

# **The Pecan Man Study Guide**

**The Pecan Man by Cassie Dandridge Selleck**

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## Plot Summary

“The Pecan Man” is a historical confessional novel by Cassie Dandridge Selleck which recalls a child rape, a murder, and a cover-up in Mayville, Florida, all revolving around a man known locally as the “Pecan Man”. When the novel begins, it is the summer of 1976. Ora Lee Beckworth, recently widowed, hires a local black woman named Blanche Lowery to keep house for her. Ora also takes on a local black homeless man named Eldred “Eddie” Mims – the Pecan Man – to do yardwork for her. Eddie is known as the Pecan Man due to the sacks of fallen pecans he collects from the pecan trees that line Main Street.

Locals are unsure of Eddie at first, with most children finding him to be scary. However, Eddie soon becomes a fixture in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, Ora and Blanche move from not only having a working relationship, but to having a growing friendship as well. Blanche has five children – a son named Marcus, and four daughters named Patrice, Danita, ReNetta, and Grace. Late in September, Blanche and Ora discover that 5-year-old Grace has been brutally raped by Skipper Kornegay, son of the local police chief. Blanche knows that justice for her daughter will be impossible in a small Southern town. Against the advice of Ora, she tells Grace that Grace has dreamt it all.

As the autumn sets in, a degree of normalcy returns to Blanche’s family. However, seeing Skipper in the town’s homecoming parade causes Grace to scream, and Ora, Blanche, and her other children to turn away from the parade before getting to see Patrice marching in it. When she questions why no one was there to see her leading the cheerleading squad, Ora and Blanche blame Grace’s terror on the police car sirens.

Thanksgiving rolls around, and Ora hosts Blanche, her family, and Eddie at her house. Eddie asks how Grace is doing after the incident – something about which Marcus, on leave from Fort Bragg, has no idea. Marcus follows Eddie when he leaves, pressing Eddie for more information. It was Eddie who found Grace following the rape, and delivered Grace to Blanche. Enraged, Marcus finds Skipper in town, only to be chased by Skipper who wields a knife. Marcus and Skipper fight, with Marcus killing Skipper. Ora helps Marcus concoct a plan to get out of town. Marcus is killed in a car accident while driving away. Eddie is targeted for the murder of Skipper. He is beaten up and arrested.

Ora decides she will do whatever she can to clear Eddie’s name. She works closely with her friend Harley T. Odell, the circuit court judge, to keep Eddie’s bail low and to make sure he is no longer treated harshly by the police. Ora does her best to keep Blanche and her family optimistic, hosting Christmas and making sure that Blanche and her children have as wonderful a holiday as possible.

Eddie, meanwhile, decides he will change his plea from innocent to guilty, hoping for a plea bargain that will give him life in prison. That in turn will give him shelter, food, water, a bed, and a toilet – things which he has been living without. It will also spare Blanche the truth about Marcus’s part in the murder. Ora’s conscience is haunted by Eddie’s



decision, but has no choice but to go along with it. Blanche likewise consents to things playing out as they do. Ora, however, makes it known privately to the police chief the truth of everything. As a result, Eddie's plea bargain is quietly accepted, and he is given life in prison.

Decades pass. Blanche dies in 1998 at the age of 59. Grace, a drug-addict, is convinced by Patrice to go into rehab. Eddie dies in 2001, leaving behind a letter for Ora which explains some things about himself. Blanche is Eddie's illegitimate daughter from before the time he served with the Tuskegee Airmen. The entire novel itself turns out to be a dictated confessional account from Ora. She doesn't know whether she will end up in jail or in a nursing home, but insists the truth must be known to clear Eddie's name once and for all, and to allow Grace to truly confront the past.



# Chapters 1 – 6

## Summary

Chapter 1 – The little town of Mayville, Florida, prepares for the July Fourth Bicentennial in 1976. Fifty-seven year-old widow and mother Ora Lee Beckworth has a black maid named Blanche. Blanche lives in a section of Mayville known by all as “Colored Town”. Blanche was born light-skinned enough to cause her father to abandon his wife, declaring her a cheater. Blanche’s mother chose Blanche’s name from a book of baby names, deciding it was a fitting and pretty name. Blanche herself ultimately came to raise five children, and two grandchildren after one of her daughters ran off with a drug dealer. In retrospect, Ora believes fate bound her and Blanche together through the Pecan Man.

Pecan trees line Main Street in Mayville. Many of the residents are unhappy about the opening of Lifeways, a company that provides counseling and services to addicts, substances abusers, and others. There is also a patch of woods in which an old, black homeless man lives beginning in 1975. He is known as the Pecan Man due to always carrying a sack of pecans tied to the handlebar of his bike. He is old and weathered like a ghost, which scares many people.

Chapter 2 – Ora decides that it is time the truth be told. The Pecan Man’s real name is Eldred “Eddie” Mims. Ora explains that he ultimately comes to be arrested for the murder of 16-year-old Skipper Kornegay, and dies in jail 25 years later. In the spring of 1976, she hires him to mow her lawn and tend to her gardens for \$10 a week, plus lunch and tea. He is gentle and kind, believing \$10 is too much. Miss Dovey Kincaid later swings by to visit. She is a gossip, and thinks it is not a good idea to have Eddie in the neighborhood more than he has to be. She believes no good will come of it. Ora tells Dovey to get on home.

Chapter 3 – Eddie’s presence in the neighborhood becomes routine, and people stop being afraid of him. The autumn approaches. Larger chain stores are causing many local and independent stores to go out of business. For example, Ora must now go to Winn Dixie to shop for groceries whereas in the past, she went to Thriftway downtown. On September 24, returning home from the Winn Dixie, Ora is surprised to see Blanche, and her youngest child, Grace. Grace has cried herself to sleep in Blanche’s arms while Grace is still crying. Ora puts Grace to sleep in the guest room, realizing there is blood between Grace’s legs. Ora then holds Blanche as Blanche breaks down.

Chapter 4 – Sixteen year-old Patrice calls Ora’s house to see why her mom isn’t home. Ora tells Patrice that Blanche is not feeling well and will be spending the night. Blanche, meanwhile, worries about going to the police or to the hospital because Chief Ralph Kornegay’s son was the one who raped Grace. She fears retribution, and knows the police won’t believe her because she is black. Ora argues that something must be done, but Blanche wants time to think about what can be done. The next morning, Blanche



reveals to Ora that Grace has been informed what happened was just a really bad dream.

Blanche decides she will keep Grace home from school for a week, and change her bus route. Ora determines that Grace should spend some time with her every day for a few hours, taking the bus to the corner. Ora wonders why Blanche hasn't told her more about her kids, but Blanche doesn't answer. While Grace is in the bath, Ora goes to J.C. Penney to buy a new outfit and shoes for Grace. Back at home, Ora and Blanche determine that Grace's clothing should not be washed.

Chapter 5 – October comes on, and a routine develops. Eddie continues to tend to the yard work while Grace settles into time spent with Ora. Ora makes Grace a witch costume for Halloween. After they leave, Skipper Kornegay shows up with Donnie Allred and Allen Madison, all without costumes but looking for candy. Ora is not happy to see Skipper, contending they are now men and do not need candy. Skipper and Ora stare one another down. Ora throws candy at his feet and then goes inside. November comes on, and Blanche's other children grow comfortable visiting Ora, including Patrice who will be leading the Mayville High Cheerleading Squad in the Homecoming Parade. When Grace sees Skipper in his father's squad car during the parade, she screams. Ora then brings Grace inside. Ora herself becomes sick to her stomach from the experience.

Chapter 6 – Patrice is unhappy that no one was around to see her lead the cheerleading squad in the parade. Danita and ReNetta, Blanche's twins, blame it on the police car sirens scaring Grace. Patrice is worried for Grace, believing that Grace hasn't been herself lately. Blanche says Grace is only tired. Ora helps the twins with their homework. The twins are amazed Ora has been to college. Ora wonders how her life would have been different if she had lived for herself, and not for the man she married. While polishing silverware for dinner, Ora explains to the twins that she met her husband, Walter, while home from college for her father's funeral in 1938. She finished Agna Scott College in Atlanta before marriage to have work to fall back on if being a wife and mother didn't work out. Ora was never able to have children, but had a happy life where she was able to meet the expectations of a wife.

## **Analysis**

"The Pecan Man" is a historical confessional novel by Cassie Dandridge Selleck which recalls a child rape, a murder, and a cover-up in Mayville, Florida, all revolving around a man known locally as the "Pecan Man". Mayville, Florida, is a Southern town in transition from the past to the future. Tradition, attitudes, and culture of the past is clashing, meshing, or submitting to the present. The past thus becomes an important theme. While the Civil Rights Movement has changed much, racial attitudes and the past persist. For example, Ora – clearly not a racist herself – refers to the black part of town as "Colored Town" in the novel, acknowledging that nobody calls black people "colored" anymore, but that it is merely out of habit and the past.



Other changes come to Mayville that not everyone likes. Many of the old local stores have gone out of business as major chain stores have moved to the area. Many of the changes have to do with race, and here, the theme of racism becomes especially important. Ora herself not only hires a black woman, Blanche, to tend house, but actually befriends her as well. It is something that would not always happen in the past. Ora's decision to hire Eddie, a black homeless man, to tend to her lawn, is met with suspicion and distrust at first by the white neighbors.

The racism of the past also persists in ugly ways. Five year-old Grace is brutally raped by Skipper Kornegay, the white son of the white police chief. It is unlikely that Skipper would have raped a young white girl, knowing that the chance of punishment would be unavoidable. Skipper's reasoning for raping a young black girl is borne out by Blanche. Blanche tells Ora the police will not believe her or Grace because they are black, and Blanche fears retribution from the police, who are all white. All Blanche can do is to tell Grace she had a bad dream.

Sadly, Blanche accepts things the way that they currently are. While the racism of Mayville is not legally institutionalized, it is attitudinally ingrained in the minds of most Mayville residents, black and white. While Blanche may have legal recourse to gain justice for her daughter, she refuses to pursue anything because she does not want to rock the boat. Just because something is legal does not make it possible. Instead, Blanche changes Grace's bus route, and arranges for Grace to visit with Ora each day.

Interestingly enough, at one point, Ora wonders why Blanche hasn't told Ora more about her children. While it is clear that Ora and Blanche are slowly becoming friends, the reader also recognizes something that Ora does not at this point: racial attitudes. In the past, socialization and friendly sharing were things mostly done among one's own race. In the present, the lines are beginning to blur. Despite this, Blanche still considers herself to have a "place", and sharing things about her family are not something to be done with one's employer. This will change over time, however.

Family itself also emerges as an important theme early in the novel. It is clear that Blanche deeply loves her children, and is horrified by what has happened to Grace. She is thus trying to do everything she can in order to help Grace as much as she believes Grace can be helped. It is also clear that Ora herself is without family. Having recently been widowed, Ora appears to have no one in her life beyond Blanche and Blanche's family. It is clear that Ora is lonely, and her reaching out to Blanche is born not just of human kindness and decency, but out of loneliness as well. Blanche's family soon becomes a fixture around Ora's house. This hints at the kind of family that will come to exist in future chapters, as Blanche, her children, and Ora essentially become family.

Ora herself also becomes a locus for moral courage early in the novel. Her decision to hire Eddie when everyone writes him off as a homeless black man – with some even being afraid of him – speaks to Ora's moral quality and character as a human being. Indeed, Ora goes so far as to defend Eddie against nosy and racist neighbors. In that time and in that place, when reputation meant everything, for Ora to go against the



prevailing grain to defend Eddie is an act of tremendous moral courage. It will not be the last time Ora demonstrates such courage.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Ora take on Eddie to do work at her house? How does she respond to neighbors who question her decision?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Blanche insist on telling Grace that her rape was a horrible dream rather than going to the police, or to any law enforcement agency? Can Blanche be faulted for this? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Ora wonder about why Blanche has not shared more about her children? Why do you believe Blanche has not shared more with Ora about her children?

## Vocabulary

euphemism, feeble, etiquette, blatantly, gaunt, studious, admonitions, feign, bemused





# Chapters 7 – 12

## Summary

Chapter 7 – Thanksgiving arrives. Blanche's family attends. Her son, Marcus, is sent out to invite Eddie. Eddie happily accepts, and leads those gathered in prayer before dinner. Ora is happy to have a full table of people and activity. Eddie explains he has been in Alabama for the last few weeks, visiting his daughter, but that he won't live near her because some things just aren't meant to be. They do not have much in common. After dinner, Eddie asks how Grace is getting along after he found her screaming for her mother. Marcus demands to know what happened to Grace, and Eddie leaves the house, apologizing for speaking out of turn. Blanche says that Grace fell. Marcus does not believe her, and goes out after Eddie.

Chapter 8 – Ora calls a cab for Blanche and her children, and tells Blanche she and her children are family. Later that night, at 9:30, Marcus arrives at Ora's, saying he is in trouble and needs help. He is covered with blood, and appears to have been in a fight. Marcus explains that Eddie saw three boys headed out of the woods, one of them zipping up their pants, after which he heard Grace screaming. Marcus explains he has killed Skipper after Skipper laughed about raping Grace, and then chasing Marcus with a knife. Marcus managed to get a hold of the knife, and stabbed Skipper numerous times.

Chapter 9 – Marcus spends the night at Ora's. The next morning, she decides to sell Marcus her husband's old car, gives him enough cash for a hotel room in Atlanta, and tells him that when he returns to Fort Bragg, to explain away his injuries as a bar fight. She tells Marcus to memorize the story and not to stray from it. She has Marcus leave Blanche a note explaining he has gone back to Fort Bragg. She then cleans the house to eliminate traces of Marcus, washes his clothes with bleach, and packs them away to burn later. When Blanche arrives, she is saddened to learn of Marcus's departure. Ora explains he left because he was so upset. Ora thinks about how sometimes doing the right thing doesn't seem right. She knows helping Marcus is right. Two police officers arrive to reveal that Marcus has been killed on I-75 in a car accident.

Chapter 10 – Marcus is buried at Mount Zion AME Church cemetery. Two days later, Eddie is arrested for Marcus's murder. Dovey Kincaid shows Ora the newspaper story about it. Dovey harps on the fact that Ora called Eddie a harmless old man. Ora orders Dovey to leave her house. Ora goes to see Eddie in jail. He has been brutally beaten by the police for resisting arrest, according to Ralph Kornegay. She encourages the officer watching Eddie, Chip Smallwood, to find some tomato soup so Eddie can eat. Chip consents to doing so, apologetically handcuffing Eddie before leaving the room. Ora tells Eddie she will get him out of there, prays, and cries until the Public Defender arrives.



Chapter 11 – Jeffrey Thatcher introduces himself as the Public Defendant. Ora explains that Eddie attended Thanksgiving Dinner at her house the day of the murder. Eddie denies speaking to anyone after leaving Ora's house. Eddie denies the murder, and denies there is anything to implicate him. Ora wants Eddie released on bail. Thatcher says it will be difficult to do, but he will try. Chip returns with a cup of soup. Ora asks Chip about how he's getting along with his parents. He says he doesn't see them much anymore, though he is still close to his mom after a falling-out with his father.

Having taught Chip in Sunday School, Ora knows Chip is an honorable young man. She presses him for information about Eddie's arrest. He explains he wasn't there when they first brought Eddie in, but had arrived by the time they brought Eddie out of the infirmary. He says he can't say whether or not Eddie put up a fight because he wasn't there. He explains that if he was there, he wouldn't have let the others beat Eddie the way they did. Ora then calls her friend, Circuit Court Judge Harley T. Odell, known to everyone as "Poopsie" since childhood. He agrees to look into the case. Ora then calls Ralph Kornegay, expresses her condolences, and says that Eddie is innocent. She tells Ralph she'll hold him personally accountable if Eddie is hurt again.

Chapter 12 – Ora visits Eddie every day, bringing him soft food to eat. Ora does her best to keep Eddie's mind off of things by talking about the coming spring and what they'll plant in her garden. Eddie isn't too worried about the trial, believing the truth will see him through. He explains he saw Marcus twice the night of the killing, before and after. He explains he hasn't told his attorney about meeting with Marcus to spare Blanche more horror and trauma.

## Analysis

The theme of family becomes central in this section of the novel. Ora not only hosts Blanche and her children for Thanksgiving dinner, but also hosts Eddie as well. It is clear that Blanche and Ora have become better friends since Grace's rape, as Blanche has come to rely on Ora for much. Indeed, Ora calls Blanche and her family children on Thanksgiving night – something which makes a serious impression on Blanche. The relationship between her and Ora has moved from white employer/black domestic to friends to family.

However, the secret of Grace's rape cannot be hidden for long. Marcus, on leave from Fort Bragg, finds out about the rape through Eddie. Accordingly, he sets off to find Skipper. Skipper not only confirms the rape, but sadistically laughs about it. It is a clear indication of the racial motivation for the crime, as Skipper believes a black child is worth less than a white child, and worthy of laughter over so heinous a crime. When Skipper goes after Marcus with a knife, Marcus acts in self-defense, killing Skipper.

Given the prevailing racial attitudes of the time, coupled with the fact that Marcus has killed the son of the police chief, there is no hope for Marcus at all. He is black while Skipper is white. It does not matter how Skipper was killed, but only that Skipper – a white boy – was killed by Marcus, a black boy. Marcus knows he must leave town after



consulting Ora for help. Ora herself knows Marcus is in a serious predicament. Her insistence that Marcus leave town appears to be for the best for Marcus. Marcus agrees. While the morality of the situation is tenuous at best (Marcus killing in self-defense), the decision to flee after the commission of the killing is in and of itself morally questionable.

Marcus is tragically killed in an auto accident the very next morning. One of two things can be supposed – that either Marcus committed suicide in grief over everything that happened, or that Marcus was beside himself with fear and unable to focus his mind, leading to the accident. Two days later, Eddie is arrested for the crime of Skipper's death. It is clear the arrest is racially motivated, and that Eddie himself is a scapegoat. Not only is Eddie beaten nearly to death upon arrest, but the fact that the town's only homeless black man should be singled out for a crime with no real evidence is racially telling.

Ora herself knows the racist attitudes prevailing in the arrest, and works to stop them. Her moral courage – and the theme of moral courage – show through in Eddie's arrest. She personally challenges the police chief to treat Eddie better, or she'll hold Kornegay personally accountable. She also uses her friendship with Judge Odell to press Eddie's case, and personally vouches for Eddie at Thanksgiving. This takes tremendous moral courage on Ora's part, but the reader also recognizes there is a degree of moral culpability as Ora reveals nothing to Blanche or anyone else about Marcus's role in Skipper's murder.

Moral courage can also be found in the character of Chip Smallwood, who defies the racial tendencies of the police force. Chip, though he must follow lawful procedures regarding Eddie, nevertheless clearly feels for the man. Chip contends that had he been present during Eddie's arrest, he would not have let Eddie be physically assaulted. Ora recognizes Chip's moral character, and the two slowly becomes allies in their common struggle in defense of Eddie. For Chip to go against institutionalized power in the police force demonstrates profound moral courage. Whites can be ostracized just as easily as blacks. The past continues to hold sway thematically.

Indeed, the past also holds sway over Eddie in the present as well. Not only do racial attitudes originating in the past affect him in the present, but also his own past personal history as well. Small pieces of Eddie's past are revealed. It is revealed that he has at least one daughter in Alabama, but that he and his daughter do not get along. Although he won't get into why, it is clear that there is something from the past which continues to divide them.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do the police target Eddie for the murder of Skipper? What causes them to do so?



## Discussion Question 2

Why does Ora refuse to tell Blanche the truth about Marcus's departure? Why does she continue to refuse to reveal anything about Marcus to the police, Thatcher, or Odell? Is she morally justified in doing so? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Ora know that she can trust Chip? Do you believe Chip is trustworthy? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

dispatched, fastidious, transgressions, solemn, exonerate, combative, monotone



# Chapters 13 – 18

## Summary

Chapter 13 – Christmas rolls around. Every year, Ora gives Blanche a large bonus so her children will have a good holiday. Ora takes advantage of the colder weather to burn Marcus's old clothes. Blanche doesn't want to celebrate Christmas after the death of Marcus. Ora decides to host Christmas at her house instead since it will be her first without Walter, and because Blanche's family deserves a good Christmas.

Chapter 14 – Ora goes to Blanche's house on Canal Street and is surprised to find Patrice home alone with an older man named Cedric, who appears to be about twenty. Cedric leaves for work as Patrice comes to the door, saying it isn't what it appears to be. Ora then brings Patrice out to do some Christmas shopping, including for Patrice herself. When Patrice tries to pick up the packages for Ora, the clerk calls the manager, accusing her of trying to steal. Ora is incensed, and goes to find Patrice in Manager Red Bascomb's office. She explains everything, and Red apologizes to Ora and to Patrice. Patrice then goes and coolly collects the packages. Ora later chastises herself for ascribing Patrice's innocence to Patrice being with her, rather than to Patrice being innocent in and of herself.

Chapter 15 – Decorations go up at Ora's house on Friday afternoon. It is eleven by the time they finish, so Ora simply has Blanche and her family stay the night. Patrice says her family doesn't have enough beds at home for everyone. Patrice also admits to missing Marcus. Ora apologizes for what happened at the department store with the packages. Patrice says that it is okay, that she is used to it by now.

Chapter 16 – Ora finishes Christmas shopping, including the purchase of four bikes for Patrice, Grace, and the twins. At home, she meets with Judge Harley Odell. Odell explains he believes Eddie didn't kill Skipper, but something must be done with Eddie until the trial. In exchange for cutting bail in half to \$50,000s for Ora to pay, Odell wants Ora to stop calling him "Poopsie" and to allow Eddie to stay in the guest room. Ora is both pleased and stunned that she will have Eddie staying with her.

Chapter 17 – Odell's secretary, Clara Jean Munderson, calls Ora Monday morning with information on posting bail. Blanche is stunned that Ora is posting Eddie's bail. At the bank, Ora deals with head teller Seely Graves. Ora tells Seely to keep the transaction to herself. She then meets with Clara and invites Clara to dinner. Clara gently refuses, saying she may have a date for Christmas Eve, but doesn't want to tell Odell until she knows where it is going, because Odell has been like a father to her. The invitation is extended to her date. Ora then meets with Odell, who says that Eddie will be transferred to Ora's house by Chip Smallwood. Odell explains he has made it known he will be watching Ralph and what happens, so no trouble is expected. When he arrives, Ora and Blanche help him settle in. Ora receives many phone calls about Eddie, assuring people he is harmless.



Chapter 18 – School lets out for Christmas, and Ora busies herself baking cookies with Blanche’s children and Eddie. They make the cookies cut into the shapes of Santa Claus brown with cocoa powder. Ora reflects on how one’s view of the world often reflects one’s skin color. Grace hugs Eddie, thinking he looks sad.

## Analysis

Family becomes especially important thematically as this section of the novel unfolds. It is clear that Ora, Blanche, and Blanche’s children have become something akin to a family. That Ora continues to host holidays at her house – including Christmas – speaks volumes about how much Ora, Blanche, and Blanche’s children have come to mean to each other. This is crucial given the rupture of Blanche’s family between Grace’s rape and Marcus’s death. Ora, in effect, becomes the glue that holds all of them together, and gives them any semblance of normality. Even the recent past is as powerful as the distant past.

Ora’s familial tendencies – including her kindness and her loneliness – has her reaching out to other lonely people as well, such as the young Clara Munderson. She invites Clara, and her date, to Christmas Eve festivities. With Eddie now living at Ora’s house, it is a foregone conclusion that he will be included as family in the Christmas celebration. Even Blanche’s children have come to see Eddie as something like family – an important harbinger for future revelations.

In many ways, Ora becomes almost a grandmotherly figure to Blanche’s children, from helping them with homework to purchasing things for them for Christmas to looking out for their interests. For example, Ora is surprised to find the teenaged Patrice at home alone with an older man – something Ora questions. Any indignations suffered by Blanche’s children also become suffered by Ora. When Patrice experiences racially-fueled assumptions that she is a thief at the department store, it is Ora who swings to Patrice’s defense swiftly and surely.

Indeed, Ora herself is not without racial tendencies. She is, however, able to identify these tendencies and to correct them. For example, she chastises herself for explaining away Patrice’s innocence in the department store based on the fact that Patrice is with her rather than the fact that Patrice is innocent only because she is innocent. Mild racism can also be seen in other places, involuntarily or voluntarily. For example, Blanche is surprised that Ora is posting Eddie’s bail, based not just on the amount of money needed to post bail, but because it is Eddie who is going to be bailed out.

Indeed, while baking Christmas cookies with Blanche’s children, Ora recognizes how much one’s skin color can influence one’s perceptions of the world. For example, without thinking, Ora bakes cookies which depict Santa as white, while Blanche’s children prefer cookies that depict Santa as black. The Christmas cookies thus become symbolic of racial assumptions that some people make at some point or another about the world. These sorts of racial perceptions are genuinely harmless, but they are something recognizable as having to be worked at to be overcome.



## Discussion Question 1

What is telling about the Christmas cookie cutting scene, and the store cashier and manager questioning Patrice in the department store? What revelations do these instances lead to Ora about race and about herself?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways do Blanche, her children, and Ora begin to operate like a family? What does this mean for them emotionally, especially at Christmas as it relates to the past? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Ora criticize herself for arguing for Patrice's innocence based on the fact that Patrice is with her at the department store? Do you believe Ora is justified in her self-criticism? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

nonchalantly, bewildered, mutual, preemptive, prerequisite, blurted, bigotry, punctual, chided





# Chapters 19 – 24

## Summary

Chapter 19 – Final preparations are made for Christmas, with Eddie helping with the bikes when they are delivered so they are not seen by the children. It turns out that Clara's date is Chip Smallwood, who helps set the bikes out when the children are in bed. Ora approves of Chip dating Clara. On Christmas morning, the children are thrilled with their gifts, especially the bikes. Blanche, however, ends up crying because Marcus planned to buy everyone bikes with his Army money.

Chapter 20 – One afternoon after dinner, Odell stops by. Grace blurts out that she hates having bad dreams. Odell asks about these bad dreams. Ora tries to intervene, but Grace explains the dream is about a white-haired boy. Blanche then sends Grace to the kitchen to get Odell some ice cream. Odell asks Ora about what is going on. Ora says the bad dream has been inspired by the death of talk about Skipper's murder. Odell is still suspicious.

Chapter 21 – New Year's comes on. Eddie goes out under the explanation that he is going to the post office to pick something up on Patrice's bike. When he doesn't return, Ora calls Chip to help her search for Eddie. They check the Greyhound Bus Station and The County Line Bar just south of town. The bar serves black patrons through a window at the back so the white patrons inside do not become combative despite the fact that the bar owner would willingly serve black people inside otherwise. Chip is amazed that sort of thing is still going on.

They drive into the black area of town, but still cannot find Eddie. They then check the woods, and find him there. He has been drinking and reflecting on the past, including his children in Alabama. Chip helps bring Eddie back. Ora assures Eddie that Chip knows he did not kill Skipper. Chip is legally forced to report the incident. Odell warns Eddie that drinking again will result in bail being revoked. Eddie reveals he usually sends his pension to his daughter, Tressa, or spends it on food. He often spends it on alcohol, however. The pension comes from his time as a fighter pilot, having trained in Tuskegee, Alabama.

Chapter 22 – Eddie decides he wants to change his plea to guilty. It will get him into jail, won't cost him a cent, and give him three meals, clean living conditions, a bed, and a toilet. Ora understands why Eddie wants to plead guilty, but cannot allow it. She says he will be paying a debt he does not owe. Eddie says life sometimes works out that way, and that he has caused his own share of heartache in the world. Eddie further contends that only ill can come from the truth now, especially after Ora's cover-up of Marcus. Eddie hopes for a plea bargain. He meets with Jeffrey Thatcher, who agrees to look into it. Ora then calls Ralph Kornegay.





Chapter 23 – Eddie’s arraignment is set for January 26, 1977. Chip brings the old barber’s chair Eddie has kept in the woods to Ora’s house, where Eddie places it in the garage. Blanche is horrified that Eddie is going to plead guilty. Ora, meanwhile, has told Ralph the truth about everything –including Skipper’s rape of Grace. It is now up to Ralph how things will proceed. Within a year, Ora explains, Ralph will die of a heart attack. His wife follows two years later.

Chapter 24 – Eddie is sent to the state correctional facility after his plea bargain where Ora visits him regularly. Eddie’s health slowly begins to improve. Ora, meanwhile, encourages Patrice to apply for college. Patrice hadn’t previously considered college because she didn’t think it would be affordable, and because the school guidance counselor never spoke to her about it. Ora encourages Patrice to ask for help whenever she needs it. Patrice explains she always wanted to be a lawyer.

## Analysis

As the novel continues, the theme of family remains strong. This is especially true through Christmas as Blanche, her children, Eddie, Clara, and Chip converge on Ora’s house. Ora has a full house for the first time in years, and for the first time with people (apart from her husband) whom she actually considers to be family. Ora is thrilled to have everyone around, and Blanche’s children are thrilled with how everything has worked out for them. They are able to enjoy a celebration as well as they can given their brother’s untimely death.

Ora comes to greatly appreciate that Clara is dating Chip Smallwood. Her grandmotherly ways are on clear display as she gives Clara her approval about dating Chip. It is something that Clara takes to heart. While it is clear that Clara views Odell as a father figure, it is clear she views Ora as something of either a mother or a grandmother figure. The approval delights Clara.

The secret about Grace’s rape continues to bind Blanche and Ora together in ways beyond friendship. They both scramble to prevent Odell from learning about the rape after New Year’s when Odell drops by for a visit after dinner. Odell himself has demonstrated tremendous moral courage in following through with overseeing Eddie’s treatment, and the entire pending case.

The case itself becomes a source of moral courage for Eddie. Eddie decides that he is going to attempt a plea bargain in exchange for life in prison. His decision to do this can be considered even heroic, for it will not only guarantee him a home in prison, but will protect Blanche from the truth about her son Marcus. Eddie believes that Blanche has had more than her share of heartache. Eddie says that he himself has caused more than his own share of heartache to others, so it is about time he takes some away from another.

When Eddie goes missing, it is Chip who assists Ora in finding Eddie. Chip brings Ora all over town in order to do so. It is through Chip that Ora is exposed to the racialized



culture that still persists in certain parts of town. One such place is The County Line Bar, where black patrons are served out back through a window. This is done to keep the white regulars inside happy. The bar owner himself would serve blacks inside the bar, Chip explains, but will not in order to keep his white regulars happy. Chip himself cannot get over the fact that such things still go on.

When Eddie is found, he is very drunk. More of his past is revealed in his inebriated state. He confirms that he spends much of his money on alcohol. He also confirms that he served with the Tuskegee Airmen during World War II, service from which he still draws a pension. Much of Eddie's past, however, still remains a mystery.

Chip's decision to help Eddie home, though he must report the incident, again demonstrates tremendous moral courage on his part. He, like Ora, goes against the tide of prevailing attitudinal racism and risks alienation. However, Chip cannot go against what he knows to be true. The truth itself becomes important in dispensing with racism as it relates to Eddie's case. Ralph Kornegay, confronted with the truth about his son, refuses to contest the plea bargain. This allows the reader to draw one of two conclusions. Either the rape of Grace was not Skipper's first such incident, or Ralph had to protect his family's reputation by letting the truth be buried with his son. The truth later goes to the grave with Ralph himself.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that Ralph Kornegay refused to contest Eddie's plea bargain? What effect does the truth appear to have on Ralph? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Eddie decide to plead guilty? Do you believe he is morally justifiable and commendable in his actions? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do the Christmas gifts of bicycles cause Blanche to cry? How does Ora respond? Why?

## Vocabulary

Vehemently, rumped, enunciated, rational, acquittal, meddling, arraignment



# Chapters 25 – 30

## Summary

Chapter 25 – Walter was a good, decent, and intelligent man who carefully planned everything, including the operation of his insurance agency until Ora decided what to do with it. At the age of 58, Ora decides to return to work to pursue every avenue for paying for Patrice's college. She becomes the first young woman to receive help from a scholarship fund set up through the agency for deserving young women.

Over the next 20 years, Ora continues working for the agency, and resumes the community involvement she neglected after Walter died. Blanche becomes Ora's closest friend, and often attends community functions with her. While Blanche may have changed out of her work uniform, Ora remembers, not everyone stopped equating Blanche with a domestic servant to be ordered about no matter where she was. Blanche knows that it comes from her skin color, not what she wears.

Chapter 26 – Grace's third grade teacher, Miss Folsom, is very strict, and has Grace punished for not finishing her classwork. Grace is paddled for this. This outrages Ora. Ora believes Grace needs help, but Blanche doesn't want to hear anything about the past. She says she will do her best to get Grace moved to another class. She says everyone must move on, that what is done is done. It is never spoken of again while Blanche is alive. Chip and Clara marry in Spring 1979 and have two sons. Clara works for Odell until 1983, when he retires. By 1988, Grace is 18, a pregnant high school dropout, and a drug-addict. Danita marries Curtis Bledsoe, who goes into the ministry, and raises a family with him. ReNatta becomes a hairdresser and never marries.

Chapter 27 – By 1998, Ora is turning 80, and Blanche is in her late 50s. She is raising Grace's children, Shawn and Rochelle, practically alone. Patrice becomes a lawyer and often visits her mother and Ora. She also visits Eddie, who is still in jail. She wants to reopen his case, saying something bothers her about it all. Ora will not speak of what happened unless Eddie gives his consent. Ora then requests that Patrice handle her will. Blanche has been very tired lately, which worries Ora. Ora plans to leave her house to Blanche as long as Blanche is alive. Money is earmarked for all of Blanche's children for college and stipends, except Grace. Ora knows that any money left for Grace will just go to drugs, and knows she is partially to blame for it.

Chapter 28 – 1998 is a difficult year for Ora. Odell dies on a fishing trip out West, which deeply affects both Ora and Clara. When Blanche doesn't show up to work one day, Ora goes looking for her. Ora finds Blanche unconscious from a stroke. She lives two weeks longer before she dies, never regaining consciousness. Ora reflects on death. She is not afraid to die, but hopes she'll be able to see Walter again and tell him everything she never knew when he was alive.



Chapter 29 – Grace comes home for the funeral. Blanche is only 59. Patrice convinces Grace to go into rehab. Grace begins at Lifeways. In 2001, Eddie dies. Among his few meager possessions are a few photos from the past, including one of the first Christmas Blanche and her family had spent with Eddie and Ora. Ora is named Executor. She arranges the funeral per his instructions – a simple state-sponsored ceremony. Eddie also writes a letter for Ora which reveals important things.

Chapter 30 – Eddie's daughter, Tressa Mims Hightower, attends the funeral. She is an attorney. Ora attends the funeral with Chip and Clara. Tressa thanks Ora for all she has done for her father. Also attending are Grace, who is very thin but clean, and Danita and ReNetta. Patrice also attends, explaining she continued visiting Eddie in prison, bringing him cake made by her best friend – Dovey Kincaid's daughter. It turns out that Eddie's letter reveals that Tressa is Grace's, Danita's, ReNetta's, and Patrice's aunt.

Blanche was an illegitimate daughter who was left behind when Eddie joined the Air Force. Having gotten another woman pregnant – Tressa's mother – Eddie refused to make the same mistake again and married her. Ora doesn't know if she will go to jail or to a nursing home, for she has confessed everything about the past to Clara, who has taken it down in writing. Ora leaves her house to Blanche's girls. She also determines that she will die with a clear conscience, clear Eddie's name, and finally help Grace to face her demons.

## Analysis

The final section of the novel spans the next 25 years in fairly rapid succession. It turns out that the entire novel is a statement being given in 2001 to Clara by Ora about the past, and about Ora's role in past events. The past becomes central to the novel as Ora recounts history – including her own, the history of others, and the personal history of Eddie himself. As it turns out, the harbinger of familial activity paved the revelation for the knowledge that Blanche is Eddie's illegitimate daughter, fathered before leaving for Tuskegee. Here, there is a failure of family as family also continues to be an important theme.

Hoping to avoid the mistakes of the past, Eddie married the second woman he got pregnant. It is now clear that Eddie's decision to plead guilty and to protect Blanche about Marcus was not merely the act of a good man and a good friend. Instead, it was the loving act of a father. This is all revealed in the letter written for Ora before Eddie dies in prison in 2001. It is demonstrative proof of the importance and success of family, thematically. Eddie's confessions about the past in turn leads Ora to decide it is finally time to reveal her own part in the cover-up.

Even as time passes, vestiges of the past keep a hold on Mayville and its residents. For example, at community events, Blanche is more apt to be treated like a domestic servant rather than a fellow human being of equal standing. Patrice refuses to apply for college at first because she doesn't think it is possible for her to achieve a scholarship or gain any tuition help.



However, there are also important changes that occur. Some are good and some are bad. Ironically, Patrice becomes best friends with the daughter of the formerly racist Dovey. Ora decides to take over her husband's insurance agency, and comes to begin a fund for scholarships for deserving young women. Patrice becomes the first beneficiary of this scholarship fund. Years after the rape, Blanche refuses to allow Grace to receive any sort of psychological help, which in turn destabilizes Grace mentally and emotionally. As a result, she becomes a drug-addict and mothers two illegitimate children that she leaves for Blanche to raise while she runs off. Only when Blanche dies does Grace decide to get help at Patrice's insistence – a clear act of family love and intervention.

Ora herself feels as if she has lost a dear family member with the passing of Blanche at the young age of 59. The family that Ora was never able to have on her own has been made possible through Blanche, her children, Eddie, and Clara and Chip and their children. Ora demonstrates that family doesn't always necessarily look the way one expects, and that family is never always only a question of blood-relation, but of love, loyalty, compassion, and support of an emotional, moral, physical, and spiritual nature.

Ora's own greatest act of moral courage comes at the end of the novel. Now in her old age, and knowing that Blanche and Eddie are dead, Ora decides it is finally time to tell the truth about the past. She does this in order to clear Eddie's name, and to allow Grace to finally face the truth of the past, and to confront her demons. By confessing the truth, Ora risks not only alienating Blanche's children that she has come to consider family, but risks prison time for herself as well. The truth, Ora, contends, is more important than anything else.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Ora wait so long to tell the truth surrounding Eddie, Marcus, and the killing of Skipper Kornegay? Do you believe she is morally right in having done so? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

For what reasons does Ora at last break her silence about the death of Skipper Kornegay? What does she hope this will accomplish?

## Discussion Question 3

What revelations does the letter written to Ora from Eddie contain about Eddie? How does this change the nature of his decision to argue a plea bargain 25 years before?

## Vocabulary

asinine, prudent, vow, vaguely, stipend, illiterate



# Characters

## Ora Lee Beckworth

Ora Lee Beckworth is the main character and narrator of the novel "The Pecan Man" by Cassie Dandridge Selleck. Ora is a white native of Mayville, Florida, is 58 years old, and is the recent widow of Walter Selleck, an insurance agency owner and operator. Never able to have children, Ora is saddened by Walter's death. She hires a black maid, Blanche, to tend house for her. Ora is educated, refined, morally upright, and lonely. She and Blanche slowly become friends, leading Ora to feel as if she is ultimately part of a family. During the summer of 1976, Ora hires the Pecan Man, Eddie Mims, to tend to her lawn and gardens.

In September, Blanche's daughter Grace is raped by Skipper Kornegay. Ora is incensed, and spearheads efforts to get justice for Grace. Blanche, however, puts her foot down, saying no good will come of it because they are black. Ora has no choice but to grudgingly accept this and to help keep it a secret. Following the rape, Grace, as well as Blanche's other children, become fixtures at Ora's house, including for Thanksgiving. Blanche's son Marcus learns about the rape through Eddie. When Marcus kills Skipper in self-defense, Ora helps him to flee town though he is killed in an automobile accident.

Eddie is charged with the murder of Skipper, and Ora leaps to his defense. She ensures that her friend, Circuit Court Judge Harley Odell, takes a personal interest in Eddie's case and well-being. Meanwhile, Ora does her best to hold together Blanche and her children, ensuring they have a good Christmas. She emerges as something of a grandmotherly figure to them, caring for them and offering them advice and moral support. She goes on to post Eddie's bail, and takes Eddie in before trial.

When Ora learns that Eddie desires a plea bargain, she privately confronts Skipper's father with the entire truth, causing him not to contest the bargain. Ora visits Eddie in jail, and continues to keep on Blanche as a maid and good friend until Blanche dies at the age of 59 in 1998. When Eddie dies in prison in 2001, Ora comes clean about the entire affair in a written statement given to Clara Munderson. Ora does not know what will become of her, but she knows that when she dies, she will go to her grave with a clean conscience.

## Blanche Lowery

Blanche Lowery is a young black woman in her 30s who has five children, including Marcus, Patrice, ReNetta, Danita, and little Grace. Blanche is the illegitimate daughter of Eddie Mims. Blanche is a sweet and lovely woman who is hired by Ora to tend to Ora's house. She and Ora slowly become friends. Whereas Blanche is used to the attitudinal racism of most people in the area, Ora consistently surprises Blanche with her open-mindedness, loyalty, and kindness.





When Grace is raped by Skipper, Blanche is horrified, but knows going to the police will do no good since she and Grace are black, and Skipper is the son of the police chief. Blanche does not want Ora doing anything about what happened, and goes on to tell Grace she has merely had a bad dream. The rape becomes a dark secret shared between Blanche and Ora that is ultimately found out by Marcus. When Marcus is later killed in a car accident, Blanche is devastated. She never learns that Marcus is the killer of Skipper or that Eddie is her father.

As the years pass, Blanche resists Ora's suggestions of therapy for Grace, arguing that the past is in the past, and that is where it should remain. In her late teens, Grace becomes pregnant, drops out of high school, gets into drugs, and runs away with a drug dealer. Blanche is left to raise Grace's two children on her own, while continuing to work for Ora and becoming her closest friend. In 1998, Blanche suffers a fatal stroke at the age of 59.

## Eddie

Eldred "Eddie" Mims is an elderly black homeless man who lives in a patch of woods in Mayville, Florida. Eddie is hired by Ora to tend her lawn and garden. Eddie is known locally as "The Pecan Man" due to the sacks of pecans he collects. Eddie is a World War II veteran, having served with the Tuskegee Airmen. He is also the father of Blanche, an illegitimate daughter he left behind when he went to serve in Tuskegee, Alabama. Eddie long regretted the decision, and decided to marry the next woman he got pregnant. He has one daughter from that marriage, Tressa, who lives in Alabama. He does not get along well with Tressa, and struggles with alcoholism.

It is Eddie who first discovers that Grace has been raped by Skipper, and it is Eddie who later confesses this to Marcus. Eddie covers for Marcus's murder of Skipper, and is himself arrested instead. Eddie decides to plea bargain in order to receive shelter, food, water, a bed, and a toilet in jail. He also does this to protect Blanche from further heartache, and because he is Blanche's father. Eddie is visited often in jail by Ora and the others, and ultimately dies in 2001, taking the truth to his grave.

## Grace Lowery

Grace Lowery is the youngest daughter of Blanche Lowery, and is the younger sister of Marcus, ReNetta, Danita, and Patrice. Grace is a kind and gentle 5-year-old child who is mercilessly and brutally raped by Skipper Kornegay. She is discovered by Eddie, who delivers her to Blanche. Blanche tells Grace the rape was nothing more than a bad dream, which Grace accepts – though she can never move past recurring nightmares. Emotionally and mentally unstable, Grace is refused treatment by her mother. In high school, Grace becomes pregnant, drops out, gets into drugs, and runs away with a drug dealer. She leaves her two children, Shawn and Rochelle behind to be raised by Blanche. Only after Blanche dies is Grace convinced to go into rehab by Patrice.





## Marcus Lowery

Marcus Lowery is the oldest child and only son of Blanche Lowery. Marcus is a morally upstanding young man who is serving in the U.S. Army, stationed at Fort Bragg. When he comes home for Thanksgiving, he is stunned and angered to learn that Grace has been raped. He seeks out Skipper, and must kill Skipper in self-defense. Horrified at what he has done, Marcus seeks out help from Ora, and leaves town. He is killed the next morning in a car accident.

## Skipper Kornegay

Skipper Kornegay is the white son of the white police chief. Skipper is a cruel and unkind teenager who brutally and heartlessly rapes Grace, only to laugh about it later to Marcus's face. Skipper goes after Marcus with a knife, only to be killed in self-defense. Skipper's killing prompts the arrest of Eddie.

## Ralph Kornegay

Ralph Kornegay is the police chief of Mayville, Alabama. He is the father of Skipper Kornegay, and charges Eddie with the murder of Skipper. Ralph has Eddie brutally beaten upon arrest under the guise of resisting. His aggressions are halted by Ora, who says she will hold Ralph personally accountable for whatever happens to Eddie. When Ora later confronts Ralph with the truth about his son, Ralph has no choice but to allow Eddie to make a plea bargain without objection. Ralph dies of a heart attack one year later.

## Harley T. Odell

Harley T. Odell is the Circuit Court judge and childhood friend of Ora's. He is known locally as "Poopsie", though why is not explained. Odell serves as a calming force for tensions surrounding Eddie's arrest and Skipper's death. He ensures no further harm comes to Eddie, and ensures that bail is halved so Ora can post it. Odell employs Clara Munderson as an assistant, retires in 1983, and dies in 1998 while on a fishing trip.

## Chip Smallwood

Chip Smallwood is a kindhearted young member of the Mayville Police Department. Chip is estranged from his alcoholic father, though he maintains close ties with his mother. Chip is perhaps the only morally upstanding man on the Mayville Police, and makes sure Eddie is treated well in prison. When Eddie goes missing, it is Chip who helps Ora track him down. Chip later begins dating, and ultimately marries Clara Munderson, having two children with her.



## Clara Munderson

Clara Munderson is the assistant of Judge Harley Odell. Clara is a sweet, pretty, and lonely young woman who ends up dating Chip Smallwood. They later marry and have two children. Clara continues working for Odell until he retires in 1983. It is Clara who records Ora's statement in 2001 about the events surrounding the killing of Skipper Kornegay some 25 years before.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Pecans

Pecans are a kind of edible nut grown on trees. They are collected in great numbers in sacks by Eddie as he rides around town on his bike. The sacks of pecans lead to Eddie's being nicknamed "The Pecan Man". Ora stresses in the novel that the name is to be pronounced "pee-can", the way Southerners do.

## Pecan trees

Pecan trees line Main Street in Mayville, Florida. They are a distinguishing characteristic of the town. Their bounty of pecans is collected by Eddie as he rides around town on his bike. The trees' pecans earn Eddie the moniker, "The Pecan Man".

## Bicycles

Bicycles are purchased in the novel by Ora for Blanche's children. The bikes come to be seen as symbolic of the loss of Marcus, who originally intended to purchase bicycles for his siblings with his Army paycheck. Though Blanche is thankful for Ora's intent, she is also very upset because the bikes remind her of everything she has lost. Additionally, Eddie rides an old, rickety bike to get around town. From Eddie's handlebars hang sacks of pecans, earning him the nickname "The Pecan Man".

## Knife

A knife is drawn and wielded by Skipper Kornegay when he chases after Marcus. The two become involved in a brutal fistfight, during which time Marcus gains possession of the knife. Marcus then uses the knife to repeatedly stab Skipper, ultimately killing him.

## Santa Claus cookies

Santa Claus cookies are baked by Ora and Blanche's children prior to Christmas. This scene becomes symbolic of the importance of race in everyday assumptions. Ora recognizes how much one's skin color can influence one's perceptions of the world because of the baking of these cookies. Ora bakes cookies which depict Santa as white, while Blanche's children want cookies that depict Santa as black. These sorts of racial perceptions are genuinely harmlessly made, but they are something recognizable as having to be worked at to be overcome.



## Eddie's Letter

A letter is written to Ora from Eddie prior to his death in prison in 2001. The letter reveals much of Eddie's past – from his time spent with the Tuskegee Airmen to his abandoning an illegitimate daughter, who turns out to be Blanche. The letter makes it apparent that Eddie's decision to take a plea bargain and to go to jail was to spare Blanche further heartache over the death of her son – Eddie's grandson – Marcus.

## Photographs

Photographs are among the few meager possessions kept by Eddie. Some include time from his service with the Tuskegee Airmen, and as a young father. Other photos he keeps are photos taken of Christmas 1976, when Eddie was staying at Ora's. The photos are bittersweet, as they show both happy and sad times. Ora, who comes into possession of the photos, gives the old photos to Tressa at the funeral.

## Alcohol

Alcohol is often consumed by Eddie in the woods. Eddie has long been a functioning alcoholic, spending as much money as he can on alcohol. After New Year's, Eddie goes missing. Chip helps Ora track Eddie town. They discover him drunk in the woods, and learn about his penchant for alcohol in the process.

## Statement

A transcribed statement is given by Ora and taken down by Clara in 2001. This occurs following the death of Eddie in prison. The statement is Ora's way to reveal the truth about the events surrounding the death of Skipper Kornegay, to clear Eddie's name, and to allow Grace to confront her own demons. It also made so that Ora may clear her conscience before she goes to her grave.

## Bloodied clothing

Bloodied and torn clothing is collected by Blanche and Ora after Grace's rape. It is stored away in a plastic bag should the need ever arise for it. The bloodied and torn clothing becomes symbolic of a loss of innocence. After Marcus kills Skipper, he rushes to Ora's house for help. Ora takes his bloodied clothing, and later burns it in order to keep Marcus clear of the murder investigation.



# Settings

## Mayville

Mayville is a medium-sized town in Florida. It is an archetypal old Southern town, replete with a tree-lined main street, police department, local stores (many of which are folding to larger chains), an area of town for blacks, and a struggling conscience over the issue of race long after Civil Rights. While there are good people like Ora, Chip, Clara, and Odell in the area, there are others, like Ralph, Skipper, and many on the police force, who adhere to the racial ways of old. For example, there is the County Line Bar which serves black patrons out back so white regulars inside are not upset. Additionally, Blanche knows the police will never believe her about Grace's rape, because Grace is black, and her white rapist is the son of the police chief. Ora, however, will not abide by the town's inherent racism, and personally intervenes to see that Eddie is treated well in prison, and that Circuit Court Judge Odell takes a personal interest in the case. The murder causes many people to flee town, and by 2001, large sections are run down.

## Colored Town

Colored Town is an all-black part of Mayville, Florida. It is where Blanche and her children live, and where all of Mayville's black residents live. Some work there. It is home to its own set of establishments, including a barbecue place. It is also prone to crime, as the man that Grace later runs away with is a drug dealer. When Eddie goes missing, Ora and Chip venture into Colored Town in order to try to locate him.

## The wooded lot

The wooded lot located in Mayville, Florida, serves as a home to Eddie. There, he keeps his few meager possessions, including an old barber's chair. He also keeps a fire pit to cook food and keep warm. The wooded lot ends up becoming a refuge for Eddie as his trial approaches. He seeks out the wooded lot's isolation to lose himself to alcohol. He is later discovered there by Ora and Chip, and brought back to Ora's house.

## Main Street

Main Street is the primary roadway in Mayville, Florida. Main Street is known as being the central part of town, and is noted for its pecan tree-lined streets. It is a beautiful place. Main Street is where Ora Lee Beckworth lives. It is where she hires Blanche to do work on her house, and later hires Eddie to do work on her lawn and garden. When Grace is raped, Ora's home on Main Street becomes a safe haven for her and Blanche, and later becomes a second hope to all of Blanche's children. After Eddie is arrested, Ora posts bail and has Eddie come to stay at her house.



## State Correctional Facility

The State Correctional Facility is where Eddie is taken following his plea bargain. He looks forward to, and enjoys his time spent there. It keeps him away from alcohol, gives him shelter, food, water, a bed, and a toilet. Eddie remains imprisoned at the State Correctional Facility until 2001, when he passes away. Prior to his death, Eddie writes a letter to Ora from the facility, explaining more about his past and why he chose to do a plea bargain.



# Themes and Motifs

## Racism

Racism is an important theme in the novel “The Pecan Man” by Cassie Dandridge Selleck. Racism is the hatred, mistreatment, or mental state of another based on that individual’s skin-color and race. Racism, and racial attitudes, appear in many ways in the novel, with each one of them affecting the plot in various ways. Some instances of racism are terrible and vile, while others are a source of conditioning and natural assumptions.

Although Civil Rights have been achieved in the United States by the mid-1970s, remnants of racism persist in the Southern town of Mayville, Florida. When Ora hires Eddie, a black man to tend to her lawn and garden, some of the neighbors become distressed by the fact that he is a black homeless man. As Eddie becomes part of the area’s routine, most drop their opposition to him.

When Blanche’s black daughter, Grace, is raped, it is done by the white son of the white police chief. It is highly unlikely that such a brutal act would be committed against a young white girl. When Marcus later confronts Skipper about the rape, Skipper laughs about it. Likewise, Blanche does not even bother to try to get justice for Grace, because she knows that she and Grace, two black females, have no hope against the white police chief and his son.

After Skipper’s death, Eddie is targeted for the crime because he is a black homeless man. He is severely beaten upon arrest, under the excuse that he resisted. The only member of the police force willing to protect Eddie is Chip Smallwood. This is made possible by Ora’s intervention, and her involvement in the case of Judge Odell. Odell himself oversees things to ensure that Eddie is no longer the target of racially-motivated behavior.

When Eddie goes missing, and Ora and Chip go looking for him, they drive by the County Line Bar. The bartender, though he would serve black patrons inside otherwise, serves black patrons through a window in the back so as not to make white regulars inside angered. Chip, though he has known about this for a while, still tells Ora that he is amazed that such things are still going on.

Other forms of racism are born of innocent assumptions, and defy both black and white. While baking Christmas cookies in the shape of Santa Claus with Blanche’s children, Ora thinks nothing of the Santa Claus cookies being vanilla in color and taste. Blanche’s children insist on making black Santa cookies, which Ora gladly lets them do. It makes Ora think about how one’s skin color colors one’s perceptions of the world.

While shopping for Christmas, Patrice is accused of trying to steal Ora’s goods at a department store. Ora intervenes, saying that Patrice is with her and therefore innocent.



The store's manager apologizes to Patrice and to Ora. Ora later reprimands herself for protesting Patrice's innocence based on the fact that Patrice was with her, rather than the fact that Patrice was in and of herself, innocent. Ora knows that these sorts of racial incidents, though certainly not malicious, clearly need to be overcome.

## Family

Family is an important theme in the novel "The Pecan Man" by Cassie Dandridge Selleck. Family, thematically, involves the mutual love, loyalty, compassion, and emotional, physical, and even spiritual support between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still act in accord with the traditional family unit. In the novel, family appears as both an incredibly important, positive, and successful thing, and as a failure in other parts.

Blanche's family appears to be close-knit by all appearances. She and her five children – Marcus, Patrice, ReNetta, Danita, and Grace – get along quite well with one another, and do their best to handle the racism and other difficulties they face together. By contrast, Ora has no family. Unable to have children, Ora is recently widowed and lonely. Ora originally hires Blanche on to tend house for her as a maid. They become friendly with one another, but events beyond their control fast-track their friendship which becomes a semblance of family.

When Grace is raped, Blanche shelters Grace at Ora's house. Ora happily obliges. Ora is terrified about what has happened, and does everything she can for Grace and Blanche in order to make them comfortable. While Blanche does not want to pursue justice, believing it to be impossible, Ora acts to protect the people she has come to care about so deeply by speaking to the chief about Eddie's treatment, and by getting Judge Odell involved in things.

Ora ultimately comes to host Blanche and all of Blanche's children at her house regularly. This includes Halloween and Thanksgiving. It is after Thanksgiving that Ora tells Blanche she and her children are family. She has come not only to invite them into her home, but to offer them safety, security, good food, loyalty, and support. This is especially true for Blanche, as she struggles first to deal with Grace's rape, and then Marcus's death. Ora becomes the glue that holds together their makeshift family.

Christmas proves to be a bittersweet time for the family. Ora continues to protect and watch out for her new family, such as when she defends Patrice's honor in the department store. Ora goes on to buy many Christmas gifts for Blanche and her children, including bicycles. The bicycles cause Blanche to cry, and Patrice to become teary-eyed as Marcus originally intended to buy bicycles for everyone. Nevertheless, it is proof of the love that Blanche and her children have for one another – and for Ora.

However, family also has its shortcomings. It does not always live up to its intended purposes. Eddie heads to Alabama to serve with the Tuskegee Airmen, leaving behind a young daughter, Blanche. Eddie's abandoning of Blanche is later made up for his





determination to protect her from the truth about Marcus's role in the killing of Skipper. It is the effect of fatherly love for Blanche that causes Eddie to take the truth to his grave. Likewise, Ralph Kornegay has clearly not raised his son, Skipper, correctly. Skipper seems to think nothing of treating blacks with racial contempt, and barbarically raping a small black girl, only to laugh about it later. The truth about Skipper ultimately helps lead both his parents to an early grave.

## Crime

Crime is an important theme in the novel "The Pecan Man" by Cassie Dandridge Selleck. Crime involves activities which are illegal, and in many cases, immoral. In the novel, the crimes committed vary, with most being racially-caused in nature.

The first crime committed in the novel involves the brutal and sadistic rape of a 5-year-old child, Grace, by Skipper Kornegay, son of the police chief. It is a horrifying crime that is both of an immoral and illegal nature. It is committed by an obviously disturbed person acting on racial impulses. He clearly targeted a black child rather than a white child, probably knowing he could not get away with targeting a white child. This rape will fuel the events of the novel to follow.

The second crime committed in the novel involves the killing of Skipper Kornegay by Marcus Lowery. Marcus's decision to confront Skipper, and the subsequent killing, arise out of a lack of due justice for Grace. Although the killing can be justified as self-defense, Marcus's fleeing of the scene and leaving town – for whatever reasons – is still a crime. His decision to do so may be seen as exonerating, due to the fact that he would not receive a fair trial and proper justice otherwise.

This is indicated through two separate incidents. Upon learning of Grace's rape, Ora wants to seek out justice immediately. Blanche blocks this attempt, knowing that the word of a black woman and a black child against the word of the white son of the white police chief in a Southern town will only lead to backlash and retribution. When Eddie is arrested for the murder of Skipper – without any clear evidence – he is savagely beaten by the police (in and of itself a crime) supposedly for resisting

There are other lesser crimes committed in the novel. Eddie's refusal to divulge everything to the police about Marcus, and about meeting with Marcus before and after Skipper's death, can be considered obstruction of justice and is a crime. That Eddie personally takes the fall for Marcus – though it is done to protect Blanche and Grace – can also be considered a criminal act. Ora's aiding and abetting Marcus in fleeing Mayville can also be considered criminal despite the reasoning behind it. Likewise, Ora's determination to remain silent on the entire incident for decades can also be considered criminal, despite the intent for having done so. That black patrons are served out behind the County Line Bar can also be seen as an illegal – and an immoral – act.



## The Past

The past is an important theme in the novel “The Pecan Man” by Cassie Dandridge Selleck. The past –one’s history, and the history that surrounds one –has a tremendous bearing on the present. It helps determine attitudes and actions undertaken by individuals – and greatly influences the plot of the novel.

Mayville, Florida, exists in the aftermath of the Civil Rights era. While institutionalized racism is a thing of the past, racial attitudes persist among many members of the community. This aura of racial animosity can be seen directly by Skipper’s rape of Grace. Skipper clearly targeted a black, rather than a white child, knowing that raping a white child would have had serious consequences. Despite the illegality of the rape, Blanche knows that going up against the white son of the white police chief for Grace will not only be hopeless, but might even be dangerous. Few whites will believe the word of a black woman in such a situation – an unchanged aspect of racism from the past.

The institutionalized racism continues to exist through people's attitude. When Marcus confronts Skipper, and must kill Skipper in self-defense, Marcus faces the same crisis of justice. Marcus, a young black man killing the white son of the white police chief, will automatically be seen to be in the wrong. Though Marcus has every legal means available to him, the socio-cultural mindset of the locals will not be in accord with affording Marcus legal justice.

This mindset is exhibited in force when Eddie is targeted for the murder. Eddie, a homeless black man, is automatically assumed to be the killer, and is charged and arrested for the crime. When he is arrested, he is savagely beaten for supposedly resisting arrest – but his elderly, frail nature can mean any resistance would have been feeble at best. Clearly, he has been beaten so brutally because he is a black man, and because the police are seeking revenge not just for Skipper, but revenge against a black man.

Eddie’s own past is telling about his present. Blanche is Eddie’s illegitimate daughter, whom Eddie abandoned believing she could not be his daughter because she had lighter skin. Going on to serve in Tuskegee, Alabama, Eddie got another woman pregnant. Learning from the past, he chose to marry her, though his relationship with his legitimate daughter, Tressa, did not end up being a good one.

In the present, Eddie wants to make up for the past. His decision to shield Blanche from the truth about Marcus’s role in Skipper’s death, and to take a plea bargain of guilty for the crime, is not merely a question of shelter, food, water, a bed, and a toilet in prison. It is a statement and action of fatherly love by Eddie for Blanche. Eddie explains that while Marcus’s debt is not his to pay, but he has caused more than his share of heartache in the past, and intends to make up for it.

The past is also important for Ora throughout the novel. Recently widowed and without children, Ora is sad and lonely. The past is a bittersweet thing for her. It causes her, in



the present, to especially reach out for Blanche and Blanche's children, to offer them safety, stability, and moral support through the difficult times they endure.

## Moral Courage

Moral courage is an important theme in the novel "The Pecan Man" by Cassie Dandridge Selleck. Moral courage involves taking a moral stand on a controversial issue, even when that stand may or may not be wrong or popular. Various examples of moral courage, both large and small, perforate the novel.

The first act of moral courage in the novel – small though it may seem – comes when Ora decides to hire Eddie to tend to her lawn and garden. Eddie is a black homeless man – two things some of the neighbors are concerned with. Ora defends her decision to hire Eddie despite pressure and gossip from her neighbors. As Eddie becomes part of the neighborhood routine, nearly all neighbors drop their objections and concerns. Ora's small moral stand is a step in the right direction against racism.

When Eddie is arrested for the murder of Skipper, the overwhelming sentiment in town and on the police force is that he is guilty, mainly because he is a perfect scapegoat as a black homeless man. Only one member of the police force goes against the grain. Chip Smallwood makes multiple courageous moral stands against prevailing opinions. He ensures that Eddie is cared for while in the town prison, and later helps Ora to track down and find Eddie when Eddie goes missing rather than to alert the police – the result of which would have been terrible.

Eddie himself makes a courageous moral stand later in the novel. He decides that he will plead guilty to the killing of Skipper in order to ensure life in prison while also protecting Blanche and her children. This stand is made not merely out of personal consideration, but as an act of fatherly love. Eddie's 25 year silence on the matter is also a testament to his courage.

The final stand of moral courage in the novel comes through Ora's confession by statement. With Blanche and Eddie dead, Ora's decision to finally come clean about the events surrounding Skipper's death requires courage. She could have let things stay as they were and gone to her grave with the truth, but Ora cannot abide this. She determines that clearing Eddie's name and allowing Grace to confront her demons will mean going to the grave with a clean conscience.

Given that Ora will make what time she has left on Earth tumultuous at best by reopening a supposedly-closed crime from 25 years before (as well as not knowing whether or not she will end up in jail or a nursing home), her stand can be seen as moral and courageous. She could have lived the rest of her life in peace, but has chosen not to do so.

# Styles

## Point of View

Cassie Dandridge Selleck tells her novel “The Pecan Man” from the first-person reflective omniscient perspective of Ora Lee Beckworth, the main character and principal protagonist of the novel. The novel itself comprises what is a recorded statement by Ora regarding the events of Skipper Kornegay’s killing Thanksgiving night, 1976. The statement is being given to Clara Munderson by Ora in the first-person, and being recorded as such. The reflective omniscient aspect of the narration is due to the fact that it is being given 25 years after the event, allowing Ora to both reflect on the events, and to fill in important contextual information that would have otherwise not been known.

## Language and Meaning

Cassie Dandridge Selleck tells her novel “The Pecan Man” in language that is simple, proper, and straightforward. This is attributable to the narrator, an educated and formal Southern woman, Ora Lee Beckworth, who was raised to always speak correctly and with manners. The novel is told from her point of view, so it is only natural that the language employed should be reflective both of her upbringing, and of the place where she lives. The South, for all its paradoxes, has long been considered a place of manners and politesse. As a result, a genteel formality and politeness pervades the words and deeds of most Southerners. Even Ralph Kornegay, confronted with the truth about his son, and the knowledge that Eddie will strike a plea bargain, still politely – if reluctantly – defers to Ora, wishing her a good day.

## Structure

Cassie Dandridge Selleck divides her novel “The Pecan Man” into thirty consecutive, linear, and nearly-chronological chapters which span the years from 1975 through 2001, but focus primarily on the summer and autumn of 1976, and the winter of 1976-77. The simple, traditional structuring to the novel allows the reader to remain focused on the plot and events as they unfold. This is important given that the novel forms the transcribed statement of Ora about the events of later 1976 to early 1977. She frequently interrupts the account to contextualize things, add additional information, or to speak about things in the present. For example, Chapter 23 includes Ora’s revelation to Ralph Kornegay about the truth behind his son’s killing. She breaks from the narrative to explain that he died one year later, with his wife two years after that.



## Quotes

The events that year were the real driving force behind the mass exodus from the neighborhood. It was the year of the Pecan Man.

-- Ora (Chapter 1 paragraph 15)

**Importance:** Ora speaks about how the Main Street neighborhood in which she lives has changed over the years, and how the people who live there are no longer the people who used to live there. Much of the area is now run-down as well. It all began, Ora explains, in the summer of 1976 with the Pecan Man. Her explanation of the changing of the neighborhood due to an event during that year is an omen for bad things to come.

It was amazing how quickly things went back to normal, if you can ever call your life normal after such an event has taken place. Blanche told Grace that her ordeal had been nothing more than a bad dream.

-- Ora (Chapter 5 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The catalyst for the events that would lead to the mass exodus of the neighborhood described earlier by Ora originate in the raping of 5-year-old Grace, the daughter of Blanche, Ora's black maid. Grace largely accepts the idea that the rape was only a bad dream. Nevertheless, Ora sees to it that Grace stays with her in the afternoons, rather than walking home. As a result, a degree of normalcy – of a new routine – sets in, but the truth remains just beneath the veneer of normality.

If Blanche had packed faster, if Marcus had headed upstairs to finish fixing that leaky faucet, if I had never invited Eldred Mims to Thanksgiving dinner, Skipper Kornegay might still be alive today.

-- Ora (Chapter 7 paragraph 44)

**Importance:** Ora sets the stage for the killing of Skipper Kornegay, Grace's rapist. She reflects on how a series of simple events, and a meal meant to bring people together, would ultimately do more to rupture them instead. She reflects on how if Blanche had put away food faster for Eddie to take home, or if Eddie had never been invited to dinner at all, or if Marcus had been elsewhere in the house, things could have turned out very differently.

You have options, Marcus. You can stay here and go to jail if you want to, but you asked for my help and I'm trying to give it to you. Do you want it or not?

-- Ora (Chapter 9 paragraph 18)

**Importance:** Marcus, after killing Skipper Kornegay, rushes to Ora's house to plead for help. Ora suggests Marcus flee, but Marcus isn't sure. He wants to stay at first, but Ora reminds him that he'll end up in jail whether or not the killing was in self-defense. She leaves the choice up to Marcus, who decides to leave. He is killed in an auto accident the next morning.



I jes' know that Miz Blanche done been through enough this year and I cain't go bringin' no harm to her or her family.

-- Eddie (Chapter 12 paragraph 34)

**Importance:** Eddie is arrested for Skipper's murder. Yet, he will not reveal the truth behind Skipper's killing to Blanche. Eddie knows that Blanche has suffered enough between the rape of Grace and the death of Marcus. To throw into the mix that Marcus had murdered Skipper and was fleeing town would only make things worse. As Ora will find out later, this is not just the act of a selfless, kind human being, but the act of love of a father.

Who would think this was still going on?

-- Chip Smallwood (Chapter 21 paragraph 27)

**Importance:** When Eddie goes missing, Ora and Chip go looking for him. One of the places they check out is the County Line Bar, which serves black patrons out through the back window in order to keep white regulars inside happy. Chip acknowledges the bartender would probably serve blacks inside were it not for demanding regulars. Nevertheless, Chip can never get over the fact that such things – in the mid-to-late 1970s – are still going on. This demonstrates the prevailing racial attitudes that persist after Civil Rights.

I'm going to change my plea to guilty.

-- Eddie (Chapter 22 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Eddie decides to change his plea to guilty. This is done for three reasons. First, pleading guilty will give Eddie stability: shelter, food, water, a bed, and a toilet. Second, it will mask the truth about Marcus's role in Skipper's death. Third – though it is not revealed until later – Eddie's decision to save Blanche some heartache comes not just from human kindness and common decency, but because Eddie is Blanche's father, and abandoned Blanche years before.

I can't let you pay a debt you don't owe.

-- Ora (Chapter 22 paragraph 17)

**Importance:** Ora is startled by Eddie's decision to plead guilty. She does not want to let Eddie go through with it. Eddie, however, explains that others have paid with heartache for his debts, so it is about time he paid someone else's debts. Ora does not understand until much later this is because Blanche is Eddie's illegitimate child whom he abandoned decades before.

And so our vow was made and sealed and never broken as long as Blanche was alive. We did not speak of it again.

-- Ora (Chapter 26 paragraph 35)

**Importance:** While Ora attempts to encourage Blanche to get therapy for Grace for what Grace has been through, Blanche says it is simply not an option. She says that the



past is the past, and the past must remain in the past. As a result, Blanche and Ora never speak of the incident again. In a way, the truth is buried – but it does not remain buried, as following Eddie's death, Ora gives a statement to Clara.

I'm determined to go to my grave with a clear conscience, and I just can't do that until I tell the truth about Grace.

-- Ora (Chapter 30 paragraph 41)

**Importance:** Ora sets out her reasoning for coming clean in the very end. An old woman, she wants to go to her grave with a clean conscience, having told the truth about Grace and Eddie. Eddie's name must be cleared, Ora knows; and the truth will allow Grace to confront her own demons from the past. Ora herself does not know whether she will end up in jail or in a nursing home, but she does know that she will someday die with a clear conscience.