the restaurant, Alice Stone.

The interviewer in the article asks about Alice Stone. The cookbook, *Homegrown*, was also the basis for a PBS show which focused on different regions of the south. Gus and Alice met at a secret Communist Party party. Gus says in the interview that Alice joined the party, as he did, because it was the only party that embraced integration. She worked as the head chef in the restaurant for almost 20 years, then left with her husband to go to upstate New York to start an organic farm.

The reader learns that Café Andres was a favorite place of all types of celebrities because it was such an out of the way spot that they could be themselves there. It wasn't a place to do business, but rather a place to be around friends.

Chapter 8

The year is 1982 in January. Bobby is writing a letter to his MeeMaw, and the reader is privy to its contents. He writes that he has been doing very well at Café Andres and is the assistant chef there. He says that he makes enough money to have his own place, now, instead of having to live at the residence hotel with Mike. He tells his MeeMaw that he wouldn't have found his lovely studio apartment if it weren't for Gus's partner, Randy, a photographer. They knew of a friend, who knew of a friend, who had the apartment. He writes that his father has started calling him on the phone every few weeks or so.

The last time he called his father told him that his mother had joined a women's group called, *Save our Sons*. Bobby says that he didn't want any more details on that, and his father had been respectful enough to change the subject. He offered to send money so Bobby could come for Thanksgiving. Bobby writes in his letter to his MeeMaw that he turned down his father's offer as he's sure there's not a place at the table for him anyway.

He writes about all of the interesting markets and places that he's started to visit in the city. He says that Gus has taken him under his wing and is developing his palette. Bobby writes that one day when he was at the open air vegetable market that he noticed a black woman there. He says that he's seen her there many times before, and what makes her stand out to him is the way she carries herself, very regally. She's an



older woman, with white hair pulled back in a bun. The vendors all seem to know her and treat her with such respect. They all call her Miss Alice. There is a younger white woman, well dressed, following her around, helping carry the purchased items. Bobby writes that he immediately liked the both of them and started to just follow them around discreetly from a distance, like a little puppy.

The next day he tells Gus about the woman in the market and Gus tells him that this woman was none other than THE Alice whose cookbook he is using, and that the younger woman was the editor of the book. Bobby is certain that this is God's way of confirming what he is doing. He writes that he thinks that Gus is grooming him to one day take over the Café. He is also nervous because Gus had immediately called Alice to see if she wouldn't come to the café for a quick lunch. She agreed and now Bobby writes, he is terribly excited and terribly nervous.

Analysis

These chapters chronicle the early days of Bobby at Cafe Andres. He shares the magazine article that was written about the cafe, and the reader learns that it used to be 'the' place for all of the celebrities in New York at the time. This was due in large fact to Alice's cooking, which was unique and genuine, and many of the literary celebrities, who hailed from the South, felt at home there with Alice's cooking.

The reader gains some information about Alice in Chapter 7 and learns that she was the part owner of the restaurant, something that 'colored' women back in the seventies weren't really doing. Additionally, she became a television celebrity chef on PBS. She had written a cookbook called Homegrown, which sold quite well. She has long since left the kitchen and is living on a farm with her husband raising organic vegetables.

As the chapters progress the reader learns that Bobby is still estranged from his family. He has tried to reconnect with his parents, to tell them about his success in New York, but they don't want to hear the details of his life. His father offers to send him money to come home for Thanksgiving, but Bobby knows that it is just a meaningless gesture and that there will be no room at the table for him. This entire sequence demonstrates the theme of Family once again.

The theme of Religion comes up briefly when Bobby spots Alice at the market one day. He believes that it is a sign from God that he is doing what he is supposed to be doing by being the chef at the Cafe Andres. When he tells Gus about seeing Alice, Gus now knows that she's back in town and immediately calls her to come to a soiree the following week. He wants to show off Bobby's talent.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Family as it occurs in Chapter 8.



Discussion Question 2

Why does Bobby write letters to his dead grandmother?

Discussion Question 3

Why doesn't Bobby accept his father's invitation to come to Thanksgiving?

Vocabulary

reprimand, complexity, intensifies, muse, cynicism, adages, niceties, abrupt, subtlety, palate, impudent



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9

It is February 1982, and it is the day of the great luncheon with Alice. Gus, of course, has made it an 'affair' inviting Alice's editor and her husband, Jack, Truman Capote, and a few other distinguished literary types. Everyone arrives and stands around mingling. Alice's face doesn't change expression the entire time. Finally, when Gus is sure that Truman Capote isn't going to be arriving, he seats everyone.

Bobby has opted for true Southern cuisine that most regular patrons don't get at Café Andres. He decided that serving Alice something from her own cookbook would be presumptuous and he wants to give a nod to their shared southern heritage. However, she doesn't finish the catfish filet, only eats a bite or two of the hushpuppy, and then leaves before dessert. Bobby is crushed, but hides it well. However, all of the other guests rave about his cooking and Gus beams. Bobby puts on his best hostess face, as his mother would say, but inside he feels completely defeated.

Chapter 10

It is still 1982. Gus tells Bobby that the luncheon was a roaring success, but Bobby doesn't feel that way. Gus says that he's promoting him to full chef and that he will be cooking five days a week from now on. Bobby is flattered, humbled, and excited. Shortly after this Gus introduces him to a man named, Sebastian who is a famous Broadway producer of plays. He is more than 20 years Bobby's senior, but they instantly hit it off.

In two month's time Bobby and Sebastian have moved into Sebastian's lavish apartment. They go to visit Sebastian's parents for brunch and Bobby is shocked at how accepting they are of Bobby and Sebastian's relationship. It makes Bobby realize how much he misses his own family and how different they are compared to Sebastian's. He knows that at his home this kind of brunch would never be acceptable. The Times does an article on Bobby's new way of cooking and the number of customers and patrons begins to pick up at the restaurant. Gus is beyond pleased and Bobby feels as if he is on his way.

Analysis

The theme of Appearances is touched upon in Chapter 9 with Alice's approach to Bobby's food. She appears to enjoy it, but then doesn't eat it all. And, in the middle of the event, she abruptly leaves. To Bobby it appears as if she didn't like the food and wasn't going to be embarrassed because she can't endorse it. Later, he learns that she was actually jealous of his talent and was too competitive to see that she should have supported him. Though it appeared that she hated the food, in truth, she loved it.



The theme of Appearances is also indicated in Chapter 10 when Bobby meets Sebastian. Though he is much older than Bobby, Bobby is able to set the age difference aside and truly see Sebastian for the engaging and endearing man that he is. They hit it off so well that they end up becoming a couple.

This also ties into the theme of Love for Bobby. Other than Pete he's never had another encounter with anyone else. He's ill prepared and fumbling, but Sebastian is kind and loving with Bobby. In time, Bobby comes to realize that many of the things that he had been taught about love and about how a couple should act were wrong.

The theme of Family is demonstrated in Bobby's homesickness. He meets Sebastian's parents who are openly supportive of Sebastian and his life choices. This is in such direct opposition to his own family that it depresses Bobby severely. He experiences his first critical acclaim at the restaurant, but he isn't able to fully enjoy it because of the way he knows his family views him.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Appearances in this chapter. What examples do you see of appearances?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Love. How does Bobby feel love? How is it expressed?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Bobby not fully able to enjoy critical acclaim for his success at the restaurant?

Vocabulary

eccentric, collards, opinionated, rind, touche, yearn, apprenticing, stingy, fingerlings, nostalgia, truffles, salvage



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11

It is 1985, and it is wintertime in this chapter. While lying in bed with Sebastian, Bobby finds a small raised bump the size of a quarter on his chest. It is Sunday, but they call a personal friend who is a doctor, who agrees to see them immediately. All around them, Bobby muses, gay men are dropping dead from AIDS or cancer and no one seems to care.

They arrive at Dr. Wilson's apartment and Sebastian asks to go into the room alone with Dr. Wilson. Bobby waits outside and bites his nails. Soon he hears a keening coming from the bedroom and he knows the verdict is not good. He barges into the room and gathers Sebastian into his arms and they cry together.

Chapter 12

It is the winter, again, but the year is 1988. Sebastian is dead. Sebastian's parents did not handle his illness, nor his death, well. During his illness, Bobby recalls, his father only visited a few times. His mother, Dahlia, visited constantly, and called incessantly. Then, when Sebastian died, Dahlia took to wearing all black and singing Sebastian's favorite song over and over while Mel, Sebastian's father, ate and ate, gaining nearly 40 pounds.

Bobby decides to remain at the apartment that they both shared, both for the memories and for the fact that Sebastian would have loved the fact that even in death he was holding on to his rent controlled apartment. Bobby grieves deeply and realizes that he loved Sebastian the way that one is supposed to love a spouse, warts and all.

Dahlia makes a point of visiting every week for a cup of tea. She isn't a replacement mother figure, and he knows that he isn't a replacement son for her, but in their common misery and loss, there is comfort. His own parents do not know about Sebastian's death, nor do they know about his relationship with Sebastian. He feels as if they do not deserve to know. He mourns that at the age of 28 he has lost everyone that he truly ever deeply loved.

He finds himself drawn to a Catholic Church hoping to regain or find comfort as he once did as a child. As he enters he notices that the carpet is blood red, and though he is not Catholic, he dips his finger in the fountain and places a drop on his forehead as he'd seen others do. The African American priest has begun his sermon, and Bobby is shocked to see that the priest is hooked up to a bottle of oxygen. Bobby decides that trying to rekindle something with God, a God who allows AIDS, is a waste of his time.



This is especially true since most churches continued to state that the deaths of gay men were deserved and God's divine wrath. Still, he does not leave and goes forward to receive communion with the rest. He hesitates when the priest offers him the wafer, and the priest smiles at him and asks if he is Catholic. Bobby says that he is not and Bobby watches as the man's eyes turn hard. The priest takes the wafer back from him, then makes a sign of blessing over him, instead. Humiliated, rejected, Bobby stands and leaves. As he walks down the aisle and makes for the exit, he recalls and relives all of the instances when he'd been called a 'fag' when his parents had called him an abomination, when he'd been run off from his own home and town. Out on the street the cold winter air hits him hard.

In the midst of his emotional turmoil, and as he makes his way back home, he spies Alice Stone. Great, he thinks, yet another person who has rejected me. However, giving a nod to his Southern upbringing he greets her cordially. They end up walking together as they are headed in the same direction. They talk about holiday baking duties and specialties. They arrive at Bobby's apartment complex and they start to take their leave of one another when Alice stops Bobby and apologizes for all those years ago when she'd purposely snubbed his cooking. She tells him she has always regretted it, and that she did it because she recognized the talent he had. She invites him to come to her apartment later to help her with her holiday baking, if he wants to. He tells her that he will definitely do that. She surprises him by leaning in and kissing him on both cheeks, then telling him that she knows about Sebastian's death and is deeply sorry for him. Bobby feels himself tear up, but then they part, with him promising to meet her in an hour's time to begin cooking.

He arrives at Alice's apartment and they begin working, cooking, and sharing. Bobby learns that Alice had been married a couple of times and that the last husband that she divorced was a 'tortured soul' in that he despised the way that whites treated him. He was always in a perpetual state of 'angry' she shares. Her first love, and almost husband, she shares, was Jewish, and his mother hated the fact that Alice was black. The same applied with her own family, she tells Bobby.

As they work, Bobby tells her about his experience at the Catholic church earlier that morning. Alice scoffs and says that the priest's god is too small and that Bobby needs to keep looking for the 'real' God. Bobby finds himself feeling oddly comforted in the kitchen working with Alice, and it reminds him of his MeeMaw's kitchen. They bake Challah bread and when it comes out of the oven later in the evening, Alice brings some plates down and offers the bread to Bobby saying, 'take.' He tells her that it is 'divine.'

Analysis

Having watched many of their friends die of AIDS Bobby is horrified to find a small raised bump on Sebastian's chest one morning as they are lying in bed. This bump winds up being an indication of AIDS and they know that their days together are numbered. The bump, then, represents the beginning of the end for their relationship.



The theme of Love is apparent in both chapters as Bobby goes through the diagnosis with Sebastian, holding him and comforting him through his illness, and then mourning him deeply after his death. He realizes that he loved Sebastian as one would love a spouse, warts and all, as he says.

During this time Bobby longs to reach out to his family but knows that he can't share his tragedy with them, that they will not understand, nor offer the consolation that he needs. Despondent he wanders into a church. The theme of Religion comes into play as a priest on oxygen refuses to give Bobby communion because he is gay. Devastated, Bobby leaves.

It should be noted that the author has poignantly made the priest impaired, unable to fully draw in a full breath, needing to be on artificial 'air' in order to continue his work. This would seem to indicate the priest's inability to clearly offer God's love to anyone, let alone minister to the congregation. He is literally suffocating himself and others.

Alice's recognition of Bobby's devastation, and her offering of the bread, using the terms priests usually use when giving communion, is her way of telling Bobby that he is not only worthy, but that the real God loves him no matter what. Bobby writes that he feels as if he has come home and in Alice's kitchen finds redemption and acceptance unlike any he's ever felt in any church. Alice's kiss, earlier, had also insinuated the same acceptance and belief in him.

Discussion Question 1

What is the author's purpose in depicting the priest with an oxygen bottle.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Religion in these chapters.

Discussion Question 3

Why was Bobby unable to talk to his family about his devastating loss?

Vocabulary

valiantly, flute, absentmindedly, inane, dilemma, fussy, critiques, cassette, poached, lesion, impressionistic, lucid



Part Three, Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13

It is 1989 and this chapter is set in Connecticut, focusing on a new character, Amelia. Her two daughters are out of the house, one at boarding school and the other at college. Amelia and her husband aren't getting along well, and has suggested several times that they separate. Amelia is wracked with guilt over accidentally killing their old poodle, who jumped into her car without her knowledge and died in the hot car. However, as a result of the dog's death, it seemed, for a while, to bring her and her husband, Cam, back together. It does not last.

Now, because she's inadvertently left the back gate open their other dog has slipped out. Cam runs after her and returns with the dog, furious with Amelia. They quarrel and he tells her that she's let herself go and is unappealing to him. That night she sleeps in her oldest daughter's bed. Midway through the night she hears noise in the master bathroom. She goes to investigate and Cam is throwing things out of the medicine cabinet. When he sees her standing there he tells her that he is still furious with her. She apologizes for three or four things, none of which she thinks she really should apologize for, and he says that if she doesn't know why he's angry then they are in worse trouble than he thought.

Exhausted, Amelia goes back to her daughter's bed. She locks the door behind her. After she hears Cam leave for work the next morning she comes out to get breakfast. Amelia needs to call and talk to someone but she doesn't know who. Then, it dawns on her: she will call Aunt Kate. The reader will remember that this is Kate, Alice Stones' editor. Amelia remembers that the last time she'd spoken with her aunt had been when she had broken in on a dinner party at Andres and then stormed back out. Kate answers the phone and the two discuss the situation. Kate suggests that she get out of town for a while and come visit. Amelia is resistant at first, making excuses. Kate corners her with some blunt words and even tells her that there is a part time job opening at her office. Amelia and Kate end their call, but Amelia recognizes that she's not ready to leave Cam, at least not yet.

Chapter 14

It is still 1989 and the chapter is set in Connecticut. Amelia discusses her own parents. Her father, a leading geneticist, and her mother, a leading alcoholic, were divorced many years previously. Amelia always suspected that there might be something inappropriate that happened between her Aunt Kate and her father, but there was never any talk of it. Still, she muses, there are enough bread crumbs if one is curious enough to follow them.



Amelia remembers when her Aunt Kate had told her about her mother's young adulthood, how she'd married her high school sweetheart, gotten pregnant, and then he'd been shipped off to fight in World War II. The baby died at six months of age from Meningitis, and her husband was killed overseas. Her grief almost overwhelmed her, Kate had said.

Kate and Amelia's father had fallen out over a cookbook, or so the story went, Amelia shares. Her father had said that the book glorified conditions for the Negro in the south in the 1920s when it was not a good time, and that making it look any other way was inappropriate. He tells Kate that the book is horseshit. Incensed Kate and her husband Jack leave. As far as Amelia knows they never spoke again. Any of them.

Analysis

The theme of Family is strong in both of these chapters, first with Cam, then with Kate. Amelia is the common denominator between all of them. Cam is clearly not happy with the marriage and if Amelia were honest with herself, neither was she. However, her own parents split many years prior and she doesn't want to be another statistic. Unfortunately for her, to stay in the toxic relationship will spell the end of the last scrap of individuality that she has. This is what Kate points out to her when she calls her.

Kate is understanding, but firm in her conviction that Amelia needs to leave Cam immediately. However, Amelia is not one that is given to impulsive or quick decisions, something that she and Kate differ on. Kate leaves the door open, literally and figuratively, should Amelia change her mind. Just knowing that she could leave seems to make Amelia feel better.

Amelia also delves deeper into her own parents' lives. She recalls that her mother nearly lost her mind with grief over the loss of her first husband and their infant son. Though Amelia has a hard time envisioning her mother in that role, she acknowledges that most likely Susan (her mother) did the best that she could.

Amelia also asks Kate about her falling out with her father. Kate tells Amelia that it was never anything like an affair, but rather it was over a cookbook, written by Alice Stone. He was angry and had said at the time that the cookbook glorified the slave days, painting everything in a rosy glow and that he refused to believe that it was ever like that. Those days were painted in blood and pain, he told Kate back then. Because of this declaration, neither he nor Kate ever spoke to one another ever again.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Family in these chapters.



Discussion Question 2

Why did Kate and Amelia's father stop talking?

Discussion Question 3

Her mother is an alcoholic now, but what does Amelia learn about her mother that at least explains some of her behavior?

Vocabulary

murmurs, usher, dazzlers, sliver, imperious, prickly, intimacy, somber, grimace, sultriness, uncluttered, gadgets



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15

It is still 1989 and set in Connecticut. Things have become a senseless parade of insults thrown at Amelia from Cam. Each night he rants and raves, listing all of her faults, and she apologizes for being such a disappointment. Then, she states, they go to their separate bedrooms. Amelia wonders how this can be her life now.

Amelia realizes, at the last moment, that she and Cam are supposed to attend a dinner party. She tells Cam that she'll call and cancel, but Cam wants to go. The host and hostess of the party are from Atlanta, his old stomping grounds, and they know his mother, Taffy. Amelia agrees to go only because she doesn't want another fight. Why her mother in law would be arranging their social life she has no idea.

They arrive at the McCloud's house, which is a mansion and immaculate. Bo McCloud offers them a drink, stating that Parrin McCloud will be joining them momentarily. When she does join them Amelia can tell that there's clearly a very large age difference between the old Bo and his 18 years younger wife. Bo takes Cam into his Big Game room while Parrin takes Amelia into the kitchen for some champagne and appetizers. Later, they all gather with another couple that has arrived to play a round or two of Scruples. It becomes evident throughout the game and the dinner party that Cam and Parrin are having an affair. Amelia doesn't know what to do with the information.

Chapter 16

Amelia and Cam have separated. Cam calls and wants to visit Amelia at their house. Amelia, who was just headed out the door, tells him that they can meet and she rearranges her plans to stay and wait for him. Maybe he wants to make another go of it, she tells herself.

Cam arrives and he tells her that he and Parrin need to get married because she's pregnant with his child. He needs Amelia to sign the divorce papers. He leaves and Amelia downs all of a bottle of Champagne. Then she continues to go into Manhattan as she had originally planned to meet an old school friend named, Sarah. On the train she breaks down and has a good cry.

Analysis

The theme of Family is discussed in both chapters, and it is shown how the family dynamic can unravel once children enter into the equation. On the one hand, both Cam and Amelia's daughters are grown and gone, so Cam and Amelia were left to confront one another. When they did this they realized that they were no longer right for one



another and split. Likewise, Cam finds out that Parrin is pregnant with his child and wants to start a family with her. To a family, children, the author seems to be suggesting are often the glue that binds.

Additionally, there is the theme of Appearances. For more than twenty years both Cam and Amelia have gone through the motions of being the perfect couple and family. They belonged to the right clubs, attended the right functions, and sent their children to the right schools. But behind closed doors those appearances were deceiving and instead the reality was a family that was terribly miserable with one another. When Amelia tells her daughters that she and their father were separating, they weren't surprised at all.

Another theme that is brought up is Love. Cam and Amelia seem to have no love in their relationship right now, though Amelia feels the loss of that love more deeply than Cam. Cam has definitely moved on. Yet Amelia cannot get over it. Additionally, she has much love for her children. Her relationship with them and feelings for them has only increased as she has clung to it amidst marital turmoil.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Family in these chapters.

Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of Appearances demonstrated?

Discussion Question 3

What forces Amelia to finally take Kate's offer?

Vocabulary

dislodge, melancholy, celebratory, molten, litany, contraption, nix, analytical, vulnerable, exuberant, albeit



Part Four, Chapters 17-18

Summary

Chapter 17

This chapter is set in 1990, in New York City. The focus is on Amelia still. It is six months since she's separated from Cam and she's going to New York City to have lunch at Café Andres with her Aunt Kate. When they meet at the Café, she tells Kate that she and Cam are making the separation final and are getting a divorce.

Kate feels that she also needs to unburden and begins to tell Amelia about the ultimate fight that drove her away and upset her to the point where she never spoke to Amelia's father every again. Kate is quick to point out that they did not have an affair. That night after she'd taken off before dinner, Kate had returned home still shocked that Amelia's father had hated the idea of the book. She called him on the phone to ask why he hated it so much. She tells Amelia that this is when he revealed something to her, something that to this day she cannot talk about. When Amelia presses her to say what it was, all Kate will tell her is to ask her father.

Kate asks a waiter to see if Bobby can come and visit them at their table. Bobby emerges and greets Kate warmly. Kate introduces Amelia and tells Bobby that Amelia is just the person to help him with his book on the café. Amelia has a sense that her life is about to take a turn for the better after all.

Chapter 18

It is still 1990. Kate insists that Amelia come and stay with her while Jack is away on business. That way, she says, they can catch up and Kate can introduce and assist Amelia with the work she will be doing for Bobby Banks. Amelia agrees.

The next morning Amelia decides while she has the apartment to herself that she will call her father and ask her about the instance that Kate alluded to while they were at Café Andres. Before calling her father, she flips through an old copy of the Alice Stone cookbook called Homegrown. She sees a picture of a very young Alice and wonders if maybe her father had an affair with this colored woman? What is the mystery between the two, she wonders. As she flips through the book she sees a picture of Alice as a girl and standing beside her is a tall boy with a chicken on his shoulder. For a moment she studies the boy's face, and then it hits her.....the young boy staring at her from this photograph is her father.

Amelia leaves two voice mails for her father, but after a little while finds Alice's address (where Bobby also now lives). She decides that she will go and visit Alice, show her the picture in the cookbook and ask how she knows her father. She arrives at the apartment and Bobby is there. He lets her in and tells her that Alice is at the market and will be back shortly. They begin discussing Bobby's book that he wants to write.



She looks around the room and finds another, larger picture of her father and Alice. She begins to put it all together. Amelia asks Bobby about the picture and he tells her that the boy is Alice's dead brother, James. Now things start to make sense; her father's paranoia about sunlight and using sunscreen, their last name was Brookstone (stone being in it). She sees that her father was not the son of dead Italian emigrants as he had told everyone. He was a light-skinned black man. Amelia knows that this explains her unruly curly hair, too.

Alice enters the apartment. Amelia is so overcome with the revelation that she approaches Alice and tells her immediately who she is. Alice becomes angry, shaking her head. She says that James is dead, and has been dead for 60 years. Amelia gently tells her 'no'. She tells him that her father is a well-known geneticist living in California. Alice refuses to believe it. She tells Amelia to get the hell out of her house. Amelia turns to leave and Bobby is curled up on the couch, sobbing quietly.

Analysis

The theme of Family continues in these two chapters, focusing primarily on Amelia and her father, and the secret that Kate alludes to. That Amelia puts two and two together after looking through Alice's first cookbook, means that she already has an idea of what her father has been hiding her whole life. With the knowledge that she may have African American in her background, she begins to revisit certain events in her childhood, most of them centering around her father's insistence on things that didn't make sense back then. His insistence that they all wear long sleeves, stay out of the sun, and wear sunscreen, now all makes sense.

The reader should also note that the James in this section is the same James in the prologue of the novel, and it will be revealed that Alice was the sister of James in the prologue. This is the author's way of bringing the events full circle and connecting the main characters of the novel. The reader also gets to see how the formative events of James' childhood growing up where he did and witnessing deadly prejudice first hand impacting the way he acted towards other people, especially Amelia.

The theme of Prejudice is also present, most notably in Chapter 18 when Alice rejects Amelia and who she is. Alice tells Amelia that her brother James, died long ago. Amelia argues with her and tells her that he is alive. Alice refuses to talk about it and literally throws her out of her house. In essence, Amelia's father is guilty of prejudice as well, assuming one heritage over the other instead of embracing the both of them. This choice made by both of his relatives (Alice and James) sets up an internal struggle for Amelia as she attempts to try and deal with her newly discovered dual heritage.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Kate literally force Amelia to work with Bobby on his book?



Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Family in these chapters.

Discussion Question 3

How is everyone in these chapters guilty, in some way, of prejudice?

Vocabulary

expansive, bluntness, appalling, grim, failings, reconciled, estranged, pretensions, aerating, intoned, gregariousness



Chapter 19

Summary

Chapter 19

It is a year later, 1991, in New York City. The divorce has been finalized and Amelia has moved to the city permanently. Now, as she takes her usual morning swim she remembers a time when she and Cam's mother were planning on going swimming at the country club. The maid's daughter, who was African American, was visiting that day and Amelia had asked if the little girl wanted to go swimming with them, too. The little girl enthusiastically agreed. However, instead of going to the country club, Taffy, Cam's mother, had taken them all to the community pool.

Later as they sat poolside she confidentially told Amelia that the country club might have embarrassed the young girl as 'no colored person has ever been in its hallowed waters'. Now, in the present, knowing about her own lineage she thinks that Taffy might have had to revise that statement.

Amelia finally received a phone call from her father, who did not deny it. He passionately told her that she should never allow anyone to tell her that she's not as good as they are. Amelia assures him that this is not happening. He tells her that she doesn't have to tell anyone if she doesn't want to. Amelia is incensed. She wants people to know who she is...who she really is.

Alice invites Amelia to come back to the apartment. Alice makes it clear that she acknowledges the fact that James is alive, but that she wants nothing to do with him. Alice continues to talk about her brother as if he were still dead to her. Later, when Amelia arrived back home she asked Kate how in the world she could leave Alice's apartment, then go to see James in Connecticut, knowing what she knew. Kate is quiet for a moment, then tells her that Alice knew. Kate had told her right before the book had been published.

Alice and Amelia continue to meet. While Alice will not speak of her brother after he left the farm, she often rambles on for hours about her brother when they were children. She talks about the game they used to play, their feet touching, reading each other's minds. She tells Amelia about finding the dead boy lynched in the woods, and how she found out that their great grandfather was a white man. Alice shares with Amelia that this 'connection' that they had was strong until she was 16. Then, James had sent a letter telling everyone to forget he'd ever been born, and like that, the connection was severed. It had upset Alice so much that she'd gone to Manhattan hoping to find him. Many years later, while she was working with Gus on a window decoration, she'd seem James with a pregnant white woman. She'd run after him calling to him. When he turned to look at her, Alice says, the look was withering. She says that she just stood there in shock. From that moment on, James was truly dead to her, she says.



Having gotten this aired between them, Alice, Amelia, and Bobby begin working on Bobby's cookbook. They finish the book many months later and have the launch party at Café Andres where Gus also announces his own retirement. The occasion is a huge affair and gains great media play. Amelia is shocked to see that Bobby's parents have come through the door to attend.

Bobby and Amelia start to attend church together on the Upper West Side. The priest is a reformed hippie, but still sports his ponytail. He extends God's love through his sermons to whomever wishes to attend his church. Amelia loves his exuberance and how he will spontaneously shout 'Rejoice!' for no reason at all. This particular morning both she and Bobby are a little hung over from a party at Kate's. Nonetheless, they've come to church together.

While praying Amelia hears heavy breathing, like panting. She opens her eyes and looks across the aisle to see a huge Golden Retriever sitting patiently next to his owner. As Amelia looks around she sees that the sanctuary is full of animals. She looks to Bobby who reminds her that it is a blessing of the animals day.

There is a slight disturbance at the back of the church and everyone turns to see a single woman, quite old with her silver hair pulled into a bun. Walking in front of her is a peacock. When the peacock walks four feet into the aisle, he spreads his wings. Amelia says that at this point her soul soars, and inside she becomes still, allowing herself to feel wonder, and awe. She realizes that she is surrounded by heartbeats, some inside furry bodies, and some inside winged ones, and some, she says 'inside our own imperfect skin.'

Analysis

In this final chapter the reader sees Amelia and Bobby both coming to a place of peace within themselves. Both of them have confronted their past, uncovered some truths that have been buried, and are both searching for a deeper meaning to their lives.

They both attend church together, thus demonstrating the theme of Religion. At this church they are accepted and welcomed. Bobby and Amelia are both able to receive communion (many churches would not give communion to divorced people, as well as homosexuals). They are able to find some solace when they come to this particular church, primarily because of the priest, a reformed hippie, whose way of speaking seems to resonate with the both of them.

The theme of Family is also addressed in this chapter as Alice finally invites Amelia back to her apartment and tells her the painful story of James' rejection of her so many years prior. Angry, Amelia calls her father and confronts him with the truth that she's learned from Alice. He is quick to tell her that she need not tell anyone her mixed heritage if she doesn't want to. Amelia is upset and appalled that he would even suggest such a thing.



Amelia recalls how her former mother in law had made a big deal about not taking the maid's daughter to the local country club because the little girl was black. She'd told Amelia at the time that so far no black had ever been swimming in those country club waters. Now, knowing what she knows, Amelia laughs inwardly...a black had indeed been swimming in those waters for more than 20 years.

While at church, Amelia has a revelation that changes her entire perspective on who she is and what her identity might be. It happens because an older woman walks in with a peacock. It is a blessing of the animals service, and others have their well-behaved pets with them on this day. But, the peacock, as it unfurls its feathers and stands there in all of its glory, seems to speak volumes to Amelia. Symbolically, the peacock is Amelia unfurling her own 'feathers' to the world. She realizes that the animals, whether furred, scaled, or winged, were all happy inside of their skins. Amelia realizes that God loves them all, no matter what, no matter who they are. And this is enough for her.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolism of the peacock?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Family in this section.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of Prejudice in this section.

Vocabulary

pejorative, fervently, lineage, scattered, intolerable, affinity, errant, opportunistic, minimizes, scruples



Characters

Alice and James Stone (Children)

At the beginning of the novel, a prologue introduces Alice and James Stone, two children growing up in Emancipation, North Carolina. James is older by a few years, but the two siblings are extremely close. They like to play a game where they will sit on the ground, the flats of their feet touching. Then one of them writes a word on a chalk board and the other draws a picture of it with his own chalkboard. They are correct each time. Their mother doesn't like them to play the game, however, so they do it in secret. It is a special bond that they have until many years later.

Alice and James find a boy who has been lynched when they are out in the woods chasing an old sow. As they are both African American children, they are terrified to see a young black boy hung from a tree. They see the men who did it walking in the woods, and fearing for their own lives, they hide. When they can, they go home and tell their grandfather, who is afraid that they were seen.

Later, James, who openly hates the way African Americans are treated in the nearby towns, often pushes the envelope, challenging the whites-only rules. This makes his grandfather fearful of reprisal, so he arranges to send James to stay with relatives in New York. For many years, this is the last that anyone knows of James' whereabouts.

Mamma Stone

Mamma Stone is James and Alice's mother. Her husband fought in the war and didn't come home. So she moved in with her parents. She works many jobs in neighboring counties and bakes bread for those around her. She is an extremely good cook and she passes this on to both of her children.

Grandfather and Grandmother Stone

Grandfather and Grandmother Stone help raise the children. They helped to settle and found the town of Emancipation. They are both former slaves, and fiercely want their children and their grandchildren to be educated and well spoken. Grandfather Stone tells James and Alice, at one point, that when his mother was a young girl, Hortican Stone had used and abused her sexually. All of the children that she had were half white. This is why, he explains, James is so light skinned.

Three Hunters

Alice and James, as children, see three hunters walking through the woods. They hide when they see them as they are afraid of how they might be treated. James is so afraid



when he sees them that he wets his pants. Later, when they find the boy that has been hung in the tree, they know that the men are the ones who've done it.

Red Haired Hunter

One of the hunters that Alice and James (as children) see in the woods, is a red headed man. Later, when the children are in a neighboring store, they see the red-haired man again. Alice is paralyzed with fear. It is this sighting that makes Grandfather Stone adamant about sending James off.

Mr. Hicks

Mr. Hicks is the owner of the store in the neighboring town. He buys all of the pork goods from the Stone family, though he doesn't advertise the fact that his meats all come from colored farmers. He is extremely prejudiced and has 'coloreds' enter from the back of the store. He also refuses to sell the same goods to both blacks and whites, which makes James extremely angry. James talks back to Mr. Hicks, again, making Grandfather determined to send him away.

Bobby Banks

Bobby Banks is the primary protagonist of the story. His story unfolds as the reader watches an innocent and happy boy meet with prejudice and hatred because of his differences. His MeeMaw was his only champion after his own mother turned her back on him.

Bobby adored his mother and wanted nothing more than to be around her and to be like her. Edie Banks enjoyed being with Bobby, too, preferring him over her other sons. However, this ends when Hunter, her middle son, plants 'evidence' in Bobby's drawers indicating that he is gay. After this, she views Bobby as diseased and broken.

Bobby's rejection from his mother wounds him to the core and makes him consider killing himself. His brother, Hunter's, continual tormenting eventually drives him to stand up for himself, threatening to release bees into Hunter's bed (Hunter was highly allergic).

When Bobby falls in love for the first time with a boy named Pete, he is unsure of how to feel about it. The entire time he is with Pete he keeps feeling as if God is condemning him to hell. When his father and mother catch he and Pete in bed together, Bobby is devastated and terrified. He runs to his MeeMaw's home who takes him in. He ends up living there for another three years until he graduates.

His grandmother comforts him and tells him that he is a child of God and that no one else has the credentials to judge him. It is his grandmother who gives him the money to



leave the south and start a new life in New York. Her death devastates him, as he feels truly alone at that point.

While in New York Bobby becomes more comfortable with his sexuality and more comfortable with himself in general. He takes a job at Cafe Andres and finds a kind of family among his co-workers and friends.

Hunter Banks

Hunter Banks is Bobby Banks' brother. Hunter torments him incessantly, putting notes in his school books calling him a 'fag.' Hunter also spreads rumors about Bobby at school and stands by while others beat him up and pick on him.

Hunter is very allergic to bees so Bobby threatens to loose some bees he collected from the woods in Hunter's bedroom if Hunter doesn't stop with the torture at school. Hunter is terrified and leaves him alone after that.

Hunter is described as being athletic, having a slight learning disability, and is loud and impulsive. He also ruins a friendship that Bobby had with a little girl in the neighborhood named, Keisha, simply because she is black.

Reverend Banks

Reverend Banks is Bobby's father. He is a very self important personality and likes his family and his home to be 'picture perfect.' When it becomes evident that Bobby is gay, his father does not take it well, and decides that Bobby is possessed of some evil spirit. When it can't be prayed away, he threatens to send Bobby to military school.

He and Bobby remain estranged for many years until they both make some efforts to reconnect. The Reverend tells Bobby that he doesn't want to know about his life, but would like to talk to him now and again. This only comes after Bobby has made a name for himself in New York.

Edie Banks

Edie Banks is Bobby's mother, whom he adored when he was a young child. She and Bobby were close and she would often ask his advice on clothing choice, place settings, and would have him help her in the kitchen. She suspects that Bobby is gay but won't bring herself to directly address it.

She severely wounds Bobby emotionally when she tells Hunter that she knows that Bobby is damaged and wrong. When Hunter plants gay porn and some of his mother's underwear in Bobby's drawer and then arranges for their mother to find it, Bobby's mother distances herself from him permanently. It wounds Bobby so deeply that he considers killing himself.



MeeMaw Banks

MeeMaw is the Reverend's mother and Bobby's only champion. Bobby loved staying at her house, helping her cook her famous pound cakes (which she sells weekly to various families in town). She lives by herself in a wonderful house full of smells which she shares Bobby. MeeMaw allows Bobby to be who he is without judgement.

When the Reverend catches Bobby in bed with Pete, it is to MeeMaw's that he runs. Bobby tells her that his parents are going to send him to a Military School, but MeeMaw intervenes and allows him to stay at her house the rest of his high school years.

When Bobby graduates MeeMaw takes him to New York and gives him \$6,000 to start his life somewhere other than Decatur, Georgia.

Troy Banks

Troy Banks is Bobby's older brother. He becomes a doctor in Atlanta. He doesn't have much interaction with Bobby because he is so much older.

Keisha

When Bobby is young he doesn't have any friends. He just can't seem to find any in his neighborhood, nor at school. The things he likes to do most other boys don't like. He gets on his bike and goes a few streets over from his own and finds a girl named, Keisha. She is African American, but Bobby doesn't care. A friend is a friend in his book.

Keisha is brash and bold and talks Bobby into going into an abandoned old house where she knows there are strawberries. They pick all of the berries and bring them back to MeeMaw's house. Later, Keisha stops being Bobby's friend because Hunter calls her the 'N' word.

Shawna

Shawna is a girl from high school that both Pete and Bobby hang out with. She's not like other girls, choosing to wear grungy clothing, and to say and do punk things. She understands that she's Pete's 'cover' and doesn't mind.

Pete

Pete is Bobby's first boyfriend in high school. They go to a Fourth of July laser show with another friend of theirs named Shawna. Shawna makes it okay for all three of them to lie on the blanket together. But Bobby can't help thinking about Pete.



Later on in the evening, after everyone has had way too much to drink, Pete confesses to Bobby that he's attracted to him as well. They go back to Bobby's house and start to make out. They are caught by Bobby's parents. Bobby is never allowed to see Pete again. This is also a catalyst for Bobby's parents to essentially disown him and for him to live with MeeMaw.

Mike

Mike is a friend of Bobby's when he first comes to New York. They both live at the residence hotel, which is a place that allows gay men to rent a space to live. Many places in the city are off limits to 'their kind' Mike tells Bobby. Mike gives Bobby a crash course on being gay and being in New York. Mike later dies of AIDS.

Gus Andres

Gus is part owner of Cafe Andres and is the one person who is instrumental in establishing Bobby's cooking career. He sees Bobby's talent and is willing to support it. He is also the one that introduced Bobby to the love of his life, Sebastian.

Sebastian

Sebastian is Bobby's life partner. He introduces Bobby to many cultural things that he had never experienced. Sebastian's parents are Mel and Dahlia, who are both devout Jews. They tolerate Sebastian's life choices, Dahlia moreso than Mel. They are open and inviting to Bobby when he and Sebastian visit them.

Sebastian is much older than Bobby, but they are truly devoted to one another. Sebastian is a playwright and a producer of Broadway plays. He is also an artist. Sebastian dies in the late 80s from AIDS. His loss devastates Bobby.

Jose the Cook

Jose is the cook at Cafe Andres when Bobby first arrives. In fact, Jose had just been hired minutes before Bobby came into the cafe to meet Gus. Gus hires Bobby to apprentice under Jose because he is so taken with Bobby's desperation to succeed.

Dr. Wilson

Dr. Wilson is the doctor that Sebastian and Bobby go to see on a Sunday in the winter when Bobby finds the lesion on Sebastian's chest. Dr. Wilson agrees to see them at his own personal apartment. He has to give them both bad news, and confirms that Sebastian has AIDS.



Dahlia and Mel

Dahlia and Mel are Sebastian's parents. They are very Jewish and observe many of the customs. However, they are both very accepting of Bobby and of Sebastian's choice to be gay. Mel overeats and Bobby says that he is easily 300 pounds. Dahlia is a dark-skinned beauty, as Bobby describes her, and even in her sadness looks like a work of art.

Amelia Brookstone

Amelia is Kate's niece. She is married to an oppressive man named Cam. During Bobby's debut event at the Cafe, Amelia bursts in to see her Aunt Kate, sobbing that Cam has been with another woman. Bobby hands her a towel to dry off from the rain.

Later, Amelia leaves Cam and comes to live with her Aunt Kate. Her life and Bobby's becomes intertwined once again, as they all collaborate with Alice on Bobby's new cookbook. Amelia also comes to terms with the fact that her true heritage has been hidden from her and that she is actually half black.

Kate

Kate is Alice Stones' editor. She edited the very famous cookbook called, *Homegrown*, by Alice, the co-owner of Cafe Andres. They remained good friends even after the book was produced. They are often seen together around town.

Kate loves Amelia as if she were her own child. She is married to a man named, Jack, who is devoted to her. They never had any children of their own. It is Kate who suggests that Amelia ask her father about his past and who he is.

James Brookstone

James Brookstone is in actuality, James Stone, Alice's long lost brother. When he was smuggled out of Georgia to live in New York, he decided that he was light skinned enough to pass as white. He reinvented himself, tagged the name Brook to his real last name and became someone else. He cut off all ties with his family, went to college, and became an award-winning geneticist.

He always protected his secret about his heritage, making certain that his children always wore sunblock and long sleeves when in the sun. It is only when Amelia confronts him that he tells her the truth. He hates the way that he treated his sister, Alice, and how he severed their special connection. He didn't think that he had a choice.



Alice Stone (adult)

As a grown woman, she married a man who was killed in the war. She was left without much idea of how to make a living. So, she began cooking. When Gus tasted her food, he agreed to have her co-own the restaurant with him. The rest was culinary history, as Gus liked to tell everyone.

Alice became quite well known for her recipes, had a long running PBS cooking show for many years, wrote a couple of books, and became a recluse in her later years. She becomes a close friend to Bobby who takes over her place as cook at the restaurant, and eventually they move in together, finding comfort in common ground.

It is Alice that helps Bobby to heal some of the deeper wounds that his family and supposed friends have inflicted over the years. It is highly symbolic when Alice bakes a loaf of Challah bread, then tells Bobby to 'take, eat' as if he were taking communion. This was her way of telling him that he was worthy and loved by people and by God, who was bigger than the priest who had told Bobby to leave the church.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Wild Sow

The Prologue features a inciting incident that begins with a wild sow. Both Alice and James find signs that there's a wild sow with babies. James wants to go deeper into the woods to find the wild sow. It is when they are tracking the sow that they come across the boy who's been lynched.

Alice herself muses about how differently the wild sow is from the domesticated sows on the farm. She thinks that the wild sow has more dignity and certainly commands more respect. As an older woman, she exhibits many of the same wild traits, instead of being a 'domesticated' black woman.

The Lynched Boy

The lynched boy is the inciting conflict at the beginning of the story. It also sets the tone for James having to be sent away because he won't be silent about the way whites treat blacks. The lynched boy represents suppression and oppression as well as the theme of Prejudice which will come up again and again throughout the novel both on a racial level and for homosexuality as well. Alice describes the red-headed hunter as having hair as red as a fresh red crisp apple. She identifies the hunter's hair with the blood of the boy that he killed.

Little Black Sambo Book

Alice talks about reading a book called 'Little Black Sambo' in school. It is evident that she is incredibly intelligent. She talks about with the exception of this book, all of the other books feature blonde-haired and blue-eyed protagonists. There was no room in the literary world for someone that looked like her. The book symbolizes Alice's hope that there will be more books and more inclusion in the future.

Pink Cupcakes

When Bobby is 6 years old he stays at his MeeMaw's house and they make cupcakes. He's so excited because she always lets him choose which color frosting he wants. He shares that he almost always chooses pink. However, the one time MeeMaw sent the pink cupcakes home Bobby was teased so badly that they agreed to never send pink cupcakes home again (though they made them at her house). The pink cupcakes are an early nod to readers that Bobby is most likely gay.



Keisha's Pink Ribbon

Keisha is one of Bobby's only friends when he is younger. He loves the way that she dresses and is especially drawn to her pink ribbon that she wears in her hair. This is another 'clue' that the author gives to the reader to indicate that Bobby has rejected gender stereotyping and is most likely gay. It also connects to the pink icing on the cupcakes that Bobby and his MeeMaw made.

Bobby's Ceiling Fan

When Bobby and Pete go to bed together at Bobby's house, Bobby is aware of the ceiling fan making noise above them. Suddenly, he is keenly aware that the fan has stopped. His parents have caught them together.

The beating of the fan symbolizes Bobby's life thus far, and it represents the heartbeat of his identity. When his parents come into the room and turn off the switch, they are, in essence, turning off that part of him; rejecting who he is.

MeeMaw's Poundcake money

MeeMaw's poundcake money is money that she saved up specifically for Bobby because she knew that once he graduated he would need to leave the South, that there would be no place for him there. The money is MeeMaw's way of telling Bobby that she believes in him and wants to support his new start elsewhere. She is giving him his freedom.

Auntie Mame

Auntie Mame is a reference to the Broadway play called Mame. The main character, flamboyant and overly dramatic is a common thread that Bobby finds among other gays in New York. Nearly all of them were infatuated with Mame at an early age. Bobby starts to find acceptance.

Alice Stone's Cookbook ('Homegrown')

The cookbook ended up being 'more' than a cookbook. First, it became a vehicle for Alice to live the life that she'd always longed for, as both a celebrity and as a businesswoman. Secondly, it allowed her to meet and befriend Kate, her editor, and through her, Amelia, her estranged grandniece.



Sebastian's Bump

While lying in bed together, Bobby finds a raised welt on the middle of Sebastian's chest. They have buried so many friends due to AIDS that they are terrified about what it might mean. To Bobby it represents change and something that he has no control over in his life.

Priest on Oxygen

After Sebastian's death Bobby feels the need to return to his faith. Though he is not Catholic he finds himself inside of a Catholic church. The priest who has started a service at the front of the church is on oxygen. Bobby is encouraged at first, but when he goes forward to receive communion the priest refuses to give him communion because he is gay.

The fact that the priest is on oxygen is the author's way of indicating that the priest's faith is 'on oxygen' as well, that the connection to God is not what it should be, and that it is, quite literally, gasping for air.

Alice's Kiss

After Bobby is rejected at the Catholic Church he runs into Alice making her way back from the market. He doesn't tell her what happened, right away, but she can tell that something is wrong. She also knows about Sebastian's death. Then, she reaches up and gives Bobby a soft kiss on the cheek. Bobby says that the kiss seemed to absolve him of everything and that for a brief moment he felt as if he were being kissed by his own loving mother, before she decided that he was a lost cause.

Alice's Challah Bread

Finally, Bobby tells Alice about how the priest at the church rejected him. He's at Alice's apartment watching her make bread. She tells Bobby that the priest's god is too small, that the God of everything that is, is the only one fit to judge others. Then, she takes the fresh challah bread and gives him a piece saying 'take, eat,' which is what a priest does when giving out the sacraments. In essence, she is telling him that he is fit to take communion and to worship.

The Peacock

At the end of the novel, Amelia is at a church that she attends regularly with Bobby. It is a blessing of the animals service. At the back of the church an old woman walks in with a peacock on a leash. When it has proceeded down the aisle a few feet it unfurls its

feathers. Amelia watches in awe and realizes that she is like the bird, finally ready to express herself to the world.



Settings

Emancipation, North Carolina

This is the place in North Carolina that was founded by Grandfather Stone. It is entirely owned and run by former slaves. It is later purchased and absorbed into the neighboring county when the tax liens aren't paid. This is also where James and Alice find the lynched boy in the woods.

Decatur, Georgia

Decatur, Georgia is where the first part of the story takes place as it is where Bobby grows up. He and his family live in the suburbs, there. It is depicted as a prim and proper, traditional Southern town, and Bobby's home is one where both parents try to project the 'perfect' image.

Manhattan

This is a vibrant and welcoming town to Bobby. This is where he finds acceptance, kindred spirits, and a chance to make something of himself. This is where he spends the rest of the book.

Cafe Andres

Cafe Andres is located in Manhattan. It was once the preferred hangout for the southern ex-pat literary types in its glory days. Often celebrities from all artist walks of life would catch a casual lunch there.

In the present day, it belongs to Gus Andres and Alice Stone. This is the cafe where Bobby is employed and where he is 'discovered' by the New York food elite. He feels accepted there and really blossoms into not only a successful chef but also someone more comfortable in his own skin. He becomes more confident as a result and finds a kind of family there.

Alice's Apartment

Alice's apartment reminds Bobby of his MeeMaw's home. He falls in love with it instantly. Later, he moves in with Alice as it just makes sense to both of them. It becomes a sanctuary for Bobby.

The Upper West Side Church

This is the church where both Amelia and Bobby attend. The priest is a reformed hippie, and still sports his ponytail. The acceptance that they find there heals the deep scarring and wounds that have been inflicted on them over the years.

Themes and Motifs

Family

The theme of Family is explored in many ways throughout the course of the novel. At the beginning of the novel the focus is on the relationship between James and Alice, showing how close they are, and that they had a special psychic bond with one another.

The other focus in the Prologue is on the relationship between the Grandparents and the grandchildren. It is their intense desire that their grandchildren be fully educated and learn to speak well so that the white community would not be able to take advantage of them. This is a belief that is handed down through the generations, and one can see it being passed along from James to his daughter Amelia.

Later, the focus is on Bobby and his family. Bobby loves his mother to the point of hero worship. His family dynamic, however, is bad. There is little tolerance in his family for anyone who doesn't portray the correct image or conform to accepted social norms. Bobby's effeminate ways often earn him his family's disdain. The only one of his biological family that doesn't dislike him is his grandmother, who supports and champions him despite everything.

Later, when Bobby moves to New York he finds acceptance in a way that he has never before experienced. In many ways his new group of friends are more family than he has ever had. It is here that the definition of family is experienced by Bobby in a new way. Here he finds love and support.

Religion

Religion is focused upon many times throughout the novel. First, there is Bobby's insistence on following the letter of the law when it comes to going to church and doing what his youth leader has told him. It is his desire to witness to three unchristian people that drives him to explore several streets over where he finds Keisha, one of his earliest friends. However, he is disappointed to find out that Keisha is already 'saved' because he wants to please his group leader at church.

Later, Bobby's father becomes the pastor at a local church. When it is discovered that Bobby is gay, his father wants to pray the devil out of him. The author would seem to be stating that often religion hides and harbors some of the more evil personalities, the most destructive personalities on the planet. Treating his son as if he were diseased impacted and scarred Bobby so badly that it would be decades before he would get over it.

When Bobby goes to New York and meets Sebastian, he figures that God doesn't want him anyway since he's living in sin. However, when Sebastian dies of AIDS, Bobby



writes that AIDS killed God for him, because why would a loving God cause something like this to happen to good people?

Despondent after Sebastian dies, he goes into a Catholic Church where there's a priest who is using an oxygen bottle. The priest refuses to give communion to Bobby who is devastated and humiliated. The fact that the priest is on oxygen represents the fact that this religion, and in particular, the Catholic Church, is weakened from lack of oxygen and is as diseased and impotent as the priest.

Lastly, Amelia and Bobby go to another church, an Episcopalian church. The priest there is welcoming, nonjudgmental, and insightful. It is during a blessing of the animals service that Amelia realizes that God loves all of His creatures, despite their species, gender, or race.

Prejudice

Prejudice is a major theme in the novel, 'A Place at the Table.' First, there is the overall prejudice experienced by people of color throughout the novel. Because it spans the time period of 1930-1995 much comes of civil rights and the treatment of persons of color.

One of the first indications of this is the two African American children (Alice and James) who find the young black boy lynched in the woods. As the Prologue progresses the reader sees the Stone family repeatedly discriminated against in the stores, with their land, selling their goods, and purchasing items in neighboring counties.

Later, the reader sees Alice, as a young woman, standing on her own feet and demanding to be made co-owner of the Cafe Andres. This was something that was unheard of in the sixties. And, yet, Alice manages to do so, though she shares with Bobby later, that she resented being the token black who was often paraded out to the patrons.

Additionally, there is widespread prejudice against homosexuality. In particular, Bobby experiences his first discrimination against him at the hands of his brother, Hunter. Later, a priest refuses to give him communion because he is gay. His own family disowns him and it is nearly 20 years later when they reestablish contact.

Appearances

Amelia and James' characters embody this theme. First, James, Alice's older brother, is so light skinned that he can 'pass' as white. This is just what he does when he has to leave Emancipation, NC because he challenged the white establishment there.

James is so able to pass as white that when he arrives in New York he reinvents himself, telling others that he is the orphan of two Italian immigrants. He is allowed to go into the service, gain the GI bill, go to college, and becomes an award-winning



geneticist. This is something that would never have been attainable had he continued to claim his African American heritage.

Later, Amelia realizes that she has been a part of Cam's idea of a 'perfect' marriage, not her own. To the outside world they were the perfect family (much like Bobby's was in the seventies and eighties), but that she was miserable. When she finally walks away, she learns from her Aunt Kate that she is of mixed heritage. This she confirms when she talks to her father.

The author, through all of these events and scenes, depicts what happens when appearances become more important than people; that living up to impossible standards only damages society, and can permanently wreck some of the most creative souls on the planet.

Love

All of the characters in this novel seek love. It is the one sole common denominator throughout all of it. Bobby just wants to be loved by his mother, which happens until Hunter severs that link that he has to his mother. Later, Bobby looks for that love and acceptance in Pete, and finds it, only to have it taken from him by his family.

Even Edie Banks, Bobby's mother, is searching for love and acceptance. She believes that having the perfect image and giving the perfect appearance will do that for her. However, embracing this philosophy leaves her feeling empty and defeated.

Bobby and Sebastian find one another and for the first time Bobby is truly happy. When Sebastian dies, it sets many things in motion that brings Bobby to a point where he must confront his wounded childhood self. Bobby has the love of his patrons and of the city, and yet, his own family are still estranged from him.

Amelia learns self love after she leaves Cam and realizes that she never really knew herself, or was allowed to find herself when she was with Cam. It is only after she comes to the city, lives with Kate, that she realizes that her desire to find true love has to first start with loving herself.

Styles

Point of View

'A Place at the Table' is told primarily from the first person perspective of either Alice, Bobby, or Amelia. Alice's point of view starts off the book in the Prologue, but for the bulk of the book the point of view is Bobby's. The last four or five chapters feature the viewpoint of Amelia as she deals with her own identity and heritage. This allows the author to focus on different themes such as Prejudice, Family, and Love, through the eyes of three different protagonists enduring three different experiences. Also, these characters are not randomly chosen. In the latter part of the book it is revealed that they are all connected. Finding out how they are all related adds an air of mystery to the novel and keeps pushing the reader forward to discover how they relate to each other.

Language and Meaning

The language and meaning are straightforward and on a 9th grade level and up. Since it revolves around cooking and cultural heritage there are often references made to cooking, produce, raising of farm animals, and measuring things. Often the personality of someone is defined using desserts, fruits, or other food related items.

Structure

The book is structured into four parts with several chapters comprising each section. The Prologue centers around Alice and James, whereas parts two and three feature Bobby Banks. The last section features Amelia, primarily. There is the use of letters and magazine articles to give the reader a more in depth understanding of landmarks, people, and to give the reader some backstory.



Quotes

Granddaddy was always saying that the trees had borne witness to all of human misery.
-- Alice (Prologue)

Importance: Alice says this to herself when the three white hunters show up in the woods. She knows that she and James need to hide and let them pass, that they are dangerous, that the trees will hide her.

But you can't go messing with a white man's killing. Hurts my heart to tell you, but it's the truth.
-- Granddaddy (Prologue)

Importance: Grandfather tells James this after they find and cut the lynched boy from the tree. He's worried that the white men will find out who cut the dead boy down and will come after them.

I know I should be happy that Keisha is saved, but I can't help but be disappointed. I wanted to bring a heathen to Jesus.
-- Bobby (Part One, Chapter 1)

Importance: Bobby has met Keisha and is disappointed that she's already a Christian as his RA leader has given them all a mission to talk to three unsaved people that week.

Mama laughs again and I feel myself inflate with the air she releases.
-- Bobby (Part One, Chapter 2)

Importance: This is something that thinks when he's helping his mother clean up before an important luncheon. It also is an early indicator to the reader that Bobby more clearly identifies with his mother, rather than with his father or brothers.

Where would we be in life without our garnishes?" Beauty is so crucial.
-- Gus (Part Two, Chapter 7)

Importance: Gus, in an interview about the Café, tells the writer that his café seemed to beckon to Southern writers and southern people because it captured the feeling of detail that is typically southern.

The most important piece of information about an artist is not whom he or she invites into his or her bed! Such thinking drives me mad, as if sex is the single and solitary defining thing about a creative person.
-- Gus (Part Two, Chapter 7)

Importance: Gus tells the writer of the article, when asked if his café were famous and popular because it catered to the gay element, that he wishes everyone would get over



themselves and stop focusing so much on who is sleeping with whom. This quote also suggests one of the themes, which is that of Prejudice.

Dress it up with some basil cut in a chiffonade, maybe give it a fancy name— call it corn and crevettes— and serve it forth to the New Yorkers who will have no idea what they are eating, who will have no idea they are eating my loneliness transformed.

-- Bobby (Part Two, Chapter 10)

Importance: Bobby has just returned from a brunch with Sebastian's parents and realizes how much he misses his own family who will not accept him as Sebastian's family accepts him. He turns his attention on creating recipes that remind him of home.

We walked through something unfathomable together. We came out on the other side, changed, only to find that much of the world remained the same, callous and indifferent.

-- Bobby (Part Two, Chapter 12)

Importance: Bobby says this about Dahlia, Sebastian's mother, who continues to visit with him every week, even after Sebastian's death.

AIDS destroyed God for me, the same as it destroyed an entire community of those who create beauty and art, the dazzlers among us, reflecting God's creative spark.

-- Bobby (Part Two, Chapter 12)

Importance: After Sebastian's death Bobby goes into a Catholic church where a priest on oxygen is speaking. Bobby doesn't know why he's there, only that he hopes to regain some semblance of the faith he had as a child. However, he realizes that he can't believe in a God who would allow something like AIDS.

For the majority of my life, this is what I have done. Justified the adult children peeing in the baby pool. I want to make my way into deeper waters, with adults who can actually swim.

-- Amelia (Part Four, Chapter 17)

Importance: In this passage Amelia is meeting Kate six months after separating from Cam. She's done with people making excuses for her mother and her father, for her husband, and for every adult in her life that has behaved badly.

I think it is fair to say that I have become more interested in observing the world, rather than judging it."

-- Amelia (Part Four, Chapter 19)

Importance: In this passage Amelia has reached a point in her life where she has adopted a 'live and let live' attitude. This passage also underscores one of the major themes, that of prejudice.

How those of us who are renters are perhaps in a better position to recognize that our time here on earth is a borrowed gift. That it's not ours to own, though it is ours to relish.



-- Amelia (Part Four, Chapter 19)

Importance: In this passage Amelia has started attending church with Bobby and their pastor is a kind person. He has helped Amelia to view life with a different perspective.