

# **The Queen of Palmyra Study Guide**

**The Queen of Palmyra by Minrose Gwin**

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# Plot Summary

The Queen of Palmyra tells the story of ten-year-old Florence Forrest's coming of age in 1960's Mississippi amidst segregation, racism, and dark family secrets that threaten her definition of right and wrong.

The novel opens in the turbulent 1963 summer in Millwood, Mississippi. Florence Forrest is ten-years-old and proud of the fact that her Daddy entrusts her with fetching "his box" whenever the phone rings. Florence doesn't yet know what's in the box, but she knows it's important. When she's not helping Daddy with the box, Florence sometimes helps Mama in the kitchen baking cakes, or her grandmother's maid, Zenie, with the sewing and ironing. Because her family has moved around a lot, Florence doesn't have any friends her own age and is at least one year behind in school. During the first few weeks of summer, Florence begins noticing strange events in her household. She notices her mother drinking more and her father spending more nights out of the house. There's an obvious tension between her parents, but Florence doesn't yet understand that it's because they have staunchly different views of the way African-Americans should be treated. Her father, the Nighthawk for the KKK, is doing all he can to push the blacks out his neighborhood, while her mother, an integration supporter, does all she can to warn her neighbors of the Klan's attack plans.

A few weeks into the summer, Zenie's niece Eva comes to town with the hopes of selling life insurance policies to the African-Americans in Millwood. She doesn't mind that Florence's father is the main insurance salesman in town, and hopes to flip his black customers into her services. Even though Florence's father is a horrific racist, he still allows Florence to spend time in the black neighborhood, Shake Rag, while he's at work. There, Florence falls in love with the unique, loving people and on many occasions, wishes she was part of their families rather than her own. As the summer passes, life at home becomes increasingly turbulent as Florence's mother begins to drink heavily, dulling the pain of her husband's abusive, violent ways. Many nights, no one bothers to feed or bathe Florence, who basically raises herself with Zenie's occasional assistance. One afternoon, Zenie and Florence make a horrific discovery: Eva has been attacked in the cemetery near their home and someone has branded her face with a cigarette butt. Rather than return home to Raleigh as many Shake Rag residents encourage Eva to do, she remains in Millwood to help fight for civil rights. This attack is a turning point in Florence's life. For the first time, someone she loves is affected by racism, but Florence does not yet know that her father is the culprit. As a result of Eva's attack, Mama slips further and further into her depression and alcoholism, and eventually drives her car into the side of an oncoming train. Miraculously, she survives but is sent to an insane asylum for shock therapy.

The summer carries on with Florence learning more about the KKK. When she accidentally starts a house fire trying to bake cakes for Mama's business, Daddy brands Florence's wrists with his cigarette light to teach her a lesson. Mama returns for a few days but runs away again, leaving Florence behind. By the end of the summer, Florence has greatly matured. She now realizes that Daddy's racist behavior isn't normal, that not



all families act this way, and that Mama is a disturbed woman who failed her as a mother. All of these realizations come to boiling point when Florence unwittingly witnesses Daddy murder Eva. At the time, Florence isn't sure what she saw, but as an adult, all the pieces come together in her mind. After the murder, Daddy threatens to kill Florence if she ever reveals the truth. With this final straw, Florence runs away from her childhood home and heads off to New Orleans with Mimi. Florence spends the rest of her life in Louisiana with Mimi and Mama, when she finally returns. Before Hurricane Katrina hits, Florence makes her realization: that she saw Daddy kill Eva, and she finally musters up the courage to confront him about it. Before the hurricane hits, Florence gets in her car and drives into the storm, knowing that Daddy is destined to die in the flood. She intends to sacrifice her life to the storm but at the last moment, jerks her steering wheel to the left, to safety.



# Part One: Chapters 1 & 2

## Part One: Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

The Queen of Palmyra opens with the line, "I need you to understand how ordinary it all was." The narrator, ten-year-old Florence Forrest, recounts the late-night phone calls her father, a burial insurance salesman, receives and how he calls for her to go into the basement and fetch his mysterious box, the contents of which wouldn't be revealed to her until later in the summer. The box had been handed down to Win Forrest from his father, and his father before that. Every time that phone call comes, Mama huffs and puffs around the house, throwing cake pans into the sink and slamming doors. Once, Mama dared to push the hated box off the table and Daddy rounded on her, threatening to snap her thin arm in his bear-like fist. Florence spends a lot of time at home because before returning home to Millwood, Mississippi, her family moved around a lot while Daddy tried to find work. As a result, she's missed so much school they're not even sure what grade she should be in. The novel opens in May, a few weeks after the family's return to Millwood, and Florence won't be returning to school until September.

After tonight's phone call comes and Papa leaves the house, Mama asks Florence if she'd like to go for a ride. Even though it's past Florence's bedtime, Mama drives with her out to the bootlegger's house to buy tallboys. On the way, she always buys Florence a chocolate milkshake to keep her quiet. At the bootlegger's house, Mama sometimes secretly passes the black man a handwritten note with her bills. Tonight, she whispers, "All right, it'll be all right now. Nothing ever happens until after midnight. Just don't go wasting any time, though. Get everybody inside, and the boys in the woods" (p. 17). Driving quickly away, Mama lets Florence open the beer cans for her, which she drinks while she's driving home, and sometimes take a swig or two.

Florence describes her mother's sudden decision to return to Millwood after their year away, the bus ride home, and her extended family's reaction to the return. Mimi and Grandpops, Florence's grandparents, were thrilled to have the family back home. Florence moved back into her old house and Mama went back to her cake-making business from home. There are many reasons why Florence is teased and bullied by the neighborhood kids, but sometimes Mama's cakes help build bridges. After a particularly dangerous episode of bullying, Florence works out an arrangement with the next-door neighbor children exchanging half a cake per week for unlimited use of their backyard swing. After this incident, Mama starts drinking moonshine from a poison bottle she keeps under the sink. At first, Florence thinks she's actually trying to kill herself, and she can't erase this image no matter how many times Mama assures her that the moonshine is hidden in the poison bottle so Daddy won't find out.



## Part One: Chapters 1 & 2 Analysis

Florence's story is set in the tumultuous summer of 1963 in Millwood, Mississippi. 1968 was a key summer for the Civil Rights movement and saw an array of violence, including the assassination of Medgar Evers and the Birmingham school bombing. This is also the year the Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his infamous "I Have a Dream" speech which ignited the nation. The year before, in 1962, James Meredith became the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, an act that outraged conservative white Mississippi residents. The divide of the nation is represented in Florence's own household. It's clear very on in the text that Daddy is a staunch white nationalist who believes black people should be kept in their place. The idea of integrated schools would have enraged him and he would have done everything in his power to keep this at bay. Mama, on the other hand, sympathizes with, and even supports, civil rights fighters. During her late-night trips to the bootlegger, she delivers handwritten notes warning them of racist activity. It hasn't yet been revealed that Mama gets her information from Daddy, a member of the KKK, but it's clear that she has a personal connection to the information. The fact that Mama lives with an emboldened racist has likely driven her to drink. As the drama of the novel unfolds, Mama will be unable to cope with the emotion and completely drowns herself in alcohol.

The novel is told from ten-year-old Florence's point-of-view, which create an interesting conflict in the narrative. Because she's still a child and views the world through naïve eyes, much of what she witnesses passes under the radar. She opens the novel with the very poignant line, "I need you to understand how ordinary it all was" (p. 1). Because she has grown up in a dysfunctional home, with an alcoholic mother and a violent, racist father, it seems ordinary that her father should receive phone calls in the middle of the night, ordinary that he would take his mysterious box with him, ordinary that Mama would pass letters to the black bootlegger, ordinary that she would drive the car drunk. Florence has been isolated from other children for most of her life, so she has no other lifestyles to compare her own to. She is dirty, neglected, and exposed to inappropriate scenes, but all of this seems "ordinary" to her. It is only as an adult - and indeed, Florence's adult voice, the voice "writing" this novel, interjects to explain what she's learned - that Florence is able to fully comprehend how damaging her childhood was, to herself and to her community. It is also interesting to note that in addition to being isolated from her peers, Florence is also isolated to what is happening in the world. Her family doesn't have a television, so Florence never hears of the Martin Luther King speech, she isn't exposed to the images of police dogs and fire hoses synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement. Because her parents have polarized views on the topic, they never talk about it at home, so Florence is completely naïve to the current political turmoil.



# Part One: Chapters 3 & 4

## Part One: Chapters 3 & 4 Summary

Saturdays are the busiest days in Florence's house because it's when all the ladies in the neighborhood come by to pick up the cakes they've ordered. Each Saturday morning, Mama runs around the house frantically cleaning anything the gossip's eyes might land on. She always dresses up in nice clothes, combs her hair, and puts on her makeup. On her first Saturday back, everyone is thrilled to see Mama again. They gather like chickens in the kitchen catching her up on all the town gossip, which usually has to do with the "Coloreds." Immediately, Mama corrects the women: They don't want to be called "Coloreds," they want to be called "Negroes." The gossip stops as the women pay for the cakes and quickly skitter out of the kitchen. Mama is so frustrated that when the house is empty, she throws all her newly collected bills and coins at the wall. She rounds on Florence and demands that as long as she live, Florence always call the African-Americans "Negroes," never "Colored." Dumbfounded, Florence nods. When she asks if Mama is going to make Daddy use the word too, Mama slaps her hard across the face. On the nights that Mama stays up late to bake, Daddy often climbs into bed with Florence, rests his hand on her stomach, and tells her stories. Florence doesn't like the way her Daddy smells - like hair oil and cigars - but she does like his stories about brave Christian men fighting like soldiers to protect their wives and children. Even as a child, Florence notices that in Daddy's stories, everything good is white and everything bad is black.

Millwood is divided into two parts of town, one for the Whites and one for the Blacks. The Black part of town is called "Shake Rag" which leads Florence to believe that everyone wears rags there. The first time she visits, Florence is shocked to see neat houses with flower boxes and mowed lawns. Against Daddy's wishes, Mama often makes deliveries to Shake Rag when families there suffer great tragedies. When the family returns to Millwood, Mama arranges for Mimi's black maid, Zenie Johnson, to baby-sit Florence at her house in Shake Rag in the afternoons. Each day after she finishes up work at Mimi's, Zenie walks with Florence back to Shake Rag. She pours a cup of coffee and reads yesterday's newspaper, often exclaiming loudly at the stories. Sometimes, she refuses to speak to Florence after what she's read saying, "Leave me alone, while folks" (Page 56). On the days that she likes Florence, she tells her fantasy stories her mother once told her about Zenobia, the Queen of Palmyra. Zenobia, whom Zenie is named after, was an Arab Queen who fiercely led her men into battle. One afternoon while Zenie and Florence are playing cards, there's a knock at the door: it's the burial insurance salesman coming to collect this month's payment.

The next afternoon, another visitor arrives: Zenie's niece, Eva. Even from outside, Florence can hear Eva and Zenie laughing about her and her family, which makes her feel ugly and uncomfortable. Eva has just graduated from college and decided to move to Millwood to sell burial insurance to black folk, even though the white men in the neighborhood already have a firm hold on the market. Eva can't believe that there would



be a black person in all of Millwood who wouldn't want to switch over to an insurance company run by and sold by fellow blacks. Eva smiles at Florence and asks if she's like to see her stuff. She gives Florence a full makeover with all her fancy makeup even though the skin color doesn't match. Florence has never had so much fun or felt so beautiful, but when she looks at herself in the mirror she says in dismay, "I look colored" (p. 77). She doesn't mean for the exclamation to come out sounding racist, but it does and immediately, all the happy energy is sucked from the room. Eva slams shut her makeup kit and Zenie roughly washes the paint off Florence's face. No one speaks to her or makes eye contact with her until her mother comes to pick her up a few hours later.

## Part One: Chapters 3 & 4 Analysis

When Mama corrects the ladies in her home, saying that their black neighbors prefer to be called "Negroes" rather than "Coloreds," she crosses an invisible line in everyday white pleasantries. By correcting her friends, Mama has taken a political stand, an act considered highly provocative at the time, particularly when coming from a woman. The rest of the housewives don't have an opinion or choose not to share it out of fear. White Americans siding with their black neighbors during the Civil Rights movement were often ostracized from their communities. During segregation, many white people refused to shop at stores that also served blacks, or stores identified as being owned by Civil Rights sympathizers. The women likely didn't speak up one-way or the other because it was simply too dangerous to have an opinion, especially if that opinion was different than the majority's, as Mama's was. The only friend who stays to talk with Mama is her best friend, Navis. Navis is a single woman who lives alone and seems unaffected by the opinions of others. Although she doesn't verbally support Mama in front of the other women, the fact that she stayed behind after everyone else leaves highlights their close bond. When Mama throws the money, she seems to be saying that she doesn't want to profit from racism. If these women look down on their black neighbors, Mama doesn't want their money and she's angry that her family desperately needs it. Mama's reaction to Florence's question, "You going to make Daddy say [Negroes] too?" is unexpectedly violent (p. 43). Even before she asks the question, Florence knows Daddy would never use that word, and in her child mind, that's something to be proud of. Mama slaps Florence not because she's challenged her, but because she recognizes Florence's pride in her Daddy's behavior. Mama slaps Florence because she knows she would never get away with slapping her husband. Florence is the only part of Daddy that Mama can control.

In this section, the reader is introduced to Zenobia Johnson, Mimi's black main. When Mama was growing up, Zenie was her caregiver and she wants Florence to have the same cultured upbringing. It's no doubt Mama's relationship with Zenie that has influenced her sympathy to the Civil Rights Movement and she hopes to pass this political passion on to her daughter, an ideal all the more important since marrying an active member of the KKK. Zenie is an interesting, unique character. Typically, Southern literature creates stock "Mammy" stereotypes in black nursemaids. The Mammy archetypes were "cheerful, loving servants, vastly content in their work and devoted to





their masters, especially the children they cared for. They were obese, stupid creatures, with no breath of sexuality about them." Gwin seems to be actively combating this stereotype in Zenie. Zenie is a complex woman who loves Mama but views Florence apathetically. If she weren't being paid to spend time with Florence, she certainly wouldn't be. Behind closed doors, Zenie complains about everything from the pain in her legs to her low pay. She has an active sexual relationship with her husband Ray (although she doesn't display this publicly) and fights hard to obtain her Civil Rights. Zenie seems to generalize her relationships with whites the way most white people at the time generalized their relationships with blacks. When she reads a disturbing article about race relations in the newspaper, Zenie takes out her frustration on the only white person close enough: Florence, even though she doesn't understand Zenie's sudden changes in mood.

It is also interesting to note that naïve Florence, who has absolutely no understanding of the racial conflicts her town is embroiled in, feels a stronger connection to Zenie's family than her own. At Zenie's house, Florence sees a family that is actually interested in each other's days. They talk animatedly, laugh, show affection, and fight with abandon. All their emotions are on display, while at home, emotions are kept locked in a box or hidden in a poison bottle. Florence's exclamation that "I look colored!" further highlights her naivety about race relations. She genuinely meant the statement to come out as a compliment. She associates "colored" skin with a feeling of happiness and acceptance, but because it comes out of a white mouth, and out of the mouth of a known racist's daughter, her words are perceived differently. In this moment, Florence faces the harsh realities of the time, but she doesn't quite understand why Zenie and Eva are so upset. She remembers that her mother had warned her never to use the word "colored," but she doesn't understand the full political implications of the word.



# Part One: Chapter 5

## Part One: Chapter 5 Summary

Zenie prepares the laundry for the laundress, Uldine, to pick up. Zenie is always on time with the laundry because one week when she forgot, Mimi made her do the laundry herself without additional pay. On this particular day, Florence helps Zenie strip the beds of their sheets and toss them like kites over the giant banister. After, Florence watches as Zenie prepares lunch in the blazing hot kitchen. After lunch, Grandpops always takes Florence into the sitting room to read Uncle Wiggily books to her. Florence reads the childish books aloud, as she does every time Grandpops requests it, even though she finds the tales of a talking rabbit babyish. After Grandpops returns to the office, Florence lays down in the pile of sheets and falls asleep. Wrapped in the white sheets, she dreams she's the Queen of Palmyra. When she wakes, she excitedly tells Zenie about her dream. Zenie snaps that no matter how hard she imagines it, Florence "ain't no Queen of Palmyra ... Can't make yourself any old thing you want to be. Don't work like that" (p. 98). Zenie glares at Florence and says that some stories belong to people, and then she hisses at Florence to go away, she's tired of white folks messing with her stuff.

The summer wears on, hotter than any other summer Florence can remember. Each day, she marvels as Eva leaves the house in her freshly pressed skirt and beautiful, shiny pumps. No matter how sweetly Eva presents the insurance options to her neighbors, none of them want to switch to her policies. They all sweetly explain that they already have an insurance man, even if he's white and expensive. At home, Daddy is busy collecting insurance payments and working on a map of the US that will separate everyone by race. At night, he continues to get his mysterious phone calls or lie in bed with his hand on Florence's stomach telling stories. On the night's he goes out, Mama buys Florence a milkshake and they drive to the bootleggers. By now, she's moved on from tallboy beer cans to straight moonshine. On the days Florence spends at Zenie's, she sometimes watches Zenie work and sometimes watches her husband, Ray, building and tinkering in his workshop. One evening while Daddy is telling Florence stories in bed, Florence lets slip that Zenie has a niece in town selling insurance policies, just like him. Daddy is outraged and lets loose a long, racist diatribe about segregation and how "niggers" are taking over everything. Daddy clomps from the room and Florence hears him get his box and stomp out of the house.

## Part One: Chapter 5 Analysis

Gwin is very crafty in the ways that she highlights segregation and race expectations in the novel. Rather than explicitly state how difficult Zenie's life is, she shows the reader through beautifully constructed, subtle scenes like this scene at the dinner table. It's a blazing hot summer, but Zenie is still expected to wear her black maid's uniform complete with a white apron and thick, opaque tights while she cooks in the kitchen. During the meal, Zenie doesn't eat with the family and doesn't prepare a meal for



herself because every time she sits down to eat, someone needs more cornbread, or cold water poured into their glass. Mama is the only person at the table who seems embarrassed by the fact that Zenie literally sits around waiting for someone to ask her to serve them, rather than eating her own meal.

The theme of storytelling is integral to Florence's childhood and the way she processes the turbulent events of this summer. Growing up, Florence is told stories by many different people trying to teach her life lessons. From Grandpops, Florence learned the stories of Br'er Rabbit and Uncle Wiggily, two rabbits down-on-their-luck who use pluck and ingenuity to survive in the cruel world. From Daddy, Florence learns the story of Bomba and the Swamp, which teaches her that everything white (including people) is good, while everything black is evil. From Zenie, Florence learns the stories of the Queen of Palmyra, a black Queen who leads her people with dignity, honor, and force. Many of these stories serve as symbols for lessons directly related to the conflicts in *The Queen of Palmyra*, and these symbols will gather strength as the novel progresses. Zenie's reaction to Florence's excitement over the Queen of Palmyra story is interesting. Zenie shared her childhood stories as a way of relating to Florence, to tell her more about herself. Not fully understanding the cultural impact of the Queen of Palmyra stories, Florence claims them as her own, saying that she would like to be the Queen. Zenie is angered because in her mind, Florence already has everything because she has power: she is white. On some level, Zenie fears that if Florence adopts the Queen of Palmyra story as her own, it becomes a little less black, it has a little less cultural resonance. Cultural history is all Zenie has to cling to and she's not willing to share that, too, with a white girl.

Finally, the main conflict of the novel is introduced when Florence accidentally lets it slip that Eva is selling insurance policies in Shake Rag, deliberately stealing business from Daddy. Eva represents the new, empowered black youth who believe in strengthening their community from the inside. In Eva's opinion, black people shouldn't purchase insurance from unsavory white sellers like Daddy. It is clear to her that white-run insurance companies overcharge and rip-off black buyers. Their rates are higher for black families, and when they need to collect, the insurance companies either fail to pay out, or pay less than the policies are worth. By selling an alternative insurance policy - from a company owned and run by African-Americans - Eva hopes to empower rather than victimize her community. Although Eva has good intentions, she is almost as naïve to the realities of race relations as Florence is. First, she fails to recognize the inherent danger of stealing business from dangerous white men like Daddy, men who feel that black people should be kept in their place. Daddy is a violent racist and now that he knows about Eva, she will certainly have hell to pay. Eva's situation is additionally complicated by the fact that most of her neighbors refuse to switch policies, even though they know Eva's is better. This highlights the fear many black people have of angering the KKK. Something as simple as switching life insurance policies could be perceived as a challenge to white power. White insurance salesmen like Daddy thrive off of manipulating and intimidating black clients. If these clients suddenly switch to a new policy, the white salesmen will miss that income and come to collect in different, perhaps even violent, ways.



# Part One: Chapters 6 & 7

## Part One: Chapters 6 & 7 Summary

Florence wakes in the morning to discover that her father has left in the middle of the night with his box. Newspapers announce that the segregation boycott starts today. Worried about Florence's haggard, unkempt appearance, Mimi takes her to the beauty parlor for a much needed haircut. Mimi is concerned about Mama and asks a lot of questions about her recent behavior. Florence considers all the things that worry her about Mama but doesn't mention any of them. She simply says, "She's behaving" (p. 120). When Mimi doesn't stop condemning Mama, Florence finally snaps and insults her grandmother's favorite hat. Hurt, Mimi sends Florence out of the house and down to Zenie's for the rest of the afternoon. Zenie is not pleased when Florence joins her for the walk home, but lets her fall into step beside her. As they walk past the cemetery on the way to Shake Rag, Florence spots a girl lying next to a tombstone that reads "Daddy Gone Home." As they get closer, Zenie murmurs "Oh sweet Jesus, oh sweet Jesus," and Florence realizes that the girl shaking on the ground is Eva. Running up to her, Florence sees that Eva has been attacked: her hair and clothes are mused and an angry circle has been burned into her cheek. Zenie shouts for Florence to fetch Ray. Florence finds Ray in the shed and shouts at him to hurry up and follow her. When Ray sees Eva lying in the cemetery, he snaps at Florence to "Get on back. Get out of here" (p. 125). After everyone else is gone, carrying Eva back home, Florence lays down next to the tombstone and falls asleep. She wakes a few hours later as Mama frantically pulls her off the ground. When Florence tells Mama about Eva, Mama's face turns ashen. She starts to shake and cry. She drives home like a maniac, screaming her husband's name. When she discovers he's not at home, she takes a swig from her poison bottle and starts baking. The next morning, she brings a gorgeous six-layer lemon cake to Zenie's house for Eva, but everyone in the house refuses to take it.

Mama drives straight from Zenie's house to the police station where she attempts to file a police report against the man who hurt Eva. The Sheriff is initially quite helpful but stops short when he realizes Mama is talking about "some little colored gal" (p. 144). He dismisses Mama's complaints and says that he doesn't want to get involved. When Mama says that she's the wife of Win Forrest, the Sheriff nearly laughs, "I expect that husband of yours is worried some too. Maybe he can help y'all find out who-all bothered that little colored gal" (p. 144). Florence sees something dark take over her mother's face and she immediately asks to be taken to Mimi and Grandpops. In the car, Florence covers her eyes and cries the entire way, not sure where Mama is taking her. When they pull up outside Mimi's house, Mama kisses Florence on the lips - something she's never done before - and drives away. Mimi and Grandpops give Florence a full meal, immediately noticing that the girl hasn't eaten anything all day. They don't ask why Florence has come to visit, but given the hour, they know something is wrong. Mimi gives Florence a much-needed bath, combs her hair, and brushes her teeth. Late that night, Florence wakes to hear Grandpops on the phone with the police: Mama has



driven her car onto the tracks and straight into an oncoming train. By some kind of miracle, she survived.

## Part One: Chapters 6 & 7 Analysis

Other people have started to notice Mama's strange behavior and the obvious way she and Daddy neglect Florence. Because Florence and her family have been away so long, it's likely that the neglect has been happening for some time, but no one was around to witness it. Mimi is concerned about Florence's dirty clothes and unkempt appearance but obviously doesn't want to confront her daughter about it. What's interesting to note about Florence's reaction to Mimi's questions is that, despite her confusion and loneliness, Florence feels fiercely protective of her parents. She senses that if she speaks the truth, they might be separated. For a lonely, isolated child, the thought of being separated from their only family is terrifying. Even though Florence deserves a better life, she doesn't understand that Mimi is trying to help her. Instead, she views Mimi's questions as a threat. This protective mentality will carry on throughout the novel, even when Mama and Daddy's actions become more alarming and sinister. Thematically, Florence's silence is also important. By refusing to tell the truth, she rewrites her life story. She turns a blind eye to reality and imagines that she's living in a perfect world where Mama is attentive and Daddy isn't frightening. While this may be a survival mechanism, the decision to ignore the reality of that summer will haunt Florence for the rest of her life.

Eva's attack is the turning point in the novel. For the first time, racism has touched someone Florence loves, but she doesn't yet understand its implications. As soon as Ray sees Eva, he knows, innately, that Win Forrest is behind the attack, which is why he lashes out at Florence - something he would never otherwise do. Similarly, when Mama hears about it, she drives home in anger screaming Win's name. She, too, seems to know that he has crossed a line and she is powerless to stop him. This may be why she attempts to engage the Sheriff in Eva's case. While she doesn't blatantly accuse her husband (which would be suicide), she hopes the Sheriff will do justice without identifying her as the whistle-blower. The Sheriff's reaction highlights the deeply embedded racism of the time. He doesn't feel it's his place to get involved with Eva's case because she's nothing more than a "little colored gal." His words to Mama also insinuate that Win Forrest is the perpetrator. It is important to note that at the time, most white people who committed crimes against black people were either never arrested or set free by their juries. In the P.S. Gwin writes that, "Southern juries back then were all white and all male; white murderers of African Americans got a free ride. Examples from that period abound. The murderers of Emmett Till went free. The trial of Byron De La Beckwith, who killed NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers, twice resulted in a hung jury" (p. 8).

Mama's reaction to Eva's attack is to immediately bake a cake - a seven-layer lemon cake - as a way of apologizing. Because everyone knows that Win Forrest is to blame, the cake is somewhat of an insult. To Zenie and her family, accepting the cake from Mama would have felt like saying an apology is enough, a cake makes everything



better. They don't want a cake. They don't want to settle for sweet frosting. They want justice. On some level, Mama must have understood this. She must have understood that there was no way she could make this better. The niece of her beloved Zenie was attacked by her husband. Just as Mama knew there was nothing she could do to help Eva, she also knew there was nothing she could do to stop Daddy. The guilt and fear so overwhelmed Mama that she felt her only option was death. Mama's attempted suicide is selfish on many levels. First, it highlights her crippling fear. She could have taken a stand against Win, could have turned him in to the police, but she was too afraid. Second, by killing herself, Mama knew that she was leaving Florence behind and that whatever violence Win took out on her would be directed toward their innocent daughter, which is exactly what happens.



## Part Two: Chapters 8 & 9

### Part Two: Chapters 8 & 9 Summary

After hearing the news about her mother, Florence climbs under the bed and stays there, pretending to be dead. She stays there all morning and long into the afternoon, no matter what people say to call her out. Finally, Daddy arrives and rests his hand on Florence's shoulder. The act is so comforting, Florence starts weeping all over again. In one fluid motion, he pulls Florence from under the bed and into his arms, carrying her home. Over his shoulder, Florence sees Zenie staring at them, her eyes like cold daggers. All the neighbors have come out of their homes to watch Daddy carry Florence home, and when they get there, the tables are mounded over with food and cards from Mama's many concerned friends. Immediately, Florence dives into the potato salad. She doesn't even like potato salad, but today, it tastes like the best food on earth. She eats and eats until she sees her stomach swelling with food. The more she eats, the hungrier she feels, stuffing her face with eggs, ham, potatoes, and cherries. Suddenly, she realizes that she has all this food because Mama is going to be gone for a long time, and it doesn't taste so good anymore. Her loneliness returns and she runs to bathroom to vomit. There's a bad taste in Florence's mouth that she can't get rid of, no matter how many times she brushes. When Florence comes out of the bathroom, she sees Daddy with his head in his hands on the couch, sobbing.

That night, Florence and Daddy sleep together in the same bed for warmth. Florence wakes in the middle of the night to the sound of silence: no pots banging around, no oven door slamming shut. A sudden fear that Mama will lose her cake baking business floods Florence and she leaps out of bed to solve the problem. She's helped Mama bake her cakes many times and feels sure she can handle the task on her own. Carefully, Florence lays out her supplies and organizes her baking table. Everything goes smoothly until she accidentally catches a tea towel on fire. The fire quickly spreads to the aprons and curtains until the entire kitchen is in flames. Daddy comes flying downstairs and manages to put the fire out before it spreads to the whole house, but he's righteously angry. He grabs Florence by the arm and drags her into the living room. There, he pulls out his lighter and burns two long scars into Florence's wrists to teach her a lesson about fire.

The next morning, Florence wakes to find that her arms have been bandaged and that Daddy is gone. When he returns, he's far too cheery carrying his box and smiling at Florence. He promises his "special girl" a big surprise if she can keep a secret. Frightened by Daddy's sudden change in emotion, Florence nods silently, ready to take whatever he doles out. Daddy places his finger up to his lips, signaling once again that what he is about to show Florence is a big secret. She repeats the motion, still nodding. Satisfied, Daddy opens his box and reveals its contents: a full KKK outfit, crosses, and a Bible. Florence is disappointed. To her ten-year-old brain it's nothing more than a Halloween costume, but to Daddy it obviously means so much more. Daddy explains that he's the Nighthawk, just as his Daddy and his Granddaddy were. The Nighthawk's



responsibility is to organize and watch over the meetings, and to make sure that no one gets hurt as they're spreading their message around Mississippi. In the middle of Daddy's speech, the phone rings. Florence listens in shocked silence as he retells the story of last night's house fire, only this time, he makes it sound like Florence is a silly little girl who absentmindedly set the kitchen on fire. Florence is outraged that Daddy would tell it this way: she was careful and methodical in her preparation, not childish.

At Mimi's house, Zenie immediately notices the bandages on Florence's wrists and asks to see them. Florence refuses and shouts at Zenie when she gets too close. Florence has never raised her voice to Zenie before and the fact that she does so now indicates a change between them. Silently, Zenie walks home with Florence by her side. Florence slips into Eva's room to try to cheer her friend up. Eva stares blankly at the walls until Florence mentions her burnt arms. Suddenly, Eva's eyes snap toward Florence and she breaks into a wild laugh chanting, "I know how Flo got burnt. I know how Flo got burnt" (Page 193). Raising herself from the bed, Eva announces to everyone's surprise that if Florence can freely live her life, so can she.

## Part Two: Chapters 8 & 9 Analysis

When Daddy comes to take Florence home, Florence looks over his shoulder to see Zenie staring coldly at them. Because she's a child, Florence assumes that Zenie's dagger eyes are directed at her, that she's angry with Florence for acting petulant. Adult readers will likely understand that Zenie's glare is directed at Daddy, whom she knows attacked Eva, but Florence assumes all emotions are somehow related to her. This will plague Florence throughout the turbulent summer, she fails to recognize the external conflicts happening around her and internalizes everyone's pain. When she returns home, Florence is overwhelmed by an insatiable hunger. She stuffs her face and stretches her stomach until she vomits. It's obvious that she's eating to fill a hole left after Mama's disappearance. The bad taste left in her mouth is symbolic of Daddy's sins which cannot be washed away. Florence doesn't try to understand why Mama tried to commit suicide even though she's old enough to connect the dots. Florence holds all her fears at arms length. Subconsciously, she seems to understand that if she opens her eyes to the reality of her situation, she will be crushed by its devastation.

The house fire is a physical representation of the way Florence's home life has been destroyed. The kitchen, so symbolic of Mama's presence, has been burned and blackened. With Mama gone, everything is dangerous and out of control. Daddy burns Florence's wrists to teach her a lesson, a direct parallel to the burn on Eva's face, also inflicted to teach a lesson. At this point, there should be no doubt in anyone's mind, including Florence, that Daddy attacked Eva. Interestingly, Florence closes her eyes during her punishment and doesn't remember it happening. Later in the novel, Florence says, "True stories happen and then you tell them. But what you tell depends on what you see" (p. 381). By closing her eyes to Daddy's violence, Florence can pretend it never happened. As soon as Eva sees the burns on Florence's wrists, she feels an immediate connection to the girl. In her mind, Florence lives with the devil, and if she survive, so can Eva. From this point on, Eva and Florence forge a strong friendship





based on their struggle to survive. The difference is that Eva fully recognizes and understands Daddy's danger while Florence is still naïve to it.

It's interesting to note that when Daddy is on the phone with Mimi explaining the house fire, Florence is angered not by Daddy's obscene punishment but by the way he retells her story. Readers will understand Florence's frustration: the narration depicts an organized, meticulously detailed child mastering a task most adults would feel inept to complete. She plans and executes baking gourmet cakes perfectly. The hand towel that accidentally catches fire is a complete accident that could have happened to anyone. The fire only caught on because the fan Florence set up to cool the cakes fanned the flames. In Daddy's retelling, Florence is depicted absent-minded, even clumsy child. This version of the story is only partially true, but Daddy has spun the events of the night to make himself sound like a hero. Florence thinks, "The one who tells the story gets to say who's bad and who's good. Then the story rises up and puts on its clothes and goes out into the world" (Page 206). This idea of storytelling inventing truth carries on throughout Eva's attack and her eventual murder, creating an interesting parallel of victimization. Whenever Daddy tells stories about the blacks living in Shake Rag, he makes them out to be horrible monsters. White newspapers publish scandalizing stories about black men raping and torturing innocent white women, spreading fear and racism to the masses, even though the stories aren't true. During segregation in the 1960s, all the stories seemed to be the same: white people were honest, upstanding, religious patriots, while black people were violent, unpredictable, menacing heathens. On this night, Florence learns an important lesson on storytelling that will affect the way she views Daddy, race relations, and society as a whole: those who tell the stories get to say who is good and who is bad, and in the South, black people are almost always bad.



## Part Two: Chapters 10 & 11

### Part Two: Chapters 10 & 11 Summary

Out of bed for the first time in days, Eva walks straight to the bathroom where she takes her time bathing, lotioning her skin, and spritzing various perfumes. When she finally emerges, she looks more beautiful than any woman Florence has ever seen. Eva announces that she'll be walking down to the ice cream store, and Zenie insists that she take Florence with her. At first, Eva is annoyed by the demand but as she stares at Florence, something in her eyes changes. Suddenly, she sees Florence "Not [as] a stray do the way I thought of myself most of the time, but [as] something valuable and secret, the way Daddy thought of his box and the stuff in it" (Page 199). They walk down the street together, Florence making careful note of Eva's confidence shoulders and stride. Outside the ice cream stop, the men smoking pipes and chewing tobacco stare at the girls as if they're ghosts. The old men trip over themselves asking Eva how she's doing and how she's feeling, but Eva mostly ignores them. Inside, Mr. Lafitte, the ice cream shop owner, tells the girls they can have whatever they'd like, on the house. As the girls cluck and coo over the ice cream flavors, Mr. L asks Eva when she's leaving. Eva spins around and calmly states that she's not going anywhere. The two get into a whispered argument about why Eva should town - she is still young enough to have a life somewhere - and why she should stay - Eva's not scared of bullies in sheets. Before they can finish their conversation, Grandpops storms into the ice cream shop and orders Florence into the car. Before she goes, Florence hears Grandpops scolding Eva for daring to bring Florence into the streets with her. He says that she's not fooling anyone and that she's forbidden from walking alone with Florence again. When Eva repeats that she's not planning to leave town anytime soon, she says she was "born and bred in a briar patch" (p. 211).

Enough time passes that both Florence and Eva's burns have healed and begun to fade, but both are left with scars. Daddy admits Mama into a mental institution for shock therapy to cure her from her depression. She writes occasional notes home that disturb Florence. At nights, Daddy continues to take his phone calls and leave for meetings. He's purchased a "headache stick" that he uses to smash people's heads in. Too afraid to leave Florence home after the house fire, Daddy has started taking her to his KKK meetings. The Klaven, as the meeting room is called, is nothing more than a closed-down gas station garage, but Daddy treats it like the gates to Heaven. At the first meeting, Florence is molested by her neighbor, and fellow Klansman, Dan Chisholm. The rest of the Klansman bounce Florence on their knees, hug her too tightly, and wail with delight when they see another child being brought into the fold. In the middle of the hubbub surrounding her arrival, Florence wets her pants and bites her tongue. As they drive home that night, Daddy tells Florence that he's proud of her but she's too tired to respond.



## Part Two: Chapters 10 & 11 Analysis

At the ice cream shop, Eva faces off with her community. Most everyone feels that Eva should pack up and move back to North Carolina where she'll be safe from further attacks. Eva views such a move a sign of cowardice. By staying in Millwood, Eva is fulfilling the role of the Queen of Palmyra, the black Queen in Zenie's tales who fearlessly leads her people in battle. Eva is willing to put her life on the line for the Civil Rights Movement. In future chapters, she'll take on a literacy project with the hopes of teaching Shake Rag residents how to read so they can legally fight for equal rights. Eva also fulfills the symbolism of Br'er Rabbit, one of the characters in Grandpops' stories. In these tales, Br'er Rabbit - who was also born in a briar patch - must be tricky and scheming in order not to get stuck in the prickly plants. Similarly, Eva will have to be careful not to get stung once again. Eva saying that she's been "born and bred" in a briar patch means that she is ready for the fight. Her people, the African American people, are used to struggle and staying in Millwood after the attack will be her biggest fight yet. She and Grandpops face-off about Florence because Grandpops fears that Florence will be put in danger if the KKK come after Eva again. Eva, on the other hand, ironically views Florence as a form of insurance. Surely Daddy won't attack her in front of his little girl. Unfortunately for Eva, she underestimates Daddy's violent rage and disregard for Florence's mental wellbeing.

Daddy's disturbing parenting style is further illustrated in his sudden interest in ingratiating Florence into KKK culture. It starts with his emotional unveiling of the box's contents in Chapter 9 and continues with the KKK meetings in Chapter 11. It's obvious that Daddy has taken a keen interest in Florence now that Mama is out of the picture. Cynical readers might even theorize that Daddy institutionalized Mama as a way of keeping her out of the picture forever. If she were home, Mama would have put up a fight to keep Florence away from the KKK. If she couldn't control Daddy's involvement in the racist group, she could certainly control Florence's. But Mama's not here to protect her and Florence is too frightened to disappoint Daddy. It's interesting to note that Daddy shows Florence the contents of the box the morning after he burns her arms. It's almost as if revealing the contents are a form of apology. Florence sees the connection between Daddy's violent behaviors and the box, which leaves her with an unsettled feeling in her stomach. In this moment, she knows that Daddy is a bad man but she's too intimidated to admit it, even to herself. She tries to rewrite the story by imagining that the secret meetings are a bonding time, that she and Daddy are getting closer. Yet she cannot erase the scars, both physical and emotional, of Daddy's abuse. What could be interpreted as a happy celebrative time in the meeting is marred by Florence's molestation (Klansman Chisholm inappropriately touches Florence as he's helping her change into her white robes), the incident of wetting her pants, and the bloodied tongue. All of these events are meant to be a secret between Daddy and Florence, and they invent a hand signal - bringing their finger up to the tip of their nose - to seal the oath of silence. This silence will weigh heavily on Florence for the rest of her life. As an adult, she knows she should have spoken up but her many fears - of Daddy abusing her, of Daddy leaving her, of betraying her family - keep her silent.



## Part Two: Chapters 12 & 13

### Part Two: Chapters 12 & 13 Summary

The morning after the KKK meeting, Florence wakes feeling different. Daddy makes her breakfast for the first time in her life and can't show her enough how much he loves her, how proud he is of her. Florence feels special, but there's a darkness building in her stomach that leaves her feeling unsettled. At Mimi's house, Grandpops seems concerned with Florence's declining health and how far behind she is in school. At Zenie's house, everyone continues trying to convince Eva to return home to Raleigh but she won't budge. She's started selling encyclopedias instead of insurance policies, and when she learns that most of Shake Rag can't read, sets up literacy lessons. She knows there's no way black people will demand change if they can't even read the Constitution. When Eva learns how far behind Florence is at school, she offers to tutor her, charging Mimi and Grandpops \$1 per hour. They start with diagramming sentences, Eva's favorite activity. The first sentence Eva writes out is "The girl carefully touched the beautiful rose" (p. 242). Later, she changes the sentence to "The careful girl was touched by the beautiful rose" to make things more difficult. When Grandpops comes to pick Florence up one afternoon, he offers to buy her a whole set of encyclopedias to help her study. It's clear that this is his way of making amends with Eva for his harshness at the ice cream shop. A few days later, however, Zenie is cooking in Mimi's kitchen when she hears a loud thump upstairs. She and Florence sprint up to Grandpop's room to see that he's fallen out of bed. Florence calls for the ambulance and waits anxiously for them to arrive. By the time the ambulance arrives, Grandpops is already dead.

On the day of Grandpop's funeral, Mama is released from the mental hospital to attend the ceremony. Florence anxiously awaits her mother's arrival all afternoon, preparing a light lunch to share and imagining the things they'll talk about. Evening rolls around and Daddy returns home alone. Mama has chosen to spend her day with Mimi rather than come home. Daddy walks up the sink and starts crying, his shoulders shaking. Florence wraps her arms around Daddy's waist and they cry together. The next morning, Mama gives Florence an "everyday hug" with her good arm. The other arm is wrapped in a dirty cast. Through the entire funeral, Mama's exterior doesn't crack. She doesn't shed a single tear but sits working pleats into the fabric of her skirt with busy fingers. During the meal afterward, everyone wants to talk to Mama, to find out how she's doing, especially her cake ladies. Mama ignores all of them except her best friend, Navis. All the ladies start talking about taking Mama to the beauty salon and getting her fixed up, which finally snaps Mama out of her trance. In a strange voice, she announces that she'll be baking cakes tonight. Pick up will be tomorrow morning at 9:00. Then, without another word, she leaves the funeral party and starts walking home. Florence chases her mother down the sidewalk, trying to keep up. As soon as she gets home, Mama sees that Daddy has thrown away all her baking supplies, even the sugar and flour. Incensed, she starts writing up a shopping list. Florence shouts out ingredients they need and



Mama diligently jots them down. She steals Daddy's car keys, asks Florence to pre-heat the oven, and drives away.

## Part Two: Chapters 12 & 13 Analysis

This section is all about teaching. In the postscript to the novel, Gwin states that, "Teachers can change lives and open spaces in the world were there were none, in large and small ways" (P.S. p. 6). By teaching Florence how to diagram sentences, Eva is, in a way, teaching her how to navigate the complex, confusing world. On paper, Florence learns how to judge the way each word affects the words around it, completely altering the sentence, or story, being told on the page. This is symbolic of the way Eva teaches Florence that each action, each reaction, each person, each word spoken affects the larger story of society. Once Florence is able to understand the way Daddy's actions, and her own actions, affected the events of the summer, she will be able to see the truth. Contrasting Eva's intelligent, witty teaching, Mimi's teaching style - which fails to capture Florence's imagination or truly teach her anything - is depicted as outdated and dusty, similar to her views on segregation and racism (which don't affect Florence nearly as much as Eva's views).

Eva also teaches the residents of Shake Rag important lessons during her time in Millwood. First, Eva teaches many of the residents how to read. Eva benefits from this by selling more copies of encyclopedias, but she also benefits from the knowledge that she is making a change in the Civil Rights Movement. When black people can read, they can challenge what is written. They can write down their thoughts and spread them around. They can have confidence in their education and the knowledge that they are just as good, just as worthy, just as American as the white people. By refusing to return home after the attack in the cemetery, Eva also teaches the residents of Shake Rag to stand up for themselves, to be brave in the face of danger. Eva is eventually killed for this lesson, but her teachings linger in the mind of the characters long after her death.

When she hears that Mama will return home for the funeral, Florence imagines an emotional, loving reunion. Unfortunately, she is once again faced with rejection. Most mothers would want to see their children first after a long time away, but Mama waits until the funeral to set eyes on Florence, and even then, greets her coolly. It's possible that Mama's standoffishness is due to her guilt or due to the shock therapy adding her brain, but it's more likely that she has shut down emotionally to protect what little is left of her soul. She can't open herself to Florence because she's too afraid of the pain it will cause her. She will be forced to recognize the way she's failed her daughter and failed to protect her community. Coming home to see that Win has cleared the house of her baking supplies shows Mama that he never intended for her to come home. Her fears are realized: Win has sent her to the mental institution not for her betterment, but to keep her out of the picture. By the end of the Part II, when Mama drives off, most readers will recognize that Mama is never coming back. In a direct contrast to Eva, who faces her problems head on, Mama runs away. As an adult, Florence makes the following realization about her mother: "By then I had come to understand that not everybody can't be the Queen of Palmyra. For some people being afraid is the hardest

thing in the world. I could see how such a person might do anything just not to be afraid anymore" (p. 374).



## Part Three: Chapters 14 & 15

### Part Three: Chapters 14 & 15 Summary

Florence isn't sure how much time has passed before she realizes her mother isn't coming back home again, but it is a long time. The first thing she does after Mama drives off is wash all the mixing bowls and pans. Then she takes out the meal she prepared in case Mama gets hungry while she's baking. She sets out what few ingredients they have in the house, greases the pans, preheats the oven, then sits outside and waits. She waits for hours, full of hope that Mama will return her old self again. She runs through the recipes in her mind in case Mama has forgotten them while she was away. As Florence sits and waits, she notices the roaches creeping in after sunset. Worried that they'll be attracted to all the fresh food Mama brings home, Florence starts stomping them. She stomps all the roaches in her yard and sidewalk, then starts on the ones in her neighbors' yards and down the street. She kills all the roaches she finds for blocks, but still, Mama doesn't come home. When Daddy arrives, he's angry to see Florence still up and her mother nowhere in sight. When he realizes what's happened, he's outraged, calling his wife a flurry of curses. He calls his friends on the phone and orders them to hunt her down. Florence is disturbed, not only that Daddy is hunting Mama down like a frightened rabbit, but that Mama left her behind. She knew she was leaving and simply chose not to take Florence with her. Terrified of what will happen to her, Florence waits until Daddy isn't looking, then sprints down the street toward Shake Rag, to Zenie's house. It's nearly two o'clock in the morning when she arrives, but Florence bangs on the door anyway begging to be let in. She's surprised to see all the TVs in the neighborhood turned on, but one-by-one they start clicking off. No one will answer the door even though Florence can hear voices behind them. Finally, after what feels like hours of knocking, Eva opens the door and tells Florence that she has to go home. Someone has just shot Medgar Evers, the civil rights leader, and it's not safe for Florence to be here. With nowhere else to go, Florence mournfully walks to Mimi's house.

In the days that follow, Florence doesn't see much of Eva except during their lessons. She overhears Eva saying that she's insurance: "Peckerwoods ain't lighting no fires under us long as we got the girl in the house" (p. 298). One afternoon, Eva starts asking questions about Florence's mother and whether or not she's heard from her. Florence eagerly answers the questions; no one ever wants to talk about her mother. But when Eva's questions flip over to questions about Daddy and his secret meetings, Florence grows suspicious. She says that she doesn't know anything about the meetings, except she does. The contents of Daddy's box have increased to now hold a hatchet and rope. To keep her mind off her boredom, Mimi arranges for Florence to attend a summer camp for the first time in her life. At camp, Florence tells everyone that her name is Flo and pretends that her life is as normal as theirs are. Suddenly, Florence finds herself surrounded by friends, a complete novelty. For the month away, Florence doesn't read any letters from home because she doesn't want to be reminded of what she's left behind. Here, she has a new life, one she can be proud of. Florence volunteers to help



in the kitchen because she feels at home with the African-American cooks there. She teaches them some of Mama's cake recipes and laughs at all their jokes.

## Part Three: Chapters 14 & 15 Analysis

In this section, the Civil Rights Movement continues painting the backdrop of the novel while Florence remains oblivious to it. When word spreads through Shake Rag there's a white girl prowling the neighborhood, one-by-one the residents click off their televisions. No one, even Zenie, wants to be caught awake when race tensions are so high, especially by the daughter of an active Klansman. Mimi seems to recognize that Florence is miserable at home; she may even have suspicions of abuse given Win's history with Mama, so she arranges for Florence to attend a summer camp. Florence has a better time than she could have imagined, and for the first time in her life, has girls her own age to compare her life to. Surrounded by "normal" ten-year-olds, Florence realizes that her home life is seriously disturbed. When it's time to return home, Florence is heartbroken. She watches all the girls being greeted by their parents and knows her homecoming will be nothing like theirs. By witnessing other dads meet their daughters, something clicks in Florence's mind: her dad is different, and not in a good way.

At camp, Florence creates a new identity for herself, Flo: "At camp I told everyone my name was Flo, and it was Flo this and Flo that. Flo, come here, I want to talk to you. Flo, do you think my nose is too bit? I want to sit by Flo. Nobody asked my last name and nobody cared who my mama and daddy were. Nobody's eyes turned sly at the sight of me" (p. 312). Flo is cool, in control of the situation, and wildly popular. In a way, it's all of Florence's imaginings come true. She hopes she can carry-on this persona back in Millwood, but as soon as she sees Daddy in the distance, that darkness creeps back up inside her and she becomes meek Florence once again.





## Part Three: Chapters 16 & 17

### Part Three: Chapters 16 & 17 Summary

When Florence sees Daddy waiting for her outside the camp, she can tell from his expression that Mama hasn't come home yet. She hugs him in the middle the way she saw the other girls hug their fathers, but he doesn't hug her back. He comments on the weight she's gained, but offers to take her out for dinner, a rarity in Florence's childhood. There's something about the way people whisper and point when Daddy's around that makes Florence uncomfortable. She tries to say that she's not hungry, but Daddy accuses her of acting "too good for a hamburger" (p. 317). He drives her to a fast-food restaurant but can't figure out how to work the intercom speaker to order their food. His frustration rises as teenage boys in the next car snicker as he fumbles with the box. Trying to help, Florence reaches over her father to press the intercom button and before she even knows what's happening, Daddy grabs her arm and snaps it out of its socket at the shoulder. Just as quickly, he snaps it back in. He digs his fingers into Florence's knee and snarls, "I don't want to hear nothing out of you. Nothing. Thinking you so smart" (Page 320). He slams the car into reverse and speeds home. There, he orders Florence into bed, locks all the doors behind himself, and peels out of the driveway. The house is a total mess, with papers stacked into piles all over the living room. Most of the photos are flyers with photos of Medgar Evars, George Lee, and Emmett Till with their faces X'd out. Another stack of papers are copies of a letter Daddy's written to various editors demanding complete segregation and warning against "the pestilence of miscegenation" should the two races be allowed to mix. In her bedroom, Florence fights back the urge to cry and vomit. She cradles her injured arm and lays in bed feeling sorry for herself, especially about the fact that Mama left her behind when she ran away. Mama got away but Florence is condemned to live here with Daddy.

The next morning, Daddy drops Florence off at Mimi's so early that no one else is awake in the house. She walks down to Zenie's house and sits under the mimosa tree until she sees the neighborhood starting to rouse. She knocks on Zenie's door and is surprised to see Zenie still in her nightgown. Her floors are covered with people sleeping. Zenie assures Florence that they're all just visiting, but that she shouldn't tell her Daddy about hem. Florence is jumpy and cagey, especially when anyone comes near her injured arm. She tries to get out of her tutoring lessons with Eva, but Eva won't hear of it. Back at Mimi's house, Florence digs around the medicine cabinet for some aspirin and is shocked to see bottles of paregoric bottles. Florence draws herself a bath and falls asleep in the warm water. She wakes to Mimi and Zenie standing over her, shrieking at the streaky bruise creeping across her shoulder. Zenie is hollering for someone to call the doctor, and Mimi is repeating "Oh Lord," under her breath, unable to tear her eyes away from Florence's arm. Even though Florence refuses to tell anyone what happened to her arm, Mimi clearly wants to take her away. She suggests a little trip together to visit her friend Mabel in New Orleans. Florence likes the idea, but doesn't want to be too far away in case Mama decides to come home. When Daddy comes to pick Florence up, Mimi broaches the subject of taking Florence away for a



week or two, and Daddy immediately shuts down the idea. He says he needs Florence here with him, and that she's all he has left. When Mimi pushes, Daddy grows angrier and angrier before ordering Florence into the car.

The car is filled with so many papers and envelopes that Florence has to sit in the back seat. The windows are so dirty she can barely see through them. Daddy clumps to the car and squeals out of Mimi's driveway. He's driving so fast, Florence almost doesn't recognize where they're going. She's surprised when they turn into Shake Rag, which is out of the way. Daddy takes a quick left and then parks the car. Through the dirty window, Florence can see Daddy walking up to a black woman wearing a bright scarf around her neck. He has something shiny in his hand. The woman's face is hidden, but Florence can make out her body. For a few seconds, it sounds like the woman is singing, and then she crumples over: "In any case, there was this quickness. Then he leaned over her and she seemed to disappear. And whatever encounter they'd had, it was over and done with in no time" (p. 353). It is all very ordinary to Florence and she doesn't give it a second thought as they drive home. When they get home, Daddy hands over a stack of one-dollar bills, more money than Florence has ever seen in her life. He says it's an early birthday present. He says that Florence is a good girl because she knows how to keep secrets. They exchange their secret hand gesture, the one they've done so many times before, bringing their finger up to the bridge of their nose. Daddy says Florence can take the money and go down to New Orleans, if she'd like. Then gruffly grabs her bad arm, pulls her close and whispers that if she ever breaks the oath, she'll die. Something snaps in Florence as she wriggles away from Daddy's grip. She sprints toward the door, grabbing the box on her way out. She knows she can outrun Daddy because of his bad leg, and takes advantage of his handicap. She sprints up Mimi's driveway but stops near the pecan trees. She builds a quick fire using the lighter in the box and throws all Daddy's prized belongings in the flames. Then she bursts through the screen door and tells Mimi everything. Without a word, Mimi races upstairs and starts packing her bags. She throws all her beloved hats and a few articles of clothing in a suitcase and throws that in the back of her car. She leaves a note for Zenie and then she and Florence drive away. They drive through the night to New Orleans.

## Part Three: Chapters 16 & 17 Analysis

In the two weeks that Florence has been gone, Daddy's behavior has spun wildly out of control. With Mama out of the picture, he's free to let his racist ways completely take over the house, whereas before, he had to keep them hidden in his box in the basement. The contents of the box have expanded to include the headache stick, a hatchet, and rope (used for lynching), so the reader should expect that he is building up to a scene of extreme violence. It's unclear exactly what causes Daddy to snap when Florence comes home from camp. It could be the stress of his white power campaign - the evidence of which is strewn all over the house - or it could be the fact that Florence truly has changed during her time away. Maybe Daddy realizes that his precious daughter, whom he thought he could mold into the perfect KKK child, has come home world wise. His attempts to isolate Florence from the outside world have backfired and in the moment when she innocently reaches across him to press the intercom button,



she is asserting her role as a problem solver. She no longer sits silently in the passenger seat waiting for Daddy to teach her a lesson, she makes an independent gesture to show Daddy how the world works. It's clear that Daddy is a power hungry man who preys on the vulnerable to feel powerful. A simple gesture like showing Daddy how the intercom works is a challenge to his power and he reacts violently. The reaction of the people who see Daddy on the streets - the whispering and staring that initially makes Florence uncomfortable - illustrates that his behavior in public has also become more erratic. It's clear that Win has earned a terrifying reputation as an unpredictable, violent man. It's likely that in the weeks while Florence was away, Daddy blatantly campaigned for white power without hiding behind his white sheet. People recognize his face and the reputation that goes along with it.

It makes sense, then, that Daddy would kill Eva in broad daylight. He either no longer cares about his reputation or knows that he will never be held accountable for his crime. Given the history of the time, it is probably the latter. Daddy feels untouchable by the law and justified in his actions, so justified, in fact, that he murders Eva while Florence watches. He hopes that his abuse will keep Florence silent about what she's seen. His threats go too far, however, and when he threatens Florence's life, something snaps inside her: "That's when two stories took shape all at once in my mind's eye. I could see them both as clear as day and for a moment I stood frozen between them." In the first story, scaredy-cat Florence walks quietly out to the yard, starts to run, and then never stops. The first story is very similar to Mama's. She's afraid, so she runs away. The second story is different, and it stars Flo: "Flo is nobody's fool. She gets into the doorway and pushes open the screen, but she doesn't hop out like a scared rabbit saying, yes sir, yes sir...[she] pulls [Daddy's] keys out of the deadbolt lock ... No car for him! Then she says what she has to say, she hisses it. Catch me if you can" (p. 356). This moment is symbolic of Florence's coming-of-age. She finally sees the truth: that Daddy is not to be trusted. She has morphed completely into her alter ego, Flo, and left the frightened child behind. Flo, like Eva, is reminiscent of the Queen of Palmyra: a woman brave enough to tackle her troubles head-on rather than running away.



## Part Four: Chapter 18

### Part Four: Chapter 18 Summary

This section switches into Eva's point of view as she describes the moment of the second attack. She describes the way Win Forrest stops his car and jumps out, like he's going to ask her a question. She can tell that he's in a hurry, which is why she doesn't run away, even though that's her first impulse. She wants to stand her ground, show him that she's not afraid. She sees a screwdriver in his hands and figures he must be having car trouble. She sees Florence in the backseat of the car, staring back at her. She figures that there's no way Win is going to hurt again with his little girl looking on. As he paces toward her, Eva practices how she's going to turn him down, how she's going to say she's too busy to help him. She doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing her sweat. As soon as Win reaches Eva, he grabs her by the hair and pulls her head back, exposing her neck. She sees the screwdriver come up and feels the pretty scarf around her neck tear. Then she feels the screwdriver digging into her skin, peeling away muscle from bone. He lets go of her hair and she collapses on the ground. Her throat fills up with blood and she feels like she's drowning. Even as she falls, her eyes are wide open and she can see Florence staring straight at her, standing on the shore she's unable to reach.

### Part Four: Chapter 18 Analysis

This short chapter retells the murder scene from Eva's perspective. Not only does it confirm all suspicions that Win Forrest is the murderer, it gives Eva a voice in her death. In the postscript to the novel, Gwin writes, "Eva can't be just a saintly victim; she has to be feisty and vulnerable, generous and selfish, fiercely intelligent and naïve. That's why Eva's voice erupts in the next to last chapter; she can't be a mute victim" (P.S. p. 4). By giving voice to Eva's character at the moment of her death, Gwin is boldly giving voice to the many voiceless victims of hate crimes who have been either glorified into sainthood or ignored, neither of which do the victim's story justice. By switching narrative point-of-view, Gwin is also signaling to the reader that Eva's story is just as important to the novel as Florence's. It's interesting to note that in Eva's last moments, she feels as if she's drowning. This sensation is a slight foreshadowing to the way Win Forrest eventually dies, drowning in Hurricane Katrina.



# Part Five: Chapter 19

## Part Five: Chapter 19 Summary

The next morning, Mabel opens up the newspaper in New Orleans and exclaims that a girl in Millwood has been killed by a screwdriver in the neck. The newspapers have reported that the murder occurred during a spat with the girl's boyfriend. As soon as Mabel says the name Eva Greene, Mimi and Florence gasp. Florence is especially concerned because she knows Eva doesn't have a boyfriend. Everyone starts crying as Mimi arranges to send Zenie and Ray some flowers. Even though Florence doesn't connect the dots with the scene she witnessed a few days before, but in the narrative, she says that something "flutters" at the corner of her sight like a gnat. Time passes and soon, the people from Millwood fade in Florence's mind. She never stops thinking about Daddy, mostly because she's terrified he's going to come looking for her, but he never does. Mimi finds a new job teaching at a school in New Orleans, and Florence wonders everyday about her mother's whereabouts. One afternoon, almost four years after Florence and Mimi flee to Louisiana, Mama shows up at their front door. She admits that she didn't expect to run away the way she did, but once she started driving, she just couldn't stop. She ran to her friend Navis' house and Navis helped keep her hidden for a few days, until the initial search died down. Then they two women took a midnight Greyhound bus to Memphis and down to Amarillo, Texas where Navis had family. They've been living there for the past four years, until Mama heard that Mimi had moved to Louisiana. Florence isn't sure how to react when she sees Mama after all these years. She always imagined she would be overjoyed, but so much has changed. Seeing Mama just makes her feel tired. As far as she's concerned, Mimi is her mother now. She did what Mama never could: protect her from Daddy, no matter the cost.

When Florence is eighteen, she begins teaching at Crossman Elementary school, teaching fifth graders how to diagram sentences. She works happily at this job for twenty years until one day, while diagramming at the blackboard, the fluttering in her eye returns. As she writes a sentence on the blackboard, something shifts in her vision. The sentence, "When the fireman broke in the window, the girl woke from a deep sleep; with barely a moment to spare, she was able to see her dilemma and jump" is one she constructed herself, one that she's very proud of. A girl in the front row nervously asks if the girl died. No, Florence says curtly, "The fireman caught her. The fireman saved her life" (Page 379). As soon as she says it, Eva's face floods Florence's vision like a ghost who's been lurking around the corner for years and has finally mustered up the courage to come into the light. The scene Florence has tried so hard to forget, the scene of Daddy and the screwdriver, comes flooding back. Suddenly, Florence sees everything clearly. The woman with the scarf around her neck was Eva. Daddy killed Eva while she watched in silence. Mimi and Mabel are long dead by this point, and Florence now lives alone in their old house. She leaves school early, gets in a car, and drives to the Millwood library, hundreds of miles away. All the details of Eva's murder come flooding back to her, and suddenly, she's able to process everything with adult eyes.



When she drives back to Louisiana a few days later, a storm is brewing at the Gulf. Many people have packed up their belongings and moved away as the storm, which will later be known as "Hurricane Katrina" comes rolling in. At home, Mama and Mabel have packed up their car to drive to safety. As soon as she sees Mama, Florence tells her what she knows: that Daddy killed Eva. Mama is flabbergasted and can't believe Florence didn't realize the truth until today. Mama sucks in a breath with realization and says, "You were scared" (p. 385). Florence realizes that the only person who wasn't afraid of Daddy was Eva, and she was the only one who didn't run. With her bags packed, Florence drives Rosewood, the nursing home where Daddy now lives. The storm is whipping up signs and already pelting Louisiana with rain. The nurses assume that Florence is there to help evacuate her father, but when she walks into the room, she can barely look him in the eyes. He's old and demented now, but he still recognizes his daughter. With an anger that has been building for thirty years, Florence hisses that she knows Daddy killed Eva. She saw him. Just like old times, he brings his finger up to the tip of his nose, signaling the oath of silence between them. One of the nurses catches up with Florence as she marches back out to her car asking whether or not she's evacuating her father. "No," Florence says coldly. "I'm not taking him" (p. 388). Then she gets in her car and drives away, straight into the storm. At the last moment, she turns her steering wheel sharply to the left, deciding to save her life rather than throw it into the violent storm.

## Part Five: Chapter 19 Analysis

When Florence hears about Eva's death, it's interesting to note that she doesn't recognize her father as the killer. Even though she now sees Daddy as an evil man, she doesn't think he's capable of murder. Still, some details about the story flutter around like gnats - perhaps it's the image of the screwdriver, the bright scarf, the crumpled body - Florence never says exactly what the shadows are, but it's clear that one day they will flit into the light. As an adult, Florence realizes that, "True stories happen and then you tell them. But what you tell depends on what you see. And what you see depends on what you know" (Page 381). As a child, Florence didn't have enough knowledge to understand or "know" what was happening around her, and as a result, she failed to see many things: injustice, racism, even murder. When she ages and can see the world through adult eyes, her story changes: her story of the past and her story for the future. It is the very act of diagramming sentences - piecing together the way actions affect a story - Eva's legacy, which leads Florence's realization of the truth. She says that, "I wanted to reach out and close my hand on it the way you'd grab at a gnat that's buzzing around your head. Mostly, though, I tried to ignore it as best I could, though as time went on, the flutter wore on me, the way a reoccurring dream you can't remember but can't forget either wears on you. You have to either forget it or remember it; otherwise it will spin a web around you and never let go" (p. 371). Even then, Florence makes a conscious decision to close her eyes to the truth. Some part of her brain recognizes Daddy as the killer, but she is still too weak to accept the truth. The danger in this, however, is that she will be trapped in that truth, unable to break free of Daddy's control, unable to heal her wounds, unable to move on her life. Florence's story is inspired by the true story of many Southern children at the time. In the postscript to the novel, Gwin



writes about her inspiration in creating Florence's conflict: "Several white women, men, and children who witnessed horrendous crimes during the Civil Rights years have come forward in the past couple of decades to testify about these crimes. In most cases, these belated witnesses felt enormously threatened during the sixties when these acts of violence were committed and so just recently have felt they could speak. Some of them [like Florence] had actually forgotten the events and then remembered them in adulthood" (P.S. p. 7).

Gwin also writes that, "In her turn, Florence teaches semicolons and diagramming to her inner-city students in New Orleans to help them map out an incoherent world. That's why Florence takes that sharp left turn back into her story - it's the act of teaching that calls her back, it's Eva who calls her back" (P.S. Page 6). Once again, Gwin gives voice to the victims by insinuating that it's Eva's ghost who forces Florence to see the truth, in one final moment of teaching. Florence exerts her power of Daddy by leaving him to die in the storm, which brings the theme of abuse full circle. Abuse occurs when a powerful party uses force (either physical, emotional, or sexual) to take advantage of a weaker party. A strong argument could be made that the white population abused their power over the black population in the south by supporting segregation, which withheld basic human rights from the African-American people. This abuse is seen through segregation laws, personal relationships, and the intimidation of the KKK. The power of men in white sheets is further exemplified during the scene in which Mr. Chisholm sexually abuses Florence during a KKK meeting, which highlights the way powerful people often prey on the vulnerable. At the end of the novel, Florence seeks revenge on her father for his years of abuse, to her, to Mama, and to the African-American people. In his old age, Florence commits him to a nursing home known for abusing its elderly patients, and she refuses to evacuate him when Hurricane Katrina rolls through. This final act of power, leaving her father to die, raises interesting questions: Does Daddy deserve to die for his crimes? Does Florence have any more right to play executioner than Daddy did?



# Characters

## Florence Irene Forrest / Flo

Florence Irene Forrest is the narrator and protagonist of the novel. When the novel opens, Florence is ten-years-old during the turbulent 1963 summer in Millwood, Mississippi, when segregation, racism, and hate crimes are commonplace. At the opening of the novel, Florence is a relatively naïve child, unaware of the political situation her family is apart of. She recognizes racism and segregation, but doesn't yet understand the implications of their presence within her family. Florence loves making late-night runs to the bootlegger with her alcoholic mother because it's special time spent between them. She's proud of the fact that Daddy entrusts her with his special box, and she looks past the fact that it's filled with KKK paraphernalia. As the novel progresses, Florence's isolation and neglect is highlighted as her mother slips further into her alcoholism and her father obsesses over his latest racist plans. Florence finds herself identifying more with Zenie and her family in Shake Rag, than her own, especially when Zenie's glamorous niece Eva moves to town. When Eva is attacked in the cemetery near her house, and Mama drives her car into a train, everything in Florence's life shifts. Ever so slowly, Florence begins to realize that her father's rage is dangerous and that he may have had something to do with Eva's attack. When she returns home from summer camp, Florence is unable to ignore that her life is nothing like the life of a normal ten-year-old and that Daddy's behavior is disturbing. When he attacks Florence herself and threatens to kill her, Florence finally makes the break and runs away, heading south to New Orleans with her grandmother, Mimi. Forty-two years later, Florence finally realizes that Daddy killed Eva and that she saw it happen. At the end of the novel, Florence relives the experiences of her childhood with adult eyes, completely flipping the narrative on its head.

## Eva Greene

Eva Greene is Zenie's seventeen-year-old niece who comes down to Millwood from Raleigh, North Carolina, to sell insurance policies in Shake Rag. When Eva first comes down to Mississippi, she seems as naïve as Florence, unaware that trying to push in on a white man's business might cause some problems. She also doesn't understand why the black folks in Shake Rag are too afraid to switch from Win Forrest's policies to her own - why would black people want to buy from dishonest whites who rip them off when they can buy from their own? Win Forrest is particularly threatened by Eva's presence and is outraged by the fact that she doesn't stay "in her place." While Eva is walking home from work one afternoon, Win attacks her in the cemetery. He rips her dress (and may have even raped her), and burns her face with his cigarette. For days, Eva lies in bed feeling sorry for herself, until Florence stops by and shows her the burns on her arms. Then, Eva realizes that she is not the only victim of Win Forrest's abusive rage. If Florence can go on with her lie - when she has to live with the man - so can she. Despite the urgings of her friends and family to return to Raleigh, Eva refuses to be





silence. She stops selling insurance policies and moves on to selling encyclopedias, teaching her illiterate neighbors how to read along the way. Eva becomes an instrumental figure in the Civil Rights movement as she encourages her neighbors to educate themselves and take a stand. In the end, her pursuit for equality ends when Win Forrest kills her by stabbing a screwdriver into her neck. For forty years, Eva's memory haunts Florence until she realizes the truth: she saw Daddy kill Eva and finally, Eva's death is revenged.

## **Martha Irene Forrest / Mama**

Martha Irene Forrest is Florence's mother. She is the neighborhood cake baker, famous all around town for her gorgeous cakes, baked every Friday night and sold every Saturday morning. Neighborhood women gather in Martha's kitchen not only for her delectable cakes, but to catch up on the gossip. Martha is different from most of the women because she cares about civil rights and even chides women for using the "N" word in her presence. Mama is in an abusive marriage and uses alcohol as a way of numbing her pain. As the civil rights movement picks up steam in Mississippi, Martha picks up her drinking, often making late-night visits to the black bootlegger to pass on warning messages detailing the KKK's plans. After Eva's attack, Martha seems to realize that her husband was involved in the attack and she drives her car into a train. She survives the accident and spends the next few months in a mental institution receiving shock treatments to treat her depression. She surfaces a few months later for her father's funeral and then steals her husband's car and runs away, leaving Florence behind. No one hears from Martha for four years, when she surprisingly shows up on her mother's doorstep.

## **Winburn Forrest / Win / Daddy**

Winburn Forrest is Florence's father. Win is the Nighthawk for the KKK, a role that was passed down from his father and his grandfather before him, a role that he takes very seriously. Being a member of the KKK is the most important thing in Win's life, certainly more important than his marriage or family. During the day, Win sells insurance policies to the black residents of Shake Rag. He charges each family twenty-five cents a month for their policies and when they can't pay, threatens them with physical violence. Win is obsessed with segregation and the idea that blacks should be kept "in their place." He takes offence to any of his black neighbors who overstep his boundaries, and Eva is a perfect example of that. When Eva moves to Millwood and begins selling insurance policies in Shake Rag, Win is so threatened by her presence that he attacks her in the cemetery, burning her face with his cigarette. Later, when Eva refuses to move back home, Win finishes the job he started by killing her. Although Win lives the majority of his life working for the KKK in Mississippi, everyone in his life has left him, including his wife and daughter. He dies alone in a nursing home in New Orleans, drowning in Hurricane Katrina.



## Zenobia Johnson / Zenie

Zenie Johnson is Mimi's black maid and Florence's caregiver. Zenie is a no nonsense maid who only takes on nannying duties for the extra cash, not because she likes children. Zenie is an interesting character because she portrays a real, complicated woman who resents her position of servitude, not the simpering, good-hearted black nanny characterized in many Southern novels set during the same time period. It's clear that Zenie despises Florence's father, but feels a sense of camaraderie with Florence's mother, whom she also raised. Zenie is very conscious of her black heritage, particularly her stories, and takes offense when anyone threatens to claim her stories as their own.

## Ray Johnson

Ray Johnson is Zenie's husband. Ray works a fulltime job but also takes on occasional construction, handy-man jobs in the neighborhood when they arise. Ray is a good-hearted, clean man who is always seen wearing a hat. Ray works hard to create a nice life for his wife, and does his best to keep a low profile in the white neighborhoods so as not to bring trouble to his family.

## Miss Josephine / Miss J

Miss Josephine is Zenie's mother. She lives with Zenie and Ray in their home when she becomes too old to work. With her old age, Miss J begins to lose her mind and rarely speaks. She spends most of her time in her rocking chair, staring expectantly at the door. After Eva's attack, Miss J passes time by peeling all the leaves off the mimosa tree.

## Mimi

Mimi is Florence's maternal grandmother and the only real constant in Florence's life. Mimi is a proud woman, always seen around town wearing flamboyant hats, which Florence thinks are ridiculous. Mimi employs Zenie and treats her well, unlike many homeowners at the time, although she does build an outhouse for her "outdoor workers," showing that on some level, Mimi still supports segregation. At the end of the novel, Mimi realizes that Daddy is abusing Florence, so she runs away with her in the middle of the night. She and Florence live together for many years in New Orleans, until Mimi's death.

## Grandpops

Grandpops is Florence's maternal grandfather. He's described as a skinny but powerful man who has taken a keen interest in Florence's education. Every afternoon,



Grandpops reads to Florence from the Uncle Wiggily books, which she hates because they're under her reading level but appreciates because it's their special time together.

## Miss Kay Linda Chisholm

Miss Kay Linda Chisholm is the next-door neighbor. Despite the fact that her name means "how beautiful!" she is short and pudgy with hair "the color of the sky when there's a tornado coming" (p. 25). Miss Kay Linda symbolizes Southern charm and etiquette, but underneath their façade, the members of the Chisholm family are practicing racists.

## Little Dan Chisholm

Little Dan Chisholm is Florence's neighbor. He regularly bullies Florence, calling her "white trash." One afternoon, when Florence is attempting to befriend him, Little Dan pushes Florence so high on the swing that she fears she'll fall off, the whole while calling her terrible names. When Daddy sees what's happening, he gallops in to defend Florence and nearly kills Little Dan in the process. To make up with him, Mama offers Little Dan half a cake a week if he promises not to tell his mother what's happened.

## Eugene

Eugene is the black bootlegger that Mama delivers notes about KKK activity to.

## Mr. Lafitte

Mr. Lafitte is the ice cream shop owner in Shake Rag. After Eva's attack, he tries to convince the girl to return home, but Eva refuses.

## Frank

Frank is the white man sent to help Eva sell encyclopedias in Shake Rag. He's described as puffy and pale, but it's clear he's in love with Eva. When Eva is killed, Frank helps lead the march in her honor, the only white face in a sea of blacks.

## Navis

Navis is Mama's best friend. She is sympathetic to the abuse Mama suffers and her mission to help save the blacks in their neighborhood from the KKK. Navis is largely absent in the novel but it is later revealed that when Mama runs away from the asylum, she and Navis move in together. They live together for the rest of their lives.



# Objects/Places

## Millwood

Millwood is the city in Mississippi where Florence and her family live. Millwood is divided into a white neighborhood and black neighborhood known as Shake Rag. During the novel's setting, Millwood is fully segregated and in the midst of a turbulent battle for civil rights.

## Mississippi

Mississippi is the state where Florence Forrest and her family live during Florence's childhood. She runs away from Mississippi with Mimi a few weeks before her eleventh birthday.

## Louisiana

Louisiana is the state where Florence and Mama live as adults. They live in Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina, where Daddy dies after the storm floods his nursing home.

## Segregation

Segregation is the enforced political state of Mississippi during the mid 1960s when this novel is set. Segregation required blacks to live in separate neighborhoods from white, use separate bathrooms, drinking fountains, swimming pools, schools, and much more. As a result of segregation, blacks couldn't hold certain jobs, shop at certain stores, or ride on certain busses. Florence notices segregation all around, but doesn't understand the deep hatred born from racial inequality until it's too late.

## The Box

The Box is Daddy's prized possession. He keeps it locked downstairs only bringing it up when he receives mysterious phone calls in the night. When Florence is ten-years-old, Daddy reveals the box's contents: KKK paraphernalia he uses during meetings and when he wants to intimidate neighboring blacks.

## Shake Rag

Shake Rag is the black neighborhood where Zenie, Ray, and Eva live. Although the neighborhood is far poorer than the white neighborhood where Florence has grown up, everyone lives in a state of pride, keeping their gardens and lawns perfectly groomed.



Florence feels much more at home in Shake Rag than she does in her own neighborhood and enjoys the sense of community among the African-Americans who live there.

## Cakes

Cakes are what Mama sells to make extra money for the family. She enjoys baking and her cakes are known as the best in the neighborhood. Mama bakes at night, banging pots and pans into the early morning. Florence often helps her mother bake cakes and when Mama is admitted into the mental institution, attempts to fill the cake orders herself, almost burning the house down in the process.

## Jim Walter Homes

Jim Walter Homes are the mail-order homes purchased through a magazine. After years of saving, Zenie and Ray finally purchase a Jim Walter home, where they proudly live without doors because they didn't have enough money to purchase them separately.

## Uncle Wiggily

Uncle Wiggily is the wily character in the novels Grandpops reads to Florence each afternoon. The rabbit is born in a briar patch, which makes him determined and sly. No matter what unfortunate situation he gets into, Uncle Wiggily always makes his way safely out of it. For most of the novel, Mr. Wiggily is a symbol for determined African-Americans, like Eva, who hope to make change, no matter what hurdles they must overcome. The only difference is that Eva is eventually killed while Mr. Wiggily always escapes unscathed.

## The Poison Bottle

The Poison Bottle is where Mama keeps her moonshine underneath the sink. She is forced to hide her alcohol there because she knows her husband will throw it out if he finds it. She drinks from this bottle, much to Florence's horror, whenever she bakes or is particularly emotional.

## Insurance Policies

Insurance Policies are what Daddy and Eva sell. Daddy has a firm hold on the market in Millwood, so when Eva arrives selling policies specifically for African-Americans, Daddy feels threatened. Daddy feels threatened by Eva's competition and attacks her because of it, first burning her face and then killing her.

## Encyclopedias

Encyclopedias are what Eva sells after she decides selling insurance policies are too dangerous. Most of the people in Shake Rag can't read, so Eva teaches them. Then, they are so interested by the encyclopedias, Eva never runs out of business. Most people in Shake Rag purchase their sets on layaway, buying first books A-F, then another few books, then another, until they own the entire collection.

## Roaches

Roaches are the insects that has infested Florence's Mississippi neighborhood. Roaches are also a symbol for the racists that have infested the area. Both come out only at nighttime, rapidly multiply, and are a cause of revilement in the South.

## Camp Metone

Camp Metone is the summer camp Mimi sends Florence to after Mama runs away. Mimi says that attending camp is to help Florence's social skills - which it does - but it's clear that she wants to give the girl some time away from her cruel father.

## Roselawn

Roselawn is the nursing home where Daddy is kept when he reaches old age. This is also where he dies, after Florence refuses to evacuate him during Hurricane Katrina, penance for killing Eva Greene.



# Themes

## Storytelling

The theme of storytelling is integral to Florence's childhood and the way she processes the turbulent events of the summer when she was ten-years-old. Growing up, Florence was told stories by many different people trying to teach her life lessons. From Grandpops, Florence learned the stories of Br'er Rabbit and Uncle Wiggily, two rabbits down-on-their luck who use pluck and ingenuity to survive in the cruel world. From Daddy, Florence learns the story of Bomba and the Swamp, which teaches her that everything white (including people) is good, while everything black is evil. From Zenie, Florence learns the stories of the Queen of Palmyra, a black Queen who leads her people with dignity, honor, and force. Many of these stories serve as symbols for lessons directly related to the conflicts in *The Queen of Palmyra*, but it is Florence's lessons on storytelling itself that holds the most resonance. After Florence accidentally starts the house fire, she overhears Daddy telling the story of the accident to Mimi. In Daddy's retelling, Florence was absent-minded, even clumsy, while he swooped in to save her life and to stop the fire. This version of the story is only partially true, but Daddy has spun the events of the night to make himself sound like a hero: "The one who tells the story gets to say who's bad and who's good. Then the story rises up and puts on its clothes and goes out into the world" (Page 206).

This idea of storytelling inventing truth carries on throughout Eva's attack and her eventual murder. Whenever Daddy tells stories about the blacks living in *Shake Rag*, he makes them out to be horrible monsters. White newspapers publish scandalizing stories about black men raping and torturing innocent white women, spreading fear and racism to the masses, even though the stories aren't true. During segregation in the 1960s, all the stories seemed to be the same: white people were honest, upstanding, religious patriots, while black people were violent, unpredictable, menacing heathens. Those who told the stories got to say who was good and who was bad, and the blacks were almost always bad. Florence doesn't realize the implications of these stories until she is much older, nearly twenty years after Eva is murdered. Suddenly, Florence realizes that, "True stories happen and then you tell them. But what you tell depends on what you see. And what you see depends on what you know" (p. 381). As a child, Florence didn't have enough knowledge to understand or "know" what was happening around her, and as a result, she failed to see many things: injustice, racism, even murder. When she ages and can see the world through adult eyes, her story changes. Her story of the past and her story for the future.

## Abuse

Most of the abuse in the novel happens in Win Forrest's hands. Win is a violent man with a menacing temper and an obsession with orderly respect. As a white man, Win demands respect from his family, friends, and community, particularly from those he



views as "lesser than" himself. Win beats his wife and daughter and violently attacks many blacks who live in Shake Rag, including Eva Greene. The interesting thing about the abuse in *The Queen of Palmyra* is that with every violent act, Win Forrest feels justified. He feels justified in abusing his black neighbors because he feels that they have stepped out of place. His fists send them firmly back where they belong. When he burns Florence's arms and pulls her shoulder out of socket, he honestly believes he is teaching her a lesson. The same goes for his abuse toward Martha - even though it's not directly addressed in the text, Win's temper no doubt added to Martha's depression.

But it is not solely Win's abuse toward his family that creates this theme. Abuse occurs when a powerful party uses force (either physical, emotional, or sexual) to take advantage of a weaker party. A strong argument could be made that the white population abused their power over the black population in the south by supporting segregation, which withheld basic human rights from the African-American people. This abuse is seen through segregation laws, personal relationships, and the intimidation of the KKK. The power of men in white sheets is further exemplified during the scene in which Mr. Chisholm sexually abuses Florence during a KKK meeting, which highlights the way powerful people often prey on the vulnerable. At the end of the novel, Florence seeks revenge on her father for his years of abuse, to her, to Mama, and to the African-American people. In his old age, Florence commits him to a nursing home known for abusing its elderly patients, and she refuses to evacuate him when Hurricane Katrina rolls through.

## Teaching

The fact that Florence has little to no formal education highlights her naivety during the 1960s. Most of her education comes from informal sources, like the stories told to her by her parents, grandparents, and caregivers. Under Eva's tutelage, Florence learns about diagramming sentences and world geography, but her mind is also opened to truths about humanity, politics, and society. In the postscript to the novel, author Minrose Gwin states that, "Teachers can change lives and open spaces in the world were there were none, in large and small ways" (P.S. Page 6). By teaching Florence how to diagram sentences, Eva is, in a way, teaching her how to navigate through a complex, confusing world. On paper, Florence learns how to judge the way each word affects the words around it, completely altering the sentence, or story, being told on the page. As an adult, Florence not only passes on the formal lessons to her students, she realizes the importance of Eva's teachings. Finally the words line up in Florence's mind and she is able to see the truth: that Daddy killed Eva. Contrasting Eva's intelligent, witty teaching, Mimi's teaching style - which fails to capture Florence's imagination or truly teach her anything - is depicted as outdated and dusty, similar to her views on segregation and racism (which don't affect Florence nearly as much as Eva's views).

Eva also teaches the residents of Shake Rag important lessons during her time in Millwood. First, Eva teaches many of the residents how to read. Eva benefits from this by selling more copies of encyclopedias, but she also benefits from the knowledge that she is making a change in the civil rights movement. When black people can read, they



can challenge what is written. They can write down their thoughts and spread them around. They can have confidence in their education and the knowledge that they are just as good, just as worthy, just as American as the white people. By refusing to return home after the attack in the cemetery, Eva also teaches the residents of Shake Rag to stand up for themselves, to be brave in the face of danger. Eva is eventually killed for this lesson, but her teachings linger in the mind of the characters long after her death.



# Style

## Point of View

The Queen of Palmyra is recounted in first-person limited omniscience narration from Florence's point of view, which creates an interesting conflict in the narrative. Since she's still a child and views the world through naïve eyes, much of what she witnesses passes under the radar. She opens the novel with the very poignant line, "I need you to understand how ordinary it all was" (p. 1). Because she has grown up in a dysfunctional home, with an alcoholic mother and a violent, racist father, it seems ordinary that her father should receive phone calls in the middle of the night, ordinary that he would take his mysterious box with him, ordinary that Mama would pass letters to the black bootlegger, ordinary that she would drive the car drunk. Florence has been isolated from other children for most of her life, so she has no other lifestyles to compare her own to. She is dirty, neglected, and exposed to inappropriate scenes, but all of this seems "ordinary" to her. It is only as an adult - and indeed, Florence's adult voice, the voice "writing" this novel, interjects to explain what she's learned - that Florence is able to fully comprehend how damaging her childhood was, to herself and to her community. It is also interesting to note that in addition to being isolated from her peers, Florence is also isolated to what is happening in the world. Her family doesn't have a television, so Florence never hears of the Martin Luther King speech, she isn't exposed to the images of police dogs and fire hoses synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement. Because her parents have polarized views on the topic, they never talk about it at home, so Florence is completely naïve to the current political turmoil.

The point of view only changes in Chapter 18, when it switches to Eva's perspective as she retells the story of her murder. Not only does it confirm all suspicions that Win Forrest is the murderer, it gives Eva a voice in her death. In the postscript to the novel, Gwin writes, "Eva can't be just a saintly victim; she has to be feisty and vulnerable, generous and selfish, fiercely intelligent and naïve. That's why Eva's voice erupts in the next to last chapter; she can't be a mute victim" (P.S. p. 4). By giving voice to Eva's character at the moment of her death, Gwin is boldly giving voice to the many voiceless victims of hate crimes who have been either glorified into sainthood or ignored, neither of which do the victim's story justice. By switching narrative point-of-view, Gwin is also signaling to the reader that Eva's story is just as important to the novel as Florence's.

## Setting

The Queen of Palmyra is set during the tumultuous summer of 1963 in Millwood, Mississippi. 1963 was a key summer for the Civil Rights movement and saw an array of violence, including the assassination of Medgar Evers and the Birmingham school bombing. This is also the year the Martin Luther King Jr. delivers his infamous "I Have a Dream" speech which ignited the nation. The year before, in 1962, James Meredith became the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, an act that



outraged conservative white Mississippi residents. The divide of the nation is represented in Florence's own household. The town of Millwood itself is divided into two sections: the white neighborhood, which is known as Millwood "Proper" and Shake Rag is the black neighborhood where Zenie, Ray, and Eva live. Although the neighborhood is far poorer than the white neighborhood where Florence has grown up, everyone lives in a state of pride, keeping their gardens and lawns perfectly groomed. Florence feels much more at home in Shake Rag than she does in her own neighborhood and enjoys the sense of community among the African-Americans who live there. The main characterization of Millwood during the time when the novel is set is that it's in throngs of segregation, the enforced political state requiring blacks to live in separate neighborhoods from whites, use separate bathrooms, drinking fountains, swimming pools, schools, and much more. As a result of segregation, blacks couldn't hold certain jobs, shop at certain stores, or ride on certain busses. Florence notices segregation all around, but doesn't understand the deep hatred born from racial inequality until it's too late.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in *The Queen of Palmyra* has divided critics. Minrose Gwin, the first-time author of this novel was a poet first. As a result, the language is extremely flowery. Gwin employs a simile for nearly every description. There is rarely an unvarnished sentence, which can be overwhelming and even isolating for some readers. It's easy to get lost in Gwin's poetic prose, which may be a struggle for some audience members. To illustrate her theme of cyclic time (and stories never truly having and ending but winding around themselves over and over), Gwin regularly switches tenses from past to present and back again, sometimes within the same paragraph as the adult Florence recalls an idea from her childhood, then the child Florence remembers another story that layers on top of the first.

It is also important to note that Minrose Gwin is a Southern writer, almost self-consciously determined to align the novel within the genre of Southern fiction. Generally speaking, Southern fiction is defined as literature that places significance on family, community (and the protagonist's identity within that community), sense of justice, racial tension, and the use of Southern dialect. In the postscript Gwin writes, "I'm interested in the idea of being consumed by the past, how ghosts of the past continue to haunt us despite our best efforts to erase them on the blackboards of our minds. For me, as a writer, the Southern past is a teacher. It helps me understand the human willingness to avert the eyes from what we don't want to see, or deafen the ears to stories we don't want to hear" (P.S. p. 9).

## Structure

*The Queen of Palmyra* is comprised of 19 chapters split into five sections. The first section is the longest, at 155 pages, describing Florence's childhood, her family, the political conflicts of the time, and her relationship with the African-American community.



This section breaks after Mama's attempted suicide attempt - the first major turning point in young Florence's life. The second section address Florence's relationship with Daddy, particularly in regards to his affiliation with the KKK. In this section, Florence remains naïve about her father's activities but begins to realize that he is not an honorable man. This is the section in which Daddy burns Florence's arms and when she first begins to fear him. Mama returns in this section, but just as in the first, runs away from her problems rather than facing them. Unlike in the first section, Florence is bit more skeptical about her mother and, for the first time, questions whether or not she should have been abandoned. In the third section, Florence becomes more actively involved in differentiating between good and evil. She goes away to summer camp and is enlightened to the world. She gains insight into the civil rights movement, recognizing Zenie and Eva's passions, and most importantly, she realizes that Daddy is an evil man. Florence fully embraces her alter ego, Flo, confronts Daddy by burning his box, and runs away with Mimi. The fourth section, the shortest section in the novel, tells the murder story from Eva's point of view. The fifth and final section of the novel deals with Florence's adulthood. Here she has fully matured to see the truth: that Daddy killed Eva. The entire novel has been building up to Florence's moment of understanding and the result is the beautifully crafted release of over 300-pages of tension.



## Quotes

"Mama said the devil's food with angel icing should be a lesson to me about how both bad and good could look pretty and taste sweet. How they could get so mixed up, each with the other, that sometimes you couldn't tell which was which. What a danger those kinds were" (p. 27).

"The roaches have nibbled up all the droppings of icing and cake and on the strength of the sugar have had millions of babies and grandbabies and great-great-grands that stare and scurry when a light is turned on at night. Now that we're gone, all they have to eat is somebody else's nastiness and each other. They've gotten scrawny and mean-spirited. They've grown larger wings" (p. 38).

"I could see my reflection in her eyes, but it wasn't the same girl I saw in my father's eyes, the one with long blond hair that flowed like a river of gold. It wasn't a girl at all. It was the serpent crawled out from under the rock. The old poison come home" (p. 44).

"When words splash out, they are gone forever. You can't catch pieces of water in your hands and hold onto them. They run through your fingers and splatter where they will" (p. 79).

"Zenie goes back into the kitchen and takes her apron off the door hook. She puts it back over her head like you'd harness an ox to the plow. The apron isn't part of her; she hates it. It covers most of her bosoms and lap in white, though the white is stained with grease and juice and smears of something that looks like blood" (p. 90-91).

"Sometimes a space in time feels like a slap in the face. First you don't breathe, then you touch the spot, then you can breathe again. Anybody who's been slapped knows this. That's why you can live with getting slapped once every now and then, just not over and over all the time. You need quiet spaces between" (p. 145).

"It's hard to say what happened next. There's always the story wanting to live its life, whether you want it to or not. So it may wander off, leaving you to say all right then, I give up, let's go ahead and just shut the book ... But just when you settle into thinking that, the story comes back from its wanderings and says why hello there, here I am again" (p. 160).

"And it's the seeing, isn't it, that lets us catch slippery things and hold them forever in our mind's eye? Of course, even if you can't see something, you can remember it" (p. 177-178).

"That's when I got it. You can make up what happens and it can be that. Smooth as eating a piece of lemon meringue pie. Whatever story you want is yours as long as you can think up the picture you want to see and make somebody else want to see it too" (p. 187).



"What I didn't know was how many ways there are to be dead. People say dead's dead, but that isn't exactly it. There's the buried dead, but there's also the walking talking dead. Later on, I'd come to think that what Mama really wanted was the first thing. Walking talking was what she had to settle for" (p. 195).

"The one who tells the story gets to say who's bad and who's good. Then the story rises up and puts on its clothes and goes out into the world. He'd made me out the bad one and him the good one. Saving the day. Keeping me from burning down the house" (p. 206).

"Words open the keys to the kingdom, girl," she said. "Words and sentences and stories. They're all we've got to get by in this cold world" (p. 298).

"Something poisonous lurked under all those mountains of papers. A poison disguised as love. Who was that love for? It seemed it was for me. My skin. My girlhood" (p. 323).

"By then I had come to understand that not everybody can't be the Queen of Palmyra. For some people being afraid is the hardest thing in the world. I could see how such a person might do anything just not to be afraid anymore" (p. 374).

"I realize now just what a shrewd choice Eva made with this second sentence: not only does it illustrate the difference between active and passive voices and adverbs and adjectives, but it also shows how a word can mutate into metaphor. How the ordinary can be beautiful as well as ugly. How many ways one can touch and be touched" (p. 377).

"True stories happen and then you tell them. But what you tell depends on what you see. And what you see depends on what you know" (p. 381).



## Topics for Discussion

Why do you think the novel is entitled *The Queen of Palmyra*? Which character, if any, do you think the title refers to? What parallels can be found between the stories of the Queen, Zenie, and Francis? Based on the events in the novel, what does it mean to be "Queen"? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Discuss the use of storytelling in the novel. What role do stories play in Florence's young life? Choose one of the significant stories - Br'er Rabbit, Uncle Wiggily, Nancy Drew, or Bomba - and explain what parallels can be found between this story and Florence's. Why do you think the novel is entitled *The Queen of Palmyra*? What does this story teach Florence? What does it teach the reader about the storyteller? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Explain what Florence means when she says, "True stories happen and then you tell them. But what you tell depends on what you see. And what you see depends on what you know" (p. 381). How is this relevant in Florence's life? What realization does she make as an adult that changes her story? How does this novel balance the conflict between seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

On the opening page of the novel, Florence states, "I need you to understand how ordinary it all was." What is she referring to? What part of Florence's daily life during childhood is ordinary? What is unordinary? When does Florence realize that something has shifted and what she previously thought of as "ordinary" is wrong? In what ways does the novel explore the "ordinariness" of Southern life during the 1960s? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Discuss the way teaching is reflected in the novel. Compare and contrast the roles Mimi, Eva, and Florence have as teachers. Why do you think the theme of teaching is particularly relevant in this novel, set in a segregated Southern state during the 1960s? Who teaches Florence the most about life? What important lessons does she learn in this coming-of-age tale? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

There are many different forms of narration at work in *The Queen of Palmyra*, including a narrator that shifts back-and-forth between present and past tense. What does this shifting narration achieve? In your opinion, does the narration add to or distract from the story? Why? What is accomplished by including Chapter 18, the only chapter in the novel with a different narrator? Why might Minrose Gwin have made this choice? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe Florence's relationship with her mother. Why didn't Mama come back for Florence after running away from Daddy? What does this act say about her, as an individual as well as a mother? Do you think Florence has ever forgiven her mother for leaving her behind? Why or why not? Do you think Florence's view of Mama would have

been different if she had been a bit older when Mama left? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

Describe the character of Win Forrest. What has caused him to become such an evil man? What factors have affected his racist beliefs? Is there anything sympathetic about his character? Why or why not? Do you think he deserved to die at the end of the novel, when he is old and frail? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.