

# **Postcards from No Man's Land Study Guide**

**Postcards from No Man's Land by Aidan Chambers**

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# Plot Summary

Postcards from No Man's Land tells the story of World War Two's effect on three generations of a family and the secrets revealed when a long-lost grandson visits Amsterdam to discover the truth.

Jacob Todd travels to Amsterdam when a friend invites his grandmother, Sarah, who is too ill to attend. Rather than let the plane ticket go to waste, she sends her grandson in her stead. When Jacob arrives, he feels very unsure about his surroundings. He is prone to depression and suicidal thoughts, and being in Amsterdam has exacerbated these feelings. Jacob feels a strong connection to Anne Frank, even going so far as to say that he is in love with her, but when he visits her home, his negative feelings intensify. He has a strange encounter with a beautiful man - whom he initially thinks is a woman - before being mugged. Stranded in the city, Jacob has no choice but to stay with Daan, the son of the couple he had initially come to meet. Under Daan's guidance, Jacob thrives in the city, and a whole new world of experiences is opened up to him: he visits art museums, explores his family history, and engages in multiple romantic relationships. At the core of Jacob's travels, however, is visiting the woman who cared for his injured grandfather during the war. This woman, Geertrui, who is Daan's grandmother, is dying. She has scheduled a medical-assisted suicide and wants to tell her story to Jacob before she does.

In Geertrui's chapter's, the reader hears the story of World War Two through her teenaged perspective. She first met the British soldier Jacob Todd when he parachuted into her village to push back the German occupation. When he returned to her home a few weeks later, terribly injured, Geertrui hid him in her cellar and helped nurse him back to health. When their living situation becomes too dangerous, Geertrui and Jacob move into the home of Dirk Wesseling, Geertrui's fiancé. The German soldiers come very close to discovering the truth about Jacob - which would have put everyone in grave danger - but they manage to keep the hidden soldier safe. Over time, Geertrui and Jacob fall in love. When Dirk abandons the house to return to the army, Geertrui and Jacob's relationship becomes physical. Soon after Jacob is well enough to walk around, he dies from a massive heart attack, devastating Geertrui. A few months later, she discovers that she is pregnant with Jacob's child. Taking pity on her and with a heart still full of love, Dirk asks Geertrui to marry him, so long as she never tells anyone the truth about the child. Geertrui agrees.

The two stories merge when, on her death bed, Geertrui admits that her daughter, Daan's mother, was fathered by Jacob Todd, whose grandson and namesake has come to visit. The news shocks the entire family, but eventually brings them together as they prepare for Geertrui's death. The story ends with the younger Jacob Todd preparing to return to America. He struggles with weight of this new truth, wondering if he should tell his beloved grandmother, Sarah, what he has learned. As he departs, Jacob reevaluates what it means to love and what it means to be brave.



# Chapter One (Jacob)

## Chapter One (Jacob) Summary

Seventeen-year-old backpacker Jacob Todd has just arrived in Amsterdam. He feels lonely and confused, not knowing anyone in the city and not being able to speak the language. He sits down at a café to watch a trio of street musicians, including an attractive teenage-girl who beats the bongos. He feels himself starting to become aroused as he watches her play, and is startled out of his reverie when another teenage girl, even more beautiful than the bongo player, sits down at his table and strikes up a conversation. Jacob is struck by how beautiful he finds the girl even though she looks like a boy. Even her voice is low like a boy's, but Jacob is aroused and enjoys having someone to flirt with. The two teenagers share a few beers and a very flirtatious conversation. The girl, Ton, helps Jacob read his map and figure out where he is in the city, their legs brushing against each other under the table. Their sexual chemistry is undeniable. Suddenly, Ton stands and says she has to go. Jacob begs for her phone number so he can see her again, but Ton is standoffish, saying Jacob would regret it. Before she leaves, Ton grabs Jacob's hand and shoves it to her crotch. He is shocked to feel an erect penis there. Ton is not a girl at all, but a boy. When Ton is gone, Jacob realizes that s/he left behind a box of matches with a pink condom inside. On the condom, Ton had written, "Be ready. Niets in Amsterdam is wat het lijkt" (p. 12). While Jacob is still reeling from his discovery about Ton, a mugger steals his backpack, including all his travel documents and money. Jacob chases him down the street, but is unable to catch the thief.

## Chapter One (Jacob) Analysis

It is Jacob's second day in Amsterdam and he is feeling very depressed. He has come to the city at his grandmother's request, to visit the grave of his grandfather. He had been staying with his grandmother's friends, but Jacob felt as if he was inconveniencing the couple. They send him to Amsterdam for the day - perhaps to get him out of the way - and his depression intensifies: he knows no one and cannot speak to the language. To top things off, Jacob has just visited the Anne Frank house, a tourist destination he was most looking forward to exploring, and has had a horrific experience there. He doesn't go into detail, but the reader can safely assume that this event will be revealed in full later in the novel.

Also in this section, Jacob meets Ton, an attractive gay man whom Jacob initially mistakes for a woman. He hands Jacob a note that reads "Nothing in Amsterdam is as it seems," which is a fitting message for his character. This message, that nothing is what it seems, is at the heart of the entire novel as Jacob explores his family history to discover secrets that have been hidden for generations.



# Chapter Two (Geertrui)

## Chapter Two (Geertrui) Summary

Nineteen-year-old Geertrui is the second protagonist of the novel, but her narration takes place in 1944, during the final months of the Second World War. On the morning of Sunday, September 17, 1944, Geertrui wakes to see parachutes falling from the sky like confetti. She knows the allied soldiers are arriving and that they will push the Germans out of the city. It is liberation, and the city is ecstatic. Geertrui and her father had spent the last four years listening to English radio, practicing their new language. Outside the window that morning, Geertrui hears an English soldier say that he is thirsty. Despite the fact that there is still fighting on the streets, she rushes to draw a pitcher of water. She throws open the front door and hands over the water. There are three British soldiers outside who regard Geertrui with affection. She is immediately enamored with one, who introduces himself as Jacob Todd, for his beautiful, blue eyes. When the soldiers move on, Geertrui realizes she had been too shell-shocked to utter a single word.

For days, soldiers continue filling the city, but the villagers have become less optimistic. Fighting rages on, and it appears that the Germans have a strong foothold. Wounded British soldiers swamp the streets, including a gravely injured man who bangs on Geertrui's front door begging for medical attention. Geertrui and her mother do their best to patch the poor man up, but it is clear that he needs medical attention immediately. Bravely, Geertrui and her father bundle the man into a wheelbarrow and push him, through the fighting, to the nearest hospital. Despite their efforts, the man dies. As they rush back across the city, Geertrui is terrified to see the German soldiers approaching the city, killing all the allied soldiers in their path. Back home, her family hides out in their cellar with a handful of British soldiers. When they emerge a few days later, their house has been nearly destroyed by the bombings, but they are alive.

## Chapter Two (Geertrui) Analysis

This section introduces the major action of the novel: World War Two. The novel is set during the final months of the war, when German forces occupied much of the European territories, including many small villages in the Netherlands. The Allied forces, including England, sent many soldiers to push back against the occupation. They parachuted into the villages in surprise attacks, and the villagers rejoiced in what they believed would be a swift victory over the Germans. Like Geertrui, many villages prepared for this day by learning English - so they could thank the Brits in their own language and welcomed the soldiers with open arms. Immediately, Geertrui is enamored with one particular soldier, Jacob Todd, for his piercing blue eyes. Despite the initial celebration when the Allied soldier arrived, there are not enough of them and the Germans maintain their hold over the villages. Being nineteen-years-old, for the first time in her life, Geertrui feels empowered to help in the warfront. She risks her life to bring an English soldier to the



hospital on the other side of town, but it is too late: the soldier dies. Later in the novel, this soldier's letters will be read aloud at a ceremony honoring the men who gave up their lives in Oosterbeek.



# Chapters Three & Four (Jacob)

## Chapters Three & Four (Jacob) Summary

Jacob is beginning to hate Amsterdam. He feels very confused, disoriented, and disappointed. He had been most looking forward to visiting Anne Frank's house, but he left after an undisclosed event left him feeling emotional and embarrassed. Before he left on this journey, his father called Jacob a "congenital wimp" and now, Jacob is starting to believe it. The rain begins to pour in Amsterdam and Jacob begins to feel suicidal. The only person who was ever able to pull him out of his suicidal depressions was his grandmother, but she's not here now. She calls these moods Jacob's "mouse moods" because he takes all his fear and turns it internal, like a shivering, terrified mouse they once found in the floorboards of her house. Jacob tried to free that mouse, but he accidentally killed it. In a way, he has never forgiven himself for that death. He now has a reoccurring nightmare of beating a man-sized mouse, over and over. In the moments before the mouse dies, Jacob realizes it is not a mouse at all but a small boy: himself.

The rain turns to a downpour and a kindly old woman pulls Jacob into the dry. He asks if he can help her find the family he is meant to be staying with in Amsterdam - the address was written down in the stolen backpack - and after she is unable to reach the family, the woman, Alma, offers to take Jacob out for coffee to warm him up. Jacob explains that he is in Amsterdam to find the family that cared for his grandfather, also named Jacob Todd, when he was injured during the Second World War. They talk about many things, including the story of Anne Frank, which Jacob finds particularly moving. In fact, he thinks he has fallen in love with Anne, despite the fact that she only exists as words on a page. Before she drops Jacob off at the train station, with money for his fare, she gives him a note: *Waae Een Wil Is Is Een Weg* (p. 45).

## Chapters Three & Four (Jacob) Analysis

This section introduces one of the key elements of Jacob's character: his "mouse moods." Jacob is prone to depression and suicidal thought. It is clear that there is something dark lurking in his history that brings these emotions on, but he never discusses it in the novel. It is interesting to note the strong connection Jacob feels with Anne Frank. Anne Frank, the Jewish girl made famous for her diary, which was discovered after she spent years in hiding from the Nazis and was eventually killed in a concentration camp. All across the world, Anne Frank is a symbol of hope. Despite her horrific living conditions, she was a beacon of light, choosing to find beauty in her everyday life, and searching for love over hate. Anne lived a life full of depression but was never depressed. Jacob admires this characteristic so much, that he feels he has fallen in love with Anne. He has never told this to anyone, fearing that he would be mocked, but reveals this secret to Alma, the kindly Dutch woman he meets on the streets during the rainstorm. Alma does not mock Jacob; she does not even judge him,



which gives Jacob a newfound feeling of confidence. This should also signal to the reader that Jacob is beginning to open up, to trust other people. It can be safely assumed that through the course of Jacob's journey, he will discover much about himself, and how to share that with others.



## Chapter Five (Geertrui)

### Chapter Five (Geertrui) Summary

It was a Wednesday afternoon when Jacob, the soldier with the beautiful blue eyes, is returned to Geertrui and her family. He is unconscious and so caked with mud that Geertrui doesn't recognize him. At the medic's orders, Geertrui and her mother spend the next two hours carefully sponging his body with warm water, to clean his wounds while preventing further damage from the shrapnel still embedded in his skin. They remove all his clothing, and Geertrui is embarrassed to see a naked penis for the first time. Another soldier is brought to the family at the same time: Sam, a shell-shocked teenager who does little but stare in silence at the wall. Unexpectedly, he breaks into poetry one day. For the first time since arriving to Geertrui's home, Jacob wakes from his coma. A few days later, the soldiers all receive word to leave their hiding place, to try to meet up with the main army across river. Those who are unable to walk are ordered to give themselves up as prisoners-of-war when the German army returns to the village. For the first time in a long time, Geertrui is terrified. Jacob is belligerent, insisting that he can walk even though it is obvious that his wounds prevent it. When his sergeant tells him his orders, to stay behind, Jacob asks to be taken upstairs for the invasion. He would rather be killed defending this home than taken as a prisoner-of-war.

### Chapter Five (Geertrui) Analysis

The relationship between Geertrui and Jacob expands when he is returned to her home as an injured soldier. Their relationship immediately becomes intimate when Geertrui is forced to strip him naked to clean him. Until this point, Geertrui had never seen a naked man, and the sign of his genitals unnerved her. To save his life, Geertrui must face her emotions: fear and embarrassment, to nurse him back to health. As the chapter progresses, the reader sees Geertrui's fierce protection over Jacob. Many readers may see that Geertrui has fallen in love with Jacob, even if she has not yet admitted this to herself. The theme of courage is explored when Jacob admits that he would rather be killed in action, which would be considered a heroic death, but instead face the humiliation of becoming a prisoner-of-war.



## Chapter Six (Jacob)

### Chapter Six (Jacob) Summary

Jacob meets up with Daan van Riet, the son of the family he initially stayed with while visiting Amsterdam. He has heard that bringing flowers is common courtesy when visiting someone's home in the Netherlands, so he stops and purchases a single sunflower with the money Alma gave to him. Daan lives in a stunning apartment, which he says truly belongs to his grandmother, Geertrui. Geertrui is in the hospital. The two young men share a quick meal and reminisce about the time Daan and his parents visited Jacob and his parents many years ago. Daan remembers the visit fondly, but Jacob has no recollection of it. Although Daan is friendly, Jacob still feels like he is hiding something, and that Jacob is inconveniencing him. He was supposed to be staying with Daan's parents, but after the mugging, Daan's apartment was much closer. Daan tells Jacob that Geertrui has an incurable illness, but that he can't tell Jacob anymore about it, at least not yet. Jacob is confused and frustrated: why won't anyone tell him what is going on? Later, Daan translates Alma's letter for Jacob. It says, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

### Chapter Six (Jacob) Analysis

This short chapter suggests that if Jacob wants to make great gains during his time in Amsterdam, he will have to give something. In order to explore himself, he will have to make himself vulnerable. This is unnerving to Jacob, who is painfully shy and awkward in social situations.

Daan and Jacob share an easy bond, although Jacob fears that Daan is hiding something from him. Jacob fears that he is inconveniencing Daan and that it would be best for everyone if he caught the next flight home. When Jacob came to Amsterdam, it was intended that he would stay with Daan's parents, but when Jacob was mugged, he lost their address. Daan's phone number was the only number he could find in the telephone book, which is how he found himself staying here. Daan reveals to the reader that Geertrui, the nineteen-year-old protagonist of the previous chapter, is his grandmother. She is dying, which explains why she so urgently wanted Sarah, Jacob's grandmother, to visit.



## Chapter Seven (Geertrui)

### Chapter Seven (Geertrui) Summary

Late in the afternoon on the day the British soldiers receive their orders, Geertrui's brother, Henk, and her fiancé, Dirk, show up. Geertrui's parents are beside themselves with happiness: they had thought both boys to be dead. The soldiers are also pleased for the family they have come to love, but it is clear that there is sadness in their eyes as well: they wish they were having the same reunion with their own families. Henk and Dirk have decided that Geertrui should come with them back to the countryside, to be safe from the German soldiers when they arrive. They fear that the Germans will punish anyone who helped aid or abet the British soldiers, and they have been known to act violently against young women. Geertrui fumes as her family discusses her future without her input. Finally, she explodes, saying that she will not leave Jacob. She has nursed him for weeks now and she won't abandon him to die at the hands of the British soldiers. She will stay and defend the house with him. Her family is flabbergasted. Dirk, especially, does not understand Geertrui's devotion to the injured soldier, but it is he who suggests that if Geertrui won't leave Jacob, then Jacob must come with them to the countryside. It will be dangerous, but if that is the only way to ensure Geertrui's safety, he will gladly risk it. They must move immediately, and the boys quickly load Jacob into the wheelbarrow they will use to push him across the village. Geertrui does not dwell saying goodbye to her parents. It will be the last time Geertrui sees her father: he dies later that year in the great starvation that follows the war.

### Chapter Seven (Geertrui) Analysis

Her relationship with Jacob has awakened something primal in Geertrui. Like a mother hen surrounding and protecting her chick, Geertrui refuses to be separated from Jacob, regardless of the consequences. Dirk, Geertrui's fiancé, agrees to help protect Jacob, which shows his kindly nature. He clearly loves Geertrui and would do anything to keep her happy, even if that means losing her to another man. This section also introduces the great starvation that followed the German occupation. With all the food and supplies going to feed the soldiers, there was little left for the farmers, and no time to tend to the next year's harvest. This horrible history will be explored in depth later in the novel, and its horrors are foreshadowed by Geertrui's acknowledgement that this starvation claimed her father. She wishes she had said a proper goodbye to him, which will be a reoccurring desire in Geertrui's story.



# Chapters Eight & Nine (Jacob)

## Chapters Eight & Nine (Jacob) Summary

Daan brings Jacob to an art museum and shows him a painting Rembrandt did of his son, Titus. Jacob and the son look exactly alike. Jacob cannot take his eyes off the painting. Titus and his father, the famous Rembrandt, had an interesting relationship. Historically, Rembrandt is remembered as selfish, somewhat neglectful father, but Daan argues things differently. When Rembrandt was forced into retirement, Titus single-handedly kept his father financially afloat by commissioning paintings from him. This painting of Titus is especially guarded because a few years back, someone kissed Titus' face, leaving a bright, red lipstick mark on the canvas.

The next day, Daan is on the phone with his mother, Tessel, for a very long time. She is upset because Geertrui has been difficult at the hospital and is insisting upon seeing Jacob. Daan knows he isn't supposed to discuss Geertrui's condition with Jacob, but Jacob is growing increasingly anxious, fearing that his presence in Amsterdam is an inconvenience for the entire family, and that he should just return home. To prevent him from leaving the city, Daan agrees to tell Jacob what is going on with Geertrui. She is dying from cancer and has arranged her own suicide with a euthanasia doctor.

## Chapters Eight & Nine (Jacob) Analysis

Geertrui is dying. In fact, now that she has arranged her own suicide, her death is imminent. Initially, she had wanted Jacob's grandmother, Sarah, to visit her in Amsterdam, but Sarah wasn't well enough so Jacob came instead. Geertrui and Sarah have remained in contact since Sarah's husband, the soldier Jacob Todd, died under Geertrui's care during the Second World War. Throughout Geertrui's retelling of her time with Jacob, it is interesting to note that she rarely acknowledges that Jacob was a married man. In fact, the reader may forget that Jacob's relationship with Geertrui was an extramarital affair. This fact is important to remember, as the guilt surrounding this affair affects many characters in the novel. When it is revealed that Geertrui has scheduled a doctor-assisted suicide, it becomes clear that Geertrui had wanted to clear her conscience with Sarah before her death. Now, if she wants to tell someone the truth, that person will have to be Jacob.

Meanwhile, Jacob is undergoing extreme introspection. He discusses his "mouse moods" with Geertrui and says that he feels guilty to be alive. Most likely, he feels guilty because the girl he loves, Anne Frank, is dead. He hasn't appreciated his life, which leads to a feeling of guilt because Anne, whose life was cut short, appreciated every minute she had, even as she lived in hiding. The meaning of love is further explored when Jacob visits the art museum with Daan. He spends a lot of time studying Rembrandt's painting of his son, Titus. Daan suggests that true love is observational love, as Rembrandt observed his son to paint him in such detail.



# Chapter Ten (Geertrui)

## Chapter Ten (Geertrui) Summary

As Geertrui, Henk, Dirk, and Jacob flee the village for the city, they accidentally meet up with an unsuspecting German soldier relieving himself in the woods. They have no choice but to kill him. It was a natural instinct, to save themselves, but they deeply regretted it. After this incident, the teenagers arrive safely at the Wesseling family farm (Dirk's family's home) and are greeted by Dirk's family. The parents are thrilled to see that their son is still alive, but angered to see that he has arrived with extra mouths to feed and a British soldier that could potentially endanger their lives.

Henk and Dirk build a hidey-hole in the hayloft where they can quickly hide if the Germans invade their home. Jacob is still too injured to hide out in the hole so he takes residence in the spare bedroom, with Geertrui acting as his on-call nurse. Mrs. Wesseling is a stern woman who is somewhat disapproving of Dirk's engagement to Geertrui. She knows that Geertrui is a city girl who will never adjust to life in the country. She is also suspicious of Geertrui's feelings for Jacob, but does not discuss this with her son. Geertrui has no intention of marrying Dirk, but she has not yet told him. She is not in love with him. She is slowly falling in love with Jacob. Each morning, the best part of Geertrui's day is when she rouses Jacob from sleep. She starts by singing a little song her mother once sang to her, and Jacob joins in singing the harmony. They sit for the next hour over breakfast discussing sweet nothings.

## Chapter Ten (Geertrui) Analysis

In this chapter, the teenagers arrive safely to the hiding spot that will become their home for the duration of the war. While it is safer for them in the countryside because there are far fewer German soldiers there, they are not safe. As the months progress, the danger will expand, particularly as starvation takes hold of the big city. Now, the farmers are able to support their families off what they glean from the land. They have the ability to milk cows, churn butter, bake bread, and harvest fields. The German soldiers know this, and, even though it is against military law, often visit farming homes with the hopes of purchasing these rare items. As the war progresses, however, soldiers, and starving city dwellers, will begin to take these items by force. Even though it is against the law for German soldiers to purchase supplies from farmers, it happens all the time, and the Wesselings fear that one of these visiting soldiers might spot Jacob. They might also wonder why Dirk and Henk are not serving the war effort and take them as prisoners-of-war.



# Chapters 11 & 12 (Jacob)

## Chapters 11 & 12 (Jacob) Summary

After the shocking conversation about Geertrui's condition, Jacob and Daan leave the apartment to have a drink at the nearby bar. Daan greets many friends with the traditional kiss on each cheek, and Jacob notes that the intimacy of a relationship is expressed by how close the two kisses get to the lips. As he looks around the bar, Jacob is shocked to see Ton standing in the crowd. The two make eye contact and Ton walks toward him. Jacob is so startled he doesn't know how to respond, especially when Ton doesn't greet him, but greets Daan, his old friend, instead. Jacob can feel himself flush with embarrassment. Ton sits down with Jacob and the two easily strike up a flirtatious conversation. Ton says that he thinks the mugger had a crush on Jacob and was trying to come onto him when he stole Jacob's bag. When Jacob disagrees, Ton accuses him of being naïve. He also says that he figured out that Jacob thought he was girl, which is why he quickly left the café. When Jacob drunkenly suggests that he knows what it means to be gay, Ton sets him straight, saying, "I don't think you do. You've heard about it. You've read about it, I guess. But you don't know it" (p. 119-120).

The next morning, Jacob takes a train to meet Daan's parents and to visit Geertrui in the hospital. As soon as Jacob is in the hospital room, Geertrui does not take her eyes off him, regardless of whether or not other people are talking to her. Everyone leaves Jacob alone with Geertrui so they can get acquainted, and Jacob tells her the story of how he came to live fulltime with his Grandmother. After the age of ten, he had struggled to connect with his father, and when his mother went into the hospital, he went to live with his grandmother who had always adored him. When his mother returned from the hospital a few months later, he was so adjusted in his new life that he decided to stay. Jacob also tells Geertrui about his "mouse moods" and how he contemplates suicide when he is in them.

## Chapters 11 & 12 (Jacob) Analysis

In this section, it becomes clear to the reader that Ton and Daan are lovers, which is strange because Daan seems determined to hook Ton up with Jacob. Daan lives a freestyle life, void of consequences. He loves who he chooses to love - both men and women - but doesn't form relationships. It is unclear why Chambers has chosen to create such an ambiguous character, and why Daan is so determined to lure Jacob into his lifestyle. Meanwhile, Jacob visits Geertrui again and tells her about his grandmother, Sarah. He explains that Sarah has loved Jacob since the day he left for the war. When he died, she was devastated. She never remarried, and she idolizes the man Jacob was. Nothing he has ever said or done has tarnished her memory of him. For the reader, this may be hard to hear. Geertrui had a long affair with Jacob, which Sarah never knew about. When Jacob learns the truth, he will struggle with his conscience: should he tell Sarah what he knows?





## Chapter 13 (Geertrui)

### Chapter 13 (Geertrui) Summary

One terrible morning, Dirk breaks Geertrui's lovely morning ritual by shouting that the Germans are coming. Mr. Wesseling runs out to stall the soldiers from entering the house, Dirk and Henk rush out to their hidey-hole, and Geertrui struggles to hide Jacob. When she realizes that Jacob is still too ill to walk and cannot, therefore, make it to the hidey-hole, she and Mrs. Wesseling are forced to come up with another plan. When they hear the Germans in the house, Mrs. Wesseling shoves Geertrui into Jacob's bed and tells her to lie on top of him, hiding him under her body. Geertrui is to act as if she is sick - and contagious - in the hopes that the soldiers will not investigate her bed more closely. When the soldiers enter her room, they are clearly distressed at the sight of her and do not probe beneath her blankets. When they are gone, Geertrui is still frozen with fear, but she begins to notice Jacob's body below her. She feels the way their bodies have molded together, notices the warmth in his skin and the bulge at his groin. Even in the silence of the house, nothing else occurs between them. Geertrui simply lies atop Jacob and feels his every breath.

After that terrible day, the Wesselings decide that it is no longer safe for Jacob to stay in the spare bedroom. He must be moved to the hidey-hole so that if the soldiers are to return, he will already be hidden. From now on, Henk and Dirk will nurse him. Geertrui is devastated. She knows it is for the best, but she misses Jacob terribly. She begins to realize, now, that she is falling in love with him. Geertrui sulks for three weeks as Jacob bonds with the boys in the barn. She wonders if he even misses her. The family is raided again. When the raiders demand food and drink, the Wesselings oblige. Dirk and Henk realize that the soldiers will continue to return with demands. It is no longer safe to hide there. Rather than tell anyone of their plan, Dirk and Henk slip out in the middle of the night leaving notes apologizing for not saying goodbye. They have been too long idle during war and have left to rejoin the resistance. Geertrui never sees Henk again.

### Chapter 13 (Geertrui) Analysis

In this section, Geertrui and Jacob first realize their sexual attraction to each other. They obviously felt a strong connection over the past few weeks, but social expectation and morality prevented them from acting on their attraction. Jacob was a married man, after all, and Geertrui was a respectable young woman. The two young lovers respectfully kept their relationship platonic. Through the narration, the reader knows that Geertrui was falling in love with Jacob, but until this moment in the bed, it's as if she didn't know she could do anything about it. When she lies on Jacob's body, however, they can no longer deny their sexual attraction. Their reaction is interesting, particularly because in modern times, young couples would immediately give into their desire and sleep together. Jacob and Geertrui simply lie in bed and feel each other breathe. This moment, this connection, is all Geertrui has to cling to after the Wesselings decide that





it is no longer safe to house Jacob in the spare bedroom. It is possible that Jacob's relationship with Geertrui might have accelerated had they still been alone in the bedroom together, but now, they are under the constantly watchful eye of her brother and fiancé. A few days later, Dirk and Henk feel hopeless in the hidey-hole. They are young men taught to fight, and they feel like cowards hiding in the hayloft. They leave, giving Geertrui opportunity once again to be alone with Jacob. The reader can safely assume that their relationship will quickly escalate.



# Chapter Fourteen (Jacob)

## Chapter Fourteen (Jacob) Summary

The day after visiting Geertrui in the hospital, Jacob attends a ceremony at the cemetery where his grandfather is buried, to honor the British soldiers that parachuted into Oosterbeek to battle the German soldiers there. Tessel and Jacob share pleasant conversation for the train ride over, during which time Jacob admits that he wishes his grandfather had kept a journal during the time he was at war. That way, Jacob could truly understand what his grandfather went through. As it is now, his grandfather is just a figure to him, not a real man. When they arrive at the war cemetery, Jacob is astounded by how many people are there. Tessel leads him to his grandfather's grave and Jacob is overwhelmed to see his own name - the same name as his grandfather - on the tombstone. There is a teenage boy and girl leaving flowers on the grave, and Jacob stops to talk with them. This brother and sister have been laying flowers on Jacob Todd's grave ever since they were small children. The siblings give Jacob a tour of the cemetery, telling him everything they know about the battle. Hille, the sister, mentions that Anne Frank's diary is her favorite book, which stops Jacob in his tracks. He immediately feels a strong connection to Hille and knows that he can trust her. Hille tells him that there is a longer version of Anne Frank's diary - the version that Anne Frank's father didn't edit - available for viewing at a library in Amsterdam. The two have coffee after the ceremony and discuss their future plans.

## Chapter Fourteen (Jacob) Analysis

In this section, Jacob visits a ceremony honoring the men who parachuted into Oosterbeek. Even though Jacob has studied the war in school, and certainly through Anne Frank's diary, he feels disconnected to his grandfather and wishes there was a more personal account of his wartime experiences. Keen readers may have already suspected that in Geertrui's chapters, she is doing exactly that: documenting her history with Jacob so it can be passed on through the generations. This section is littered with letters from soldiers present during the invasion including Geordie, the soldiers Geertrui and her family initially tried to save that are read aloud during the ceremony. These letters are interesting because they give another level of experience to history, and they add depth to characters of the men who died defending a nation that wasn't their own.



# Chapter Fifteen (Geertrui)

## Chapter Fifteen (Geertrui) Summary

After Dirk leaves, Mrs. Wesseling stays in her room for days. She is nearly deranged with grief. She is overwhelmed with guilt, feeling that she should have turned Geertrui and Henk away when they first arrived, or that she should have let the Germans capture Jacob rather than endangering her family to hide him. With Mrs. Wesseling mourning in her bedroom, and Mr. Wesseling forced to single-handedly manage the work of the farm, Geertrui is free to spend her time nursing Jacob in the hidey-hole. Geertrui fully depends on Jacob for emotional support as she grieves the loss of her brother. Initially, she hoped he would return in a few days, but days stretched into weeks and it became painfully clear that the boys were not coming back. As they talk, Geertrui and Jacob bond. They become friends, then affectionate friends. It starts with holding hand, or with Jacob rubbing Geertrui's back while she weeps. They hug and stare into each other's eyes. Over these weeks, it became clear that the two were in love with each other, yet they did not even kiss. They maintained a respectful distance.

Geertrui is so unsettled by the awakening love inside her, that she finds herself unable to nurse Jacob any longer. When it becomes clear that Jacob cannot safely change his own bandages, she is forced back into the hidey-hole. She avoids looking at Jacob's eyes, and feels herself blush at his gaze. When they finally lock eyes, they can contain themselves no longer and kiss. Later that night, Geertrui bathes, changes her clothes, brushes her hair, and prepares to sleep with Jacob that night. It is a deliberate, pre-meditated preparation. That night, she walks eagerly to the hidey-hole and gives herself to Jacob.

## Chapter Fifteen (Geertrui) Analysis

Geertrui is shocked to see Mrs. Wesseling's decline after Dirk abandons the family. Her torment is painful to behold, as Geertrui watches a strong woman fall apart in the face of tragedy. In a way, Geertrui vows that in the face of tragedy, she will not fall apart as she has witnessed Mrs. Wesseling do. The grief a mother feels when she loses her child humanizes Mrs. Wesseling, and for the first time, the reader may feel some sympathy for her. Mrs. Wesseling's only consolation is playing the harmonium in her bedroom. She played this instrument as a child, and now, it seems as if Mrs. Wesseling is reverting to her childhood as a way of escaping the pain of her adult life.

As Mrs. Wesseling loses control of her emotions, Geertrui gains complete control over hers. She makes the decision to sleep with Jacob, and it is clear that she has thought her decision through very carefully. She doesn't rush into her decision, but takes her time preparing herself - both physically and emotionally - for this huge step. She admits that she doesn't think about Jacob's wife. In the middle of this war, Jacob is hers, and after caring for him, Geertrui feels entitled to his love. In a way, Jacob is the only person



Geertrui has left in her life. Her parents are gone (her father is dead), and her brother has abandoned her. She clings to Jacob not only because she is attracted to him, but so she can feel connected, loved, and part of a family.



# Chapter Sixteen (Jacob)

## Chapter Sixteen (Jacob) Summary

Hille and Jacob sit down for a pancake after the ceremony at the cemetery. They discuss a bit of the city's history in the war, including many details revealed in Geertrui's chapters, such as the hotel turned into a makeshift hospital. During the conversation, Hille places her hand palm-side up in the middle of the table, urging Jacob to reach across and hold her hand. The sparks are immediate, and they quickly leave the restaurant to kiss in the street. They talk about Anne Frank and her desire to be kissed, which prompts them to kiss even more. They spend the rest of the afternoon discussing Anne's famous diary, and making-out at various landmarks in Amsterdam. When they stop long enough to take a breath, they discuss euthanasia, particularly Geertrui's upcoming death. Hille believes euthanasia is a human right. Her own grandmother scheduled her medically assisted suicide a few years ago, saying, "My opinion is that we should be allowed to die ...with dignity" (p. 215). The trouble with death, she says, is that living family members are always left with doubt: should I have done more? Could I have stopped it? With euthanasia, everyone has time to prepare, but those emotions never disappear. After this, they walk to the train station and part ways.

## Chapter Sixteen (Jacob) Analysis

As is the case with many of Jacob's chapters, Chambers artificially adds philosophical arguments into the character's conversations. For many readers, these discussions seem affected, as if they have been wrenched into the text by the author. In this chapter, Jacob and Hille have a long discussion about euthanasia, tackling one of the main themes of the novel. Although Chambers weakly attempts to showcase both sides of the argument, his novel clearly supports euthanasia, and it is through the vehicle of this story that he shares his message. This entire chapter is a philosophical conversation, without much plot. The theme of dying with dignity is interesting, particularly when partnered with the constant discussion of Anne Frank. Anne Frank, and the rest of the Jews killed in the concentration camps of the Second World War, died without their dignity, so it is interesting to hear the arguments made about euthanasia: that death with dignity is a human right. Throughout his teenaged life, Jacob has felt guilty that he is alive while vibrant spirits like Anne Frank are dead. His guilt is so extreme that they prompt suicidal "mouse moods." There is no doubt that Geertrui's death will also have a profound impact on him, although it is unclear whether he will react positively or negatively.



# Chapter Seventeen (Geertrui)

## Chapter Seventeen (Geertrui) Summary

In the days that follow, Geertrui swims in love with Jacob. After ten days confined her room, Mrs. Wesseling emerges as if nothing has happened, but she has lost her criticism toward Geertrui. She goes about her daily activities, but it is like a pre-programmed robot, not a woman with passion in her life. Geertrui still spends her time with Jacob and does not care if they are discovered. The Winter of Hunger stretches on, and thousands of starving people make their way to the countryside each week begging for food. One afternoon, while Geertrui is hanging laundry in the sun, Jacob walks from the hidey-hole and embraces her in the open. The two laugh and kiss, enamored by the danger of their love. Suddenly, Jacob staggers and falls over. Moments later, he is dead from a massive heart attack. Geertrui and the Wesseling's are stunned. They have no choice but to bury him in the backyard until the war is over and it will be safe to move his body back to England. Geertrui steels herself for the pain ahead. She does not let anyone else touch Jacob's body as she prepares it. She lights candles and keeps a vigil through the night, ensuring that his body is never left alone. The next morning, Mr. Wesseling digs a grave and a modest casket. There is no ceremony; it would be too dangerous. Later that night, Geertrui creeps back out to the grave and reads poetry from Sam's journal, weeping.

## Chapter Seventeen (Geertrui) Analysis

The turning point in Geertrui's life finally arrives. Throughout the entire novel, the reader has known that Jacob dies in the Netherlands, but no one was prepared for him to die this way. Because Geertrui has only had a few weeks of love with Jacob, the pair never experienced any trouble. They never had to admit the secret of their affair to anyone. For all intensive purposes, they loved without consequence. Since Jacob died, Geertrui has been free to live the rest of her life idolizing their time: it was perfect for those few weeks, so she assumes it would have been perfect for the rest of their lives. In this way, Geertrui is similar to Sarah, the wife Jacob left back home, because neither woman experienced the tension of a long-term relationship.



# Chapter Eighteen (Jacob)

## Chapter Eighteen (Jacob) Summary

Jacob wakes in the morning with a spring in his step, obviously pleased about his new relationship with Hille. Ton calls and invites Jacob out for the day, and surprisingly, Jacob accepts. The two spend the afternoon on a boat, exploring the city of Amsterdam from the river. While they are out, Ton tells Jacob the story of coming out to his family. His mother accepted him, but his father kicked him out of the house. Now, he pays Ton to stay away from the family, and Ton visits with his mother once a month. As they are passing down the river, Jacob begins to recognize landmarks from his first few days in the city, including the street where Alma lives. He and Ton stop at a chocolate shop to buy a thank-you gift for Alma.

## Chapter Eighteen (Jacob) Analysis

Ton's coming-out story touches on the theme of love. It is clear that through Ton's character, Chambers is arguing that people should be able to love whomever they choose, men, women, single, or married. Love, he argues, is what holds society together. When we begin putting constraints and rules on that love, society weakens as relationships fall apart and fights brew. When Ton came out to his parents, he devastated their family: his parents fought, his father disowned him, and now, he only sees his mother once a month. And why? Simply because Ton admitted that he loved men, not women. To Chambers, this notion is ridiculous and through many relationships in this novel, he argues that love is never negative. If two adults are willing participants in a relationship, their love can only be seen as positive, regardless of the outcome.



# Chapter Nineteen (Geertrui)

## Chapter Nineteen (Geertrui) Summary

Two months after Jacob's death, Geertrui knows for certain that she is pregnant with his child. At the time, it was one of the worst sins for an unmarried woman to fall pregnant, but Geertrui is overjoyed. She does not care what punishment comes her way, or the way of the child, she has a piece of Jacob that will live on after his death. Soon after, Dirk returns home. There is a joyous celebration. He asks to speak with Geertrui privately, and proposes marriage once again. Geertrui can hold nothing back from her old friend. She tells Dirk about her relationship with Jacob and her pregnancy. Dirk does not waiver. He wants to marry Geertrui, to protect her from an unmarried life. He will raise this baby as his own so long as Geertrui respects him, and does not tell anyone, including the child, the truth. Geertrui is overwhelmed with affection for Dirk and accepts his offer, so long as he does not ask to sleep with her until after the baby is born, and they never sleep together in the hidey-hole. Dirk agrees. The next night, they break apart the hidey-hole so Geertrui can finally say goodbye to her life with Jacob and start afresh with Dirk. Geertrui keeps nothing of Jacob's, save for the insignia from his parachute, when he first entered her life, and the talisman he built for her out of tin. Now, she is giving those items to her grandson, Jacob.

## Chapter Nineteen (Geertrui) Analysis

Now, the reader knows the truth about the thread tying Jacob's story to Geertrui's. Tessel, Geertrui's daughter, was fathered by Jacob Todd. Tessel's parentage was kept a secret from everyone, including her, until Dirk died two years ago. From the moment Geertrui agreed to marry Dirk, she has put aside her love for Jacob. The reader is reminded of Geertrui's methodical mind, the way she never makes an emotional decision. Some readers might feel like Geertrui has betrayed Jacob in abandoning his memory, but she had no other option at the time. She would have lived a life of misery, without social support. Dirk's proposal was a true act of love, to protect Geertrui, and the unborn child, from a tough existence. Just as Geertrui never stopped loving Jacob, Dirk never stopped loving Geertrui.





## Chapters 20 & 21 (Jacob)

### Chapters 20 & 21 (Jacob) Summary

Jacob visits Geertrui at the hospital and is given her handwritten memoirs. Jacob goes back to Daan's apartment and reads the memoirs in their entirety. Immediately, he is struck with guilt. Now that he knows the truth about his family history, he feels he has no choice but to tell Sarah, who idolizes her dead husband. Jacob knows it will devastate her. The guilt he feels over this knowledge is so overwhelming, he feels one of his "mouse moods" coming on. To keep Jacob's mind off the depression, Daan invites Ton over for dinner. The three discuss the Titus painting Jacob saw earlier in the week. Later, Daan discusses love and marriage, saying that he loves both Simone (his girlfriend) and Ton, but has no desire to marry either of them. Feeling emboldened by all Daan is sharing, Jacob announces that he would like to be present for Geertrui's death in a few days. Daan refuses, and when Jacob argues that Geertrui is his grandmother as much as she is Daan's, Daan is so furious he throws a chair and storms out of the house. Ton takes Jacob for a walk to cool him down, and explains that Daan is jealous of him. Daan has dedicated much of his life, and much of his recent time, to Geertrui and her story. He saw the way Geertrui immediately bonded with Jacob, whom she had met only a few days previously, and it made Daan jealous. Ton kisses Jacob and says that once things have settled, in a few months maybe, he would like to see Jacob again.

### Chapters 20 & 21 (Jacob) Analysis

All the chapters written from Geertrui's perspective were actually her letters to Jacob (her grandson), although the reader didn't know it. These chapters are the diary Jacob wished his grandfather had written during his wartime service. Geertrui says that all humans have a need to confess, and her story is the perfect example of that. Humans have a need to connect with each other, even if they are connecting over something terrible. Geertrui knows that she is dying and that her family deserves to know the truth. Some might say that Geertrui's confession is cowardly since she tells the truth when she has only a few days to live and does not have to deal with the consequences. Others might argue that it is better late than never. Jacob is not so sure. He feels an overwhelming weight and responsibility with the knowledge: should he tell Sarah the truth? Compounding his feelings of confusion, he and Ton kiss again. He is unsure whether he more attracted to Ton or Hille, yet he is learning not to regress into his "mouse moods" when feeling conflicted, which shows how his character has matured.



## Chapters 22 & 23 (Jacob)

### Chapters 22 & 23 (Jacob) Summary

The next morning, Jacob and Daan apologize for the previous night's fight. Jacob visits Geertrui one last time, to say goodbye. Tessel comes to visit Jacob and admits that she hadn't wanted her mother to share the truth with him. Even now that she knows the truth, Tessel does not think of Jacob as her father, she thinks of Dirk, the man she loved her entire life. Tessel also believes that Jacob should keep the truth from Sarah. Later that afternoon, Jacob visits Alma one final time, and Alma suggests that Sarah may already know the truth. They also discuss Jacob's initial visit to Anne Frank's house. He felt so unsettled because he realizes for the first time, that Anne was not his alone. The house was packed with people who all felt a connection to Anne's diary. This was difficult because Jacob felt such an extremely intimate relationship with Anne.

The next day, Jacob spends the afternoon saying goodbye to Hille. Hille tells him about Reconciliation Day, the day in the Netherlands when mothers of children fathered by soldiers in the Second World War told their children the truth of their parentage. The two teenagers discuss their relationship, and Hille says that she doesn't feel comfortable with a long-distance relationship. Still, she wants to confirm their love by sleeping with Jacob.

### Chapters 22 & 23 (Jacob) Analysis

A parallel is drawn between Jacob's relationship with Anne Frank and Sarah's relationship with Jacob. The truth of both relationships - that the beloved is not theirs alone - is realized through the written words of a diary. Based on Jacob's negative reaction to this realization, it seems clear to him that Sarah would have the same reaction were she to find out the truth about her husband. And with Sarah being so old, Jacob fears that his dear grandmother will never recover from the shock. He also fears that outing the truth will devalue Sarah's entire life, which was spent in mourning for the man she assumed died loving her alone. When he discusses this possibility with Alma, however, Alma suggests that Sarah may already know the truth. She waited until Jacob was "old enough to understand" before she sent him to Amsterdam. Before he arrived, Jacob assumed she meant "old enough to understand" how his grandfather died in battle, but now he wonders if she meant "old enough to understand" why she has remained dedicated to her husband. Reconciliation Day promotes the idea that truth is better than lies, regardless of who gets hurt. It is another seemingly selfish act - similar to loving whomever your heart desires - that favors honesty over worry and action over consequence. This theme is reiterated once again in the closing, when Jacob sleeps with Hille. They have already decided not to pursue a relationship, but they sleep together to validate the connection they feel. There are many questions of morality raised in this novel, from promiscuity to adultery and euthanasia. Chambers'

views on these topics are pedantically clear, but it is up to the reader to make up their own minds about the issues.



# Characters

## Jacob Todd (the younger)

Jacob Todd is the seventeen-year-old protagonist of the novel. When he first arrives in Amsterdam at his grandmother's wishes, he feels extremely out of place, and if he is inconveniencing the family he is staying with. The week that he spends in the Netherlands completely changes his life, for the better. In America, Jacob had struggled with depression, known as "mouse moods," and he had even considered killing himself. At the urging of his grandmother, he went to Amsterdam to visit his grandfather's grave and to meet the old woman who had cared for him when he was injured during the war. In Amsterdam, Jacob learns the truth about his family: his grandfather fathered a child with a Dutch woman that he fell in love with. The family Jacob is staying with is actually his relatives. Jacob goes through many identity crises during his week stay. After feeling attracted to both a man and a woman, Jacob questions his sexuality, but the most important struggle he faces is his personal definition of bravery. When he learns the truth about his grandfather, Jacob must decide whether or not he wants to share the truth with his grandmother, who has remained dutifully dedicated to her dead husband for the past fifty years. Jacob learns to rely on those closest to him, to trust the opinions of others, and the true meaning of family. In a way, this novel is a coming-of-age story about Jacob's emotional growth into adulthood.

## Geertrui

Geertrui is the nineteen-year-old protagonist of the novel. She lives with her family in Amsterdam during the final months of the Second World War. At the opening of the novel, Geertrui witnesses the English army parachuting into her village to push out the German occupation. She meets a handsome young soldier named Jacob Todd and is immediately taken with him. A few weeks later, Jacob Todd returns to her home, terribly injured. She hides Jacob in her cellar and nurses him back to health. When it becomes clear that the German army will not be pushed out of their stronghold, Geertrui takes Jacob to another hiding spot, at a family friend's home. There, their relationship becomes physical, despite the fact that Jacob is a married man. Geertrui and Jacob fall desperately in love, but it is not meant to be. Jacob dies and a few days later, Geertrui realizes she is pregnant with his child. She spends the rest of her life hiding the truth from her daughter, until she is a very old woman. When Geertrui is on her deathbed, she invites Jacob's American wife to visit her in Amsterdam, with the intention of telling her the truth. That woman, Sarah, is too ill to visit but sends her grandson, Jacob Todd (the younger), in her stead. Geertrui tells Jacob the truth about his grandfather as a way of cleansing her soul before death, and to ensure that the truth is recorded, no matter how painful it may be.



## Ton

Ton is the young man Jacob meets on his first day in Amsterdam, before he is mugged. Jacob is drawn to Ton as a female despite the fact that she clearly has male characteristics. Later, Jacob learns that Ton is one of his cousin Daan's lovers. Despite this, Jacob and Ton grow very close, flirting with a romantic relationship but keeping it platonic. Ton becomes a close friend and confidant to Jacob during the week he is in Amsterdam, and Jacob hopes to return to the city one day to explore his relationship with Ton.

## Geordie

Geordie is the injured soldier that Geertrui and her family first try to save when the British soldiers arrive in Amsterdam. Ignoring the war raging on their street, Geertrui and her father bundle the injured man in a wheelbarrow and push him to the nearest hospital. Despite their best efforts, the man dies. Later in the novel, Geordie's letters describing the parachute into Oosterbeek are read at the war cemetery.

## Alma

Alma is the kindly old woman in Amsterdam who takes Jacob out for coffee when he stuck in a downpour after his backpack is stolen. Not only does she give Jacob money for his train fare, she also helps orient him in the city. She loves to help the city's homeless teenagers, and urges them all to never give up. She is the first person Jacob tells about his love for Anne Frank.

## Sam

Sam is the shell-shocked soldier that arrives at the same time as Jacob, to Geertrui's door during the German invasion. He does little during the time he stays with Geertrui's family but stare silently at the wall. One afternoon, he unexpectedly breaks into a poem that rouses Jacob from his coma. Before Geertrui and Jacob move to the Wesseling house for safety, Sam gifts them with a book of poetry, which becomes one of Geertrui's most prized possessions.

## Henk

Henk is Geertrui's older brother and the person in her family that she shares the closest bond with. For the first few sections of the novel, the reader, along with Geertrui's family, believes that Henk is dead. In chapter seven, however, he surprises everyone by showing up at the family home, very much alive. He has come to take Geertrui to the countryside for her protection. He is also instrumental in saving the life of Jacob many times when the Germans return to invade the villages. When he and Jacob are almost



discovered hiding out in Dirk's childhood home, he decides that he must abandon his dear sister to protect her further. He leaves in the middle of the night and Geertrui never sees him again.

## **Dirk Wesseling**

Dirk Wesseling is Geertrui's fiancé when she first meets Jacob, and it is at his parents' house that the teenagers hide when the German soldiers return to their village. After Jacob's death, Dirk, who has never stopped loving Geertrui, marries Geertrui to save her from a life of humiliation and scorn. He promises to love her forever, so long as she never tells anyone the truth: that Jacob is the father of her unborn child. Geertrui agrees, and despite the fact that she does not love Dirk, lives a long, happy life with him.

## **Hille Babbe**

Hille Babbe is the young woman Jacob (the younger) meets in Amsterdam while he is visiting his grandfather's grave. Ever since she was a young girl, Hille has come to the cemetery to lay flowers on the soldier Jacob Todd's grave. She and Jacob (the younger) share a beautiful few days together, realizing that they share a strong connection despite the fact that they have just met.

## **Jacob Todd (the elder)**

Jacob Todd (the elder) is a British soldier wounded during the Second World War while on a mission in Oosterbeek. His wounds are so grave, he is unable to meet up with the main army and must hide out in a local family's cellar while his wounds heal. There, he falls in love with a teenaged Geertrui. When the war is over, he plans to leave his wife and live with Geertrui forever. Their love is not meant to be, however, and Jacob dies from a heart attack weeks before the liberation.

## **Sarah**

Sarah is the soldier Jacob Todd's wife, and the grandfather of Jacob Todd (the younger). Sarah spends her entire life dedicated to her husband, and she never remarries when he dies of war injuries during the Second World War. It is unclear whether or not Sarah knew of her husband's affair, and at the end of the novel, it is unclear whether or not her grandson will tell her the truth.



## Objects/Places

### 263 Prisengracht

263 Prisengracht is the house where Anne Frank and her family hid from the Nazis during the Second World War, and the house where she wrote her famous diary. When Jacob visits this house, he has an extreme reaction when he realizes that the memory of Anne belongs to the world, not just to him.

### Oosterbeek

Oosterbeek is the village in Amsterdam where Geertrui and her family live during the Second World War. The British soldiers flood the city and attempt to gain ground in this village to push out the German soldiers.

### Mouse Moods

Mouse Moods are the moods that Jacob gets into when he's feeling suicidal. His grandmother gave these moods this nickname after they discovered a terrified mouse hiding in their floorboards. Jacob tried to free the frightened animal, but ended up accidentally killing it. He has never forgiven himself for this.

### The Dream

The Dream is a reoccurring nightmare Jacob has in which he discovers two man-sized mice hiding under a blanket. He begins beating one of the mice that is curled up in a fetal position. Even though he knows the abuse is wrong, Jacob cannot stop himself. As the mouse's head cracks open and blood pools out, Jacob realizes it is not a mouse at all but a small boy: himself.

### Arnhem Oosterbeek War Cemetery

Arnhem Oosterbeek War Cemetery is where Jacob Todd, the soldier Geertrui fell in love with, is buried. Visiting the grave is one of the reasons why Jacob, the grandson, comes to Amsterdam. While visiting the cemetery, Jacob witnesses a ceremony honoring the soldiers that parachuted into Oosterbeek to rescue the village from German occupation. There, he meets Hille, the girl he falls in love with.



## **Bloemendaal**

Bloemendaal is the city in the Netherlands where the adult Geertrui lives. Jacob visits the city when he meets Geertrui for the first time and learns that she is his grandmother.

## **The Tedje**

The Tedje is the small boat Ton takes Jacob in to see the city of Amsterdam from the water. It is a beautiful boat, spotlessly maintained, with the crest of Amsterdam on the pendant.

## **The Harmonium**

The Harmonium is Mrs. Wesseling's only solace after her son Dirk deserts the family. She goes slightly mad when Dirk disappears, and begins playing the instrument incessantly. Geertrui believes that Mrs. Wesseling is obsessed with her instrument because it reminds her simpler times: when she was a little girl practicing her lessons, and horrors like war didn't yet exist.

## **The Talisman**

The Talisman is the gift Geertrui gives to Jacob (the younger) when she meets him for the first time. Jacob had crafted the talisman for her out of tin he found in the barn. He whittled the metal down to the shape of a long arrowhead, and cut a ring on top so it could be threaded through a necklace. He and Geertrui traded talismans instead of rings as a sign of their love.

## **Stenenhoofd / Stonehead**

Stenenhoofd / Stonehead is the old warehouse where ships used to unload at wartime. Ton takes Jacob here after his fight with Daan, as a place where he can clear his head. It is shaped like a large swimming pool, but filters straight out into the river. The next day, as Jacob contemplates his life's decisions, he considers going back to Stonehead to do his thinking.

## **Reconciliation Day**

Reconciliation Day is the day in the Netherlands when mothers that had become impregnated by visiting soldiers during the war told their children about their true parentage. Some chose to tell their children in public, while others, like Geertrui, chose to tell their children in private.





# Themes

## Home

All of the characters in *Postcards From No Man's Land* are displaced. Jacob is visiting Amsterdam for the first time and feels isolated within the new culture. The young Geertrui has been forced from her home by the war, and the elder Geertrui is living in a hospice hospital room preparing for the ultimate displacement: death. Jacob Todd is living in the Netherlands as a hidden soldier, while Daan is living in his grandmother's apartment. Before visiting the Netherlands, Jacob, too, lived with his grandmother because he never felt at home with his parents, and Ton has been kicked out of his childhood home after coming out as gay. All of the characters are searching for a sense of belonging, physically and emotionally. The reader experiences this search most in the characters of Jacob and Geertrui, the two narrators. Jacob's displacement seems to be more emotional while Geertrui's is more physical. When Jacob first arrives in Amsterdam, he not only feels lonely and isolated, he also feels as if his very presence is an inconvenience for those around him. This is mirrored in Geertrui's parallel story, when she feels like her presence in the Wesseling home is an inconvenience and a danger to the family. As the novel progresses, both characters find a way to balance their insecurities with their newfound appreciation of home. Both characters realize that home truly is where the heart is. Home is where one feels comfortable, loved, and accepted. For Geertrui, home was the hidey-hole where she lost her virginity to Jacob, and for Jacob, home became Amsterdam, the city he fell in love with - the place where he learned the truth about his past and felt accepted for who he is.

## Death

When Jacob's character is first introduced, the reader learns almost immediately that he struggles with depression. It soon becomes clear that his depression is a result of feeling misunderstood, perhaps even to himself. He feels extreme guilt that he is alive - and living a "worthless" existence - while the girl he loves, Anne Frank, is dead. Jacob's suicidal "mouse moods" are brought on by feelings of indecisiveness, fear that his indecision proves he shouldn't be allowed to live. Jacob struggles with death, or feelings that his death would be best, at the same time that Geertrui decides to end her life. While Jacob's suicidal thoughts are prompted by emotion, true to her character, Geertrui comes to her decision through methodical, premeditated thought. She never makes a decision haphazardly, and choosing medically-assisted suicide is no exception. Geertrui believes that all humans should be allowed to die with dignity. She lived through the Second World War, a time when hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Jews (like Anne Frank) were mindlessly murdered. They died without dignity, which is one of the greatest crimes against humanity imaginable. Although Chambers gives a compelling argument for euthanasia, it is still a death that leaves many suffering in its wake. It is up to the reader to decide whether they believe euthanasia is moral, and whether it should be allowed in society.



## Free Love

All of the characters in this novel love without fearing consequence. This is seen most sharply in Geertrui's relationship with Jacob Todd. When Geertrui met Jacob, he was a married man with a worried wife at home. Yet she fell in love with him, and when the reader hears of that love from Geertrui's perspective, it is unlikely that they would root for the relationship's demise. Their love is honest, pure, and on many levels, naive. When Jacob dies, Geertrui, like Sarah, is left with his perfect memory. Because Geertrui has only had a few weeks of love with Jacob, the pair never experienced any trouble. They never had to admit the secret of their affair to anyone and therefore never had to face the emotional pain and backlash. For all intensive purposes, they loved without consequence. Similarly, Daan promotes a message of free love without consequences. He has a freestyle life, loving both Simone (a woman) and Ton (a man). For Daan, he is getting everything he wants and no one is getting hurt, but the reader wonders how long he will be able to sustain this fantasy. Chambers seems to promote the message that as long as all parties are willing participants, love without consequence can go on forever. In fact, he seems to argue that this is the ideal way to live. Love, he argues, is what holds society together. When we begin putting constraints and rules on that love, society weakens as relationships fall apart and fights brew. Most readers, however, will question whether this lifestyle is sustainable. Can you truly love without consequence? Because Jacob died, Geertrui has been free to live the rest of her life idolizing their time: it was perfect for those few weeks, so she assumes it would have been perfect for the rest of their lives. In this, Geertrui is similar to Sarah, the wife Jacob left back home, because neither woman experienced the tension of a long-term relationship.



# Style

## Point of View

This novel is told from the point-of-view of two characters: Jacob and Geertrui. Jacob's chapters are told in past tense and third-person narration. This means that the unnamed narrator stays close to Jacob's point-of-view and gives the reader access into Jacob's thoughts and emotions while still referring to him in the third person. Geertrui's chapters are written in past tense, first-person narration taken directly from her personal memoirs. Geertrui's chapters are written from the perspective of an old woman looking back on her life, particularly the final months of the Second World War. The fact that Geertrui is dying greatly affects her perspective. In her chapters, she is recording the truth of her life before she dies, making the point-of-view completely, if not painfully, reliable. She holds nothing back from the reader - the good, the bad, or the ugly - because she wants to ensure that after a life full of lies, the whole truth is finally revealed. Through this candor, the reader is given an intimate look into Geertrui's thoughts, emotions, and fears, as if they are reading her private diary.

Since the reader learns that Geertrui is Jacob's grandmother well before Jacob does, it puts the reader in a unique position. In this case, suspense is created as the reader waits for Jacob to discover the truth. This point-of-view is important to the novel as a whole because it creates a strong bond between the reader and Jacob. This relationship is integral to the success of the story, which focuses on Jacob's journey to discover the truth about where he comes from, and where that may lead him in the future.

## Setting

Postcards from No Man's Land is set in the Netherlands. Jacob's chapters in the novel are set in Amsterdam during modern times. It is the first time Jacob has visited the city, so the reader is given many long passages of the city's descriptions as he explores this new landscape. Initially, Jacob feels unwelcome in the city, so his details are somewhat lacking. As he falls in love with the city, the descriptions become lush and sprawling, as if he is painting a picture on canvas rather than with words. The Amsterdam Jacob experiences is a beautiful mixture of city and suburb. In most big cities, there are only businesses in the city center, but in Amsterdam, real families still have their homes downtown. The city is surrounded by water and the narrow streets are littered with tiny shops that specialize in one item: cheese, wine, shoes, etc. Geertrui's chapters are mostly set in the village of Oosterbeek during the final months of the Second World War. Oosterbeek is not far from Amsterdam, but is set in the country. Geertrui's chapters have a much darker tone as the land has been ravaged by war. Homes have been destroyed from the bombing and many people are starving.



## Language and Meaning

This novel is told from two modulating perspectives: Jacob and Geertrui's. Geertrui's story is told through her handwritten memoirs, so the language is conversational and accessible to the reader. Geertrui's first language is Dutch, and she admits in her writing that she has had her grandson translate everything into English. It is clear, however, that when she dictated her memoir, she spoke in simple sentences, using straightforward language that created an easy to understand story. Jacob's narration, however, is full of dense, academic language that often alienates the reader. Before arriving in Amsterdam, Jacob was an outsider who struggled to connect with his peers. This struggle is evident in the language of his narration. It is academic and often rambling. His sentences bounce between long run-ons and short fragments, sometimes making his thoughts difficult to follow. While Geertrui's chapters feature a lot of action, Jacob's chapters are often rambling philosophical conversations that stretch over many pages, in which there is little action. Dialogue loops around conversational ideas that seem to go nowhere, which may leave the reader feeling puzzled. At times, these conversations feel pedantic, and may leave frustrated readers wondering why the novel's editor did not condense them or cut them out completely. Jacob's narration can be alienating for readers, particularly when he gets lost in lofty ideals. For this reason, many of Jacob's long conversations can be skimmed without losing plot or character development.

## Structure

This novel is comprised of twenty-two chapters ranging in length from 2 - 39 pages. Jacob's chapters are labeled as "Postcards" but they are much, much longer than postcard length. Geertrui's chapters, on the other hand, are written as diary entries although few entries are labeled with specific dates. Halfway through the novel, it becomes clear that Geertrui is writing these entries to a specific audience, her grandson Jacob. Geertrui the narrator begins to break through the narration to address Jacob directly, which is startling to the reader the first few times it happens. After Geertrui finishes telling her story, she signs the memoirs as she would a long letter. From chapter 19, the perspective remains with Jacob.

Chapter 14 is an interesting chapter because it contains many different letters written by soldiers that parachuted into Oosterbeek during the Second World War. In this chapter, Jacob is visiting the war cemetery where his grandfather is buried. He witnesses a ceremony honoring the soldiers who fought in Oosterbeek and it each of these letters details the battle. The reader is left to assume that these letters are being read aloud at the ceremony, but that is not explicitly stated in the text. Therefore, their inclusion in the novel is somewhat confusing. Also, in chapter eighteen, there is a small drawing of the talisman Jacob Todd (the soldier) crafted for Geertrui. Otherwise, the entire novel is text only.



## Quotes

"It is when success seems to be almost in your grasp that you become aware of how fragile is human existence, and of the unending possibility, almost the inevitability, of failure. And this makes you hesitate" (p. 22).

"You have to know your own truth and stick to it. And never despair. Never give up. There's always hope" (p. 42).

"I have desired to go where springs not fail, to fields where flies no sharp and sided hail and a few lilies blow. And I have asked to be where no storms come, where the green swell is in the havens dumb, and out of the swing of the sea" (p. 50).

"Father, is there anything rational about what's happening to us here? Did being rational prevent the war? Did being rational save us from being invaded? Will being rational liberate us?" (p. 72).

"When people are desperate they behave as they never would in better times. It is easy to condemn such behavior, but only if you have never been in such circumstances yourself" (p. 103).

"Here is memory. For me now there is only memory. Memory and pain. All life is memory. Pain is of now, forgotten as soon as gone. But memory lives. And grows. And changes, too" (p. 106).

"I wish people would stop. So much pain, why do we go on remembering it so much? It would be better if we forgot. But people say, no, we must always remember so that nothing like it ever happens again. To which I ask, when has the human race ever forgotten about their wars, and how much has that prevented another being fought? (p. 162-163).

"Put yourself in my hands, relax, enjoy yourself, and trust me to land you safely on the ground" (p. 173).

"They tried to revive Jacob, but only because of the human instinct to keep life going at any cost and prove to each other that we did everything we could before giving up" (p. 228).

"Was there, Jacob thought, anything better than getting to know someone who you felt all the time you already knew, as if, in some alternative life, you had always been the closes of best of friends" (p. 251).

"What a need humans have for confession. To a priest, to a friend, to a psychoanalyst...it doesn't matter so long as we speak out what moves within us. Even the most secretive of us do it, if no more than writing in a private diary" (p. 255).

"Every time we learn an important lesson about life we suffer a sense of loss. That's my experience. We gain. But there's a cost" (p. 300).



## Topics for Discussion

When Jacob returns home to America, do you think he will tell Sarah the truth about her husband? Why or why not? How does Sarah's lifelong love for Jacob compare / contrast to Geertrui's lifelong love? Do either of these women truly know Jacob? How can you tell? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Do you think Sarah already knew what happened in Amsterdam? What motivations might she have had in sending Jacob to Amsterdam? Do you think knowing the truth will affect Sarah's lifelong love for her husband? How can you tell? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare / contrast the characters of Daan and Jacob. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different? Why do you think Daan begins calling Jacob his "little brother?" What does this newfound relationship mean to Jacob? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

After reading this novel, has your opinion about euthanasia changed? Why do you think euthanasia is banned in America? What arguments does this novel give as to why it should be legalized? Do you agree? Why or why not? In your opinion, does this novel give a balanced argument, or does it favor a particular agenda? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Why do you think Geertrui chose to give her memoirs to Jacob rather than to Daan? Why was it important for Geertrui to tell Jacob the truth about his grandfather before she died? Do you think this was courageous or cowardly? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

What is the significance of Anne Frank's diary in this novel? How do Anne's diary entries compare / contrast to Geertrui's? What is the same about these two female characters and their need to connect through words? What is different? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Compare and contrast the relationship Jacob has with Ton to the relationship he has with Hille. What is the same about these relationships? What is different? Why might Chambers have chosen to make Jacob a bisexual character? How does this inner conflict deepen the themes of the novel? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.