

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place Study Guide

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place by Terry Tempest Williams

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Plot Summary

"Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place" by Terry Tempest Williams is a work of non-fiction that follows the personal family trauma of the author in addition to the evolution of the Great Salt Lake and the birds that call the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge their home. The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge is aptly named as it sits at the point where the Bear River flows into the northeast sector of the Great Salt Lake. The Refuge serves many purposes, including the protection of the marshes around the Bear River, particularly those located at the mouth of the river. The Great Salt Lake ecosystem depends upon the marshes, which are the largest freshwater component of the system. Because the marshes are surrounded by desert, waterfowl routinely flock to the area which they see as an oasis.

In the context of the book, the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge is a place of fascination and wonder to the author, Terry Tempest Williams.

The themes contained in the book are many. The Bird Refuge, the Great Salt Lake, and cancer are the main topics. Many members of the Tempest family have suffered with or died from cancer. The author uses the cycles of nature as a metaphor for her relationship with her mother who, after four years, dies from ovarian cancer.

Williams believes that extensive nuclear testing in the Nevada desert has been responsible for the extremely high number of incidents involving cancer that have plagued her family. In "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place" Williams addresses various environmental issues in addition to stories about her mother's battle with ovarian cancer. Williams has testified that she believes that the nuclear testing in the 1950s and 1960s is responsible for the nine mastectomies and seven deaths suffered by various members of the Tempest family.

Another main theme in the book is family relationships. The relationships in the Tempest family are highlighted, particularly those between Terry, Diane, and Mimi. Mimi is a strong matriarch who seems to defy the typical mother-in-law stereotype when it comes to Diane. The women obviously love each other and each brings a special level of influence to the author.

Williams is able to use nature as a metaphor for Diane's illness, from the first bout with breast cancer, through remission and finally, the journey through ovarian cancer and death. Terry becomes much more than a daughter, providing every type of assistance to Diane, particularly spiritual. The women learn from each other up to the very end.

The author has managed to turn one of life's greatest trials into a spiritual journey that honors her mother, grandmother, nature, and herself.



Chapters 1-7

Chapters 1-7 Summary and Analysis

Chapter one, "Burrowing Owls—lake level: 4204.70" begins with the author discussing the location of several landmarks including the University of Utah, the Mormon Tabernacle, Emigration Canyon, and the Salt Lake City International Airport. The trip to the Great Salt Lake from the author's home takes about 25 minutes. Williams discusses an experiment she performed in school in which the surface area of a body of water was measured. While some lakes are similar to cups of water the Great Salt Lake, with an average depth of 13 feet, is more like a dinner plate since the water is spread out over a distance. Additionally the students were required to test the salinity of the water and allow the water to evaporate leaving behind salt crystals.

Williams refers to the Great Salt Lake as a "terminal lake" because it has no outlet to the ocean. The author makes note of the water levels in each chapter because the levels fluctuate wildly depending upon climate changes. As with many things in nature the depth of the Great Salt Lake is cyclical. The water level of the Great Salt Lake may vary by as much as 20 feet over the course of the season. In the winter the lake level rises due to the mountain runoff. In late spring, the level begins to decrease due to evaporation. The lake will begin to rise again in the fall as the temperature decreases. Natives of the area tend to talk about the Great Salt Lake in reference to the depth of the body of water. The author goes on to explain various instances where the lake was at an all-time low or all-time high.

Williams claims, "That there are those birds you gauge your life by." One of these species of birds is the burrowing owl. The burrowing owls that live 5 Miles from the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge belong to Williams. The birds are seen as sentries that notify the author of changes in the land. The burrowing owl tends to be distinctive because of its choice of home. As one might expect, the burrowing owl lives underground. The adult burrowing owl stands on top of a mound of clay to collect its prey, which typically includes birds, insects, or small rodents. The entrance to the nest is littered with feathers and bones. Burrowing owls are typical part of a desert community and often take advantage of abandoned burros left by prairie dogs. As the amount of uninhabited desert decreases, many species become rare, including the prairie dog, rattlesnake and black footed ferret. Currently, the burrowing owl is on the verge of being endangered.

Williams claims she was raised to believe that there is a spirit world and all life forms will have a spiritual life even after death. As a result of that belief, the wilderness and nature are sacred. It was common for the author's family to go camping on the weekends. According to Williams, the days she loved best were the one spent at their river. The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge was considered to be a sanctuary for the author and her grandmother, Mimi. Williams was nine years old when her grandmother first took her



to the bird refuge. The girl was enthralled by the presence of avocets. At age 10, Williams joined the Audubon Society.

The author learned a lot about birds as well as marshes. For various reasons the marshes began to decline, thereby endangering certain waterfowl that claimed the marshes as their home.

Chapter Two, "Whimbrels; lake level: 4203.25'," discusses the solidity and longevity of the bird refuge. The first time Williams spots a whimbrel, it seems like a new addition to a familiar landscape. In total there are 208 species of birds that commonly use the refuge. 62 of the species nest in the region. The author claims, "It is here in the marshes with the birds that I feel my relationship to Great Salt Lake. I could never have anticipated its rise."

Years later, Williams receives a phone call from her mother, who had just returned from a trip to the Grand Canyon. It is typical for Terry and her mother to speak every morning. This morning, Terry learns that her mother had found a large mass in her lower abdomen. 12 years earlier, in 1971, Diane Dixon Tempest had been diagnosed with breast cancer. While mother and daughter try to convince themselves and each other that it could be a cyst or a benign mass, both know it is not true.

Williams discusses the trip to the hospital. She claims that her mother is too beautiful to be sick. After receiving x-rays, Diane says that the tumor is approximately the size of a grapefruit and is filled with fluid. The prognosis is not good. The immediate solution is for Diane to have a hysterectomy and then it can be determined if ovarian cancer is present. Diane says that if in fact she does have ovarian cancer, she will not have chemotherapy. It is during this time that Diane teaches Terry about solitude.

The surgery is not a complete success. The tumor is malignant and some remains inside of Diane's abdomen. The doctors are hopeful that chemotherapy can bring a cure. Diane originally refuses chemotherapy, but suddenly realizes that she has too much desire to live. Diane's health improves and respecting her mother's need for privacy, Terry drives to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge.

Chapter Three, "Snowy Egrets; lake level: 4204.05'," begins with Terry sitting by her mother's side during the first chemotherapy treatment. The treatment is horrible. While the doctors have attempted to prepare Diane for the trauma, nothing they could have said can compare to the actual event.

The author defines cancer and wonders how it can be rethought and potentially cured. During this time, Williams is working at the Utah Museum of Natural History.

Williams learns that the streets have begun to flood due to an overflow in the North Temple storm pipe. Even though it is the Sabbath, president of the Mormon Church is required to "empty the ward houses." By mid-afternoon, there are thousands of volunteers on hand building walls with sandbags. Terry's youngest brother, Hank, jokes that it is a good way to get out of church.



Chapter Four, "Barn Swallows; lake level: 4204.75'," begins with the author examining the relationship between a mother and child. The author states, "What is it about the relationship of the mother that can heal or hurt us?"

Williams compares the untimely death of the barn swallow to the uncertain lifespan of her own mother. Diane has just gone through the sixth month of chemotherapy treatment.

Chapter Seven, "Peregrine Falcon; lake level: 4205.40'," discusses a local landfill. While Williams claims to go there to perform the Christmas Bird Count, the author secretly likes to go to the dump. There are starlings among the trash that fascinate Williams. The author speaks of starlings. "The starlings gorge themselves, bumping into each other like drunks. They are not discretionary. They'll eat anything, just like us."

Williams says that she does not want to like the starlings. Perhaps it is because starlings represent what we dislike about ourselves. There are many parallels. A peregrine falcon attacks one of the starlings as prey. While Williams continues to perform the job of counting the birds at the dump, secretly she waits for the return of falcon.



Chapter 8-17

Chapter 8-17 Summary and Analysis

Chapter Eight, "Wilson's Phalarope; lake level: 4206.15'," discusses a law passed by the State of Utah regarding the lake levels off the Great Salt Lake. According to law, the lake level is not permitted to exceed 4202'. The author has noted that at this point the lake level is at 4206.15'. Obviously the Great Salt Lake is not abiding by the law. Williams states: "What lasso can you use to corral the West's latest outlaw?"

The government proposes five options should the Great Salt Lake exceed the legal lake level.

Option one: Breaching the Causeway, refers to breaching a part of the 13 mile long Southern Pacific Railroad Causeway. The causeway splits the Great Salt Lake into two parts. By breaching the causeway, the South arm's level could be reduced by 1 foot, allowing nature to have the time to take its course. Estimated cost: \$3 million.

Option Two: Store the Water. Creating a dam and reservoir is another option, although the effect would be minimal. Estimated cost: \$100 million+

Option Three: Divert the Water seems to be one of the most illogical. The Bear River was originally separated from the Snake River due to the presence of a volcanic dam put in place nearly 20 million years ago. Policymakers suggested rerouting the path to its original route. Estimated cost: \$200 million

Option Four: Diking would consist of providing protective diking on the Great Salt Lake's shore. This option seemed reasonable. Estimated cost: \$250 million.

Option Five: West Desert Pumping Project. This option was originally the idea of Brigham Young. The Army Corps of Engineers first investigated the plan in 1976. Unfortunately, the idea was determined "unfeasible" because it would threaten the United States Air Force bombing range. It is still being considered as an extreme measure. Estimated cost: \$90 million.

The final option, decided on by House Bill 30, is to breach the causeway.

The author's mother has just finished her 11th month of chemotherapy. Diane Tempest is 52 years old. As the treatment goes on, Diane's strength begins to return and more and more Diane lives only in the present.

The lake level continues to rise. The causeway that holds the bridge leading to Antelope Island is gone. The Bird Refuge, located 30 miles north, is underwater. The author sits and watches while men from the Department of Parks and Recreation remove the last boat slips. The men do not mind that Williams is there. Some of the men act bored with their job. Williams tells the men about the female phalarope, a brightly plumed bird that



spins around in the water until it stirs up food from the bottom. The men are stunned that Williams knows how many revolutions per minute the phalarope spins and the author explains that it is what she does for living. The group discusses rebuilding the causeway and one of the men on the crew claims that people should just leave the lake alone to do what it will do anyway.

Williams uses Antelope Island as a metaphor for her mother, who seems to be no longer accessible. Diane has an appointment to go to the doctor's office and find out if the chemotherapy has worked.

Chapter Nine, California Gulls; lake level: 4207.75'," begins with Dr. Smith revealing Diane's test results. The doctor claims that he is "cautiously optimistic" and that there is no cancer available to the naked eye. The doctor is cautious, however, saying that he will not know for sure until the tests from the pathology lab are returned.

The family is thrilled with the good news.

Later Dr. Smith meets with the family to say that the pathology report did not contain only good news. There were microscopic cells in 3 out of the 15 biopsies taken by the doctors. The doctor suggests 6 weeks of radiation therapy. Diane is exhausted and does not want to hear it.

The author runs away to Bear River in search of solace.

According to Williams, the California gulls were responsible for rescuing the Mormons in 1848. Since then the gull has become a part of Mormon folklore. Brigham Young saw the Great Basin as the Holy Land. It was truly God's country. While it seemed to be an ideal place, many of the people were not prepared. Winter quarters were insufficient for families who had not planned well and brought too few provisions. Livestock have been killed off by Indian raids and wolves. In 1848, it seemed as if things were beginning to turn around for the Mormons. Unfortunately, hordes of crickets descended upon the wheat fields. The crops were destroyed and once again the people struggled to find food. Farmers tried to fight off the crickets but nothing seemed to work. Flocks of gulls arrived and ate the crickets, saving the crops. Williams continues to talk about the gulls and their nesting habits.

Diane has resigned herself to the fact that she is going to die. While Diane seems to be at peace with the fact, she becomes enraged over her family's inability to accept the illness.

Chapter 10, "Ravens; lake level: 4209.10'," begins with Diane entering into radiation treatment. The treatment is difficult enough but Diane claims that she feels abused after a radiologist tells her that she has less than a 40% chance of survival.

Despite the illness, the family attempts to do things together. Williams takes her mother to go swimming in the Great Salt Lake as they had done years before.

Williams talks about a previous landmark on the lake called Saltair.



Chapter 11, "Pink Flamingos; lake level: 4208.00'," begins with the author recording the lake level. In 1984 the lake dropped 1.35'. This chapter contains personal letters, including one from Diane to a friend who has undergone surgery for cancerous brain tumor. Williams states, "Our correspondences show us where intimacies lie." It proves that, "We are not alone in the world." The author asks how one might correspond with the land when simple paper and ink will not suffice.

The second letter is from the author's parents who are in Switzerland. Diane continues to be at one with nature, which seems to keep her happy and peaceful.

The pink flamingo is a rare sight at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. The author points out that it is a curious fact that in 1985 more than 450,000 plastic pink flamingos were purchased across the United States.

Chapter 12, "Snow Buntings; lake level: 4209.15'," takes place in winter when the author notes the frozen Eastern shore of the lake. The reason that the Great Salt Lake is able to freeze is that the water level and salinity decrease. Williams refers to the lake as a woman that refuses to be tamed.

Diane makes her first trip to Bear River at the beginning of spring. Diane does not have the same affection for birds as her daughter. Williams talks about the great blue herons. Diane speaks of the book, "God Sees The Truth, But Waits" by Tolstoy. According to Diane each person must come to peace in isolation and no one can rescue us from our own Siberia.

During the trip to the river, William spots snow buntings, a very rare sight at the refuge.

Diane receives a return letter from the friend with a brain tumor.

Chapter 13, "White Pelicans; lake level: 4209.90'," begins with Williams noting the changes in the refuge and the absence of birds once there. Williams states, "The birds of Bear River have been displaced; so have I."

Williams returns from the hospital after having a small cyst removed from the right breast. The cyst is benign and it is the second time this has happened. Williams begins to wonder if cancer is also her path.

Hundreds of white pelicans stand close together at the edge of the Great Salt Lake. The birds do not look displaced. The white pelicans of the Great Salt Lake make their home on the Gunnison Island. The island is comprised of 164 acres and is located at the Northwest side of the lake. The white pelicans are able to protect their young and survive because the island is isolated. The white pelicans tend to be gregarious and gather together to catch fish after herding them like cattle. The fish are caught and shared with a sense of community. Williams points out that Brigham Young also adopted the same model. The model was called the United Order.

The United Order was reportedly a "heavenly scheme" that would create a completely self-sufficient Society. It was "based on the framework of the Mormon Church" and



could be compared to socialism. Williams explains Brigham Young's attempts at creating the ideal society. Eventually, it was learned that there was a difference between being self-sufficient and creating a self-sustaining system. Brigham Young had wanted to remain independent. According to Williams, "The Infinite Order of Pelicans suggests there is no such thing."

Chapter 14, "Yellow-Headed Blackbirds; lake level: 4209.55'," begins with the author stating that both her mother's health and the Great Salt Lake seem to be stable. Williams makes a trip to Fish Springs National Wildlife Refuge, which is a four-hour drive to the west of Salt Lake City. At the refuge William spots many varieties of birds, including yellow-headed blackbirds, ibises, night herons, bitterns, avocets, and marsh hawks.

Chapter 15, "Redheads; lake level: 4208.50'," begins with a report performed by Don Paul of the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources. It is 1985. The chapter discusses various birds and their numbers and how they relate to the Great Salt Lake. The government is still working on a way to control flooding at the lake.

Chapter 16, "Killdeer; lake level: 4208.40'," discusses the time when Williams, Diane, and Mimi have their astrology charts done. To discuss the results the women go to the Great Salt Lake to have a picnic. The women spend the afternoon talking, philosophizing and laughing while Terry and Mimi watch the birds. Diane states that she wishes she shared their fondness for the birds but is too traumatized by Alfred Hitchcock's movie, "The Birds," and can see herself in the role of Tippi Hedren.

Chapter 17, "Whistling Swan; lake level: 4208.35'," begins with the funeral of the family friend that had brain cancer. Williams begins to wonder how much time she has left with her mother.

Williams talks about walking along the shore of the Great Salt Lake after a storm. During the walk, the author spots a dead swan that may have been killed during the storm. Williams prays for the swan and gives it a kind of funeral before leaving it on the sand.



Chapters 18-24

Chapters 18-24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 18, "Great Horned Owl; lake level: 4208.45'," tells of a Thanksgiving feast held at the author's aunt and uncle's cabin in Milburn, Utah. There are 26 relatives for the grand feast. During the day, Williams' cousin Lynne finds a feather from a great horned owl.

Chapter 19, "Roadrunner; lake level: 4210.90'," starts with the author asking her mother to go to the West Desert as a dry run for a field trip Williams is scheduled to conduct for the museum. Along the way the women find the spot where the dikes would be built on the salt flats. The women come across a nine story concrete building that is placed simply to break up the monotony of the desert.

Mother and daughter check into the state line casino and decide to spend their \$10 worth of nickels on a slot machine. The women are on a winning streak and have a great time.

The chapter includes a letter from Mimi to carry in which the grandmother talks about Halley's Comet. Williams is thrilled when she gets to see the comet for herself.

The lake continues to rise. The state legislature appropriates the funds required to conduct an environmental impact study regarding the West Coast Desert Pumping Project. The author discusses the details.

Williams recounts a conversation she has with Mimi about her mother and the changes the women in the family have gone through.

Chapter 20, "Magpies; lake level: 4211.30'," begins with the Mormon Church declaring Sunday, May 5, 1986 as the day of prayer in hope that the rain might stop. The following day it rains.

Flocks of magpies descend upon Williams' lawn. The noise keeps the author from sleeping. Williams has to learn to give in to the body's natural cycles and allow herself to sleep. According to Williams, her mother's "whole being is accelerated" and Diane's curiosity is stronger than ever as is her faith and love of solitude.

Williams discusses a Circle Meeting at a Baptist church where she is one of the speakers.

Chapter 21, "Long-Billed Curlews; lake level: 4211.65'," begins with Williams discussing the fact that it is snowing at the Bear River even though it is May. The storm has caused the birds to fly in to the marshes. The following day, the skies begin to clear. Williams quotes from Julian Huxley's "The Courtship Habits of the Great Crested Grebe."



Williams discusses the region north of Promontory Point, location of the Golden Spike, which was placed to commemorate the completion of the first transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869. Nearby is the Curlew Valley, the breeding ground of the long-billed curlew, the largest shorebird in North America. Williams discusses the habits of the curlew.

The author prays to the birds and thinks about religious scripture she learned growing up in the Mormon Church.

Chapter 22, "Western Tanager; lake level: 4211.85'," begins with Williams, discussing the fact that the Great Salt Lake has claimed a record high, surpassing the previous record from 1873. It is also the author's 11th anniversary.

Williams and her husband, Brooke, celebrate with champagne along the shore.

Diane tells stories of her childhood. Terry asks if the sudden memory may contain a lesson that Diane needs to learn.

Doctors discuss an alternate kind of chemotherapy. Diane refuses.

Diane decides to wait until after Hank's birthday to tell the rest of the family. Meanwhile, Diane asks Terry to help her through her death.

The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge officially closes due to the unpredictability of the Great Salt Lake. The author claims that "Bear River now belongs to the birds."

Terry attempts to cook her first turkey for Hank's birthday. The author wants her mother to know that the holidays will be in good hands. The turkey is terrible.

Diane is in pain and Terry attempts to help her through it with loving support and visualization.

Chapter 24, "Gray Jays; lake level: 4211.40'," begins with the author hiking from Brighton to Lake Catherine. Williams picks a glacier lily to take home to her mother and also devotes the hike to her. It has been one week since Diane was able to eat.

The Tempest family poses for a formal family portrait. The photographer tells the family to smile, saying, "You all look so somber. What's the matter, is somebody dying?" The family collapses into uncontrollable laughter.

Diane undergoes another surgery to remove the blockage in her small intestine. Dr. Smith gives Diane one year to live. Diane is still trying to convince the family to live one day at a time.

Diane is restless and ends up moving into Mimi and Jack's house. Diane is in insufferable pain and knows something is wrong.



Chapters 25-30

Chapters 25-30 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25, "Meadowlarks; lake level: 4211.00'," begins with Williams standing next to the Escalante River shortly after a thunderstorm. For the first time in months Williams feels clarity. Williams speaks of a panel of petroglyphs depicting three members of the Anasazi tribe. There are three figures—a woman, a warrior, and a woman with child. Williams comments that even though they lived and died a part of their spirit remains.

Williams' visit to the Anasazi State Park is part of a high school excursion, of which Williams is one of the instructors. During the presentation by the chief ranger, Williams receives a message that she should call home right away. Diane has another blockage and is scheduled for surgery the next morning. Williams calls everyone she can think of and finally manages to get a ride arranged by one of the rangers.

Diane survives the surgery. One week after the surgery, Diane says she is tired of the physical torment. Although Diane is frail she says she will not return to the hospital. Diane has lost 20 pounds. Williams states that, "A person with cancer dies in increments, and a part of you slowly dies with them."

Chapter 26, "Storm Petrel; lake level: 4210.85'," discusses a trip on which Williams and Brooke are whale watching in the Telegraph Cove at the tip of Vancouver Island. Williams discusses the whales as well as various trees and bones.

It is September 8, 1986, the author's birthday. Mimi is operated on for breast cancer. The cancer is rare, but is 90% curable. The doctor recommends a mastectomy.

Williams spends the afternoon with her mother on the lake. The women do not discuss Mimi.

Chapter 27, "Greater Yellowlegs; lake level: 4210.80'," begins with Williams taking part in the Silver Island Expedition. Williams discusses the trip as well as findings from archaeologists. Williams also discusses fossils found along Bear River Bay.

Chapter 28, "Canada Geese; lake level: 4210.95'," discusses the author's trip to the Abbey of Our Lady of the Holy Trinity. The author and her mother sit on wooden pews and watch as 17 white robed monks sing vespers. Diane has begun to let go and Williams realizes that she is beginning to let go as well. Sitting on a grassy knoll mother and daughter watch flocks of Canada geese. The pair break bread and leave it throughout the meadow to feed the geese.

Chapter 29, "Bald Eagles; lake level: 4211.10'," begins with the author, stating that she and Brooke have moved from their home to Emigration Canyon Road. This was the route used by Brigham Young and the Latter-day Saints as they traversed into Salt Lake Valley. The author's father and Brooke assist in planting the four Colorado spruces given



as a housewarming present by Diane and John. While the planting is going on Williams discusses Mormonism, along with astrology and divining rods. These magical reviews were part of the life of Joseph Smith, the founding prophet. Williams goes on to discuss the purpose of the tools.

A member of the Mormon Church approaches John to tell him that Diane will have many years of life left. Dr. Smith disputes the prognosis, saying that Diane does not have much time left. Terry and her mother make a pact to stop discussing how she is feeling physically.

Chapter 30, "Red-Shafted Flicker; lake level: 4211.15'," finds the author awakened by a red-shafted flicker hammering on the window.

Williams goes to visit her mother and is alarmed when no one answers the door. Diane says that she is too weak to be able to answer the door. Diane begins to cry.

Diane acquiesces and goes to visit Dr. Smith. A glucose IV will give Diane enough strength to make it through Christmas. The family celebrates together and Williams recounts a toast given by Brooke.



Chapters 31-40

Chapters 31-40 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 31 "Dark-Eyed Junco; lake level: 4211.20'," begins with Williams quoting Emily Dickinson: "Pain prepares us for peace."

A dark-eyed junco smacks into the bedroom window and falls to the ground. The bird is only stunned. Although Williams wants to hold and console to the bird, she does not. Instead, Williams returns to Diane who says that she is ready to go. Later Diane gives Terry a list of questions to ask Dr. Smith. Terry slips into clinical mode and makes the call.

It is New Year's Eve and the family is planning funeral arrangements. Fuses are growing short. John thinks that Diane might die in the night. The children kiss their mother goodnight and watch as their father closes the bedroom door. No one sleeps.

Diane continues to grow weaker and has not been able to eat for weeks. John feels helpless, unable to save Diane or protect the children. Terry refers to the time with her mother is being spiritual. Even though Diane is dying, she continues to try to be the peacemaker, "to create a column in the midst of her death."

Dr. Smith visits the house and puts an IV into Diane so that her veins will not collapse. John shouts and says he will not have the house turned into a hospital. After Diane slips into a coma, he will return her to the hospital. John is past the breaking point.

Chapter 32, "Sanderlings; lake level: 4211.35'," begins with the author's visit to her mother. Diane claims that something extraordinary has begun to happen to her; she has begun to move into a realm of pure color and pure feeling. The morphine pump continues to work and Diane sleeps.

As Diane's health declines, John becomes angrier. John wants to protect the children and shield Diane from death but is helpless. The family gathers around during Diane's last hours. Terry spends a great deal of time with her mother, and finally sobs telling Diane that she can no longer be strong. John arrives home to find the house full of family. John rages and throws everybody out. There is a blizzard outside and it seems appropriate that the Tempest family is facing more than one tempest of their own.

The next day, John calls the family to let them know that Diane is dying, and that they should come quickly. John apologizes for his behavior the previous day. The family gathers round and Diane dies. Terry says that she felt "as though I had been midwife to my mother's birth."

Chapter 33, "Birds-of-Paradise; lake level: 4211.65'," begins the day after Diane's funeral. The author goes about cleaning the house from top to bottom, including her mother's hair brush from which she extracts short black hair. Hairs are spread across

the branches of the cottonwood trees so that the birds might make their nests from Diane's hair.

A friend shows the author a pair of burial moccasins, handmade and highly ornate. At first, Williams cannot understand wearing the moccasins. However, she then thinks about how she and Mimi prepared Diane's body for the funeral from the French white cotton dress to the essential oils and perfume and the other symbols—all sacred covenants. The author also goes through the events at the funeral home, including the presence of her maternal grandparents Lettie and Sanky.

The author visits a cave in the salt desert that is considered to be a holy place. Inside the cave are ancient murals of ceremonial art on the walls. There are pictographs of waterfowl, including egrets, herons, and cranes. This is the place where Williams will keen for her family and attempt to whittle down her losses.

Chapter 34, "Pintails, Mallards, and Teals; lake level: 4211.85," begins with Williams recording the second peak of the lake on April 1, 1987. The borders of the lake are fluid and the birds have gone away. Williams claims that she has been liberated from optimism.

April brings the General Conference, a gathering of Saints as Mormons worldwide gather on the Temple Square. Instead of attending, Williams drives out to the lake, listening to the wind and waves.

Williams questions the presence of the mother figure in Mormon theology.

Williams discusses a trip she and Brooke take for the Fourth of July. The trip is a hiking trip in dark Canyon. During the hike Williams falls and suffers a deep pressure wound on her forehead. Although Williams is going to be all right there will be a significant scar on her face. Back in Salt Lake City, Terry and Brooke meet with Brooke's brother-in-law, who is a plastic surgeon. The cuts runs from the author's widow's peak, over the forehead across the bridge of the nose, down her cheek and to the edge of the jaw. She can see the boney plate of the skull. Williams comments, "I have been marked by the desert."

Williams recounts Mimi's bout with a tumor, which causes an emergency hysterectomy. Terry and John are away on a trip in the Tetons. Upon their return, Mimi says that she is glad that they were away, because she did not want to put them through the pain of another death from cancer. Mimi claims that having cancer at 80 is much different than having cancer at 40. Mimi claims she will be fine, that everyone should just go on with their lives.

The West Desert Pumping Project is completed and the group of Utah Republicans believe they have finally harnessed the Lake. The author uses the presence of the slaughtered birds around the lake as a metaphor for her grief.

Chapter 35, "Bitterns; lake level: 4210.20'," begins with the Williams, exclaiming that she has found the birds. Many of the flocks that abandon the Great Salt Lake relocate to



Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Suddenly Williams realizes that the birds are not lost, they have just found the courage to move on. The birds' resilience convinces Williams that she must also have the same courage.

Chapter 36, "Plovers; lake level: 4209.10'," starts with the Great Salt Lake receding from its high of 4211.85' the previous year. Williams compares the land to something that is in recovery from a long illness. Williams learns that there may be some unexploded bombs in the desert. As a result a "bomb catcher" is scheduled to be built in the West Desert.

Snowy plovers have declined by 50% in Oregon, California and Washington since the 1960s due to the decline of coastal habitats. Williams discusses the shoreline of the Great Salt Lake and how it affects the birds.

Once again death visits the Tempest family as Diane's mother passes away. Shortly after Williams receives more bad news from her cousin Lynne, whose mother has contracted breast cancer. Mimi's tumor worsens.

Chapter 37, "Great Blue Heron; lake level: 4207.05'," discusses the presence of a heron as it stands on the edge of the lake. The bird is solitary and peaceful. Williams claims that she realizes that she would like to have the same solitude and admits that this is yet another paradox, "wanting to be a bird when I am human."

Mimi and Williams go on a pilgrimage to the Great Basin. Williams wants to make the trip while Mimi is still able. They visit the Sun Tunnels, Utah's equivalent to Stonehenge. The women spend the day together, partly in silence, embracing the time with each other and with nature.

Chapter 38, "Screech Owls; lake level: 4206.00'," begins with Mimi's death. The week previous Mimi tells Williams that she has a desire to see an owl. Terry asks her grandmother to send her a sign after she passes over to let her granddaughter now that everything is okay. Mimi laughs and says that she tried the same thing with her father, and it did not work.

The Great Salt Lake has returned to a state in which the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge is able to reopen.

Chapter 39, "Avocets and Stilts; lake level: 4204.70'," begins with the reopening of the bird refuge, the first time in seven years. There is much work to be done before the refuge can be inhabited. Williams and Brooke take a canoe out into Half-Moon Bay. Williams is wearing a turquoise and black shawl from Mexico, a gift to herself from the Day of the Dead. Williams recounts her visit to Mexico.

Paddling on the lake becomes a meditation, as well as the author's refuge.

Chapter 40, "Epilogue: The Clan of One Breasted Women," discusses the cancer that has plagued many women in the Tempest family. Diane, Kathryn, Mimi and 6 aunts have had mastectomies. Seven of the women are dead. The remaining two have just

finished rounds of chemotherapy and radiation. Williams has had two biopsies as well as a small tumor between her ribs that is considered to be borderline malignant.

The author says that the statistics of breast cancer are supposedly related to genetics and heredity, plus fatty diets, getting pregnant after age 30 or not having children. The statistics do not state that living in Utah might be the greatest hazard of them all. Mormons typically have a low percentage of cancer and the author asks if her family is a cultural anomaly.

The author goes through many years of discussions and government battles regarding the potential fallout from the Nevada desert and how she believes it caused the cancer in her family.

Characters

Terry Tempest Williams

Terry Tempest Williams (1955 -) is an American author, conservationist, academic and fifth generation Mormon. Williams was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah, a fact that the author claims has shaped both her life and writing career. Living in the desert has propelled Williams to learn about and protect the land. Her passion for the earth has prompted Williams to write several books about her work as a conservationist and activist.

In addition to Williams' devotion to the land, the author also devotes a great deal of time and energy speaking on health issues, cancer in particular. Williams believes that extensive nuclear testing in the Nevada desert has been responsible for the extremely high number of incidents involving cancer that have plagued her family. In "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place" Williams addresses various environmental issues in the context of stories about her mother's battle with ovarian cancer. Williams has testified that she believes that the nuclear testing in the 1950s and 1960s are responsible for the nine mastectomies and seven deaths suffered by various members of the Tempest family.

Williams' first book was published in 1984. The book, "The Secret Language of Snow," was geared toward a youth audience and was not commercially successful. During the next several years, Williams went on to publish three more books, including "Between Cattails," "Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajo Land," and "Coyote's Canyon." These books received positive attention from the critics but none of these were touted as commercially successful. Williams' first true source of recognition was In "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place" which was published in 1991.

In addition to her work in the conservation and health studies areas, Williams also serves as the Environmental Humanities Scholar at the University of Utah, the author's alma mater. Williams has also worked as a curator of education as well as the naturalist in residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History.

Mormons

Terry Tempest Williams is a fifth generation Mormon. Mormons are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), often referred to as the Mormon Church. Officially, only those belonging to the LDS Church may call themselves Mormon but the term is commonly used to describe anyone that subscribes to the beliefs held by the Book of Mormon. The scriptures in the book are believed to have been compiled by a prophet named Mormon. The book is believed to contain God's interactions with three main civilizations from 2700 BC through 420 AD. Mormon was responsible for the book's abridgment in the 4th century.



Joseph Smith, Jr. is believed to have been the first to publish the book, officially titled, "The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi" in 1830. The book, which is comparable to the Bible, includes the activities and teachings of Jesus through followers and prophets.

Diane Dixon Tempest

Diane Dixon Tempest is the mother of Terry Tempest Williams. Mrs. Tempest is one of the Tempest family members stricken with cancer, possibly caused by nuclear testing in the Nevada desert.

Lynne

Lynne is Terry's cousin. Terry and Lynne often share information about family health including the high number of members with cancer.

John Henry Tempest III

John Henry Tempest III is the father of Terry Tempest Williams.

Brooke Williams

Brooke Williams is the husband to Terry Tempest Williams

Julian Huxley

Julian Huxley is the author of "The Courtship Habits of the Great Crested Grebe."

Hank Tempest

Hank Tempest is Terry Tempest Williams' youngest brother.

Mimi

Mimi is Terry Tempest Williams' grandmother. Mimi and Terry often visited the Bird Refuge together.

Brigham Young

Brigham Young was the successor to Joseph Smith, president of the LDS Church, and founder of Salt Lake City.



Objects/Places

The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge

The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, a nesting place for a wide variety of waterfowl, is located in northern Utah. The Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge is aptly named as it sits at the point where the Bear River flows into the northeast sector of the Great Salt Lake. The Refuge serves many purposes, including the protection of the marshes around the Bear River, particularly those located at the mouth of the river. The Great Salt Lake ecosystem depends upon the marshes, which are the largest freshwater component of the system. Since the marshes are surrounded by desert, waterfowl routinely flock to the area which they see as an oasis.

In the context of the book, the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge is a place of fascination and wonder to the author, Terry Tempest Williams. Williams first goes to the Refuge at the age of nine, when her grandmother thinks the girl is old enough to see what helped to create the atmosphere revered by the family. Williams' interest in the Refuge grew from then on. During the period in which Williams learns that her mother is stricken with ovarian cancer, the Great Salt Lake and the Refuge are also in trouble. The author manages to marry the two to create an unforgettable journey.

Cancer

Cancer is one of the main topics featured in "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place." During the course of the book, Williams' mother, Diane Dixon Tempest is stricken with ovarian cancer. Diane is not the first member of the Tempest family to have cancer. In fact, Williams reports that the members of her family, not all related by blood, have all been deeply affected by cancer. At the time of the author's writings, nine members of the Tempest family have succumbed to cancer; seven of the women undergo mastectomies. The latter prompts the final chapter in the book: "The Clan of One-Breasted Women."

Cancer has been studied rigorously but no concrete answers have been found and, by and large, there is no "cure." Williams believes that the high rate of cancer in her family can be attributed to nuclear testing that took place in the Nevada desert in 1952 and 1961. Williams believes that her family is plagued by the fallout which in turn causes the cancer epidemic.

Williams manages to use the cancer and the plight of the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge as metaphors to create a journey of "spiritual grace" while coping with her mother's untimely death.

Williams continues to speak on many women's health issues, including cancer. Williams continues to work on proving that the cancer experienced by the members of her family, particularly the women, was caused by nuclear fallout from the Nevada desert.



Bear River Bay

Bear River Bay—an inlet located on the western side of the Great Salt Lake.

Salt Lake City

Salt Lake City—Capital city of Utah, founded by Brigham Young. Known as the home of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Nevada desert

Nevada desert—Location of nuclear testing in 1951 and 1962. May have caused cancer in the Tempest family.

Great Salt Lake

Great Salt Lake—The largest lake in Utah, located south west of Salt Lake City. Home to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge.

University of Utah

University of Utah—Williams' alma mater. Williams also serves as the university's Environmental Humanities Scholar.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also known as the Mormon church, Williams' chosen place of worship.

Antelope Island

Antelope Island is a small island that rests in the Great Salt Lake.

Ecosystem

The ecosystem is the system of interrelationships in nature where one thing is always dependent upon the next to support its life and function.



Themes

Cancer

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Family Relationships

A main theme in "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place" by Terry Tempest Williams is family relationships. The relationships in the Tempest family are highlighted, particularly those between Terry, Diane, and Mimi. Mimi is a strong matriarch who seems to defy the typical mother-in-law stereotype when it comes to Diane. The women obviously love each other and each brings a special level of influence to the author.

Williams is able to use nature as a metaphor for Diane's illness, from the first bout with breast cancer, through remission and finally, the journey through ovarian cancer and death. Terry becomes much more than a daughter, providing every type of assistance to Diane, particularly spiritual. The women learn from each other up to the very end.

There is much tension in the Tempest house, mostly from John Tempest, Diane's husband, who reacts in anger to his helplessness. John wants nothing more than to protect his children and save Diane's life but knows that he cannot do anything about it. The family is angry in return but understands the role that their father must play.

After Diane's death, Mimi continues to act as a source of guidance for Terry. Even when Mimi is diagnosed with cancer, first in the breast and then in the abdomen, the elderly woman consoles and teaches her granddaughter. When Mimi dies, Williams seems to finally come to terms with her grief and find her refuge.



Style

Perspective

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Tone

The tone of "Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place" by Terry Tempest Williams is the first person point of view, making it partisan and highly personal. The author is able to relate the most basic facts of nature to her own spirituality and personal struggles.

The birds hold a fascination for Williams and her grandmother, Mimi. The author's descriptions and comparisons make the birds, geography and the nature of Utah even more exciting than it might be otherwise. Even the most inanimate object takes on a unique personality.

Williams has the ability to allow the reader into her deepest thoughts, even when those thoughts are extremely painful or emotional to the point of devastation. The reader is also treated to the spirituality of the author, Diane and Mimi, paving the way to healing and the cycle of life.

It is clear through the tone of the book that Williams has devoted her life to women's health issues as well as conservation.



Structure

"Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place" by Terry Tempest Williams is a work of non-fiction, comprised of 290 pages broken into 40 chapters. The shortest chapter is 2 pages in length; the longest chapter is 21 pages in length. The average length of the chapters is 7 pages in length.

Each of the chapters is named after a bird that can be related to the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and the region surrounding the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Each of the birds represents a particular event or time in the author's life, expanding the connection Williams has with nature.

The birds include: Burrowing Owls, Whimbrels, Snowy Egrets, Barn Swallows, Peregrine Falcon, Wilson's Phalarope, California Gulls, Ravens, Pink Flamingos, Snow Buntings, White Pelicans, Yellow-Headed Blackbirds, Redheads, Killdeer, Whistling Swan, Great Horned Owl, Roadrunner, Magpies, Long-Billed Curlews, Western Tanager, Gray Jays, Meadowlarks, Storm Petrel, Greater Yellowlegs, Canada Geese, Bald Eagles, Red-Shafted Flicker, Dark-Eyed Junco, Sanderlings, Birds-of-Paradise, Pintails, Mallards, and Teals, Bitterns, Snowy Plovers, Great Blue Heron, Screech Owls, and Avocets and Stilts.

The book is written in chronological order, detailing the medical and spiritual journey of the Tempest family, along with the evolution of the Great Salt Lake and the bird refuge.

The epilogue is titled "Clan of One-Breasted Women," in which the author talks about her family's exceedingly high rate of cancer.

Quotes

"Everything about Great Salt Lake is exaggerated—the heat, the cold, the salt, and the brine," 3.

"In Mormon culture, that is one of the things you do know—history and genealogy," 13.

"It is here in the marshes with the birds that I seal my relationship to Great Salt Lake," 22.

"I know the solitude my mother speaks of. It is what sustains me and protects me from my mind," 29.

"The cancer process is not unlike the creative process. Ideas emerge slowly, quietly, invisibly at first. They divide and multiply, become invasive," 44.

"California has lost 95% of its wetlands over the past one hundred years," 111.

"Maybe it is not the darkness we fear most, but the silences contained within the darkness," 146.

"The hostility of this landscape teaches me how to be quiet and unobtrusive, how to find grace among spiders with a poisonous bite," 147.

"The summer days have been relentless with emotional heat. I'm exhausted and depleted," 163.

"Ice can immobilize, but on Great Salt Lake, it creates habitat," 202.

"'This cannot be a coincidence, can it?' I ask my cousin Lynne, over the telephone. 'Three women in one family, unrelated by blood, all contract cancer within months of each other?'" 261.

"I belonged to a Clan of One-Breasted Women," 281.



Topics for Discussion

What was Mimi's motivation to take Terry to the Bird Refuge?

Do you believe that the nuclear testing caused the Tempest family's bouts with cancer?

Of all the birds mentioned, which is the most interesting to you?

How does the author compare her mother's cancer to the Great Salt Lake?

How was the author able to find comfort during her mother's illness and after her death?

What explanation could there be—other than exposure to radiation—for all of the incidents of cancer in the Tempest family?

What is the importance of the author noting the lake levels in relation to the various birds?