Praisesong for the Widow Study Guide

Praisesong for the Widow by Paule Marshall

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"Praisesong for the Widow" tells the story of Avey (short for Avatara) Johnson from childhood through early widowhood in the form of flashbacks while she is on a Caribbean cruise with friends. The friends know Avey only as the conservative wife of a successful business man. That knowledge and their commitment to their itinerary make it all the more startling when Avey, beset by stomach pain she cannot explain, elects to cut her cruise short and return home. She would land at one of the nearby islands and fly out from there.

As she comes to this decision, flashes from her past tell the story of her childhood of summers on Tatem Island with her Creole great aunt who told her the story of the Ibos — the people they took off the slave boat in chains — and their proud and elegant countenances as they simply walked away from the traders on the water as if it was solid ground. She remembers the jubilant Ring Shouts she and her great aunt would watch from across the street, and the dance the people did as they shouted their praises. These memories melt into memories of a similarly jubilant early married life with Jay (short for Jerome Johnson) spent dancing to the jazz greats in their living room, imagining they were in their favorite dance halls, and spending sweet and merry time with their children.

The trouble comes when Avey comes to the season in her memories when she was finally driven out of her senses with suspicion of Jay's unfaithfulness. It was a fateful evening when her madness broke his heart, and drove the merry Jay from him, replaced by a man driven to make enough money to take them from their poverty and the darkness that came with it. That is when Avey began her own transformation from the dancing, merry girl she was to the reserved, tightly controlled adult she didn't recognize when she looked in the mirror.

Avey's redemption comes when she lands on the island filled with happy people waiting to go on an excursion. In her hotel that night, she finally melts into the pain of both the death of Jerome Johnson, her business man husband, and the Jay of their youth, condemned to a life of conformity and joyless control. The next morning, walking on the beach, she comes across an intriguing old man also going on the excursion who invites her to come along. She goes, and is so nurtured and welcomed, so nursed out of her pent up pain, that she rediscovers her ability to dance, and in so doing, reconnects with her own lost heritage, dedicating herself to passing it along to her own descendants, just as her great aunt had passed the stories on to her.

Part I: Runagate; Chapters 1-2

Part I: Runagate; Chapters 1-2 Summary

"Praisesong for the Widow" tells the story of a recently widowed woman's journey from her position living far from her Caribbean cultural identity and heritage to a place of having been reawakened by the very people from whom her ancestors came. She begins the story tightly reserved, living in all of the appearance of a good businessman's wife, and not recognizing herself in the mirror. Following a journey through vivid memories of her past as she cuts short a cruise with friends with the intention of flying home, she ends up squarely in the midst of a celebration of the culture from which she has spent her life distancing herself. The result is a story of redemption, cleansing and release from years of smothering damage, and reunion with the people responsible for all of the wisdom and flavor of her youth.

The first chapter opens with Avey Johnson furiously packing in the dark of night, intending to be completely done by the time the friends accompanying her on the cruise through the Caribbean, Thomasina Moore, the slightly bossy trip-planner, and Clarice, the sheepish one prone to guilt and sadness, wake up. She moves with the same urgency with which the impulse to leave had seized upon her. As she fills her six bags, her thoughts go to her youngest daughter, Marion, who had scolded her not only for the excess of baggage for the trip, but for taking such a mindless trip in the first place. She insisted that her mother should take a trip that meant something, from which she could learn something. Her second daughter, Annawilda, had said a trip would be good for her, taking her mind off of their father, her husband, who had died the year before.

In the second chapter, her friends wake up to discover Avey packed, dressed, and her things waiting by the door. Their reactions serve to characterize the two friends and their respective contrasts to Avey. Thomasina Moore is the good-hair-having slight but sassy former Cotton Club dancer whose first response to seeing the bags is accusatory inquisition. Her incredulity only grows when she realizes that her indignation is having no effect on Avey's resolve. She summons Clarice, who is still sleeping, and is the portly younger friend. Clarice's questions as to why are met every one by an increasingly angry Thomasina, who directs her venom at the concerned sweetness of Clarice, allowing Avey simply to stand comfortably in her resolve at the door. When Avey finally says she plans to take a hotel and fly out soon, Thomasina tells her how miserable it will be, and how expensive, until Avey calmly bids her friends goodbye, and leaves with Thomasina still spitting about how awful it is of her as she walks out the door.

Part I: Runagate; Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The most revealing moments in this first chapter come when Avey is thinking about her children. While her younger daughter, Annawilda, is supportive and sweet, her eldest is judgmental and displays an authority over Avey that Avey's mother would never have

allowed from Avey. She admits as she thinks that her own mother would have smacked her face for so disrespectfully telling her what to do. Avey notes the contrast in her current practices of interaction to those of her youth, when she would have expressed her distaste for things overtly, sticking out the bottom lip that she now keeps tucked consciously in. As an adult, she remains reserved and tightly ordered—so much so that as she is packing, she would rather freeze in place and hold her breath than make a noise that might wake her friends in order to avoid the inevitable confrontation her packing in the middle of the night would provoke.

In the second chapter, while Clarice is baffled and Thomasina rails about how ridiculous and suspicious it all is, Avey's mind is already made up. She knows her friends well enough to have been steeled for their responses before she even told them, so could let it roll off, so firm is she in her resolve. While Thomasina sputters, Avey's mind is already on the plane bound for home, peacefully sipping her white wine, and displays a bit of the strength of individuality and character she alluded to in the first chapter when she remembered the spunk she had in her youth.

Part 1: Runagate; Chapters 3-4

Part 1: Runagate; Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter three begins the story of the beginnings of Avey's discomfort aboard the cruise ship. She notes a certain parfait dessert that corresponded with the beginnings of her discomfort, but notes also a dream she had the night before — the first time she had dreamed since she dreamed that her children had been killed in an explosion like one she had seen on that evening's news. The dream was about her Great Aunt Cuney beckoning her to come on a walk like the walk they used to take at least twice a week when she spent summers with her on Tatem Island as a child. The two would belt up their long dresses, Avey emulating the style of her great-aunt, and set out across the countryside, playing games with each other to pass the time. She remembers the neighbors, and her great aunt's sin of crossing her ankles while she danced, getting her tossed out of the Ring Shouts for suggestive dancing. The Landing, the place where the ancestors had been delivered as slaves, became her religion after that, but the two of them still stood outside the church out of nostalgia sometimes, and watch them sing their praises and dance shuffling versions of ancient dances on the wood floor. Passing the elements of town, the two walked through what used to be a cotton field before the Civil War. They then passed a deep, old forest, and finally to Ibo Landing, where the proud and elegant pure-born African Ibos, according to Cuney's grandmother, could see with senses we can't. They knew what would come to them if they stayed where the slave ships had delivered them, and so walked away on the water, just like Jesus, still wearing their chains and all.

In the dream, however, Avey is grown up, dressed in her fur stole and pearls, and her great aunt is still urging her with all the authority as if she were still a little girl. She refuses to follow, and when the beckoning becomes more insistent, the two women finally come to blows. They pelt each other with equal strength, the fur stole on the ground, and all of the neighbors both from the Landing on Tatem Island and from the white and affluent White Plains — the home of her adulthood with her ultimately affluent husband — looking on in shock.

The fourth chapter tells the story of the evening of the parfait. The three women are in the fanciest of the dining rooms, the Versailles Room (another element of the trip that met with Marion's disapproval) for dinner, and Avey's appetite is suspiciously sparse throughout. She catches glimpses of herself in the room's grand mirrors and doesn't recognize the tightly-girdled, pearl-wearing woman looking back at her. When she is unable to eat the beautiful parfait, she tells her friends that it must be indigestion, and that she would be fine. When it is still there in the morning, she decides to spend the morning alone to quiet her stomach busy thoughts. All morning long, however, groups of noisy talking people crowd into even her most creative secluded spots, each group suspiciously similar in appearance to the last. The sports she sees the people playing bring to mind disturbing images from her past on Halsey Street of men being beaten by police with billy clubs, and the violence of the men shooting clay pigeons disturbs her

just as deeply. The people crowding in on her seem more and more dark and lascivious as her frustration grows, until at last she finds the library and is able to find some, albeit fitful, repose.

Part 1: Runagate; Chapters 3-4 Analysis

The story from Avey's childhood in Chapter 3 reveals both the reason for her distaste for the name Avatara — being given her by her great-aunt after someone mostly regarded as crazy, but sharing her heritage — and insight into what the summers with her great aunt had been like. She seems to have enjoyed the summers, emulating the older woman's style and sympathizing with her nostalgia for the fellowship and celebration of the Ring Shouts she would no longer attend. She even confesses to not having understood the miraculous nature of the Ibos' walking away on the water until Cuney, disappointed that she hadn't grasped the story's significance sooner, compares them to Jesus. She asks curtly if He drowned when He walked on the water, to which Avey sheepishly answers "no," ending any more questioning of the story. The dream serves as a powerful foreshadowing of the exploration into the very heritage it had been Cuney's passion to pass on to Avey in their summers together.

Chapter four gives some insight into the rejection of the culture of which Avey had become a member happening quite apart from her granting it permission. Everything about the culture — the rich food, the people unable to allow or to exist in quiet, their clothes, their speech, especially their games, and even their presence is now physically grating to her, and she is caught off-guard by her body's protests and the disturbing images now crowding themselves into her mind. The chapter serves to bring the experience of Avey's subconsciousness invading her waking consciousness into sharp detail.

Part I: Runagate; Chapters 5-6

Part I: Runagate; Chapters 5-6 Summary

Chapter five begins with Avey, shaking off her guilt about leaving her friends, in spite of the clear evidence that she had, indeed, ruined the trip for her two friends, finally disembarks and finds herself without a taxi standing at the harbor of the island from which she would fly back to White Plains. Standing at the harbor, she is surrounded by people all buzzing with anticipation, all seemingly excited about the same thing, and all crowding on to small, old wooden boats and casting out to sea. The strangest quality shared by the people surrounding her, though, is that they all look at her, even treat her as if she belongs there, and they have known her their whole lives. She listens through the crowd for someone speaking English instead of the Patois (Creole French) everyone is speaking, noting that the last time she heard that language had been during her childhood visits to Tatem. he is even seemingly recognized by a man who says she looks just like a woman he knows named Ida from the back — that they could even be twins. Finally, Avey is rescued by a tall taxi driver who finds her looking lost, and offers to take her to her hotel.

In Chapter Six, the taxi driver helps her to arrange her flight, and on their way to the hotel, she asks about the growing crowd on the wharf. He explains to her that all of the people at the harbor are waiting to go on the annual excursion to Carriacou island for some native tradition he never understood, and even lost a girlfriend over. The people of the island are veritably transformed by it every year at that time, putting away the English they all spoke and speaking only Patois, and migrating, every man, woman and child to an island so small no one has ever heard of it. He explains, too, the strong sense of community and helping one another with no regard for the protection of one's own wealth that exists among the people of the island. They function like a family, different from the people from off the islands. When they reach her hotel, it is on a beautiful and peaceful beach. It is itself grand and white, and she is reminded as she surveys the beauty around it of the heartbreaking Eskimo practice of leaving the elderly out in the cold when it is time for them to die, and doesn't know what brought it to mind. Once she is inside her room, the sleek furnishings contrast with the images of the Martinique museum's display of relics melted and preserved by a volcano, and the pain in her stomach returns.

Part I: Runagate; Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Avey's arrival on the island is another foreshadowing of her eventual re-connection to the people native to those islands. There is one flash and one only back to the grotesquely exaggerated faces she perceived when she was searching for solitude on the ship when an old man she realizes on reflection was in fact reaching out in kindness reminds her of someone who seemed downright evil that morning. The rest of her impressions are more like curiosity and wonder at their looks of recognition and

welcoming faces. The fact that it is the language of Tatem that they are speaking makes only a mild impression on her, however, and she continues to be focused on the task of finding a ride to her hotel.

The sixth chapter offers the first real insight into the culture she has stepped into. They are a people committed to celebration in a way that defines their lives. Their whole worlds stop for the sake of this communion with their ancestors. They give themselves to the ritual celebration with joyful and complete abandon, down to their location — even at the expense of their businesses — and their language — even while they may speak English instead of the celebration's Patois the entire remainder of the year. The taxi driver's shunning of the tradition has only effected him in that it lost him a love, and he seems in no way effected by the loss, except to pay the girl polite compliments. He is also the type to embrace the development and capitalist influences on the beautiful island, and it sets up a sharp contrast with Avey's attraction to the beautiful beach and trees, and the return of the pain in her stomach when she enters the hotel, as if her very body were rejecting the return to a manufactured world and exit of the natural one.

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapters 1-2

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapters 1-2 Summary

That night Avey spent in the hotel, as described in this first chapter, was filled with visions of her life with Jay on Halsey Street. It begins when she envisions him asking her, as if he were sitting right in front of her, if she realizes how reckless she is being with money, and as was so typical of him, asking whether she wanted to end up back where they started, on Halsey Street. She knows what created that strict, hoarding man, and walks all the way through in her memory, the days she spent with two-year-old Annawilda, the four-year-old Sis, pregnant with Marion, waiting in that fifth floor apartment for Jay to come home. She had tried to miscarry the baby, she was so afraid of the added expense, and had returned to work to help save up, and Jay started working longer hours at the department store, still unwinding with his music at night. The more she showed, the more desperate they both felt. For her part, she knew Jay was trustworthy. However, the emotional upheaval of a pregnancy they couldn't afford and their being surrounded by the sounds of a desperately poor neighbor accusing her philandering husband in the street below finally started to fuel the suspicion in her own mind that Jay was being unfaithful when he was working late. She paced the floor all evening, the child inside her squirming as if disturbed by the tumult of her thoughts, and she let herself grow increasingly untidy as her mind fixated on her suspicion, imagining every detail as if it were happening, the women seduced by the signature mustache with which he disguised his look of sharp intelligence.

In the second chapter, the story begins at the point by which the images she had imagined had become so real to her that even while he assured her he was faithful, she could not believe him and screamed at her husband just like the woman who lived below them screamed at hers. She was so impassioned that she didn't even know what she was saying, but flew at him with all of her fear and frustration. Jay responded at first with rationality, telling her about his work, and offering to let her go and see for herself what it was like. She remembers the encounters they heard so many times from the street below, and imagines they might just as easily have become the two of them, so addicted and desperate they really didn't have a choice but to remain in the slum. She saw that night that Jay wanted with all of his will to leave the crazed woman and desperately needy children, and that it took the last of his strength to stay and submit himself to what, and who, stood before him. He stayed even though he trembled and wept as he held his wife and Sis, who had come into the room to quiet their fighting.

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Avey remembers in this first chapter with intimate detail the trick her emotions played on her imagination with her desperation as their weapon. She had been living in a happy marriage, raising healthy children and enjoying a love-filled home. When an unplanned pregnancy inspires her husband to work longer hours in order to provide, which he did

without hesitating, or even needing to be asked, she bases her conclusions about what he might be doing on the actions of a man we learn in the second chapter is of much lower quality and addicted to drugs and cheap women. Jay's actions are above reproach in every way she can observe, and hers are driven entirely by her suspicion. Even while she fuels her imaginings by running over the things about Jay that made her fall in love with him, each of his best qualities only made her more sure of his transgression. The fact that the aged Jerome Johnson asked that question in his sleep the night before his final stroke, lying in the bed next to hers so many years later burns into Avey's consciousness that it was this very explosion that drove Jay to the transformation that would define the rest of his life.

When she describes Jay's reaction to her accusation, he still regards her as an equal partner, reasoning with her and making his case, even while she behaves without any decorum or adult rationality. When he points out her similarity to the people who live below them, he is drawing a parallel to a couple with nothing like their relationship, which up to this point has been filled with flirtation, passionate love even when they argued, and music and poetry that saturated even their parenting. Her accusation was an insight into her own mental state at the time. Her insight into the strength it required for Jay to stay is a testament both to her intimate knowledge of him and to the immensity of his commitment to make the best life he could for their family.

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapters 3-4

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter Three begins to tell the story of Jay's transformation to the driven and focused Jerome Johnson to whom the Avey Johnson she no longer recognized in the mirror was the dutiful wife. He started almost right away working two jobs, bringing her home the unopened second paychecks to serve as proof to her that he really was working them both. He walked tirelessly through town as a door-to-door salesman of sundry things, and paid for a course in accounting with his GI benefits, studying in every waking moment. He dressed up to look for jobs only to be met with sorry excuses he knew to be excuses, and still dutifully told Avey all about his days. When he finally concludes that the last possible obstacle is a college degree, he gets one, and so it continues, draining Jay of everything that had made him vibrant, and focusing him doggedly on the task of building as good a living as he could secure. He had believed Cuney's stories, and loved visiting Tatem when they were young, and even sacrificed those regular summer trips to work. Avey returned to work as soon as Marion could walk, and their regimented lives shaped the lives of their children, turning the eldest daughter, Sis solemn in her dedication to helping with the younger girls. Finally, Jay was able to find work as an accountant for several small businesses, move to a bigger and better apartment, and look forward to a house in White Plains.

Chapter Four opens with Avey secretly indulging in memories of their first apartment on Halsey Street and their happy life there, admitting it is a betrayal against the backbreaking pace of hard work that delivered them from that place. She lingers over the memories of the nights he would imagine they were having a night out on the town in their favorite dance halls, and chicken and pancakes when they were done. Sunday mornings had been spent eating coffee cake and listening as Jay recited black poetry to the captivated children, and nights in that narrow front bedroom, since the larger one had gone to the girls, were filled with passionately expressive and playful lovemaking, evoking both laughter and tears from a blissful Avey. It is the memory of those deeply satisfying, passionate nights that wrenches a savage sob from Avey as she sits on the hotel room's balcony. She ends her reflection settling on the changes that defined Jerome Johnson, who shaved the mustache he prized when he was called Jay, affected a new manner of speaking, becoming such a changed man that when she looked down on him in his coffin, she couldn't even look on the Jerome-face that seemed to be laughing victoriously at the long-defeated Jay.

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Chapter Three is a sad chapter, highlighting the joyless dedication to work that permeates the whole family after that fateful Tuesday night. Jay goes above and beyond to assure Avey that it is work that keeps him busy every hour of the day, testifying further to his love, and seemingly pleasing Avey, as she joins right in to the pattern of

working all day, bringing the children into regimented routines right along with her. The fact that Jay has heretofore been her only link to Tatem and its stories is also significant, since the years between that Tuesday night and her cruise will now be completely without connection to those people, their traditional boat rides of her childhood, and the miraculous stories of the ancestors.

Avey' s regret at losing the Halsey Street life offers fitting reason to recall the most beautiful parts of the life they lived in that place. The fact that the time she spent replaying those memories before they moved to White Plains serves to highlight the tragedy of the time that passes after she is aware of the loss. She reflects on all of the things that defined them as a couple and as a family and either feels powerless to reclaim those things, or too highly values the material success they attain that she isn't willing to change the patterns that got them to that place. There is still a unified purpose that speaks to the strength of their commitment to family. However, the most sacred family things are irretrievably lost, as becomes blindingly clear as she stands at her husband's coffin, realizing the man she loved in those long-lost days had died to make way for this man all those Tuesdays ago.

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapter 5

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapter 5 Summary

The last chapter of this section walks through the whirlwind of thoughts that storm through Avey's mind as she reflects on the high price her family paid for their affluence. She ponders the way they sacrificed the things that made their lives worth living. Suppose, she thinks, Jay really died that Tuesday night and the man who laughed at her from his coffin had been masquerading in his body, allowing him only a half-life of work. She reflects on a Christmas she spent with Sis and her family, when her grandson wept, discontented with every one of his gifts because the one he so particularly wanted was missing, and finally understands how he felt.

She wonders, and knows instinctively that they could have had both, had they only decided all those years back not to lose their souls, the success and the beauty of their hearts. Marion, who she remembers grew up looking at her parents like she was judging them, was an advocate for their people, even while Avey was so ardently denying her identification with the most unjust treatment of black people in the 1960s and '70s that their plights invaded her dreams, until she even stopped herself from dreaming. Marion's advocacy for the poor brought that woman on Halsey Street squarely back into her consciousness, a place she wasn't comfortable allowing her to be. She spent all of those years refusing to identify with the suffering of her race. That night on the hotel's balcony, all of the frustration of those years of pushing down her truest, best self came screaming out of her in tears and fists pounding the air with no one to restrain her, finally exhausting herself, and her thoughts coming to rest as she collapses in her fatigue to the floor on the dream of her beckoning her to come.

Part II: Sleeper's Wake; Chapter 5 Analysis

Avey here both mourns and comes to her first, best understanding of the years the elapsed between that Tuesday night explosion and her husband's early death by a stroke brought on almost certainly by the pace and joylessness of his dedication to work. She finally looks back even at the condition of her own mind, denying her role as one of the people who were being hosed down and beaten in the streets, the poor who still existed even while her world was so carefully insulated from them. Her release in the form of pounding away at the face that had replaced her husband's seems finally focused on the source of her captivity, enabling her to shed the persona she had adopted to fit that visage's requirements, giving a focus to her anger, and re-focusing her on the parts of herself and her culture that she had given up. It is perfect preparation for what comes next for her.

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapters 1-2

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapters 1-2 Summary

This first chapter opens with Avey, who had collapsed into bed exhausted after her night of purging emotions the night before, dreaming that she smells a baby who needs changing, back in the Halsey Street house. She steps groggily into the sunlight and is startled awake, remembering where she is. She surveys the mess she had made in her fit of purging clothing and baggage, and notes that her mind is now as empty as her emptied purse; "a tabula rasa upon which a whole new history could be written." She surveys her body, remembering the moments of her life that have marked it, and dresses in a dress more casual and comfortable than she has worn in years. Soon she is on the beach, captivated by the sand and the coconut trees. She aimlessly wanders, thoughts still quiet and transfixed on the familiar and beautiful elements of the beach, lost in fascination watching a brightly colored dead fish in the surf, crabs at play, imagining them animating in magical new ways, until she realizes how hot the day has become, and her own desperate need for shade and water. She whirls between one direction and the next for a while, until she finally sees a more substantial building than the lean-to shelters built only for shelter from the sun, and sees the first humans of the day, boys jumping from rocks into the water. She heads toward the building.

The building she finds is an old rum shop with no one inside, and standing in the shade of it's entry, feels something like a cooling hand come to rest on her head and draw her gently further in to the sparse and simple room. When she finally calls for someone who might work there, there emerges a small, animated old man with one leg shorter than the other, Joseph Lebert. His manner is gruff at first, as he insists that the shop is closed, but he decides to let her sit and have a drink until he is finished closing. He says he is getting ready to go on the excursion, and closing down like everyone else, and when she says she saw the people on the wharf yesterday, she has to grope for the words. He speaks with great pride about his family, and his being among the oldest living, and with sadness about those of his family who live in America and never come to the islands anymore. He explains that the annual trip is all about family, and about relaxing, dancing and drinking behave like children. Eventually, as he warms more and more, he tells her about the Beg Pardon part of the Big Drum, when they ask the Old Parents, the Long-Time People, for forgiveness for that year's faults, and tries guessing Avey's tribe. She finally explains about her losing track of time on the beach, and about her dream and disturbing hallucinations on the ship, and he listens with all of his senses, understanding even what she cannot say, and tells her to stay put, while he brings her "a little something."

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapters 1-2 Analysis

This awakening woman is a very different Avey than the one the rest of the story has observed. She is freed from any of the affectations of the previous several years, and

peacefully in touch with the life she lived at Halsey Street when she was still whole. She sees her body as if for the first time in a long time, as a well-used and family-marked vessel, and dresses it for comfort without a single thought about how presentable it is. Walking along the beach, she thinks and moves just like a little girl, oblivious to time or any other person, lost in the fascinating elements on the beach before her, drifting easily from one fascination to the next, letting her attention be captivated by whatever beautiful think caught her eye for as long as it was caught. Her body is the only thing that brings her back to an awareness of time.

Joseph Lebert is a series of contradictions bound together, both powerful-looking and hobbled, gruff and bubbling over with stories, disengaged and the most lucid, attuned listening ear she has had in years. He is the first insight into the ancestral and spiritual benefit of the excursion, telling her about the Beg Pardon and the opportunity to live and celebrate just like the ancestors did, celebrating cultural identity and making peace with those who came before. He also sees in Avey the acute need for just such an experience, recognizing the lineage in her, heartbroken at his own grandchildren and great-grandchildren never having the opportunity, and intent on allowing her to finish the journey to wholeness she has so clearly already begun.

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapter 3-4

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapter 3-4 Summary

Lebert brings Avey coconut water with a bit of his prized rum, and she instantly feels better, deeply cooled by the nurturing drink, and he assures her, although she doesn't know she needs the assurance, that she is not the only one who doesn't know her nation. He assures her, in fact, that is the very reason that he begs pardon for all of those who don't know they need it when he is praying to the Old Parents every year. So, still trying to get her to latch on to some tribal identity, he starts naming songs and dances she might know, until she finally identifies the Juba as a dance she has heard of. He is so relieved he has to sit down. Recovering, he demonstrates it for her, moving just like a woman, the years falling off of him as he loosens up in the dance. When he needs a partner, he hardly gives the involuntarily laughing Avey a choice but to join him, and just as quickly cuts off the dance to invite her on the excursion. She tells him about her plane to catch, and he won't be bothered with excuses, assuring her that her flight can be changed, and the sea will be a smooth as silk in perfectly reliable boats.

And so, Chapter Four opens with Avey standing at the dock waiting for a boat in the throng of people, the very next day after wondering at the mystery of them, at the very time she had been planning to catch the plane to the States. The arrangements had all been made to switch her flight and transport her luggage around her, and she was being whisked away on an adventure out of her hands. Lebert chooses the moment of their leaving the rum shop on their way to the wharf to introduce himself, and delivers her to wait for his return at the wharf. She remembered a film she had taken in Ghana that Marion had explained was a ceremony to feed the gods, and the trips she and her family and their social club took when she was a child up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain as she watched the gathered crowd. She remembers her stylish father and his affection for the black people gathered and his affection for them, even completely understanding their foibles, even their tendency to violence. She remembers envisioning a strong silver thread running through everyone there, binding them all together, as they prepared to go to that mountain and "lay claim: 'we gon' put on our robes and shout all over God's heaven!'"

The boat that would bear her to Carriacou is nothing like that ship the Robert Fulton, however. This one is called the Emmanuel C, and is crudely made of wood, and Avey is seated between old and wise-looking women who remind her of the queens of her congregation growing up, nurturing and comforting the sinners at the services' alter calls. As the ship takes sail, Avey settles in to the smell of the salt air with eyes closed, and feels the old women turn toward her, speaking reassuring Patois, and is finally completely at ease. In her resting mind, she is now a child again, sitting between great old women in church.

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapter 3-4 Analysis

The moments of dancing and persuading in Chapter Three give Avey a taste of the timelessness and agelessness of the festivities getting ready to happen, and of the richness of the variety of tribes, music and dances that will be celebrated there. The good drink has soothed and relaxed Avey enough that her defenses are growing less and less by the moment, and she is continuously more charmed by the animated old man with every new antic, he charmed by the fact that the imperial seat of Juba is the nation whose dance she knows. He regards her as a long-lost child, and the Beg Pardon and Big Drum as the medicine her heart badly needs. Avey is still floating just below the surface of her numbness. She is confused by Lebert's quick shifts from one unfamiliar name to another, as well as by the replacement in her mind of the familiar things of home with the post-volcanic artifacts of an ancient and foreign place. Still, she's assured by his promise that her plans can remain in tact, she agrees to make the trip.

Chapter Four describes the small clear space in her mind from which Avey can look out at the wharf, and see the people for the jubilant and peaceful crowd of extended family they are. She is as peaceful as she has been since the beginning of the book, taken back to joyful parts of her childhood, remembering her father's unflinching and realistic understanding of their people, and relentless eyes-wide-open affection for them as they waited to leave on a trip very similar to this one. Her childhood boat took her and her family to a mountain to sing praises and fellowship, free of the city and lying in the grass, making it a holy place with their celebrations. It is a beautiful parallel to what this group is getting ready to do. The fact that father's affection for the black race included even their darkest tendencies, speaks to Avey's reference to having lost when she remembers turning away from the news and putting out of her mind the suffering of her people. The fact that she now remembers admiring in that her father is an early and certain sign that a kind of healing has begun in her. The similarity between the women on the Emmanuel C and the ones in her old church also speaks to the similarity between the services of repentance then and awaiting the group when they get to Carriacou.

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapters 5-6

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapters 5-6 Summary

Chapter Five is dedicated entirely to a sermon Avey remembers, dreams, when she is sitting on the boat remembering herself as a little girl back in church. The southern preacher told about Mary of Magdalen and Jesus' mother Mary arriving at Jesus' tomb that third day and finding the stone rolled away and the Roman soldiers like dead men outside it, the glorious angel standing there, and no body in the tomb. He reminded the congregation that Jesus had told his disciples that he would rise from the dead three days after he was crucified. He told about how the women were "affrighted and filled with wond-a-a-h!" in that bluesy voice she remembers his using for maximum effect. His goal had been to remind the congregation of the incredible power God unleashes when He has something to accomplish. Next he asks the congregation from what bondage each of them might need to be freed; what stones they have pulled over their hearts to close off what it too painful to feel or acknowledge. However, she assured them that there is a way to have the stones hauled out of the temples of their hearts: by simply calling on the power that rolled Jesus' stone away. The call and response followed, thrilling in its energy and balance between the fury and the beneficence of their omnipotent and fiercely loving God. The little girl Avey, however, was back then was suddenly overtaken with the need to throw up, and there the chapter closes.

Avey awakes from her dream violently ill in Chapter Six, her body convulsed as her stomach empties over the side of the boat, the women flanking her speaking soothingly "Bon" and comforting her, as if what she was doing was precisely what they believed she ought to be doing, their encouragement never waning, no matter how violently ill she became. Soon, the pain shifts downward in her belly and the purging changes its direction. The women don't lose a moment, and covering her with their shawls, move her effortlessly below deck. Her dignity preserved, her body allowed its purge, she falls into a deep sleep, and dreams of the ships that took the slaves to America as if she is one of them, cramped and chained in just such a dark and wooden place.

Part III: Lave Tete; Chapters 5-6 Analysis

The sermon Avey remembers is precisely the salve her heart needs in this moment, reminded in such vivid detail of the impenetrable wall behind which her truest self had been concealed for all of those years. She had neglected the people of her heritage and laid down her rights both to the privilege of passing that heritage along to her children, and of living in its glory herself. The fact that this is the sermon her imagination plays for her sleeping consciousness means that her heart is already on that path, preparing to lay down her resistance.

Her physical purging reveals much about the women who are with her on the ship. They are well aware of the roughness of the waters, and the delicacy of someone

unaccustomed to the journey, but also unflinching in their willingness to mother this new woman regardless of her condition. They close around her like she is their own child, intimately encouraging and nurturing, and vigilant in protecting her comfort and dignity.

Part IV: The Beg Pardon; Chapters 1-3

Part IV: The Beg Pardon; Chapters 1-3 Summary

The final section of the book opens by describing the christening of the house with rum Lebert Joseph and his family have done in order to prepare the house for the Beg Pardon, Lebert noting that the Old Parents would be pleased. The family has kept vigil all night over the tossing and moaning, and then deeply sleeping Avey. When she awoke, it took her several moments to ascertain her location. Shame seizes her body as soon as she remembers the travails of the previous day, and the beautifully appointed room only heightens the feeling. Soon, however, Rosalie Parvay, revealed as Lebert Joseph's daughter by her mannerisms which are so like his. She offers unqualified assurance to the apologetic Avey that she has been no trouble, and that now she would like to give her a sponge bath. What follows is a long and tender one-piece-at-a-time sponging that moves Avey from a place of shame-filled timidity to grateful surrender to the careful, respectful and expertly soothing hands of Rosalie.

When she is done with the bath, she oils the now peaceful Avey, taking special care with the thighs Avey has kept bound for so many years in a tightly constricting girdle. The result is the awakening of sensation and blood-flow to nerves and muscles Avey hasn't felt living since her old nights of lovemaking with Jay. When she emerges from the room, dressed in her newly washed pink cotton dress, the meals are laid out for the Old Parents just the way Lebert had described them back in the rum shop. He is relieved she isn't mad at him, and even more so that she is still willing to accompany all of them to the Big Drum that evening.

The group sets out in this chapter in complete darkness for the Big Drum, Rosalie talking with Avey about how badly she wishes her father would give up the rum shop and let her take care of him. They pick him up on the road, and he transforms in a moment from a shrunken old man to a vibrant and ageless being, ready for a celebration as they walk along. When they arrive at their destination, Avey sees a nearly crumbled old wood house with a bare dirt yard behind, tucked into the trees. Lebert recites the lyrical names of the oldest people gathered, and makes sure Avey is completely comfortable before he joins in the merriment, moving from one group to the next in animated conversation. Soon they are all in a circle on their knees, ready for the Beg Pardon. Silence encircles the crowd, and they offer their "Pa'done mwe"s with uplifted faces. Avey offers the same to her own Great-Aunt Cuney. One of the old women sings the close of that part of the evening, and then it is on to tribal dances, so like the ones Avey had watched with Cuney when they stood outside the Ring Shouts in Tatem, these one tribe at a time, danced by the Oldest Ones. Even for the sparseness of the space, Avey is drawn in, captivated by the small and faithful group, so deeply devoted to these things that defined them. It is the essence of something passed along through generations in remembrance of the thing itself, and it is beautiful to Avey.

The music then turns brisk, and the Creole dances begin, the young people now coming close. Lebert checks again to make sure Avey is still comfortable, and goes to the circle to wet the ring with run, preparing it for the dances that will follow. The music is a combination of deeply felt lament and heartbreak, and irresistible celebration. Soon Avey is drawn in to the center of the circle, even inside the perimeter of old people, from her discrete corner by the musicians into the very heart of the music. Her body is released in just the way her husband had so praised, released as fully as it had been since all those years ago, save for her feet, left carefully in contact with the ground, observing carefully the very rule that had gotten her Great-Aunt Cuney tossed out of the Ring Shout back in Tatem. Lebert Joseph is elated, and watches is proud amazement. Then, one of the Oldest Ones approaches Avey and gives her her full name, Bercita Edwards of Smooth Water Bay, Carriacou, peering at her intently. Avey, for the first time in her whole life, answers with the name her great aunt had extolled her to use, "Avey, short for Avatara."

The book closes with Rosalie and Lebert telling Avey the following morning that they believe from the way she dances that she must be Arada. She embraces them both on departing, and resolves on her trip home to tell this story to everyone she knows. Everyone who comes in contact with her must be made to see the beauty of the lives lived here, and the story of the Ibos, as well. Tatem would regain its position as a sacred place for her and her family, and she would carry forward the torch of her family now freshly aflame.

Part IV: The Beg Pardon; Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The massage in this first chapter is as much like a sacred ritual as anything Avey has experienced in years, for all of the sweet ceremony of Rosalie's execution, and for the deep spiritual release it allowed in Avey. Rosalie speaks and delivers reassurance in every word and deed, and the fact that the maid who accompanies her is so still and faithfully averting her gaze allows all the more for Avey's comfort and surrender to the process. The fact that her memories center on her immensely satisfying love life as the last time those muscles and tendons felt so alive is indicative of a release her body and spirit have been in need of for years. She is renewed in body and spirit.

The Big Drum is Avey's moment of completing the education her great aunt had wanted so badly for her, and Lebert already knew would be just the kind of cleansing ritual and celebration her heart needed. She recognizes her need to ask her forgiveness, and does without any hesitation or qualification. The holiness of the moment when the native dances are presented is like a continuation of the prayerful reflection on the wisdom of the generations that have come before them, and they receive all of the reverent attention they deserve from every person gathered there. The note of sadness that comes from Lebert's drum resonates deep in Avey, giving voice to the deep and old heartbreak of her people, and wrapping it in the prayer and determined celebration that define that evening. Now completely integrated with her ancestral heritage, her childhood self, the truths of her life now the kind of trial that make a person strong and pure, Avey is able to celebrate in a kind of dance that also brings all of the seasons of

her life together. She dances with the passion and style of her time in love with Jay, and the reverent attention to form her great aunt's lesson instilled in her. Obeying Cuney's most sincere wish for her, she announces her name when it is asked of her just the way she had been taught as a little girl.

Characters

Avatara Johnson

Avey, as she is called for the majority of the story, is the descendant of slaves brought to America most likely from the Caribbean, and who is raised with the stories of their indomitable wills and characters. Her childhood relationship with her great aunt is characterized by her rebellion against what she saw as an unnecessary and grueling exploration into their old stories. She spends her courtship and early married life dancing so freely that her husband tells her she could out-jangle Bo Jangles, and carrying on the youthful enjoyment of life that characterized her youth forward. When the long hours Jay spends working late make Avey suspicious that he is being unfaithful, her accusations explode in an evening of irrational fear, and Avey follows Jay through his transformation into a business-minded overly socially-conscious old woman, living joylessly and out of touch with the side of herself that knew her heritage of celebration and strength. She looks and mirrors and doesn't recognize the constrained, pearl-wearing woman who looks back at her, and finds no joy in her friends. It isn't until her very body begins rejecting her life that she is forced to change course while on her Caribbean cruise, and her visit to an island still doggedly determined to retain the celebratory dances and ceremonies of contrition and reconciliation with the ancestors releases the old and true parts of herself that had been locked away.

Jerome Johnson

Jerome Johnson, Avey Johnson's husband, was called Jay in his early life, and is characterized in those years by his love of the blues and dancing with Avey, imagining they are in their favorite dance halls as they dance in their living room when he got home from work every evening. He recited poems about their heritage to the children on Sunday mornings, and he and Avey were passionate lovers. He worked hard, but was able to let the stress fall off of him listening to his favorite musicians at night. The fateful evening when Avey was finally driven from her senses by suspicion of his being unfaithful while he was working late so rattled Jay that he gave himself entirely to pursuing an over-abundant education. This, in order to compensate for being black so that he might be able to lift his family out of their poverty and finally take Avey from the dark Harlem world that allowed her suspicions to grow. His whole countenance and personality changed as he excised the music that soothed him from his world in favor of work and study, and became defined by the pursuit of the means and appearance of affluence. In the end, it is ultimately that pursuit that kills him, and the grieving of his death that takes Avey into the mental space that allows her to diverge from her course on the cruise ship.

Lebert Joseph

Lebert Joseph is the man with the rum shop on the beach on the island near Avey's hotel. She comes upon him by chance the day she walks down the beach, wandering in her fascination well beyond her ability to walk back, so Lebert reluctantly takes mercy on her thirst and takes the opportunity to tell her all about the excursion to Carriacau from which she is holding him up. While he is initially short with her, as they talk he recognizes her as having a shared heritage with those going on the excursion. He implores her to come along, assuring her the ride is safe and smooth, and being overcome with guilt when it is not. In the end, he proves to be an attentive and nurturing presence, proud of Avey's performance at and enjoyment of the Beg Pardon and tribal dances, assuring everyone that he knew she would love it from the moment he met her.

Rosalie Parvay

Rosalie Parvay is Lebert Joseph's daughter, and almost a copy of him in mannerism. She becomes Avey's caretaker while she recovers from the seasickness that afflicted her on the boat ride to the island. The morning Avey wakes up after her illness subsides, Rosalie gives Avey a sponge bath while she lies in bed, so tenderly protecting her modesty and comfort, and so expertly completing the task that by the end of the first half of the bath, Avey welcomes her touch instead of shying away, and by the end of the massage with oil, she feels parts of herself awakened again that had been squeezed to numbness in her years of conformity to the style of a middle-class woman. Rosalie is a vehicle of healing nurture and welcome.

Great Aunt Cuney

The older woman Avey would spend summers with as a child on Tatem Island. In an effort to teach Avey about her heritage, from the time of the slave ships coming across the ocean through the black culture that developed in Southern churches, she would walk Avey through cotton fields and woods coming to and from church. She would tell her the story of the Ibos who walked on water away from the slave traders still in chains, as proud as they could be, over and over again. Avey sees her great aunt again as she contemplates leaving the islands and going back home, the old woman pulling her just like she used to, but this time Avey fighting back against her with the strength of a grown woman. The beckoning old woman finally ceases her urging and Avey understands her teaching when she completes the Beg Pardon and catches the passion to tell the story of their rich and beautiful heritage to the generations that follow her.

Thomasina Moore

The planner, and more controlling of the two friends who accompany Avey on the cruise, furious that she would leave and disrupt their plans, but unconcerned as to why.

Clarice

The timid, guilt-prone friend on the cruise, also more concerned with her own unjustified guilt than with what might be bothering Avey.

Marion

Avey's opinionated, slightly controlling, activist daughter.

Annawilda

Avey's other daughter.

The Driver

Avey's taxi-driver when she gets to the island is the one who tells her everyone at the docks is waiting to leave for the excursion, something he never understood, but that possesses the people of the island every single year.

Objects/Places

Carriacau

The island on which the Beg Pardon and attendant celebratory season takes place.

Caribbean Islands

The islands through which the friends were cruising, and the home of the excursion island.

Cruise Ship

The place where Avey had the initial urge to break away from the falsity of her identity with her friends and get back to her own world.

Harlem, Halsey Street

The neighborhood in which Jay and Avey lived their early married life, happy in love, having their children, dancing in their living room in the evenings, and also the place so filled with the desperation of poverty that it drove Avey to a distracting suspicion that Jay was being unfaithful, driving him to throw himself into a heart-killing pace of work.

White Plains

The more affluent town to which the Johnson's moved when Jay was finally able to establish himself as a businessman.

Tatem Island

The island on which Avey's Great Aunt Cuney lived and hosted Avey during the summers.

Lebert Joseph's Rum Shop

The haven Avey finds from the heat after her unexpectedly long walk along the sunny beach.

The island's White Hotel

The place where Avey begins her transformation from stuffy old woman to beach-comber, precipitated by the sobbing night of contrition for the evening of accusation that so changed her husband.

The Boat

The boat Avey rode with Lebert Joseph and the kind old ladies was the location for the end of the purge of the cruise's rich food and her stomach's knots of tension accompanying her need to step off of her previous course.

The Church on Tatem Island

Avey and her great aunt watched Ring shouts from across the street from the old church where the people would do a shuffling dance very like the one the people were still doing on Carriacau and her great aunt always privately longed to join in.

Rosalie Parvay's Guest Room

The setting for the bath and massage that so relaxed Avey both in mind and body.

Jay's Records

A vital therapy for Jay when he was young, shunned in favor of work.

The Narrow Bedroom

The scene of many a passionate night of love for Jay and Avey, now only fondly remembered.

The living room at Halsey Street

The wood-floored room Jay and Avey would pretend was one of their many favorite dance halls as they unwound at the end of the day.

Themes

Family Identity

The valuable thing Avey had lost in this story, and the one that so broke her heart was the thing she wishes that night in the hotel room that she and Jay had "[held] like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who would destroy it and claim it as their own." The essential beauties that made them who they were — their music, poetry, flirtation and even her own willingness to acknowledge the flaws and suffering of her own race — were the things she and Jay allowed to atrophy away as they chased with every drop of their energy and attention the money they saw as their salvation from the hopeless poverty they so feared. Even while it was the destruction of their family by unfaithfulness that crept into Avey's imagination as a thing worth fearing, destruction by decay is what their misplaced vigilance produced. She acknowledges in reflection that vigilance would have allowed her and Jay to have had both their financial security and the pleasure they had found in those lost things. Without those things, their marriage and family became routine and soul-less; nothing more than a list of duties and a life of affectation.

Even Marion, their youngest child, grew up judging her parents in Avey's perception for their having prioritized all of the wrong things. Where their marriage was once filled with music, dancing and passionate nights, it became a business partnership focused on accumulation and appearances. Where their child-rearing had been filled with playful passing along of their nation's truths in poetry and play, it became a list of chores that obligated even the children themselves. Where Avey herself used to be a vessel of the style, laughter and deep old memories of her people, she closed herself off from those parts of herself, until she didn't even recognize the woman she presented to the outside world, nor allow even her dreams to remind her of her people.

Redemption

Avey's whole story is a long process of her very body and subconscious insisting on her return to her essential identity, and fate ushering her into the very lap of the civilization from which her lineage had sprung. The images that accompany her physical discomfort take her attention squarely into those moments that taught her about her original glory and essential truths, like her childhood with Great-Aunt Cuney, on the way to Bear Mountain with her father, and sitting in the church of the redemption-preaching pastor. It takes her then into her moments of living her most whole and fully integrated life, like the romantic and sweet times with Jay and their first two daughters, as well as into the moments in which her path most diverged from the one those moments had set her down.

Every moment, however painful, brings her closer to understanding until, on the hotel balcony on that painful night, her understanding is complete, and she can stop shedding the blocks to her happiness and the guilt that came with her defenses, and begin the

process of applying the salves that will heal the wounds inflicted by the disguise. The fact that the very truths and traditions presented to her as a child are delivered to her again on the islands and in her dreams — her great aunt and the pastor of her youth speaking from her dreams to reiterate the themes being celebrated in that place — is the perfect deliverance from a broken and hollow way of living to a life that incorporates, celebrates and is fortified by her cultural identity.

True Friendship

There is in this story a stark contrast between the friends Avey has in the beginning of the story and the ones she has at its conclusion. In the beginning, Thomasina Moore and Clarice are friends with Avey for what they can get from her. Thomasina is happy with Avey inasmuch as Avey is willing to obey and humor her. Clarice is friends with her for her ability to assuage and coddle her own tendency to guilt. The instant Avey asserts her own will in an effort to do something she needs, Thomasina accuses her of dishonesty and Clarice retreats into indulgence of her own self-pity. By contrast, Lebert Joseph extends an earnest invitation to her out of his own conviction that she has lost touch with something she needs, and an intense desire to reunite her with it. He wishes to offer her healing, and is overjoyed when he sees her receiving it, living in her truest and fullest form. Similarly, Rosalie Parvay nurtures her in a completely selfless and reassuring way, conscious of her feelings and intent on putting her at ease in a nearly maternal way. She is happiest when she is able to give to Avey, and sees her receiving what she offers. As a result, Avey is allowed to bloom in the warmth of their friendship where she was suffocating in the presence of the friends she left on the cruise.

Style

Point of View

The story is written from the third-person limited omniscient, offering insight into Avey's thoughts and impressions. Avey is described moving through her retirement trip post-widowhood with friends who only know her in the role of the reserved and dignified wife of a businessman, and are therefore caught off-guard by the uncharacteristically impulsive decision Avey makes to disembark. Their chagrin is a fitting foil to Avey's more raw and honest examination of her current circumstance. As she emerges from the facade she has maintained with her friends, every step she takes back into their world causes her physical pain, and it is in those moments of pain that her mind returns to her past. These flashbacks give insight into both the essential Avey, before she so changed herself to match a social ideal, and how that change eventually came about. Her perspective looking back is characterized by resistance to her aunt, longing for a better life when she is at Halsey Street, and later regretting the effect that longing had on her marriage. These impressions are offered as if the reader is discovering them right along with Avey, so even while it is written in the third-person, the experience of the book is very intimately connected to Avey's experiences.

Setting

The story moves back and forth between several settings. The first is aboard the cruise ship, when the retired, present-day Avey is packing in a rush to leave the cruise. Chronologically, this takes place less than a week before the end of the story. From that point, several flashbacks bring settings into the story from her childhood and different points throughout her marriage. The stories from her childhood take place on Tatem Island with her Great Aunt Cuney, where she was taught about her family and cultural heritage, specifically the stories of the tribes brought over in slave ships, and the ways the churches of the area still incorporated tribal elements in their prayer songs and dances. The stories from her marriage start when she and Jay are still dating and newly weds, deeply and flirtatiously in love, playfully dancing and living deep within their own culture of music and poetry.

From the cruise, she moves to an island in the Caribbean, where she takes a hotel that serves as the setting for her final crashing realization of the part she played in the breaking down of her now departed husband. She leaves the hotel in the morning and walks down the beach upon which she discovers Lebert Joseph's Rum Shop, where she makes the decision to accompany him to the island of Carriacau, where the Beg Pardon and native dances will take place. The boat she takes to the island is the setting for her final purge of tension and her delivery to the island and Rosalie Parvay's house for her nursing back to vibrancy and delivery to the Beg Pardon. The story ends with her back on her way to White Plains, where she lived with Jerome Johnson until he died, and is now resolved to pass along the stories of the things she has seen.

Language and Meaning

There are several dialects incorporated into the telling of this story, but in its majority, it is told in simple, casual English, rich in emotional descriptions. Since Avey is so emotionally raw both in her present-day reflection and in the moments she remembers as she reflects and purges, the words used to describe her are meant to make real the depth of her anger at her Aunt Cuney. The words also make real her anger toward herself, her passionate love for Jay, her desperate fear of losing him and being condemned to the projects with her children, her bewilderment at the physical response of her body to remembering all of that, and ultimately her release from the years of tension as she maintained the facade that had so changed her, her forgiveness of her great aunt, as well as herself, and the hope that came with the resolve to pass along the stories of her family's heritage. The dialect of a Southern preacher plays through her mind when she remembers the story of Jesus' resurrection, her Great Aunt Cuney's southern dialect is vividly reproduced, the powerful black poetry her husband recited finds expression in her memories, and the Patois (French Creole) of Carriacou gently guides Avey to add "pa'done mwe" to her reflections on her great aunt. The emotional tenderness of the language makes the transition from one dialect to another even more gentle, since the stage is already set for the passion of the preacher's story of redemption and the sweetness of the Patois's begging pardon.

Structure

The story follows the journey Avey takes from the cruise to the island, and to the Big Drum Ritual chronologically, and laces that chronology with visits in memory into Avey's past. In the flashbacks, the stories are told just as vividly, still written in the third-person limited omniscient, so that the result is a complete telling of the formative experiences from Avey's life, told in snippets as their subject matter applies to what Avey is experiencing in the Caribbean. That storyline is then divided into four parts. The first, called "Runagate" takes Avey from the ship to her hotel room on the island, and includes the stories about her great aunt, her physical symptoms of unrest on the ship, and a bit of introduction into her life with Jay in both its poverty and its comfort.

Quotes

"Music to usher Jay in the door. Freed of the high heels he body always felt restored to its proper axis. And the hardwood floor which Jay had rescued from layers of oxblood-colored paint when they first moved in and stained earth brown, the floor reverberating with "Cottontail" and "Lester Leaps In" would be like a rich nurturing ground from which she had sprung and to which she could always turn for sustenance." Part I, Chapter 1, page 12

"Worse, among the black faces looking on scandalized, there could be seen the Archers with their blue-eyed, tow-headed children, and the Weinsteins. The only ones for blocks around who had not sold and fled. An uncharitable thought surfaced amid the shame flooding her. Could it be they had stayed on in the hope of one day being treated to a spectacle such as this: at any moment the beast may spring, filling the air with flying things and an unenlightened wailing... It was something Marion was always quoting." Part I, Chapter 3, page 45

"Nevertheless, for months afterwards, she would find herself thinking — again for no apparent reason — of the practice among the Eskimos long ago of banishing their old people out on the ice to die. She would see — the image vivid for a second in her mind — the bent figure of an old woman, her face hidden in the deep ruff of fur around her hood, left huddled on some snowy waste, while the sleds filled with the members of her tribe raced away toward warmer ground. For months the perplexing vision had come and gone." Part I, Chapter 6, page 81

"Part of her knew better than this. That part of her also knew, perhaps better than he did, that it wasn't really a question of some woman, real or imagined. Even if she did exist, she was merely the stand-in for the real villain whom they couldn't talk about, who stood coolly waiting for them amid the spreading blight if Halsey Street below. And there didn't seem to be any escaping him. It was as if the five flights of stairs from their apartment to the street had become the giant sliding pond inside Steeplechase Park at Coney Island which she remembered from her childhood, and that she and Jay had already begun their inevitable slide down." Part II, Chapter 1, page 97

"Jay. He went about those years like a runner in the heat of a long and punishing marathon, his every muscle tensed and straining, his body being pushed to its limits; and on his face a clenched and dogged look that was to become almost his sole expression over the years. He ran as though he had put on blinders to shut out anything around him that might prove distracting, and thus cause him, if only momentarily, to break his stride. Even things that had once been important to him, that he needed, such as the music, the old blues records that had restored him at the end of the day, found themselves abandoned on the sidelines, out of his line of vision." Part II, Chapter 2, page 115

"'...I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young...'" he loved to recite, standing in his pajamas in the middle of the living room, while Avey, Sis in her lap, sat

listening and eating coffee cake in the armchair.
"'I built my hut by the Congo and it lulled me/ to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids/ above it...'" — with a raised hand he indicated their great height, their grandeur. Then quietly: "'...I've known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers./ My soul has grown deep like the rivers.'" Part II, Chapter 4, page 125

"Dimly, through the fog of her grief, Avey Johnson understood this. Not important in themselves so much as in the larger meaning they held and in the qualities which imbued them. Avey Johnson could not have spelled out just what the qualities were, although in a way that went beyond words, that spoke from the blood, she knew. Something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives. They had possessed qualities as transcendent as the voices on the radio each Sunday, and as joyous as their embrace could be at times in that narrow bedroom." Part II, Chapter 5, page 137

"Would it have been possible to have done both? That is, to have wrested, as they had done over all those years, the means needed to rescue them from Halsey Street and to see the children through, while preserving, safeguarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way. The most vivid, the most valuable part of themselves! They could have done both, it suddenly seemed to her, bowed over in tears there on the hotel balcony. She and Jay could have managed both." Part II, Chapter 5, page 139

"He was one of those old people who give the impression of having undergone a lifetime trial by fire which they somehow managed to turn to their own good in the end; using the fire to burn away everything in them that could possibly decay, everything mortal. So that what remains finally are only their cast-iron hearts, the few muscles and bones tempered to the consistency of steel needed to move them about, the black skin annealed long ago by the sun's blaze and thus impervious to all other fires; and hidden deep within, out of harm's way, the indestructible will: old people who have the essentials to go on forever." Part III, Chapter 2, page 161

"The man's relief at this was so great it weakened him and he had to sit down. 'So you know, you remember Juba!' And from the way he said it, omitting the word 'the' and with the heightened note in his voice, it was as if he meant more than just the dance. He might have been also referring to the place that bore the name: Juba, the legendary city at the foot of the White Nile. And it was clear from his tone that he wasn't thinking of the forgotten backwater it had become, a place where lepers and goats freely roamed the sun-baked streets, but the city he remembered it from memories that had come down to him in the blood: as Juba, the once-proud, imperial seat at the heart of equatoria." Part III, Chapter 3, page 179

"Avey Johnson stirred fitfully as the bewildering events of the last few days laid siege to her again, and immediately — her eyes still closed — she felt her elderly neighbors on the bench turn toward her. A quieting hand came to rest on her arm and they both began speaking to her in Patois — soothing, lilting words of maternal solicitude. And just as they had relieved her of the heavy pocketbook and her hat earlier, their murmurous

voices now set about divesting her of the troubling thoughts, quietly and deftly stripping her of them as if they were so many layers of winter clothing she had mistakenly put on for the excursion." Part III, Chapter 4, page 197

"She was oblivious to everything but the sluggish flesh she was working between her hands as if it were the dough of the bread she had baked that morning or clay that had yet to be shaped and fired. Until finally under the vigorous kneading and pummeling, Avey Johnson became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's roused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again. And this warmth and the faint stinging reached up the entire length of her thighs.... The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center. Until finally they reached her heart. And as they encircled her heart and it responded, there was the sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body. 'Bon.'" Part IV, Chapter 1, page 223

"And the single, dark, plangent note this produced, like that from the deep bowing of a cello, sounded like the distillation of a thousand sorrow songs. For an instant the power of it brought the singing and dancing to a halt — or so it appeared. The theme of separation and loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they had come. After centuries of forgetfulness and even denial, they refused to go away. The note was a lamentation that could hardly have come from the rum keg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart." Part IV, Chapter 2, page 245

Topics for Discussion

What do you think had been the value in Avey's mind of refusing to acknowledge the abuses of her race? Do you see anything like it in the culture around you today?

Describe the differences you see in the three Johnson daughters, and the influence their respective childhoods might have had in the development of their personalities.

What do you see as Avey's turning point, when she moves from fear to exploration, from regret to resolve? Do you think there is more than one turning point for Avey in this story?

What do you see as the most valuable part of the excursion for the people who celebrate it every year? What is the most powerful part for Avey?

What makes Lebert Joseph's invitation so persuasive for Avey? Why do you think he thought she so badly needed to be there?

What is the value of remembering and living in unity with the people of one's ancestry? Do you recognize the same value today?

Is there a way for people to live both in unity with and pride in one's own people of heritage as well as in cooperation and celebration of the differences of the people with whom one shares a country? Describe how that harmony can take place in your community. Do those principals apply globally?

What does this story teach you about friendship? Marriage? Raising children?