

The Persian Pickle Club Study Guide

The Persian Pickle Club by Sandra Dallas

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Plot Summary

This is the story of a group of friends in Depression-era Kansas tied together by shared interests in quilting, conversation, good food, and keeping secrets. As the narrative unfolds, following its central character through a series of both challenges and affirmations to her beliefs about friendship, it also explores themes relating to the dangers, rewards, and necessities for keeping secrets, to issues of ambiguous morality, and to the passing on of both truths and secrets to future generations.

The novel, narrated in the chatty and first-person voice of club member Queenie Bean, begins with a description of the welcome given to new member Rita Ritter, married into the family of two of the club's stalwarts. City girl Rita, accustomed to more sophisticated entertainments than quilting, is nevertheless made welcome by the various members of the Club, especially when she miscarries her first child.

The banding together of the women of the the Persian Pickle Club, whose name is derived from the local nickname for a particular quilting fabric, in support of Rita during and after the loss of her baby is but one example of how the bonds of friendship between the members of the club provide strength and support during times of crisis. All is not sweetness and light, however. The narrative also portrays the complex, at times confrontational, relationships between the various women, often triggered by the domineering Mrs. Judd and the sharp-tongued Agnes T. Ritter or Rita's sister-in-law. When push comes to shove, however, the women are there for one another.

As the narrative unfolds, the security of the women's relationships is challenged by two important incidents. The first is the revelation that the daughter of one of the club's members has become pregnant, outside of marriage, as the result of her relationship with a married man. Mrs. Judd, however, offers a possible solution to the situation, by suggesting that Queenie, who longs for a baby following a miscarriage that left her unable to bear children of her own, adopt the child. As the happily shocked Queenie accepts the proposal, the women promise to never reveal the truth about what will eventually become her child.

The second challenge to the women's friendships comes when the long-missing husband of club member Ella Crook is discovered shallowly buried in a field, murdered by a blow to the head. The ambitious Rita, eager to become a well known writer and desperate for something to do other than farming and quilting, decides to uncover the truth so she can write about it for the local paper. Queenie, who has decided that Rita is her new best friend, assists her in her investigations. At one point, as Rita is in the process of uncovering more and more secrets about the dead man's life and death, the two women are the victims of a violent assault, a situation Rita insists was the result of her coming too close to the truth about the murder. Queenie, however, remains convinced that the two events are unrelated.

With emotions running high, and as the Club has gathered for one of its regular weekly meetings, the highly strung Rita blurts out her suspicions about who was responsible for



the murder. She believes that it was Mrs. Judd's husband Prosper. As Mrs. Judd defends her husband, Queenie finds the mounting tension between the members of the club and blurts out the truth that the club is responsible! In the shocked aftermath of her revelation, the club members led by Mrs. Judd explain that Ella was being frequently and viciously abused by her husband, and that one day, after he assaulted her with particular violence, one of the members of the club hit him on the head hard enough to kill him. When Rita asks who struck the blow, all the club's members except for Queenie conceal the truth behind a series of lies, continuing to keep the secret.

At the conclusion of the narrative, however, Queenie describes how she came to trust Rita's loyalty and confesses that she struck the murderous blow.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

This is the story of a group of friends in Depression-era Kansas tied together by shared interests in quilting, conversation, good food, and keeping secrets. As the narrative unfolds, following its central character / narrator through a series of both challenges and affirmations to her beliefs about friendship, it also explores themes relating to the dangers, rewards and necessities for keeping secrets, to issues of ambiguous morality, and to the passing on of both truths and secrets to future generations.

City girl Rita, newly married to local farm boy Tom Ritter, attends her first meeting of the Persian Pickle Club, a group of women that gathers regularly to sew, quilt, and talk. Narration in the voice of Queenie Bean, one of the club's friendlier members describes Rita's prettiness, her occasional discomfort, and her lack of knowledge about how quilting works. At the same time, Queenie describes the other members of the club: bossy Septima Judd, friendly Ada June, scatterbrained Opalina Dux, arthritic and elderly Ceres Root, talkative Nettie Burgett, impulsive widow Forest Ann, and soft-spoken Ella whose husband, Queenie says in narration, is no longer around.

Conversation between the members of the Club refers to the long hot-and-dry spell, the hard economic times, and the need to economize. During refreshments, Mrs. Judd reports that the Reverend Foster Olive is again after the Persian Pickle Club to help raise funds for his church, but the club is reluctant, as he always seems to want things that don't have any benefit to other people. The club resolves instead to create a quilt to raise money for a home for unwed mothers in Kansas City, and Queenie has the idea of making a Celebrity Quilt, one incorporating the signatures of famous people. The members all agree that such a quilt would be a great idea, and to help her canvas celebrities for signatures.

As the clock strikes, the women realize that they have gone over their usual time. Forest Ann worries about being late getting home, and narration reveals that she has a daily date with a married man who stops by on her way home from work. As she describes the women going their separate ways, Queenie comments in narration on how glad she was that Rita moved to town. The chapter concludes with Queenie's comment that "that's what this story is about - Rita coming to Harleyville and joining the Persian Pickle Club and learning the meaning of friendship. She adds that "it's about me, too, of course, and about how I never can keep my mouth shut."

Chapter 1 Analysis

This first chapter introduces several of the novel's key elements, including its central characters such as narrator and protagonist Queenie and antagonist Rita, its main supporting characters, the women of the Persian Pickle Club, and its narrative style that



is simple, precise, and evocative language. This section also incorporates several key elements of foreshadowing. These include the reference to the Celebrity Quilt, which plays an important secondary role throughout the narrative, the reference to Forest Ann's daily visitor, whose identity is eventually revealed in Chapter 4, and the reference to unwed mothers.

Meanwhile, two key pieces of foreshadowing that can be found in the narration that closes this section also refer clearly to the book's primary theme, the importance of friendship. Specifically, Queenie's comments foreshadow the development of several new friendships, including that between Queenie and Rita, and suggests the depth and power of old ones, specifically those between the women of the Persian Pickle Club. This, in turn, relates to Queenie's second comment about being unable to "keep [her] mouth shut," itself a manifestation of one of the book's secondary themes of the keeping of secrets.

Because of their complex friendships, the women of the Persian Pickle Club are able to keep challenging, powerful secrets, and one in particular. That secret, foreshadowed here in Queenie's passing reference to Ella's not having a husband, is kept until Queenie, as she herself says, proves unable to "keep [her] mouth shut." This happens most notably in Chapter 11, at which point Queenie's talkativeness, her ultimate inability to keep a secret, proves to be a key component in defining the resolution of one of the novel's key plot lines, involving the reason why Ella's husband is missing.



Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2 and 3 Summary

In Chapter 2, when Queenie's husband Grover comes home at the end of the day, he tells her a poverty stricken family has camped on their property. Queenie reacts nervously, having had bad experiences with what she calls "tramps" and "gypsies." Grover convinces her to at least meet the family, and she reluctantly agrees. When she and Grover arrive, the family present themselves respectfully, with conversation revealing that they're on their way to California from Mississippi but have suffered a mechanical problem with their truck. After further conversation (and after meeting the Massie's baby, with narration commenting on how Queenie is unable to have children even though she longs for them), Queenie becomes comfortable enough to suggest that the family move into the long-empty shed that used to be the home to the farm's hired man. The Massies accept and prepare to move. Back home, as she and Grover are collecting a few things to make the shed more homey, Queenie worries that it's too run-down, but then, when she and Grover go back, they discover that the Massies are thrilled to be living in a better place than they've ever lived in before. As the two families set up the shed, Queenie discovers that Zepha is a quilter and a very good one at that. One quilt in particular catches her attention, and Zepha calls it a "Road to California" quilt, made by her grandmother with fabric left from her dead daughter's dress and given to Zepha as a going away present. After Queenie and Grover leave, conversation between them reveals that Grover has offered Joe Blue work.

In the first part of Chapter 3, Queenie narrates a visit she makes to the Ritter farm, where Agnes T. and Mrs. Ritter are making blackberry jam and Rita is helping with the dishes. Mrs. Ritter tells Rita she can take a break, and she and Queenie sit outside, their conversation revealing that Rita has ambitions of being a professional writer, that she is six months pregnant, and that she intends to work as the local reporter for a Kansas City newspaper once she has the baby. She adds, much to Queenie's surprise, that she plans to leave the baby in someone else's care while she's working. Rita also speaks of resenting being picked on by the bossy Agnes, who is constantly bringing up Rita's having mistaken salt for sugar while making a cake. For her part, Queenie sums up the life stories of the various members of the Persian Pickle Club and describes how it got its name as the result of a loving gift of fabric given to Ceres Root by her husband.

Following her conversation with Rita, Queenie invites her and Tom for dinner, later spending an entire afternoon cooking and paying particular attention to a pie made with rhubarb that, she tells the curious Grover, came from a secret supply. Later, when Rita and Tom arrive for dinner, the two couples spend an enjoyable evening, finishing with Queenie serving what she describes in narration of the most beautiful pie she ever made. When she and her guests bite into it, however, they are all shocked to discover that she has made it with Swiss chard instead of rhubarb. Everyone eventually has a good laugh, and Rita and Tom go home. Later, however, as he and Queenie prepare for

bed, Grover comments on how good a friend Queenie has been to Rita, even though Rita doesn't know it yet.

Chapters 2 and 3 Analysis

Several important elements are introduced in this section, including the character of Grover (and the loving, supportive relationship he shares with Queenie) and the characters of the Massies. Blue and Zepha both play particularly significant roles later in the narrative, roles that in very different ways embody the narrative's central theme of friendship. That theme also manifests in the story of the fabric given to Ceres Root (see "Quotes", p. 42). Here, it's possible to see how that fabric, shared among the various women of the club and linking their craftwork, can be perceived as being metaphorically representative of the secrets they all share (in particular, the secret of Ella's missing husband) that in turn link their lives. Other references to the theme of friendship in this section include the dinner given by Queenie and Grover for Rita and Tom, and in particular Queenie's pie. While the narrative never states it outright (see "Style - Language and Meaning"), there is the strong and clear sense here, communicated particularly by Grover's comments at the end of the chapter, that Queenie made a bad pie on purpose. Why? Perhaps to show Rita that she's not alone in making a food mistake, perhaps to draw attention away from Rita and towards herself. In either case, Grover has it right - in making the pie as she does, Queenie is showing herself to be a good friend to Rita.

Meanwhile, there are several important pieces of foreshadowing in these two chapters. These include the reference to the Road to California quilt (which is referred to throughout the narrative but which makes a moving final appearance in Chapter 10) and the reference to babies (which foreshadows Queenie and Grover's adoption of a baby boy, completed by Chapter 12).



Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

In the first part of Chapter 4, Queenie is out in the fields having a picnic lunch with Grover when Zepha Massie runs across the fields with a message - Rita is giving birth, and she's having a hard time. As the members of the Persian Pickle Club gather to offer their support, Queenie recalls how the club supported her both when she was pregnant and after she lost the baby, and reveals that Rita has only been pregnant for seven months. Queenie also describes, in narration, the occasionally sharp tongued conversations going on between the women, and reveals that the married man Forest Ann spends time with is Dr. Sipes, the town physician who is upstairs with Rita. Queenie is present when Rita gives birth to a too-small baby named Wanda, who dies two days later. Some time afterwards, Grover comments that Rita doesn't seem as upset about losing the baby as Queenie was about losing hers. When Queenie gets angry, he reminds her that she and Rita are very different women, and that she cannot expect Rita to be the kind of friend she wants, especially since Queenie's best friend Ruby has disappeared with her husband.

Some time later, the Club is gathered in Opalina's parlor for their regular meeting, with Mrs. Judd and Ella Crook both absent. As they sew, Queenie and Rita (who have spent a lot of time putting letters together asking for signatures for the Celebrity Quilt) reveal that the first two signatures have arrived. Rita also reveals that she might be asked to write an article for the paper on the quilt, with resulting conversation revealing that she had recently written an article about school board elections and gotten most of the names wrong. As Opalina serves refreshments, Mrs. Judd rushes in and announces that the body of Ella Crook's missing husband has been found - in the corner of one of the fields on the Crook farm.

In Chapter 5, Mrs. Judd tells the Club how the body of Ben Crook was found by Ella Crook's hired hand, Hiawatha Jones, how it is clear that Ben was murdered, and how Ella has fallen apart. Nettie worries about the Reverend Olive finding out what happened and sermonizing to Ella. Mrs. Judd tells her to call him and tell him to stay away - the Pickles, she says, will take care of Ella. Nettie, intimidated by both Mrs. Judd and the thought of talking to the Reverend, does as she's told.

A few days later, after the funeral and at Rita's request, Tom, Rita, Grover, and Queenie go to the Hollywood Café for a drink. As Rita quickly drinks Manhattans, conversation reveals that she's been writing more stories for the paper and that she's been asked to research and write about Ben's death as the result of it having been classified as a murder, a murder Rita says she intends to solve. Meanwhile, conversation between Grover and Tom reveals that Ben Crook was exactly what his name suggests, a "crook", and that any number of people (including Mrs. Judd's husband Prosper) were, at one time or another, angry enough to kill him. As the two couples leave, they spot Velma

Burgett, the daughter of Pickle member Nettie and her abusive husband Tyrone, having drinks with someone who looks like a traveling salesman.

Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

If the development of the friendship between Queenie and Rita is looked at as the novel's primary plot and/or narrative line, then the mystery of Ben Crook's death can be seen as both a subplot and a catalytic component of the main plot. In other words, the murder plot functions as good sub-plots often do, sustaining its own narrative identity while contributing to the movement of the main plot. In this case, their actions as they investigate the murder draw Queenie and Rita closer together, with the revelation of the killer's identity being the final glue that cements their friendship forever. Meanwhile, a good sub-plot will also explore one or more of the narrative's themes, and the murder plot functions effectively on that level as well. How Crook died is the Persian Pickle Club's deepest secret, while both the secret and the keeping of it are manifestations of the Club's views on friendship.

This section of the narrative also develops the "Celebrity Quilt" subplot, which also serves to develop the main Queenie and Rita plot, albeit in a less intensely dramatic way. While their working together on the quilt project may be less exciting, it is no less important when it comes to the two women learning how to be friends with one another. Finally, the appearance of Velma Burgett at the end of this chapter foreshadows developments in the Queenie, Velma, and baby subplot, an exploration on the relationship between the generations, another of the novel's secondary themes. This subplot is developed further in Chapter 6. At this point, however, it is interesting to consider the difference between Rita and Queenie.

Throughout the novel, Queenie is portrayed as valuing the past and tradition much more than the self-indulgent, self-serving, and forward-looking Rita, similar in character to the equally impulsive, free spirited Velma. It's therefore thematically appropriate that the character more interested in the continuity between past, present and future becomes the (adoptive) mother to an embodiment of that continuity, while the characters more interested in living in the present find themselves free of anything tying them to either the past or the future.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

A busy day for Queenie begins with a breakfast visit from Sonny Massie. Conversation reveals that busybody Lizzy Olive offered to buy one of Zepha's prize quilts, but was refused. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Velma Burgett, who wants to talk to Queenie about their encounter at the Hollywood Café and to ask her not to tell anyone what she saw. When Queenie agrees, further conversation reveals that that Velma knows the man she was with at the Café is married, and that the man had been cheated by Ben Crook. After wondering who would have dumped Ben's body by the side of the road, Velma leaves.

As Queenie cleans up after Velma's departure, Rita arrives, dressed well and eager to begin her investigations into the murder. Conversation reveals that Queenie has agreed to drive Rita to the places she wants to visit, including the Judd's farm, where Ella is staying. When Queenie worries that Ella won't take kindly to a fellow member of the Persian Pickle Club interrupting her privacy and asking questions, Rita comments that she's got a job to do, and that "reporters don't have friends". Queenie responds that "nothing's more important than friends."

Queenie and Rita begin their investigations with a look at the field where Ben's body was found. They are accompanied by Hiawatha Jackson, Ella's black farmhand, who describes how he found the body while crossing the field on the way home from helping another farm family. After he goes, Rita wonders aloud whether he killed Ben, but Queenie argues her out of that idea. Rita then theorizes that whoever killed Ben had a car, because there was no other way to get the body to where it was found. Queenie argues that Ben and his killer could have met in the field for some reason, but Rita doesn't accept that idea and remains convinced that there was a vehicle involved.

Queenie then drives Rita to the Judds' house, where she asks to see Ella and Mrs. Judd tells her to mind her own business. Rita argues that Ben's killer could very well still be around and dangerous, but Mrs. Judd continues to refuse to let her see Ella. A silent conversation between Mrs. Judd and her husband Prosper. However, results in Ella being brought out. The quiet, distracted Ella at first has difficulty responding to Rita's questions, which are instead answered by Mrs. Judd. Eventually, however, Ella is able to speak for herself, and tells Rita she has no idea who might have wanted Ben dead. Rita and Mr. Judd then have a private conversation. After he's finished talking with Rita, Prosper goes into the barn, and Rita tells Mrs. Judd that if she doesn't cover the story, a reporter with no sympathy for either Ella or the town is likely to be sent out to do it. Mrs. Judd then lets Rita and Queenie leave, but not before asking Queenie for a scrap of fabric for her quilt. This, Queenie comments in narration, means that Mrs. Judd has forgiven Queenie for helping Rita make an uncomfortable situation even worse. When Rita asks what Mrs. Judd meant, however, Queenie just tells her it was just how it sounded - Mrs. Judd wants some fabric.



Chapter 6 Analysis

Aside from the various developments in the novel's main plot is the developing friendship between Queenie and Rita, its sub-plots such as the investigation into the death of Ben Crook, the Velma, Queenie, and baby subplot, this section also develops its themes. In particular, the entwined nature of the friendship and secret-keeping themes becomes quite evident here, particularly when the end of the narrative is considered. Both, in turn, relates the most important element of the narrative introduced in this section - the role that Queenie plays in the investigation.

If Queenie's confession at the end of the book is taken at face value, and if the reader accepts that the Pickles are all in collusion to keep Queenie's guilt a secret, the actions of both Queenie and the other members of the club ought to be considered within that context. In other words, is there an ulterior motive, a secret intention, behind Queenie's offer to drive Rita to the scenes of her investigation? A desire to find out how close she's getting to the truth, perhaps? Perhaps an idea that she might distract Rita somehow from that truth? The novel is clear, either explicitly or through implication, on either point. Further if Queenie is protecting herself and the other Pickles from investigation, why then, does Queenie not allow Rita to continue suspecting Hiawatha? Again, the narrative isn't explicitly clear, but it is clear that Queenie is not only a compassionate human being, but one whose actions and beliefs are, on some level, defined by justice. It's therefore logical to assume that Queenie believes that allowing Rita to continue suspecting Hiawatha would lead to injustice, particularly in the socially and legally racist era in which the novel is set. Therefore, she disabuses Rita of the notion of Hiawatha's potential guilt.

Next, there is the scene at the Judd's house. Again, if the Pickles tell the truth later in the narrative and they all know what happened to Ben, what is going on at the farm? Is Ella faking her grief, or is she genuinely unaware of what happened to Ben's body? The narrative is never clear. It does seem clear, however, that her answers to Rita's questions are at best fabrications, at worst outright lies. Meanwhile, while it's clear that Prosper Judd doesn't know the truth, Mrs. Judd clearly does, and is determined to keep Rita from finding it out. At the same time, however, Mrs. Judd just as clearly realizes that Rita is telling the truth about the potential second reporter, and it's probably here that Mrs. Judd begins to wonder whether Rita is enough of a Pickle to be trusted with the secret. Is this, in turn, perhaps the hidden meaning of Mrs. Judd's request for the fabric, a message to Queenie that the bonds between the Pickles are inviolable and that Rita, who is now a Pickle too, must abide by them?

The other factor in all of this is the fact that Queenie is the story's narrator. The book's conclusion, with its revelation that she and the Pickles are all involved in Ben's death, clearly suggest that as she's telling the story she is also concealing the truth, which makes her an unreliable narrator, which is ironic, since as previously discussed, she is essentially portrayed as being just. Then again, it must be remembered that she is portraying herself. The question, then, becomes this. At what point do the novel's thematic considerations of friendship, of secrecy, and of continuity between generations



become more subjective than objective? Is what the novel seems to be saying on these subjects intended to be representative of authorial perspective, or is the whole thing ironic, the murderous events of the narrative undermining the apparent spiritual and emotional values its themes espouses?



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

In Chapter 7, as Rita and Queenie continue their investigations with a visit to Sheriff Eagles, who half-humorously and half-seriously berates Rita for spelling his name wrong. Their conversation goes back and forth between confrontational and friendly, with the Sheriff is apparently reluctant to answer Rita's questions in the way she would like. Eventually, however (and with Queenie's intervention), conversation reveals that Ben and Ella Crooks had had a hired man named Skillet, physically violent and powerful, who had gotten into trouble with another farmer but who, Rita is disappointed to learn, left the Crooks' farm and indeed the area some time before Ben Crook's death. As they leave the Sheriff's office, Rita hints that she has an idea who killed Ben, but gives Queenie no more information.

As Queenie drives back to the Ritter place, they pass the farm of Forest Ann, where Rita recognizes Dr. Sipes' car. Queenie accidentally reveals that Forest Ann and Sipes are having some kind of affair, but then tells Rita that because Forest Ann is a "Pickle," the club stands by her, even if she's doing something of which they don't approve. She further adds that both Forest Ann and Sipes deserve a little kindness. Rita insists that they stop by for a visit. She wants, she says, to talk to Sipes about Ben's death. After they pull in, however, and before Rita can steer the conversation in the right direction, Sipes reveals that Tyrone Burgett may have polio, and that he has to be quarantined to make sure. Queenie immediately rallies the Pickles, who all convene at Nettie and Tyrone's house even Ella Crook, who was invited at Rita's suggestion and who seems to perk up a little as she is taking care of someone else. In narration, however, Queenie questions Rita's motives, wondering whether she wanted Ella there in case an opportunity arose to ask her more questions.

The members of the Club, including the formidable Mrs. Judd, put aside their differences as they act in various ways to support Nettie who is, in turn, responsible for nursing Tyrone. Velma is nowhere to be found. Conversation with Nettie seems to suggest that she has more troubles than even the Pickles know about, but an unexpected gesture of affection from Rita stops further conversation. As she tells Nettie that Sonny Massie will be by the next day to help with her chores, Queenie and Rita leave.

In Chapter 8, as Queenie and Rita leave the Burgett farm, night has fallen and the darkness is complete. Queenie drives confidently, but a sudden scream from Rita makes her stop - a log had fallen across the highway. As the women get out to look, they are suddenly accosted by a large man who grabs Queenie and threatens to rape her. Rita swears at him and tries to get him to let go, but he kicks her to the ground. A moment later, Blue Massie arrives and fights the man off, kicking him in the groin and bloodying his nose. As the man runs off, Blue explains to Queenie and Rita that all day, Zepha had been having premonitions of something dangerous happening to Queenie,



and he had been watching for them. He then drives them to the Ritter place, but vanishes before Queenie and Rita can thank him again.

Tom calls Grover, who hurries over and comes close to angry tears when he learns what has happened. Meanwhile, Rita starts to wonder about the incident, first asking whether the attacker was Skillet and then whether it is possible the attack was related to her investigation of Crook's death. Both Tom and Grover try to convince her that that's not possible, and when the incident is reported to the Sheriff the next day, he says the same thing, adding that the man was probably the same one who made similar attacks on other women in a nearby county. As the couples leave the Sheriff's office, Grover offers to take them all out to a film, but both Queenie and Rita refuse. Queenie refuses because she does not feel well enough and Rita for other reasons.

Over the next few days, word gets out about what happened, and Queenie and Rita receive visits from the rest of the Pickles. On her visit, Forest Ann happily reveals that Tyrone doesn't have polio after all, and has been released from quarantine. After she goes, Rita comments pointedly that they "almost got killed because that bootlegger Tyrone Burgett had an attack of rheumatism!" The two women laugh, and Queenie comments in narration that she believes "that's when [she] began to feel better."

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

Here again, it is important to track Queenie's role in steering the investigation. With foreknowledge of the ending such as the involvement of Queenie and the other Pickles in Ben Crook's death, it is possible to see several circumstances in this section as having layers of meaning beyond the most apparent. Queenie's assistance in identifying Skillet during Rita's interview with Eagles, for example, can be seen as her attempt at diverting attention away from the Pickles. It's interesting to note, however, that she is still honest enough to tell Rita the truth about the identity of their assailant at the log. An interesting paradox, or at least an intriguing shading to an interesting character. Meanwhile, it's important to note that Queenie's reference to how the Pickles keep the relationship between Forest Ann and Dr. Sipes a secret is an important foreshadowing of the even bigger secret the group keeps - the truth about Ben's murder. Again, with foreknowledge of the ending, it's becoming more and more possible as the narrative continues to unfold to see that the ideas of friendship held by Queenie and the other Pickles have become somewhat twisted by the kinds of secrets they make themselves keep. Also in this context. Queenie's questioning of Rita's motives in supporting Ella's wanting to join the Pickles at the Burgett farm can be seen as ironic, to say the least.

Other important elements in this section include the hint of Nettie's additional troubles, which can be seen as both a foreshadowing of and reference to the later revelation that Velma, Nettie's unwed daughter, is pregnant), the subtly written exploration of Grover's strong feelings about his wife, and the thematic relevant manifestation of friendship in the actions of Blue Massie. This, in turn, leads to consideration of one of the most powerfully written sections of the book, the assault on Queenie. The writing here is as spare but as tellingly evocative as that in the rest of the book. In other words, Queenie's



experience of terror and violence is portrayed with the same subtle power as her experiences of tenderness with her husband, fierce loyalty with the Pickles, and humor with just about everyone.

Finally, there is Queenie's slip of the tongue when she tells Rita about Forest Ann and Sipes. Here, and as she herself says in narration, Queenie reveals her inability to keep things to herself. As such, this moment is a clear foreshadowing of the novel's climax, in which she reveals the truth about the relationship between the Pickles and the death of Ben Crook. As she suggests at the end of the first chapter, the story is at least partially about her inability to keep her mouth shut. Here is the first major example and the second is yet to come.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

In Chapter 9, a short time after wards, on a day when the Persian Pickle Club is due to meet at Forest Ann's, Queenie feels fearful and unwilling to leave the house. Mrs. Judd, however, who comes by to drive her, won't take no for an answer, especially since the Club is due to work on the Celebrity Quilt. When she and Mrs. Judd arrive, Queenie sees Rita is already there, and reacts with surprise as Rita doesn't seem to be as interested in the Club as she is. Rita, however, pulls Queenie aside and passes on some information she has discovered that Dr. Sipes, acting as the coroner investigating Ben's death, said there was no evidence of murder. Rita goes on to suggest that Sipes was paid to say what he did, and implies that the only people in town with enough money to do so are the Judds.

Later, when Forest Ann gives out the seating assignments "which was her privilege to do, since we were at her house," the place of honor at the center is given to Queenie, out of respect for her having come up with the idea of the Celebrity Quilt. As the women stitch, they discuss what happened to Queenie and Rita. Agnes T. Ritter's pointed comment about the low morals of unwed mothers triggers sobbing in Nettie, and the women realize that Velma has become pregnant. They then discuss what's to be done, since they all realize that Tyrone is likely to be both angry and violent. Finally, Mrs. Judd proposes that when Velma begins to show, she move to Kansas City and be supported financially by Grover who, when the baby is delivered, will adopt it. "Velma's going to have a baby she doesn't want," Mrs. Judd says, "and you want a baby you don't have." The suddenly excited Queenie answers that she's got to consult with Grover, but Mrs. Judd is confident that won't be a problem. Meanwhile, Rita worries that somehow, someday, the truth of the baby's origins will come out. Mrs. Judd, however, assures her firmly that none of the women at the circle will tell. After the meeting is finished, having run overtime in order to finish the quilt, Rita tells Queenie that she can't possibly trust the Pickles to keep her secret, hinting that Mrs. Judd in particular is not to be trusted. Queenie, however, is quite confident, and is driven home by Mrs. Judd to talk to Grover.

In Chapter 10, Queenie describes in narration how Rita wasn't able to tell her straight away why Rita did not trust the Judds. Rita was too busy with her investigations, and the one time she did visit Queenie already had company. Queenie also describes Grover's easy agreement to the idea about the baby, and comments on the strangeness of a visit from Sonny Massie, who tells her that Zepha and Blue want to see her and Grover that night.

As they drive over to the shack, Grover and Queenie wonder what the Massies could want, speculating that they're either planning to leave or planning to stay. When they see how homey the Massies have made the shack, however, they both come to believe they are planning to stay, and wonder what the Massies have to tell them. Blue and Zepha sit them down, and confess they came looking for Grover and Queenie, having



been told Grover was generous to wanderers even though Queenie was nervous of them. They also reveal that the man who gave them that information warned them to stay away from the Crook farm, partly because the woman there, Ella, had no money and no work, but also because there was a body in the field. Queenie realizes that the conversation took place before the body was discovered by Hiawatha, and wonders whether the man whom the Massies met was Skillet. The Massies, however, didn't see enough of the man to say. Their conversation with him took place over a fire. Grover comments that Blue should tell his story to the Sheriff. When Blue expresses reluctance to have anything to do with the law, Grover tries to convince him that Sheriff Eagles is trustworthy. The next day, however, when Grover is scheduled to pick up Blue to go see the Sheriff, Grover discovers that the Massies have packed up and gone but have left behind Zepha's treasured "Road to California" quilt. Grover believes them to have simply left it behind in their hurry to leave and avoid dealing with the police, but Queenie tells him Zepha left it for her on purpose.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Here again, the novel's thematic considerations of friendship and secrets intertwine, and again the sense emerges that true friendship means keeping secrets. Examples in this section include the way the women of the club close ranks to keep Nettie and Velma's secret, how they promise to do the same when Queenie and Grover adopt Velma's baby, and how Queenie is exceptionally confident that the Pickles will be able to keep both secrets. That confidence, of course, comes from knowing that the Pickles are already keeping what is possibly one of the biggest secrets anyone can keep. And in relation to that secret, it's again important to consider Queenie's actions in this section in relation to the truth she's concealing. For example, given her agenda to protect the Pickles, does she really recognize the man in Blue's story as Skillet, or she again attempting to divert attention from the Pickles' secret? Finally in this context, it's also interesting to look at the actions of some of the other Pickles, specifically those of Mrs. Judd. Is it possible that her no-nonsense but compassionate bossiness also came into play in the aftermath of Ben Crook's death, which, if the book's final line is to be believed, was caused by Queenie? In other words, did Mrs. Judd essentially tell Queenie to shape up in the same way then as she does now.

Meanwhile, there are several apparently positive manifestations of the book's thematic interest in friendship in this section - how Queenie is given the honor of stitching the center of the Celebrity Quilt, and Mrs. Judd's idea of what to do with Velma's baby, the Club's support of that idea. Perhaps the most positive aspect of the friendship theme in this section, and possibly in the entire book, is Zepha's decision to leave Queenie her cherished Road to California quilt. Hers is a truly selfless act. It is an act of gratitude and generosity in response to what is arguably Queenie's only truly selfless act in the book, one free from ulterior motives and dark subtext such as her generosity to the Massies when they first arrived. It may be, in fact, that aside from serving the plot by telling the story of the conversation of the campfire, the Massies serve to metaphorically represent the pure ideal of selfless friendship that the Pickles say they embody, but may not in fact actually embody.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Chapter 11 - When Queenie arrives at the next club meeting at Mrs. Judd's, she is surprised to see Rita there. Rita herself is uncomfortable and uneasy, and Queenie notices that all her fingernails have been chewed to the quick. She tells Rita what the Massies told her about the man at the campfire who she believes to be Skillet, but Rita tells her that while Skillet may have helped dispose of the body, he didn't kill Ben Crook. She suggests there was a "conspiracy" at work, but before she can explain, Mrs. Judd interrupts and tells them to start quilting.

As the women chat over the quilt, conversation reveals that the "Celebrity Quilt" has been finished, and that Ella's maiden name was Eagles. Queenie reveals that the Massies have left, Zepha leaving behind her "Road to California" quilt. At that moment, Prosper Judd arrives with fresh lemons for the ladies' tea. He compliments Ella as he passes into the kitchen, and when Ella compliments him back, Rita suddenly blurts out that he killed Ben Crook! The women react with shock, silent until Mrs. Judd demands an explanation.

Rita says she has discovered that Prosper was making mortgage payments on Ella's property, suggests that the two were having an affair, and that the entire Persian Pickle Club knows the whole story and has been keeping the truth a secret. She also suggests that Prosper paid Dr. Sipes to falsify the medical records of Ben's death, and that Sheriff Eagles was willing to turn a blind eye. Queenie becomes increasingly upset at what she is hearing and in order to silence Rita, herself blurts out that the Pickles killed Ben! She then immediately, and guiltily, apologizes for breaking the group's promise. Mrs. Judd reassures her that if she hadn't said anything, one of the others would have, and goes on to explain what really happened.

Prosper, Mrs. Judd says, was paying the mortgage because if he hadn't, Ella would have lost land that was legally hers. Ben, she says, was planning to sell it to pay his debts. She also says that Ben was often physically and emotionally abusive to Ella and that all the Pickles knew it, and that the turning point came on a day when it was Ella's turn to host the Club and Ben fed the cake she had painstakingly made to the pigs. Then, when Rita again suggests Prosper killed Ben, one by one each of the Pickles (except Queenie) says she did it, several saying they were the first to arrive after the cake was thrown out and reacted with angry vengeance. When they've all finished, Rita comments that no matter what, the killing was still murder, a claim that Agnes T. Ritter rejects. Mrs. Judd then asks whether Rita will put the story in the paper, and Agnes reminds Rita that she has been made a member of the club. "We extended the hand of friendship to you," she says, "and there's nothing in the world that's stronger than friendship. You had the right to know our secret, because we trust you."



As Rita considers, Queenie notices that Rita's hands are "not at all pretty like they were the first time [she] saw her" and that a hangnail is bleeding onto the quilt. Finally Rita says she's promised the newspaper a story about the murder, and says that that story will be the story the Massies told Queenie about Skillet, warning people "to watch out for drifters". At that, Queenie stops clenching her hands, she realizes her nails had cut into her palms to the point that she was bleeding into the quilt. At the same time, the women all pick up their needles, and as Mrs. Judd fetches refreshments, she compliments Rita on her stitches.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This section contains the book's climax, the point at which its various narrative, thematic and emotional lines come together in a point of high emotion and confrontation. There are several things to note here. The first is that in terms of narrative energy, of momentum building towards a climax, this climax seems to come slightly out of the blue. It doesn't feel like the next logical, motivated event in a series of such events, but instead comes across as what is known as a "deus ex machine," an unlikely and non-organic event that resolves the plot. The second is how the moment in question, Queenie's revelation of the truth and its aftermath, bring together both the dark and light sides of the narrative's thematic interest in friendship. In other words, she and the other Pickles contend that they are acting out of friendship and loyalty (and are asking Rita to do the same), but are at the same time acting in what many would call an unlawful fashion. A related point is the manner in which the truth is revealed, with Queenie once again proving unable to "keep her mouth shut." In other words, the moment of blurting revelation is the payoff for the setup and foreshadowing at the end of Chapter 1.

Meanwhile, it is possible to see, in the Pickles' request to Rita, a manifestation of the narrative's second sub-theme, its consideration of the relationship between generations. It could be argued that Rita is one of the "next generation" of Pickles, and is being passed the mantle of responsibility in the same way as one generation passes on responsibilities to another. This idea raises a couple of interesting side points. Does Velma, who is referred to throughout the book as a "Pickle", know the truth about Ben Crook? Can she be trusted to keep the secret. There is the sense that if the Pickles keep her secret about the baby, she will keep their secret about the murder. Is her request to Queenie to not speak of what she saw at the Hollywood Café grounded in the knowledge that she, Queenie, knows very well how to keep secrets? And, to take the question even further, is the subtext of Velma's visit blackmail?"

Other points to note include the imagery of the blood on the quilt at the end, a subtle but effective evocation of the "blood" that each of the Pickles has on her hands, and how their work is now tainted by their shared experience of murder and its cover-up. Then there is the list of confessions from the Pickles, a very engaging serio-comic moment that makes the narrative's thematic point about the value of friendship very clearly. Finally, there is Queenie's reference to how unattractive Rita's once beautiful hands now are, a metaphoric representation of how Rita's life and perceptions about herself and about people in general have become as beaten up and shabby as her nail polish.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

This chapter begins several months later. Queenie reveals in narration that everything went as planned with the birth of Velma's baby, safely and legally adopted by her and Grover and named Grover junior while Velma got a job in the city and never asks about the baby. Rita and Tom, she writes, moved to Montana after Tom got an administrative job in a copper mine. The Pickles, Queenie says, made her a friendship quilt which Rita says, in a letter, is on her and Tom's bed. Rita, Queenie adds, "turned into an even better friend after she moved away." Finally, Queenie tells how the Celebrity Quilt was bought by a man from a neighboring town who was unable to read and therefore, as one of the Pickles suggests, probably had no idea whose names he slept under.

The Persian Pickle Club gathers at Queenie's for their weekly meeting, a day after a brief rain. As they're settling in, Queenie reads a postcard from an old friend named Ruby, who's now settled in California. Queenie also shows the Club a quilt made for Grover junior by Rita, and the club members speak politely about how well Rita has learned to quilt. As they wonder what the pattern is, Agnes T. Ritter reveals that Rita wrote asking for pattern advice, and she sent a "Friendship Forever" pattern. A card left in the box the quilt came in, reading "If you wonder who's responsible, I did it", leads Mrs. Judd to ask what Rita meant. "Does Rita think," she asks, "you wouldn't know she'd made it?" Although Queenie tells Mrs. Judd that must be what Rita meant, in narration she reveals the truth.

The narrative then flashes back to the end of the meeting when most of the truth about Ben Crook's death was revealed. As she and Queenie are walking to Queenie's car, Rita asks how Skillet could have known about Ben's body if he didn't help the Pickles bury it (which Queenie has said didn't happen). Queenie says the only thing she can think of is that he discovered the body by accident. Rita then begs Queenie to tell her which of the Pickles struck the blow that killed Ben. As Queenie considers telling her, Rita reminds her that Rita is a Pickle now, and that she will keep the secret. Queenie realizes that Rita's right, and that Rita now "shared not just the secret of Ben Crook's murder but the guilt..

With the sounds of the other Pickles leaving for home in the background, Queenie says to Rita "I did it."

Chapter 12 Analysis

As is the case with almost every narrative in which a murder plays an important role, the final chapter of "The Persian Pickle Club" ties up all the loose ends left hanging once the truths of the murder have been revealed, a structural and narrative element often referred to as the "denouement." The "loose ends" in this case include the resolution of



the fate of the Celebrity Quilt, which can be seen as a comic manifestation of the novel's thematic focus on secrets. Then there is the question of what happened to Ruby, whose disappearance and fate have been a mystery throughout the narrative but who here reveals herself to be alive and well.

A key loose end tied up here is the resolution of the Velma, Queenie, and baby subplot, which can be seen as having considerable ironic weight of a woman who claims she brought a life to an end is given custody of and responsibility for a brand new life. Meanwhile, the way none of the characters refer in any way to the baby's true origins, but instead make clear efforts to connect him more with Grover than with Velma, manifests both the novel's key themes, friendship and the nature of secrets. Finally, the presence of the baby is a clear manifestation of the narrative's other secondary theme, the movement of life from generation to generation, in this case a movement not only of physical life but also spiritual and emotional. Since the Pickles will undoubtedly take their secret to their graves, Grover junior is the first of the "next" generation of Pickles to be born and to live free from secrets and guilt.

By far the most important loose end tied up in this section is the question of who struck the blow that killed Ben Crook. Granted, Queenie's narration in the book's final moments, her reaction to Rita's persuasion, makes the clear suggestion that at this moment, she of all the Pickles is now telling the truth about Ben's murderer. It must be remembered, however, that throughout the novel, as Queenie has told her story, she has at best concealed substantial truths, at worst has outright lied and manipulated circumstances in order to keep a dangerous secret. In that context, the question becomes one of whether she can be believed when she says it was her. Is she telling the truth, or is she being a Pickle? The same question could be raised in terms of her comments about Skillet. Did or didn't he help bury the body? The narrative never makes it entirely clear.

Other important elements to note in this section include the irony of Queenie's comment about how Rita became a better friend after she left. There is also the unexpected behavior of Agnes T. Ritter, her recognition of the friendship between Rita and Queenie, and also between Rita and the rest of the Pickles, and the deepening friendship she shares with Queenie. Here again the narrative contrasts the darker shadings of its thematic consideration of friendship with its lighter, more generous, more warm-hearted aspects.



Characters

Queenie Bean

Queenie is the novel's central character and narrator. She is in her early twenties, has married into a relatively wealthy family, is unable to bear children as the result of complications from a miscarriage, and in spite of her marriage being a happy and respectful one, still craves friendship. Her best friend Ruby having disappeared, she eagerly latches on to new arrival Rita, determined to both be a good friend and see Rita as a good friend herself.

Queenie portrays herself in narration as essentially moral and goodhearted, although she is subject to all-too human fears and apprehensions, particularly when it comes to strangers. These fears are amplified when she and Rita are the victims of a sexually violent night-time assault, but through the efforts of Queenie's loving husband Grover, the women of the Persian Pickle Club, and the mysterious but friendly strangers who make their home in an abandoned shed on Queenie and Grover's land, those fears are eventually eased.

As a member of the Persian Pickle Club, Queenie is privy to a dark secret, and like all the members of the Club considers loyal, supportive friendship to be higher moral worth and value than the law. In portraying this aspect of both the character and her situation, the author walks a very fine line between celebrating friendship and warning of its potential for obsessive-ness. The character of Queenie straddles that line, and one of the most intriguing aspects of the story she tells is her apparent willingness, shared with the entire club, to bend legal and moral rules in order to ensure the well being of its members.

Rita Ritter

Rita is the novel's primary antagonist, a character who comes into a comfortable and established situation and creates conflict by being different and by forcefully pursuing her intentions. She simply does not fit, does not really want to fit, and does not really try to, either. She is outspoken and impulsive, Rita's presence is a challenge and something of a trial to the members of the Persian Pickle Club, who nonetheless accept her because she is related to two of its members. This is a particularly important aspect of her character and situation, in that she essentially does nothing to earn the support and respect of the members of the club, she is simply given both as the result of her membership. In other words, she is granted status because of who she is, not because of anything she does, perceived as essentially worthy because she has connections, not because of her actual identity. As with many of the moral situations in the narrative, the Club's moral position on membership is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, there is the sense that Rita does not really deserve the unquestioning loyalty and support of the Club. On the other hand, circumstances like her miscarriage suggest she definitely



needs it. Here again, the novel develops its thematic consideration of how essentially human need and morality overrules socially and legally-imposed morality.

Septima and Prosper Judd

Septima Judd is essentially the leader of the Persian Pickle Club. Domineering, practical and incisive, her bossiness is at times difficult to take, but at other times, the club has reason to be grateful for both her intelligence and her decisiveness. Prosper is Mrs. Judd's husband, an apparently quiet man and relatively minor character who nevertheless plays an important role in the resolution of the murder mystery plot. As he becomes the focus of Rita's suspicions, her public accusation of his guilt is the trigger for the narrative's climactic revelation, courtesy of Mrs. Judd, that the Pickles bear responsibility for the death of Ben Crook.

Ella Crook

The quiet, vulnerable Ella Crook is a member of the Persian Pickle Club, under the particular care and attention of Mrs. Judd, especially when the murder of her husband Ben is revealed. Ella is an intriguing character, in that when the body is first discovered, she goes into a kind of shocked, grieving withdrawal, as if she knew nothing about the circumstances of his death. Later, as the truth about the involvement of the Persian Pickle Club in the murder becomes known, it becomes evident that she's known all along what happened. The question then becomes whether her shock and grief are genuine, whether they originate from the impact of a long-held secret being revealed, or whether it is all a mask, a cover for the truth such as that practiced by the other members of the club. There's no question that Ella is genuinely vulnerable. How that vulnerability manifests, however, is another question altogether.

Agnes T. Ritter, Mrs. (Sabra) Ritter

The sharp-tongued Agnes is Rita's sister-in-law, while the much gentler Mrs. Judd is her mother-in-law. Both are members of long standing in the Persian Pickle Club, which is the reason for Rita's membership - they simply assume that she will be interested and/or active in the Club's activities, making no effort to find out whether she actually would be. Agnes, embittered by the way she was treated as a child, is a bitter old woman in a young woman's body (she is revealed to be, like Queenie, in her mid twenties). Judgmental and opinionated, Agnes is the source of much conflict within the Club. She nevertheless displays moments of genuine compassion and vulnerability - she is the first, for example, to jump in and confess to the murder of Ben Crook (thereby protecting Ella), and she displays sensitivity in providing the departed Rita with the right kind of quilt pattern to make for Queenie's adopted baby. Mrs. Ritter is a generally less developed character, but is nevertheless important because she is kinder, more patient, and much more genuinely supportive of the members of the club in general, and of Rita in particular, than her daughter.



Nettie Burgett, Velma Burgett, Tyrone Burgett

The conservative and religious Nettie Burgett is an active member of the Persian Pickle Club. Her daughter Velma is also a member, but is much less active and being similar in interests, attitudes, and ambitions to Rita. Tyrone is Nettie's husband and Velma's father, a domestic tyrant whose temper and selfishness define the atmosphere of fear under which Nettie lives and Velma rebels. Part of Velma's rebellion is her relationship with a married man, a relationship that results in her pregnancy. The actions of the Club, and in particular Mrs. Judd, in helping both Velma and Nettie cope with that situation are manifestations of the novel's thematic emphases on both friendship and ambiguous morality.

Forest Ann

Forest Ann is Tyrone's sister, and therefore Nettie's sister in law and Velma's aunt. A member of the Persian Pickle Club and a widow, Forest Ann is known within the Club for her ongoing relationship with the married town doctor, a relationship that the Club members believe does them both good. Through Forest Ann, the narrative again explores issues of ambiguous morality and how the value of friendship overrides that morality in the name of addressing human need.

Dr. Sipes

Dr. Sipes is the town physician, a friendly efficient man who, out of compassion for her loneliness and need arising from his own spends time every day with Forest Ann. Whether the relationship is sexual is never made clear, but the members of the Persian Pickle Club clearly view it, and the pleasure it brings both Sipes and Forest Ann, as more important than any morally defined rules of behavior. There is also the sense that Sipes is, at least to some degree, in on the secret about the death of Ben Crook. Sipes does, after all, conceal the truth about Crook's death in his official coroner's report. This circumstance, it seems, suggests that he too values the ambiguous moral values associated with the Pickles' definition of friendship and loyalty over the law and the morals of his oath.

The Reverend Foster Olive, Lizzy Olive

The town minister and his sister play relatively minor roles in the narrative, but their upright and rigid judgmental morality is an effective and telling contrast to the thematically central, more ambiguous morality practiced by the members of the Persian Pickle Club (see "Themes"). It's interesting to note, in this context, how frequently the Club dodges involvement with the Reverend and his sister, and how they refuse Lizzy membership. The question, of course, is whether this makes the Club on some level as judgmental as the people they claim are TOO judgmental.



Hiawatha Jackson

Hiawatha is Ella Crook's black field hand. His discovery of Ben Crook's body triggers the murder mystery plot. Hiawatha is portrayed throughout the narrative as unquestioningly supportive of Ella, taking care of her in whatever way is possible or necessary, or both.

Sheriff Eagles

Town lawman Sheriff Eagles is genial and perceptive, on first glance a fairly hands off officer of the law but ultimately someone who will stand for little or no nonsense. He is also, as narration reveals late in the book, the brother of Ella Crook, the implication being that he knows full well the truth about her marriage to Ben. A further implication is that he has at least his suspicions about the truth of his death, and that he supports the Pickles in their conspiracy of silence to protect his sister.

Ben Crook, Skillet

Ben was Ella's violent husband, murdered in the aftermath of both a long period of physical and emotional abuse and a particularly violent act that causes at least one member of the club to resort to murder. The discovery of his body is the catalytic trigger for truths about the Club and its definition of friendship to come to the surface. Skillet was a former hired man on the Crook farm, a large, fairly unintelligent man who left his job shortly before Ben's death, who comes under Rita's suspicion as the murderer. Late in the narrative, however, and as the result of his fireside conversation with the Massie family, reported to Queenie and through her to Rita, he reveals truths about the circumstances of Ben's death, truths which clearly suggest his own innocence. The question of whether he helped the Pickles dispose of the body, however, remains unresolved.



Objects/Places

Kansas

Kansas is the state in the American plains in which the action of the novel is set.

Harveyville

Harveyville is the small community around which the farms of the Persian Pickle Club members are situated.

The Persian Pickle Club

"The Persian Pickle Club" is the name given to the weekly gathering of women who make their homes in and around Harleyville, a gathering at which the women quilt, read, take refreshments, gossip, make plans, and keep secrets. The name of the club has its origins in a particular fabric brought to the group by one of its members.

Quilts

For decades, perhaps even centuries, quilts were viewed by many as merely practical, created simply to keep people warm. For those who made them, however, and who invested their time and creativity, quilts have long and often had deeper symbolic meanings, their patterns having been given names that reflect not only their physical design but the emotional investment of their creators. In many cases, they also evoke a sense of community, in that the making of an individual quilt has traditionally, and frequently, involved the input of several sewers. Such is the case with most of the quilts referred to in "The Persian Pickle Club". In some cases, however, quilts carry with them the idiosyncratic beliefs and faiths of individual makers. In short quilts are, or at least have the potential to be, manifestations of functional creativity, as reflective of the spirit of their creator(s) as any work of art.

The Celebrity Quilt

This is a quilt made by the members of the Persian Pickle Club, an expression of their desire to help unwed mothers. The quilt incorporates the signatures of several celebrities, whose autographs were then embroidered over and incorporated into the quilt.



The

This quilt is the pride and joy of Zepha Massie, who along with her husband and children makes her home in an abandoned shack on Queenie and Grover Bean's property. The quilt, made by Zepha's grandmother under apparently tragic circumstances as it incorporates material from a dress belonging to the woman's dead daughter, represents the dreams of the Massies and people like them for a better life. In the context of the narrative, it also represents gratitude, friendship, trust, and faith.

Food

The importance of food to the narrative manifests on several levels. On the one hand, it is concrete evidence of the support offered by the women members of the Persian Pickle Club to one another. For example, in a crisis, they each bring food to the home of the troubled woman. Also within the context of the club, food is a manifestation of the group's sense of community. Finally, food becomes a manifestation of Queenie's friendship with others, whether it be her sharing breakfast with Sonny Massie or deliberately making a bad pie in order to offer comfort to Rita in the aftermath of her sugar and salt mix-up.

The Massie's Shack

The shack into which Zepha and her family move was once the home of the Bean family's hired hand. Abandoned for some time and quite run down, Zepha puts a lot of effort into making it more homey. The shack can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the value of creating a sense of home wherever one is made welcome, in a similar way to how the women of the Club find a sense of home within their circle of welcoming friends.

The Crook's Field

In an interesting contrast between the warmth and safety of the Massie's shack, established in a corner of one of the fields on the Bean farm, a corner of one of the fields on the Crook farm is the site where the body of the murdered Ben Crook was buried and is eventually discovered.

The Ritter Farm

The Ritter family, including new arrival Rita, makes its home on this farm on the outskirts of Harveyville. It is the setting for important conversations between Rita and Queenie, and also for Rita's dramatic miscarriage of her firstborn child, which in turn provides the challenging circumstances in which the strength of the bonds between the women of the Persian Pickle Club is demonstrated.



The Hollywood Café

After the burial of Ben Crook's bones, Queenie, Rita and their husbands go to the Hollywood Café for a drink. While there, Rita drunkenly reveals her plans to investigate Ben's murder, and the quartet also notices Velma Burgett, at the bar with the married man with whom she's involved and who is the father of her illegitimate child. The Café's name can be seen as having significant metaphoric value, in that Hollywood has been traditionally referred to as a "dream factory" and many of the characters visiting the café at the time portrayed in the novel are themselves dreamers. They are either chasing dreams such as Rita's dreams of being a writer, holding onto them such as Queenie's dreams of being a mother, or having them dashed.

Rain

Throughout the narrative, set as it is on the American Plains of the 1930's, the hope of rain, not to mention the need for it, is a frequently referred to dream for many of the characters. The fact that it finally does rain, albeit briefly, in the book's final chapter, suggests that on some level, the lack of rain in previous chapters can be seen as a metaphor. Specifically, the dry, parched state of the land echoes the dry, parched state of fear the women of the Persian Pickle Club lived in while the body of Ben Crooks remained undiscovered. With the discovery of the body and general public acceptance of Skillet being responsible, the women have received the rain-like blessing of freedom and hope.



Themes

Friendship

This is the narrative's central thematic concern, in that all its situations, characters and events in some way or another relate to the question of what friendship is, what it means, how it manifests, what it requires, what narrator Queenie Bean thinks it is, means, manifests and requires. In other words, there is some question as to whether her perspective is in fact authorial perspective, whether what Queenie says is what the author intends the reader to believe.

It's true that some of the aspects of friendship that Queenie values (loyalty, trust, respect) are unarguably and universally positive. The question of perspective arises because of the context and circumstances in which Queenie and the other members of the Persian Pickle Club apply those values. Those circumstances include the involvement of the Pickles in what might be described, particularly in the context of the time and place in which that involvement takes place as circumstances involving questionable morality. In those circumstances, friendship, to Queenie, seems to mean concealing truths that might harm another, and allowing the happiness of those involved in such so-called "questionable" pursuits to determine what action is taken. In other words, the morality of friendship, as defined by both Queenie and the other members of the Persian Pickle Club, is defined by the needs and desires of the individual, rather than by the rules and traditions of the society in which the individual lives. This sense of so-called "ambiguous morality" is the first of the novel's secondary themes.

Ambiguous Morality

Over the course of the narrative, Queenie and the other members of the Persian Pickle Club become involved, or reveal their involvement, in a series of circumstances that, as suggested above, involve situations in which "official" morality would probably suggest or condone one course of behavior and belief while the Club's morality of friendship requires another. These circumstances include the conception and birth of an out-of-wedlock child, an extra-marital affair, a murder, and the keeping the circumstances of that murder a secret. In their responses to each of these situations, the choices made by the Pickles, both individually and as a group, are defined and governed not so much by clear moral boundaries as by a series of gray areas defined by subjective experience and opinion rather than objective rule or law. In other words, they base their choices not on what the church, the courts, tradition or the law of the land dictate they should do to achieve the greatest moral good, but what they feel would do the most PERSONAL good. The devotion of the group, and the individuals within that group, to this principle is unswerving and, in many ways, both fierce and remorseless. It might not be going too far to say that in their own way, they are anarchists and individualists, determined to live life according to the dictates of their individual and collective conscience rather than by the rules of others. The key point to note is that the narrative, or at least Queenie takes



the position that this is not only a good thing, but a necessary thing. It is, one could argue, a very American perspective, in that the figure of the rule breaker, the outsider, the individualist is very much an iconic ideal in that particular culture.

Secrets

Secrets abound in the narrative, as do the reactions of individuals to both the hearing and the keeping of them. In general, most of the secrets in the narrative are recounted by, and kept within the boundaries of, the membership of the Persian Pickle Club, even those which, as outlined above, would seem to take those who keep the secret outside the traditional boundaries of law and morality. The narrative's apparent contention is that such secrets, those that protect and support the well being of the members of the Club, are worthy of being kept. This begs the question of how far that sense of tolerance extends. If for example, Lizzy Olive was discovered to be keeping the secret of an affair that provides the same emotional support for her as Forest Ann's does, would the Club be as tolerant?

Meanwhile, it is important to note the differences in how the characters react when important secrets are revealed. In some cases such as Velma Burgett's illegitimate baby, the telling of the secret is a good thing. It releases Nettie's pent up feelings and enables the group to put together a solution to not only that problem, but that of another of its members such as Queenie's inability to have and simultaneous longing for a child. On the other hand, there is the group's reaction to Queenie's confession that they were all involved, or have become involved, in the murder of Ben Crook. Their leaping to the defense of both Ella and themselves suggests a reaction born of fear, which in turn suggests that they are perhaps not as confident about the righteousness of their position as they suggest. The point is not made to suggest that they should be entirely confident - it would be foolish of the women to believe that a court of law, particularly one run by men would have sympathy for their position. In that circumstance, their fears are natural. In any case, it is interesting to note that the concept of fear in relation to the secrets the women are keeping is rarely, if ever, discussed. They seem to want to believe they are keeping things secret because it's the right thing to do, rather than out of any awareness, fear-based or otherwise, that if the secret were not kept, there could be serious consequences.

Relationships between the Generations

The theme of passing things from one generation to the next is a relatively minor one in the context of the narrative as a whole, but it is none the less an important one. The first point to note here is that the practice includes the passing of "things" from not only one biological generation to another, but also one metaphorical generation to another. Examples of the former include the way Grover Bean's farm was, before the narrative begins, passed on to him and his brother by their father and how Tom breaks free of the life passed on to him by his father. Finally, there are Grover's hopes of what his adopted



son has not inherited from his biological grandfather and mother. In other words, legacies go both ways, to the good and to the bad.

On the other hand, there are perhaps more examples of non-biological inheritance in the narrative. The passing on of Zepha's cherished quilt, with all its associated hopes and joys, can be seen as an inheritance of sorts, a recognition from one traveler on life's journey to another that that journey is made that much more tolerable if there is compassion along the way. Then there is the passing on of knowledge from one generation of quilters to the next, evident in several of the relationships within the Persian Pickle Club, in which the older members strive to teach the newer the ways of quilting, themselves perceivable as metaphors for the ways of life. This, in turn, is related, albeit ironically, to the final cross-generational inheritances apparent in the novel, the inheritance of secrecy. This particular passing on is ironic in that while the secret is passed on to Rita, there is the sense that it would not have been passed on if it did not have to be. In other words, inheritance can also be withheld from one generation to the next, it is also very likely that any new members of the Persian Pickle Club will not know exactly why the keeping of secrets is so important to the club, only that it is. It's also likely that when the last member of the current Persian Pickle Club dies, the secret of Ben Crook's murder will die with her.



Style

Point of View

The story is told from the first-person subjective point of view, that of one of the younger members of the Persian Pickle Club, farm wife Queenie Bean. There are several important points to note about this aspect of the novel. The first relates to the use of language, which for the most part is reflective of the sort of woman Queenie is. She is minimally educated, moral, occasionally sentimental, and often secretive. This, in turn, relates to the second, and perhaps most important, point to note about the novel's point of view.

Once the reader gets to the end of the novel, at which point Queenie seems to confess that she is guilty of the murder that has been the focus of much of the narrative, s/he realizes that Queenie is, and has been, what is called in literary analysis "an unreliable narrator." Her word cannot be trusted. She has an agenda and a personal perspective that makes telling the truth both unlikely and dangerous. Once the reader gets to the end of the book, she might very well be tempted to return to the beginning and give the book a read again in the light of this newly acquired knowledge. Where did she lie? How did she lie? Did she lie at all? On one level, the authorial choice of making a narrator unreliable adds an undeniable layer of intrigue to what has transpired. On the other hand, it raises questions of what exactly was the author's intent, particularly when it comes to strong thematic statements of the sort the narrative makes here.

Setting

The key points about setting to consider in relation to this novel are time and place, both of which are interrelated, given that the novel is set during the Great Depression in the 1930's. At that time, states in the American Plains like Kansas were particularly hard hit. The economic downturn experienced by the nation as a whole was aggravated in this and other prairie states by drought, which prohibited the farmers of the region from putting in and harvesting crops, and thereby earning a living. The economic and agricultural atmosphere of the state of the time is, therefore, an effective context for a story of how friendship can enable survival under difficult circumstances.

Meanwhile, another important component of the novel's setting is the placement of much of the action in a small town, and on the farms around that town. The nature of life in a small town is such that most people know, or at least have an idea, of the business and lives of the other people in the town. In other words, there are no secrets. The fact that the existence of the Persian Pickle Club and the bonds that keep the club together are both defined by secrets is, in this context, especially significant. Keeping secrets in a community where it's difficult to do so is a very big deal. At the same time, setting much of the action on farms around the central community creates a sense of relationship between isolation and community echoed in the relationship between the



isolated lives of the members of the Club on their farms and the sense of community they find in each other.

Language and Meaning

As discussed above in relation to "Point of View", the language of the novel is reflective of the character of the narrator. Like Queenie herself, the language of the book is simple, homey, straightforward, and moving without sentimental. This last point is particularly important to note, in that there are several key points in the narrative in which the author makes a clear effort to understate the emotional intensity of a moment, to reveal truth through implication rather than by stating it outright. A particularly vivid example of this can be found at the end of Chapter 3, in which the author makes it perfectly clear that she deliberately made a bad pie in order to help Rita feel better about having made a bad cake. In other words, language in circumstances such as that is shaped to make the reader think, rather than read passively.

The point is not made to suggest that the narrative is devoid of intense language. On the contrary, the language used to describe the assault on Queenie and Rita in Chapter 8 is simple and straightforward, in keeping with the character of both the narrator and the book in general, but is nevertheless profoundly moving, startling, and evocative. The emotion of the moment is not communicated in any sort of overly dramatic way, but is rather expressed in terms that suggest the horror of the moment rather than detail it. This spare but intense sensibility permeates the narrative, giving it a sense of graceful, if not always easy, truth until one remembers that every word of the narrative is being "spoken" by someone who is a liar or at the very least a concealer of the truth.

Structure

For the most part, the story follows a straightforward narrative line, moving from beginning through middle to end, cause leading to response leading to response and so on and so forth. That said, while the time of the narrative moves forward in a fairly straight line, events on that line occasionally divert from a clear, central plot. Even after the murder storyline gets thoroughly established and underway, Queenie's story takes substantial detours into explorations of the Massie family, the birth and death of Rita's baby, and the visit paid to Queenie by Velma Burgett. The point is not made to suggest that any of these incidents are unnecessary to the book's overall meaning and/or plot, but rather to suggest that an effective, telling relationship between those events and the main narrative line is sometimes less well defined than it perhaps could be because of the length of time spent on them.

All that said, the one diversion from the forward motion of the book's time line comes at the very end. This is the point in Chapter 12, when Queenie's narration flashes back from her new life with her baby to moments earlier in the story, specifically to conversations between Rita and Queenie after the Club meeting at which at least the partial truth of Ben's death was discussed. On the one hand, and on a purely technical



level, this creates a better ending for the book, a "surprise twist" that will make the reader close the book with a different sort of reaction than s/he otherwise might have had. On another level the flashback, coming as it does immediately following a portrayal of how happy and full Queenie's life has become, can be seen as a metaphoric reminder that no matter in what direction Queenie's life goes, the truth of her involvement in Ben Crook's death will always be with her.



Quotes

"After he met Rita at the Ritter place, Grover came right home and told me she was the nicest thing he'd seen since rain...he thinks Lottie, the two year old pie eyed heifer we just got, is a looker, too...we were chickens, all right, and Rita was a hummingbird. It gage us all pleasure just to look at her" (pg. 2.)

"There wasn't a quilt top turned out by a member of the Persian Pickle Club that didn't have fabrics from all of us in it. That made us all a part of one another's quilts, just like we were part of one another's lives" (pg. 4.)

"You made quilts out of what was on hand, like flowered feed sacks or pieces remaining when you cut out a blouse, or from trading scraps with one another...sometimes you went out and spent a nickel...for an eighth of a yard of material you just had to have, but you didn't buy yards and yards to make a quilt top" (pg. 14.)

"When he went to town one day, she asked him to bring her back a piece of the fabric she'd admired...he brought her the whole bolt of cloth. It was Persian pickle, what some call Paisley. Ceres still has a few yards of it left because it's so precious to her. She's particular about what she uses it for or who gets the scraps. Of course we all have pieces of it in our quilts. That's how come we're called the Persian Pickle Club" (Queenie to Rita, pg. 42.)

"There's a special kind of man who plants a tree when he knows he'll move on before it's big enough for him to sit in its shade" (pg. 54.)

"Men need to know the trouble they cause us'ns. They ought to have a baby just one time, and have it through their nose, too. That'd teach 'em'" (Zepha to Queenie, pg. 54.)

"I gossiped as much as anybody else, but I made a point not to start the gossip" (pg. 91.)

"I guess he was telling her something, the way married people do without talking, but I didn't know what it was" (pg. 104.)

"I loved Ruby, but being with her was like looking into a mirror...Rita was a surprise, and she made life interesting. Rita was what she would have called a real 'live wire', and it was exciting to be around her" (pg. 118.)

"Rita said she'd rather stay home, too. She told us she had work to do, and when she said it, her eyes were as hard and as mean as those of the man on the road" (pg. 137.)

"We couldn't discuss it with the other Pickles because they changed the subject, saying we ought to forget. But Rita and I couldn't forget, and talking about the man and what Blue had done to him, wondering if he was still in a sickbed or maybe crippled for life, made him smaller, less scary" (pg. 138.)



"...I felt so lucky to have such good friends that tears came to my eyes. I didn't want anyone to see, for fear they'd think I was crying over that night, so I picked up my pocketbook and searched for my thimble...with all the troubles, we'd seen plenty of one another, but I realized as I stitched how much I'd missed all of us sitting down and working together" (pg. 144.)

"The rest of us can keep a secret. Were you planning on telling?" (Mrs. Judd to Rita, pg. 153.)

"It always feels like home when I see the stars. You never go so far away you can't see a familiar sky" (Zepha to Grover and Queenie, pg. 160.)

"...the terrible words exploded in my head like Fourth of July firecrackers. I prayed one of the other Pickles would speak, but it was as quiet as death in Mrs. Judd's parlor, and I thought my skull would burst if I didn't say something to end the silence" (pg. 178.)

"Murder? You think killing a crazy man who's about to beat his own wife to death is murder?" (Agnes T. Ritter to Rita, pg. 184.)

"I remembered that night in the Ritter kitchen when Rita had sworn to sell her soul to get out of Harveyville. She wouldn't have to sell her soul now. She'd just have to sell our story to the newspaper" (pg. 185.)

"We'd spilled more blood on Mrs. Judd's [quilt] that day than the Whig's Defeat had gotten during the whole Civil War" (pg. 186.)

"When I wrote to tell Rita the baby had arrived, she and Tom sent Grover junior a telegram congratulating him on choosing us to be his parents" (pg. 191.)

"It was important to remember not that a bad man was dead but that a good woman still lived. It wouldn't surprise me if one or two members couldn't even recall which pickle had wielded the ax handle ... we were all in it together. The one who actually struck the blow knew that, and it kept her from dwelling on the fact that a man died because of her" (pg. 195.)



Topics for Discussion

Discuss whether the book's apparent thematic perspectives on the positive, lasting value of friendship are undermined or supported by its events such as a group of "friends" conspiring to keep secret the truths about a man's murder?

Discuss whether you believe that under the circumstances, the murder of Ben Crook was justified. Relate this discussion to consideration of a larger question of whether murder is ever justified.

Discuss whether the actions of the Club in keeping the identity of Ben Crook's murderer secret are appropriate. In other words, whether friendship is more important than legal justice, or whether moral justice has been served by both the killing and the keeping of the secret of the killer's identity.

Debate the question of whether "The Persian Pickle Club" could justifiably be viewed as a feminist novel, one that advocates for the rights of women to self-determination free from and equal to that of males.

Given what can be gleaned from the script about Queenie's essential character, and given the secret she is relied upon to keep, how much of what she says can the reader trust and believe? Explain your answer.

Would you keep the kind of secret the Persian Pickle Club asks its members to keep if a friend asked you to? Why or why not?

In what way does the quote from page 54 reflect the novel's thematic contemplation of the relationship between generations?

Without giving details of the actual secrets you keep, what effect does keeping those secrets have on you? Consider the question in terms of both individual and shared secrets.