

Ruby Study Guide

Ruby by Cynthia Bond

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Plot Summary

“Ruby” is an African-American historical-fantasy by Cynthia Bond. The story recounts the relationship between Ruby Bell, a woman considered to be crazy, and Ephram Jennings, a man considered weak and worthless by a town with dark secrets. The novel begins in 1974. Ephram is a lifelong resident of Liberty Township in East Texas. He has known Ruby since she was a child. He knows that she lived in New York for several years and that following her return from New York, she appeared to go crazy. She is mocked by the locals who feel that she was born with a mental illness.

Ephram has deep feelings for Ruby for two reasons. First, he has romantic inclinations toward her, and he knows what it is like to have a loved one who has gone crazy. As a child, Ephram’s mother went crazy and was committed to a mental institution. Celia, Ephram's older sister, has cared for him since that time. Celia balks at Ephram’s concern for Ruby because she sees Ruby as a threat. Celia has spent her life caring for her brother, and she will not allow another woman to take him away.

Ephram begins caring for Ruby, from bathing her to cleaning up her house to tending to her old family property. The locals gossip about this. As Ephram befriends Ruby, she reveals her past to him. The town's past also begins to unfold. Ruby is not crazy, but she is a magnet and conduit for spirits, especially the spirits of dead children. She is plagued by an evil spirit, a Dybou, from whom she protects the children. The Dybou is the spirit of Ephram and Celia’s dead father, Reverend Jennings. As a youngster, Reverend Jennings had been raped by his mother, only to begin a sexual affair with her. She became pregnant, and he was kicked out.

Reverend Jennings and other prominent members of the town had all long participated in black magic and voodoo gatherings at night, where they brutally molested and raped very young girls, including Ruby. This was discovered by Ephram’s mother, an upstanding Christian woman who went crazy because of it. Celia also chanced upon one such gathering which she blamed on Ruby, for Ruby especially caught her father’s eye. Reverend Jennings was later found hanged, his spirit empowered to remain on Earth through a dark enchantment.

It is also revealed that Reverend Jennings had secretly been prostituting Ruby out since the age of six. Ruby had been sexually molested from the age of five. In the present day, Ruby is continually sought out and raped by various men in town. She expects no different from Ephram, but Ephram proves he is not the same as the others. At Celia’s request, many of the locals try to force Ephram and Ruby apart, but they are unsuccessful in doing so. Ephram comes to help Ruby tend to the spirits attached to her and drives away the Dybou. Though Celia is finally successful in baptizing Ephram, she cannot prevent Ephram from staying with Ruby.



Book I: Wishbone, Chapters 1 – 6

Summary

Chapter 1 – It is 1974. For eleven years, all-black Liberty Township in East Texas has been home to Ruby Bell, who has gone crazy after her return from New York. Ruby wanders around town dirty and unkempt. Miss Philomena, the owner of the P&K Store, gives Ruby fresh bread every day. Ephram Jennings always watches Ruby with concern, but he has always held back from trying to help Ruby due to the shunning and mocking she receives from the locals. Ephram, forty-five years old, is himself something of an outcast. No one ever pays him any mind. When he sees Ruby urinate in the middle of the street without realizing what she is doing, he decides enough is enough.

Ephram is the younger brother of Celia, whom he calls “Mama.” It was Celia who had raised him and who continues to care for him. The two are the children of a deceased traveling preacher and his wife, a woman committed to the state mental hospital. Ephram asks Celia to bake a white layer angel cake for Ruby. Celia shares gossip with Ephram about Ruby urinating in the street, saying Ruby has gotten everything she deserves. Ephram is then hit with waves of horrible pain that emanate from his bones, and he goes to sleep to fight off the pain. As he falls asleep, he worries Ruby will never be able to taste the white layer angel cake.

Chapter 2 – Nearby Marion Lake is Ephram’s favorite place to go. Marion Lake has two suns, the one shining in the sky and the one floating on the lake's surface. In this chapter, the story reverts back in time as Ephram remembers days spent at the lake as a child anticipating getting home to eat white layer angel cake. One day while fishing, Ephram first met Maggie Wilkens and her cousin Ruby Bell. Maggie was too forward about Ephram’s mother being committed; so, Ruby stood up for Ephram. Maggie then caught and gutted a catfish which caused Ruby to cry.

In the rain, the three children ran to Ma Tante’s, a local voodoo practitioner short on patience, whom Maggie has befriended. Ma Tante told Ephram he was like the wishbone that he needed to snap to get a wish, though he might lose in the process. Ma Tante told Ruby that she was like a doorway. She had been hexed and the spirits of the dead were nipping at her heels as they tried to enter her soul. Trying to invade her soul, the spirits of the dead were nipping at her heels. Then, Maggie told Ephram to leave. Ephram was worried for Ruby. Maggie and Ephram fought outside while Ruby underwent a ritual inside which made her soul harder to steal.

Ma Tante tended to Ephram’s injuries. Then, Ephram and Ruby talked to each other. Ruby’s mother was in New York, where Ruby hoped to join her soon. Instead, Ruby was working as a maid for a white lady in Neches. The lady owned the store chain “Miss Barbara’s Bridal Necessities”. It was where Ephram’s mother had worked at one time. Ma Tante then gave each of the children small dolls –one with a silver ring for Maggie,



one with a heart for Ephram, and one with a lodestone tied to its back for Ruby. She then told Ephram and Maggie to trade dolls.

Chapter 3 – In Chapter 3, the story returns to the present. Ephram goes to visit Ruby with the cake. He is still in pain. He passes the Rankin farm, and the In-His-Name Holiness Church overseen by Pastor Joshua, who is outside. Ephram lies, telling the pastor he is bringing the cake to Bessie and Mo. The pastor reminds Ephram about coming early on Monday to set up for the funeral.

Chapter 4 – Ephram continues on his way, passing Bloom's Juke, a kind of general store which serves as a gathering place. Though it is situated in a dry county, Bloom's also sells moonshine. Four intoxicated men spill out, including Gubber, Charlie, K.O. (a former boyfriend of Celia's), and K.O's younger brother, Jeb. They are all awaiting their turn with Mabel, a fat prostitute.

A story is recounted by Mabel about the Bell family. Many members of the family can be taken for white. One Bell daughter, eighteen year-old Neva, became the well-cared for mistress of a white banker, Mr. Leech, who intended to leave his wife for Neva. Mrs. Leech would not hear of being left for a black woman. She decided that her brother, Sheriff Levy, could round up a posse to shoot Neva. Neva's younger sisters were raped, including seventeen year-old Charlotte, who gave birth to Ruby as a result. Mabel and the others believe that Ruby was wrong from the start.

Ephram continues on his way. He runs into Sheriff Levy Jr. who takes a kickback from Bloom so Bloom can sell liquor. Levy treats Ephram with a polite kind of contempt, questioning if he is out to steal something. As Ephram continues on, he notices a crow flying toward the Bell property.

Chapter 5 – Since Ruby returned from New York, she has lost nearly everything in her life, from money to clothing to her once-shapely body. She has also lost her former life in New York, where she served parties with important people like James Baldwin and Gregory Corso. She also feels the loss of others, including the hundreds of ghosts who have passed through her body –including murdered children and a Dybou. The Dybou is an evil spirit which causes her to act sexually and frightens the ghosts of the children.

Chapter 6 – Ephram remembers how when Ruby returned to Liberty in August, 1963, she was disdainful of the locals who recoiled at her condescension. Ephram stops in at the P&K for some iodine, cotton, brown thread, and a needle. Outside, Percy, Chauncy, Moss, and Gubber mock Ruby, and then mock Ephram as he leaves. He heads to Marion Lake for a nap.

Analysis

“Ruby” is an African-American historical-antasy story by Cynthia Bond. Chapter 1 introduces Ephram Jennings and Ruby Bell, the two main characters. The locals of Liberty Township consider Ruby to be crazy and Ephram to be worthless. The town itself harbors deep secrets. When the novel begins, the theme of appearances becomes



central to the plot. Liberty Township appears to be much like any other impoverished, rural Southern town. The community has a Christian flavor, small-town gossip, and a handful of stores. It also has a handful of men who really seem to do nothing other than drink and carouse.

The theme of appearances in the novel is also strengthened by both the time period and the racial makeup of the cast of characters. Liberty is an all-black town in the post-civil rights East Texas area. It is watched over by a white sheriff and his white associates. Although the county in which Liberty is located is dry, the sheriff is willing to let Bloom's Juke, a gathering place, sell moonshine for a kickback. In order to get along, the owner of Bloom's Juke and the other black members of town put up with the racial attitudes of the sheriff and his deputies.

Liberty has local oddities for citizens, such as Ruby. The town rumor mill appears to run almost exclusively on gossip about Ruby, who is mocked and derided by some. However, there are others like the deeply Christian Miss Philomena who shun such activity in favor of providing food for Ruby. However, appearances can be deceiving, and Ruby is not what she first appears to be. In fact, nothing is.

Chapter 2 is a flashback to Ephram's youth. He remembers the two suns that he saw at Marion Lake. One sun was on the surface of the water, and the other sun was in the sky. The suns are symbolic of appearances and reality. This will be especially important in future chapters regarding Ruby and Ephram. Likewise, the two suns also reflect the appearance and reality of the town. On the surface it seems like a rural, impoverished Southern town with Christian intentions but this is not the reality of things.

The first signal that something is not quite right is presented in Chapter 2 as three children (Ephram, Ruby, and Maggie) pay a visit to Ma Tante in the isolated area outside of town—a place their parents and guardians have all forbidden them to go. Here, the theme of the supernatural emerges. By all appearances, it would seem normal that parents would encourage their children to stay away from a woman known for practicing dark magic. Ruby is susceptible to being haunted by ghosts—later including the malicious Dybou—due to a hex put upon her. It is a hex that cannot be removed. As such, it serves as an ill-omen for the future.

In the flashback, Ma Tante gave a small doll to each of the children. She gave one with a silver ring to Maggie, one with a heart to Ephram, and one with a lodestone tied to its back to Ruby. Ma Tante then told Ephram and Maggie to trade dolls. The fact that Ma Tante told Ephram and Ruby to switch dolls demonstrated that they have something in common and their lives will be intertwined. The lodestone will be feared and buried by the Dybou since the Dybou can be trapped by the lodestone's power. The lodestone becomes symbolic of the past, and the burying of the lodestone will therefore become symbolic of the burying of the past. As such, it becomes symbolic of cleansing as well. Ruby's past does not matter to Ephram, which in large part explains his desire to care for her in the present.



Some of Ruby's own back story is revealed later in this section of the novel. Ruby went to New York years before, where she met numerous powerful and influential people, such as James Baldwin and Gregory Corso. It is a far cry from East Texas. Why Ruby left in the first place, what exactly she did in New York, and why she came back are all questions that have yet to be answered. It is through Ruby's past that the importance of the theme of family history also begins to emerge.

It is also in this section of the novel that the theme of sex begins to appear, though only in violent ways. The Dybou which haunts Ruby also causes her to act in a very sexual way. Ruby is the product of a massive gang rape conducted by the old sheriff and his deputies following the murder of Neva. Both serve as harbingers for the kind of sexual violence that will come to plague the lives of those in the novel.

Discussion Question 1

For what reasons does Ephram appear to take an interest in Ruby when all others appear to shun and mock her? If you were in Ephram's position, would you try to help Ruby? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why do people say that Ruby was not right from the start?

Discussion Question 3

By first appearances, Ruby simply appears to be crazy, but there is another supernatural side to her. Describe this aspect of Ruby's persona. How did it come into existence?

Vocabulary

nonchalantly, quivering, reluctant, rendition, haint, hex, uncouth, sauntered, oblige, brazenly, apothecary, impervious, conspiratorial, tarrens, cacophony, adulation



Book I: Wishbone, Chapter 7 – Book II: Two Bits, Chapter 12

Summary

Chapter 7 – Ruby has felt all day that something will be coming through the woods; so, she does her best to make herself presentable. She reflects on how men have been raping her since she was five years old. In the present, one such man is Chauncy.

Chapter 8 – The Dybou that has haunted Ruby sees Ephram sleeping and buries the doll from Ma Tante that Ephram is carrying. The Dybou seeks to feed off of Ephram's hope, but a crow arrives and chases away the Dybou. Ephram awakens after night has fallen and travels to the Bell property.

There, he hears Ruby screaming and crying about dead children and making small graves for them in the earth. When Ruby sees Ephram, she lies down believing he wants to rape her. When he pulls out a bottle of iodine, she kicks him. Her kick causes him to drop the cake and cry. She then holds and comforts him. The two eat the cake.

Book II: Two Bits

Chapter 9 – Celia falls asleep at the kitchen table waiting up for Ephram. She remembers how K. O. and Chauncy had gone to war to win her hand before her mother's incident. Since Celia is six years older than Ephram, Celia can remember how their mother turned up naked at the Easter Day picnic, which led to her committed. She also remembers how their father left and was murdered a short time afterward. Since then, Celia has assumed the role of mother and has turned herself toward Christ.

Having fallen asleep beside one another, Ephram and Ruby awaken. Ephram runs off for an hour to the P&K to pick up some tea cakes. Ruby reflects on how her New York employer, Mrs. Charlise Gladdington, taught her a sophisticated, womanly manner of doing all things. He also introduced her to culture. Ruby also remembers how she never wanted to leave Manhattan. She only returned to Texas because of Maggie's death from a heart-attack at thirty-three.

She reflects on how close she and Maggie once were and how Maggie had always given Ruby nice gifts and tried to watch out for her. One gift that Maggie never gave Ruby was a ring. Ruby also reflects on how New Yorkers were less prone to be racist than Southerners, such as the Southern station master who questioned Ruby on whether or not she was drunk because she was upset after learning of Maggie's death.

Chapter 10 – In the present, Celia becomes angry as the time approaches for church service. Ephram has still not come home. It is the day of the election for church mother, and she is enraged to think Ephram might miss it since her name is on the ballot. She has been waiting for this day for twenty-five years. Her two competitors, Supra Rankin



and Righteous Polk, are beset by gossip, and neither have memorized whole parts of the Bible like Celia.

Ephram failing to appear at church would embarrass Celia, so she rushes over to the Bell property where she finds Ephram cleaning Ruby's house. Ephram refuses to come to church. On the way to church, Celia throws herself on the ground, dirties and bloodies herself up, and prepares to blame it on Ruby.

Chapter 11 – Ruby believes that Ephram will not last the day with her, and watches him clean while she drinks the coffee and eats the teacakes he has brought her. She realizes that Ephram has chosen her over his sister. Ruby throws up, which Ephram then cleans. Ruby expects that Ephram will force her to have sex, but he continues cleaning. Ruby becomes self-conscious of her appearance, remembering how clean and eager she was when she arrived in New York at the age of eighteen in 1950.

Chapter 12 – Ruby remembers making easy money by having sex with men and women, including whites, in New York for three years. She also began a relationship with a lesbian named Abby. While in New York, Ruby reflected on some of her first sexual experiences as a child. While her grandfather was sick, Ruby was supposed to be hired out to a nice white woman in Neches who ran a boarding school at Reverend Jennings's suggestion. Instead, Reverend Jennings brought Ruby to The Friend's Club, a whore house. There Jennings received payment for bringing along Ruby. Ruby was prostituted out by its proprietor, Miss Barbara.

Analysis

The theme of sex returns immediately in this section of the novel in conjunction with the theme of history. Ruby's own past continues to be revealed. Since the age of five up through the present day, she has been repeatedly raped by innumerable men. Ephram's appearance at Ruby's house makes Ruby initially believe that Ephram is there for sex, too. She is surprised when he does not make sexual advances. Ruby also remembers how she prostituted herself out in New York in order to make easy money—a dangerous thing to do.

The theme of appearance evolves as the story exposes that Ruby has been a victim of sexual abuse for her entire life. The abuse has most certainly played a part in her "crazy" behavior, even though it appears to the people in the town that she probably has been mentally ill since birth. There is another reason for Ruby's unusual behavior, too. Ruby has a sixth sense of being able to see, to communicate, and to protect ghosts (especially those of little children). At this point in the novel, three themes are woven together. Ruby's abuse history since childhood, the appearance to others of Ruby being born mentally ill, and the supernatural powers of Ruby protecting dead children are all related.

Ruby's desire to protect the spirits of so many dead children is clearly a response to her own lack of protection as a child. Likewise, Ruby's days as a prostitute in New York



seem to be a question of sexual control, little of which she has had in her life before New York. In New York as a prostitute, she is able to choose her customers rather than merely be raped.

Ruby herself would have remained in New York had it not been for the death of Maggie. Ruby never wanted to return home, but knew she had to do so as a matter of family duty. It was then that she was beset by two things, a superiority complex which turned the people of the town away and the ghosts that haunted her as a child. Between the two, it is easy to see why many locals would simply write her off as crazy—especially in terms of ghosts.

The lodestone-bearing doll that Ephram is carrying is buried by the Dybou. The lodestone has tremendous power over the Dybou, much in the same way the past has tremendous power over Ruby. The burying of the lodestone here is the burying of the past—something which Ephram is doing with Ruby in that he is burying her past by focusing on the future.

Likewise, it is now clear why Maggie was given a doll with a small ring on it: Maggie has been very close to Ruby. She had wanted to give Maggie a special gift of a ring. However, it was something that Maggie did not have and could not afford. The ring itself comes to symbolize a bond, much like marriage, between Maggie and Ruby. Later, it will be revealed that the crow often seen is actually Maggie, and the ring symbolizes the continuing bond between them.

The theme of appearances also returns to the fore in this section. The reader is stunned to learn that Celia, a leading member of the church, will resort to any measure—including lying—in order to get Ephram away from Ruby. Since Celia professes to be a devout Christian, her deception is not in line with her appearance. Even more terrifying and sickening is the fact that the Reverend Jennings, a man who should be a model for all others in the community, is heinously responsible for renting out Ruby for prostitution.

It is possible that with Celia there may be more than meets the eye for her deception, just as there is more than meets the eye to Ruby's mental state. Celia's reaction to and treatment of Ruby are not acts of coldness or cruelty. They are acts of desperation. Desperate acts are usually rooted in a desperate cause. There is no excuse for the Reverend Jennings's behavior.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ruby suspect that all Ephram wants is sex? What does it seem that Ephram is truly after?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of appearances. Then, choose one example and explain how it relates to the theme.



Discussion Question 3

Despite Celia's outward appearance of being a Christian, she lies. Why? Does the act of lying mean that she is not a Christian? Explain.

Vocabulary

tourmaline, audacious, jubilation, onerous, amplified, affront, literati, recompense, largesse, pickaninny, gumption, immolation, blasphemy, heathen, conjured, articulated, docile



Book II: Two Bits, Chapter 13 – Book III: Revelations, Chapter 17

Summary

Chapter 13 – In the present day, Ruby begins crying, saying she is not the woman she used to be. Ephram assures her that she is plenty woman and that he is most interested in the woman she has yet to become. This gives Ruby a small amount of hope. Four women –Supra, Tressie Renfolk, Righteous, and Verde Rankin-- show up unannounced with food under the pretense of ministering. They want to baptize Ruby, but Ephram says that they've waited eleven years and can wait one more day. They ultimately leave, but over the course of the day, twenty people arrive to see what Ephram is doing fixing up the Bell house and land.

The spirits of all the children that have passed through Ruby leave for the night, including the spirit of her own dead baby, never named and stillborn when she was fourteen at Miss Barbara's. That night, Ephram bathes Ruby. As he cleans her knotted hair, he feels that her hair is telling him the story of her life. He later falls asleep beside her.

Book III: Revelations

Chapter 14 – The Dybou is called upon a group of men around a fire that night, burning a cat alive. The Dybou possesses the body of one of the men (later revealed to be Chauncy) who carries a red bag full of crushed Mandrake root, graveyard dust, gator urine, and ill intentions. He also has a black bottle full of molasses and ox blood. The Dybou then travels to the Bell land where he dumps the contents of the bag and bottle. The dusty powder will weaken courage and resolve. The crow calls upon the Dybou to stop, but he does not do so.

Chapter 15 - Gubber Samuels arrives at Ruby's the next morning, He reveals that people are ready to run Ruby and Ephram out of town after Celia says demons have inhabited her house, that Ephram's photograph burst into flames, and that the Devil has appeared three times to claim Ruby as his own. Gubber tells Ephram he'd better be at Uncle Junie Rankin's funeral that afternoon. Ephram remembers how, when he and Gubber were young, they had kissed, only to be caught by Ephram's father, who beat Ephram up. He also remembers how he and Gubber later came upon his father hanging from a tree. Meanwhile, the crow watches as Ephram steps into the dust from the red bag.

Chapter 16 – By Monday morning, Liberty is gossiping about Ephram, Ruby, and possession. When Ruby awakens, she thinks about how the liberals in New York would not be interested in a poor, black man from East Texas beyond sending a few bucks his way or posing for a photograph with him to show off. By now, the red bag powder has



been spread about the house by Ephram's feet, and a group of men, led by Chauncy and Gubber, arrive to bring Ephram to the funeral. Ephram dresses to leave and offers to bring back ice cream. Ruby kisses him.

At church, Celia makes a show of staying away from Ephram. Afterwards at the cemetery, Gubber and the others make fun of Ephram, saying that he is only looking for a girl who is just like his mother –crazy. They also call him yellow, and Ephram throws up, which splashes on Chauncy's pants. Chauncy pushes Ephram over a tombstone. It then begins to rain, which washes away the rest of the red bag powder.

Chapter 17 – Ephram's mother's grave is near where Ephram stands up. Ephram reflects on his mother's birth in 1900 in Baltimore, with no member of her family ever having been in slavery. Ephram's mother, Otha, fell in love with her future husband, Reverend Jennings, listening to him preach. However, Jennings turned out to be a man with high expectations, who later devolved into physically abusing Otha and hating her enjoyment of reading.

Otha also learned her husband was involved in secret black magic rituals at night, with locals (including Chauncy and Percy Rankin), and with men who appeared to be from New Orleans. There, Jennings cursed and blasphemed God, said the Devil was the white man's bride, and blamed females for all the ills that have befallen them. Six little girls are then brought to the fire, including Ruby. They are all sexually molested and then brutally raped. Otha is horrified. The next day, she can remember nothing, but feels sick and ill-at-ease when she looks at her husband. By Easter, her senses and her mind have gone, and she appears at the picnic, naked. From there, she is committed.

Analysis

As the novel continues, Ruby herself comes to see that not everything is necessarily as it appears to be. When men show up to see Ruby, all they ever want is sex. Rather than having a sexual encounter with Ruby, Ephram is kind and gives her hope. He tells her that he is interested in the woman she has yet to become, not the woman that she has been. Ephram's revelation here brings to the fore the theme of history and how the future is often just as important as the past. People make mistakes, and go through difficult times; but, it doesn't mean they are fated to a bad future.

As Ephram cleans Ruby's tangled and knotted hair, he is able to equate the condition of her hair to the kind of life she has lived. The scene is symbolic. Ruby's life is tangled and twisted, but Ephram has come along, and he is not only literally straightening out Ruby's hair. More importantly, he is helping to straighten out her life as well.

At the same time, both local and supernatural forces begin to work against Ruby and Ephram. Celia has drummed up a mob mentality in the town which she will use to force Ruby and Ephram apart. At the same time, a group of men practicing black magic call upon the Dybou –including one in particular, who will later be revealed to be Chauncy – in order to weaken the resolve of Ephram through the use of voodoo. It is in this section



of the novel that the supernatural truly takes hold of the plot, and will largely help to determine its outcome.

The element of the supernatural occurs in conjunction with the theme of appearances. What at first appeared to be a Christian element to the town of Liberty is only marginal at best. As Otha Jennings discovers, not everything is as it appears. Her husband, Reverend Jennings, is a man of God. However, he is not kind and gentle as originally believed. He is physically and emotionally abusive. As she later learns, her husband is involved with voodoo and black magic –a complete contradiction to who he proclaims himself to be on Sundays. On Sunday, he praises God and goodness. By night, he engages in blasphemy and perversity.

Even beyond Jennings's participation in the black rituals which contradicts everything he is supposed to be is the fact that he delightfully participates in the brutal raping and sexual molestation of small girls. It is a combination of her husband's black magic and sexual perversity that helps lead Otha to insanity. Jennings is only too glad to be rid of her when he has her committed.

Among those participating in the supernatural black rituals are Chauncy and Percy, who continue to do so into their adult lives. They believe that sexual violence is real masculinity. They form a part of the superficial Christian element in town, coming along to prod Ephram into attending funeral services for Uncle Junie. They reveal that Celia has been spreading all sorts of terrifying accusations about Ruby in order to continue drumming up support to separate Ephram from Ruby. This speaks to Celia's increasing desperation to get Ephram away from Ruby. As with Otha, not everything is as it appears to be. The same may indeed be true for Celia.

The actions of Jennings, the insanity of Otha, and the raping of Ruby all come together as well in the theme of history. As noted earlier in this section, Ephram believes the future is just as important as the past. Here, the past is revealed in order to explain how things have turned out in the present. Ephram's being pushed over a tombstone is also a symbolic act. He is tripping over the dead as he is tripping over the past. The past holds sway on the present.

It is no surprise that Ruby should resign herself to sexual violence and abuse. Since she has spent nearly her entire life in such conditions, she has come to see it as somehow normal. Otha did not simply go insane, but she was pushed into insanity by the actions and deeds of her husband –of whom Ruby herself was a sexual target.

There is also a certain level of hypocrisy in this section of the novel inherent in the theme of sex. While Reverend Jennings apparently has no compunction about raping female children, he does take issue with his son kissing another boy. It is an act for which Ephram is nearly beaten to death by the Reverend Jennings and underscores how morally corrupt Reverend Jennings truly is. There is also a sense of irony in that Chauncy and the other men are using black magic to loosen Ephram's resolve to get him away from Ruby under the pretense of Christian concern.



Discussion Question 1

What is the truth behind Otha's insanity? What is it brought on by? How does her husband respond? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What is the true nature of Reverend Jennings? In what deviant practices does he engage? What effects does this evil have on those around Jennings –both friends and fellow practitioners? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Ephram insists that the future is just as important as the past. Do you agree? Explain.

Vocabulary

bedeviled, unadulterated, furtive, impartial, stolid, beleaguered, abject, substantial, injustice, rectified, pungent, orchestrated, pestilence, ephemeral, amiable



Book III: Revelations, Chapters 18 – 20

Summary

Chapter 18 – Ephram goes to pick up chocolate ice cream from P&K, letting the rain wash over him while Chauncy goes to the Bell property. Chauncy advances on Ruby sexually. The Dybou feeds into Ruby's body as Chauncy prepares to rape her. Ephram suddenly appears, and both the Dybou and Chauncy stop what they are doing. Chauncy tries to play it off, but Ephram tackles Chauncy. The two men begin fighting. Ruby stops them, assuring Ephram nothing happened. Chauncy apologizes for the graveyard incident and then runs home. Ruby and Ephram kiss as a thunderstorm approaches. Ephram then brings Ruby into the house.

Chapter 19 – At home alone, Celia looks upon Ephram's departure as an embarrassment and an inconvenience. For example, she loathes the idea of picking up her own groceries as if she had no loved one to do it for her. Celia remembers how she used to follow her father around town. One night, she followed him to a black ritual where she saw Ruby and five other little girls viciously raped. She noticed, however, that Ruby was smiling, and appeared to have a special hold on the Reverend. In the present, Celia vows that she will either cleanse Ruby or have the Sheriff take care of her.

Chapter 20 – The Dybou in life was known as Omar Jennings. He was one of twelve impoverished children. Omar's soul had been imprisoned in the land by way of a curse made just before his death. As the oldest child, after murdering his father, Omar was raped by his mother. Afterward, he continued to willingly have sex with her until she became pregnant. He was then kicked out so another man could move in and claim responsibility for the child. Omar later murdered his mother and raped his ten-year-old sister. He put lodestones on his parents' graves so their souls could not rise and left town with every cent the family had.

Analysis

The supernatural continues to hold sway in this chapter as the Dybou attempts to invade Ruby's body through Chauncy's desire to rape Ruby. It is through the supernatural that the theme of history also returns to the fore. The Dybou's own history – his past – is related as Omar Jennings.

It is now clear that the Dybou has a direct connection to the Jennings family, though what this connection may be is not yet revealed. (The reader will later learn that Omar, the Dybou, is also Reverend Jennings.) Omar himself was brought up as the incestuous sexual partner of his mother following the death of his father, and the sexual nature of the Dybou is clear. Just as being raped is seen as normal by Ruby, sexual abuse is seen as normal by Omar the Dybou.



The supernatural also holds sway when it comes to appearances. Nothing, including the people, in and around Liberty Township is what it appears to be. Celia's own desperation to keep Ephram away from Ruby is now also clear through the presentation of her own history. It is here that history once again emerges to be as powerful as the future.

Having seen the same black ritual as her mother, Celia believes that Ruby was responsible for leading her father astray. In the present time, Celia will not allow Ruby to do the same to her brother. She will do everything in her power to fight Ruby, even resorting to lies in order to do so.

The reader should also note in this section of the novel that Omar places lodestones on the graves of his parents, which will prevent their spirits from rising. The lodestone given to Ephram is dangerous to Omar as the Dybou, for he knows the lodestone could entrap him if he does not remove it from Ephram's possession.

The lodestone itself is symbolic of being trapped in the same place—an irony given the name of the town, "Liberty." Ironically, the Dybou's burying of the lodestone—in essence, burying the past—means that he inadvertently is making sure that Ephram and Ruby will have a future. What has been holding Ruby and Ephram back is now itself being held back. The rain that falls in this section of the novel is also important because it is seen as a sense of cleansing, of purifying, of washing away sin and the past. The lodestone is buried, and Ephram and Ruby are washed clean. Their vomiting is also symbolic of an internal cleansing of the past as well.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Chaucy travel to the Bell property? What are his intentions? Why does the Dybou go along? What are the Dybou's intentions?

Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of the past in relation to the lodestone, the rain, and vomiting? How do these three symbols work together to form the potential for the future?

Discussion Question 3

What is revealed about Celia's desperation to keep Ephram away from Ruby? What, specifically from the past, fuels Celia's cutthroat desire to make sure that Ephram has absolutely nothing to do with Ruby? Do you believe Celia is justified in her actions? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

presumptuous, debauchery, labored, parish, jolted, mournful



Book III: Revelations, Chapters 21 – 23

Summary

Chapter 21 – The locals in Liberty gossip about Ephram's relationship with Ruby. Meanwhile, Ruby and Ephram live happily together. Ephram tells Ruby he intends to marry her. Ruby happily tends to her ghost children. Omar, the Dybou, watches all of this during a storm. He is revealed to be Reverend Jennings. The crow is revealed to be the spirit of Maggie, who caws warnings. Ruby rushes outside with a knife. Ephram follows and makes a whistling sound that drives away the Dybou and the storm.

Ruby then reveals the identities of her ghost children and their lives to Ephram. She also reveals her own past to Ephram, including how the Devil in the form of a man named Peter Green visited the brothel one night. There, the Devil killed Tanny, another child prostitute who was Ruby's friend, by strangling her. Ruby, seeking help from a dismissive Miss Barbara, was told that Green had paid a large amount to do what he wanted with Tanny. Tanny is now one of Ruby's ghost children. Ephram wants to help Ruby take care of the spirits of the children. He suggests moving them into the chinaberry tree into a tree house so that the crow can protect them.

The church congregation suddenly appears to reclaim Ephram and Ruby in the name of Jesus. Celia is among them. They physically restrain Ephram and Ruby, singing and praying. Ruby whips out her knife, slashing Celia's thumb. Everyone backs up as Ruby turns the knife toward Celia, but Ephram intervenes and is inadvertently stabbed. The crowd leaves, carrying the bleeding Ephram with them.

Chapter 22 – Miss P tends to Ruby who has returned to a state of craziness. Ruby discovers that all of her children have been eaten by the Dybou. She screams and is heard by Ephram on his way to see her, having mostly recovered from the stab wound. When he arrives, Ruby tells him to leave. She then attempts to force herself on Ephram sexually, accusing him of being like all other men. Ephram says he isn't like all the other men and that he knows Ruby loves him. She tells him it doesn't matter if she loves him. She'll kill him if she ever sees him on her land again. Ephram then rushes home.

Chapter 23 – Ruby takes to the woods each day to find the spirits of her dead children which have gone missing. When Chauncy, possessed by the Dybou, shows up one day she knocks him out with a shovel. He returns the next day, and she demands to know where her children are. Chauncy viciously beats Ruby, who summons enough power to drive a branch into his shoulder, causing the Dybou to flee and Chauncy to run away.

Ruby then drifts in and out of consciousness. She can hear the singing of the people witnessing Ephram's baptism. Celia nudges Ephram into the water, but Ephram tells her to stop. He enters the water on his own. The Dybou then possesses Ruby, who fights it off, thinking of Ephram the entire time. She later learns the crows have kept her children safe. As the novel ends, she realizes Ephram is coming to see her through the woods.



Analysis

As the novel moves towards its conclusion, it appears as if Ephram and Ruby will finally be left alone except by the gossipers in town. However, this is not to be, either in the case of the people in town or the beings in the supernatural world. The Dybou is incensed to see Ephram living with Ruby –and the Dybou is revealed to be Reverend Jennings. The sexual nature of the Dybou now makes sense in conjunction with who Jennings was in life between his upbringing and his sexual perversity later in life.

The symbolic nature of the ring given to Maggie by Ma Tante early in the novel now also makes sense. Rings, especially marriage rings, are symbols of union, of devotion, and of loyalty among other things. The ring symbolizes the bond between Maggie and Ruby, and it also symbolizes how Maggie has always tried to protect Ruby. As a crow, Maggie still does her best to protect Ruby. Maggie's greatest act of protection is sheltering the spirits of the ghost children when Ruby herself cannot do so.

While Ephram appears to be able to handle the present, and still looks forward to the future, Ruby does not seem to be able to let go of the past. The lodestone has been symbolically buried for Ephram, but not for Ruby. She reacts wildly against the freedom of the future and the protection offered by Ephram, for she has never before been in total control of her life. She attempts to retreat into the past by grouping Ephram with all the other men who have ever slept with, or raped her; and she turns to focus solely on her ghost children, even though Ephram is willing to help her care for them.

However, Ephram will not allow himself to be bullied anymore, especially as a man. The end of the novel brings the theme of masculinity to the fore. Ephram, who has begun to defend himself verbally and physically, recognizes that he is a strong and independent man and must be so even in the smallest of ways. For example, Ephram refuses to be nudged by Celia into receiving baptism, shrugging her hands off him and heading into the water on his own.

Though Ruby has threatened Ephram's life if he ever should dare return to her land, he is not going to let her stop him from being with her. As the novel closes, Ruby can sense that Ephram is coming back, which gives her a sense of hope. It also demonstrates that, in looking forward to Ephram, she is also looking forward to the future.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ruby lash out so violently against Ephram, threatening to kill him if he ever returns? Do you believe Ruby can be excused for lashing out? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the Dybou have such a fixation, especially sexually, on Ruby? How does Ruby combat the Dybou?



Discussion Question 3

What is the determining factor in Ephram's change from a passive male to a defensive man? Do you believe Ephram's behavior –both in defending and caring for Ruby –is evidence of real change in Ephram? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

futility, lacerated, atmosphere, chenille, oblivion, fathom, acolyte



Characters

Ruby

Ruby Bell is one of the main characters in the novel “Ruby” by Cynthia Bond. As an African-American native of the town of Liberty Township in East Texas, Ruby has had a difficult life at best. From the age of five, Ruby was sexually molested and raped by numerous men. When she was six, she was thrust into prostitution by the Reverend Jennings, under the cover story that Ruby was going to work as a domestic servant for a wealthy white woman. Ruby is forced to return to work as a prostitute over and over again through the age of fourteen, when she became pregnant and gave birth to a stillborn baby.

As a child, Ruby spent much of her time away from the brothel with her distant cousin, Maggie. Maggie did her best to protect and care for Ruby, but she was never able to do adequately do so. It was while still a child that Ruby first met Ephram and discovered she was a magnet for ghosts. Also, while she was still a child Ruby was forced to participate in black magic gatherings, where she was raped by the Reverend and numerous other men. Ruby comes to accept the use of her body for sexual means by other men as normal. So, when she travels to New York to find her mother –who left town to escape what Ruby faces –Ruby moves easily into prostitution.

Eventually, she works as a domestic for a wealthy white woman in New York, whom Ruby emulates and admires. Ruby is forced to return to Texas years later when Maggie dies of a heart attack. Back in town, Ruby looks down upon those around her for their lack of sophistication. She is shunned and/or sexually desired by many in town. Ruby ultimately comes to collect the souls of numerous dead children, in order to care for them and protect them from the Dybou. Ruby assumes a wild appearance, which leads most in town to assume she is crazy. Some men, however, take great pleasure in raping her.

Ruby is ultimately befriended by Ephram, who cares for her, cleans her home, and tends to her family’s property. Ruby at first believes that Ephram only wants to have sex with her, but his genuineness proves otherwise. He even comes to want to help her care for her ghost children. She isn’t sure how to handle the freedom and protection that Ephram offers, so she ultimately lashes out at him, threatening to kill him if she ever sees him again. However, when Ephram returns, Ruby does not follow through with her threat.

Ephram

Ephram Jennings is the younger brother of Celia Jennings and the son of the Reverend Omar Jennings and Otha Jennings. Ephram has known and been in love with Ruby Bell since his childhood. Ephram, now forty-five, is a kind, good, quiet, and often-overlooked



man who is made fun of by many other men in the town. He is likewise guarded and controlled by Celia, who has raised him. Ephram, however, breaks away from Celia's hold and the town's shunning of Ruby by seeking romance and marriage with Ruby. He believes that Ruby can become a better woman, and he is determined to do everything he can to help her do that. Even after she accidentally stabs him, Ephram refuses to back away from Ruby.

Maggie

Margaret "Maggie" Wilkens is a distant cousin of Ruby. Maggie and Ruby grew up together as children, with Maggie always doing her best to watch out for Ruby. It is Maggie who brings Ruby to Ma Tante to see if Ruby can be cleansed of the spirits that haunt her. Maggie leads a hard and difficult life, and is given to heavy drinking. She has a heart-attack and dies at the tender age of thirty-three. Her spirit assumes the physical form of a crow that continues to watch over and protect Ruby.

Celia

Celia is the older sister of Ephram and the daughter of the Reverend Omar Jennings and Otha Jennings. Celia has spent her life raising and caring for Ephram, devoting her existence to church and making sure Ephram is looked after. When Ephram begins seeing Ruby, Celia is enraged and embarrassed, feeling betrayed by Ephram for all she has done for him. She is likewise angered because she believes that Ruby, as a child, led her father sexually astray. Celia's desperation to keep Ephram away from Ruby is readily apparent in the lies that Celia tells to turn the town against the relationship between Ephram and Ruby.

Otha

Otha Jennings is the wife of the Reverend Omar Jennings. She is the mother of Celia and Ephram. Otha is descended from free blacks, with no member of her family ever having been a slave. She is from Baltimore. As a Christian woman, she fell in love with Omar's preaching and married him. However, Otha is physically and emotionally abused by Omar. Later, she discovers that Omar is participating in black magic and raping children. This causes Otha to go insane, at which time she is locked up in a mental hospital where she later dies.

Reverend Jennings

Reverend Omar Jennings is the husband of Otha Jennings and the father of Celia and Ephram. Omar was one of twelve children who grew up dirt poor. He murdered his father and was involved in an incestuous sexual relationship with his mother. Omar was kicked out when his mother became pregnant by him, after which he murdered his mother. Omar then raped his ten year-old sister before leaving. He became a pastor



and married Otha. Omar becomes involved in black magic and voodoo rituals where he blasphemes God and rapes very young girls, including Ruby. Omar also leads Ruby into prostitution. After his wife is locked up for insanity, Omar becomes a traveling preacher, he is later murdered in a black ritual which transforms him into the Dybou.

Chauncy

Chauncy Rankin is one of the many men who are frequently engaged in gossip and drink around town. By day, Chauncy claims to be a Christian. By night, he engages in black magic and voodoo rituals. He is also notorious for continually raping Ruby. Later, he comes to physical blows with Ephram over Ruby.

Miss P

Miss Philomena, known around as “Miss P,” is the owner of the local food store, the P&K. Perhaps, Miss P is the only true Christian in the story. She is always kind, warm, and accepting of everyone with no regard to their flaws or their past. This is certainly true of Ruby, for whom Miss P not only freely gives food, but also cares for and tends to later in the novel.

Gubber

Gubber Samuels is the childhood best-friend of Ephram Jennings. As children, Gubber and Ephram grew so close that they ended up experimenting with kissing –an act discovered by Ephram’s father. Reverend Jennings almost beat Ephram to death as a result. From thereon, Gubber and Ephram grew apart to the point that Gubber became one of the men who mercilessly mocked Ephram and Ruby.

The Dybou

The Dybou is an evil and malicious spirit that preys upon Ruby sexually, seeking her soul. The Dybou, formerly Omar Jennings, tries repeatedly to steal Ruby’s soul and destroy her, possessing the body of Chauncy Rankin several times in order to do so. The Dybou is, however, never successful at destroying Ruby.



Symbols and Symbolism

Lodestone

Lodestones are enchanted rocks which prevent the souls of the dead from rising up. The lodestone itself is symbolic of stasis, of being trapped in the same place. This contrasts ironically given the name of the town in which the novel is set –“Liberty”. A lodestone bearing doll is given to Ruby by Ma Tante, who then has her exchange dolls with Ephram. The lodestone is dangerous to the Dybou in the novel, for it can be used against him.

The Dybou steals and buries Ephram’s lodestone. Ironically, the Dybou’s burying of the lodestone –in essence, burying the past –means that he inadvertently is making sure that Ephram and Ruby will have a future. In other words, what has been holding Ruby and Ephram back is now itself being held back. Taken together with the rain that falls on Ephram and Ruby later in the novel, the loadstone is also important because it is seen as a sense of cleansing, of purifying, of washing away sin and the past. The lodestone is buried, and Ephram and Ruby are washed clean.

Ring

A ring, attached to a doll, is given by Ma Tante to Maggie early in the novel. Maggie has always wanted to give Ruby the gift of a ring. Rings, especially marriage rings, are symbols of union, devotion, and loyalty. The ring symbolizes the bond of love and loyalty between Maggie and Ruby. It also symbolizes how Maggie has always tried to protect Ruby. As a crow, she still does her best to protect Ruby. Maggie’s greatest act of protection is sheltering the spirits of the ghost children when Ruby herself cannot do so.

Doll with a Heart

A doll with a heart is given to Ephram by Ma Tante, who is then told to exchange dolls with Ruby for her doll with a lodestone. The doll’s heart is symbolic of the love that is passed between Ruby and Ephram. The love will one day be shared by both of them. It demonstrates that, despite the difficulties Ruby is enduring, she still has a beautiful heart, and she will one day be able to reclaim her heart by way of Ephram.

Vomit

Vomiting occurs twice in the novel between Ephram and Ruby. Their vomiting is symbolic of an internal emotional cleansing and a physical manifestation of the disgorging of the past, in conjunction with the rain which washes them clean of sin and the past.



Rain

Rain occurs later in the novel, coming down to cover both Ephram and Ruby. The rain is more than a weather pattern in the story. It is important to the future of Ephram and Ruby as they move beyond the past. The rain, symbolically, washes them clean of sin and of the past. It allows them to look to the future.

White Lay Angel Cake

White layer angel cake is baked by Celia throughout her life. It is a delicious, sugary cake that is envied by all the locals in town. Ephram has Celia bake him a cake to take to Ruby. Ruby knocks the cake to the ground, believing that Ephram is up to no good. This causes Ephram to cry, and Ruby to soften her stance toward Ephram. The two then eat the ruined cake.

Ruby's Hair

Ruby's hair is an important symbol in the novel. Ruby's hair is twisted and tangled at first, only to be cleaned and straightened by Ephram. As Ephram cleans Ruby's tangled and knotted hair, he is able to equate the condition of her hair to the kind of life she has lived. Ruby's life is tangled and twisted, but Ephram has come along and is not only straightening out Ruby's hair, but helping to straighten out her life as well.

Tombstone

Following Junie's funeral, Chauncy pushes Ephram over a tombstone at the cemetery. Ephram has long believed that the future is just as important as the past. Ephram's being pushed over a tombstone is a symbolic act: he is tripping over the dead, tripping over the past, giving emphasis to the fact that the past holds sway on the present. The past –history –forms an important theme in the novel.

Two Suns

Two suns are seen at Marion Lake by Ephram. One sun is on the surface of the water, and the other sun is in the sky. The suns are symbolic of appearances and reality. The reflection of the sun is not the true nature of the sun in the sky, just as Ruby's perceived insanity and Ephram's perceived lack of masculinity are not their true natures. Likewise, the two suns reflect the appearance and reality of the town. On the surface, the town seems like a rural, impoverished Southern town with Christian intentions. In reality, the town is full of dark secrets, black magic, and voodoo.

Knife

A knife is wielded by Ruby when she is accosted by numerous members of the town in an attempt to force her away from Ephram. Ruby lashes out with the knife, accidentally stabbing Ephram in the process. Ephram is then carried away by the people of the town to be treated.



Settings

Liberty

Liberty Township is a small, rural, and impoverished all-black town in East Texas under the jurisdiction of white-led law enforcement. Liberty is the hometown of Ephram, Ruby, and the myriad of characters who populate the novel. Liberty is home to several stores, including the P&K and Bloom's Juke. Liberty's people profess to be Christian, but most engage in gossip and mockery. By night, many of these people engage in black magic and voodoo. The town has a long history of sexual abuse and rape of children. The town's name itself is ironic. There is no liberty or freedom in Liberty. Between the ties of the past and the corrupt present nature of the people in town, individuals like Ruby and Ephram are trapped in Liberty.

Marion Lake

Marion Lake is a beautiful lake near the town of Liberty in East Texas. It is popular with the locals for fishing and sexual trysts. It is Ephram's favorite place to visit. It is also near the lake that black magic and voodoo rituals are held. Early in the novel, the narrator notes that Marion Lake has two suns. The suns are symbolic of appearances and reality. The reflection of the sun is not the true nature of the sun in the sky, just as Ruby's perceived insanity and Ephram's perceived lack of masculinity are not their true natures as human beings. Likewise, the two suns reflect the appearance and reality of the town itself. On the surface, the town seems like a rural, impoverished Southern town with Christian intentions. In reality, the town is full of dark secrets, black magic, and voodoo.

Fire Pit

The fire pit is located near Marion Lake and Liberty Township. It is where the practitioners of black magic and voodoo gather together to partake and perform sinister rituals. Early incarnations of the gathering are led by Reverend Jennings, who blasphemes God, curses women and white people, and celebrates the sexual molestation and rape of young girls. The fire pit is where the Dybou is later called to inhabit the body of Chauncy.

The Bell Lands

The Bell lands are the Bell family property where Ruby lives. Wild, overgrown, and unkempt, they are symbolic of Ruby's perceived insanity. The Bell lands are only visited by men when they decide to rape Ruby. Ephram later begins to clear, rehabilitate, and tend to the Bell lands when he pursues a romantic relationship with Ruby. The land



comes to reflect Ruby's life. As Ephram clears away the clutter and overgrowth on the land, Ruby's life itself is cleared and cleaned.

The Cemetery

The cemetery is where Uncle Junie Rankin is buried and where Chauncy and the other men mock and deride Ephram for his relationship with Ruby. The cemetery is also where Chauncy pushes Ephram over a tombstone. This is a symbolic act that gives credence to the assertion that the past is just as important as the present and the future.



Themes and Motifs

History

History is an important theme in the novel “Ruby” by Cynthia Bond. History is something that Ephram considers to be just as important as the future, though the future is not necessarily determined by the past. The events of the novel in the present time (1974) are wholly dependent upon the past, while the future is not. Ephram tells Ruby that he is more interested in the woman that she will be, rather than the woman that she has been. Yet, Ephram knows that the woman who Ruby has been is important to who she currently is now. This is underscored by the symbolism of being pushed over a tombstone at the cemetery.

In the present, Ruby is known as a crazy woman who has gotten what she deserved for running away to New York and returning home with a superiority complex. Many of the men in the town also know that Ruby is an easy woman to rape, and they take delight in doing so. Ruby accepts this as normal behavior, for her own life has been filled with sexual difficulties.

From the age of five, Ruby accepted unwanted sex as normal as she was raped by numerous men. From the age of six, she was prostituted out by Reverend Jennings, and saw one of her fellow prostitutes and friends murdered by the Devil. Ruby then went on to become a prostitute in New York, accepting dangerous sexual encounters – those of her choice in selecting customers, or those of her being raped – as normal.

Ruby’s supposed insanity comes not only from her distressed emotional-sexual state, but also from a hex that turned her into a magnet for ghosts, including the malicious Dybou. Ruby’s life in 1974 has been geared toward protecting the souls of murdered and deceased children at any cost –including the giving up of her body to rape in order to allow her to get by to continue to care for the children.

At no point in Ruby’s life has she had a true, genuine man to hold onto. Ephram changes everything for her. He is not after sex. He truly cares for her. He tends to her, cares for her, and rehabilitates her home and property. He proves to her that the past is not how the future has to be, and Ruby ultimately comes to accept this.

How the town reacts to Ruby and Ephram’s relationship is also heavily dependent upon history. Many of the town members mock Ephram for dating a woman as crazy as his mother without realizing the history behind his mother’s insanity. His mother went insane after discovering Reverend Jennings involved in black magic, voodoo, and the rape of young girls.

Celia’s own distaste of Ephram’s relationship with Ruby comes from jealousy and embarrassment, as well as the past. Celia had discovered her father’s nighttime



practices of raping young girls, including Ruby. Celia blamed Ruby for leading her father astray. Years later in 1974, she vows that she will not let Ruby lead Ephram astray, too.

Even the Dybou, formerly Reverend Omar Jennings, is not without a past. Omar's incestuous relationship with his mother, murder of his parents, raping of his sister, and participation in black magic led to his incarnation as a Dybou. This explains the perverse sexual nature of Jennings as the Dybou, using sex as a conduit for his evil intentions.

Likewise, the participation of so many men in town in the black rituals has less to do with free choice than with the reality of history. For example, Chauncy and Percy were inducted into black magic at a very young age, so they grew up believing such practices were normal the way that Ruby grew up believing rape was normal. Yet, despite their growing up having believed such things were normal, there were no shortage of opportunities for them to see things differently.

Ruby was blessed with Ephram in her life, whereas the other locals were blessed by having Miss P in theirs. Miss P herself is, perhaps, the one true Christian in town, demonstrating to others that the past does not have to control the future. Miss P demonstrates Christian charity and human kindness toward Ruby by feeding her and caring for her when everyone else mocks and derides Ruby.

Appearances

Appearances are a major theme in the novel "Ruby" by Cynthia Bond. Appearances of various people and things in the novel are never what they first seem to be. Appearances are a driving force for the plot. There is no part of the novel that is not touched by appearances.

The first real clue the reader has regarding appearances –that things are not what they seem to be –is the description of the two suns at Marion Lake. Two suns are seen at Marion Lake by Ephram. One is on the surface of the water, and one is in the sky. The suns are symbolic of appearances and reality. The reflection of the sun is not the true nature of the sun in the sky, just as Ruby's perceived insanity and Ephram's perceived lack of masculinity are not their true natures. Likewise, the two suns reflect the appearance and reality of the town. On the surface, the town seems like a rural, impoverished Southern town with Christian intentions. In reality, the town is full of dark secrets, black magic, and voodoo.

This is especially clear through the character of Reverend Omar Jennings. By daylight, he is an upstanding member of the community, an avowed Christian, and a righteous man. In secret, Jennings is a child molester, pedophile, a blasphemer of God, a physically abusive father and husband, and leader of a black magic group which sexually exploits young girls. Many other men in the town follow Jennings' example by participating gladly in the rapes and black magic practices.



By all appearances, Ruby is an insane woman who wanders around town and the surrounding area. She is also considered easy for rape, and Chauncy above all delights in raping Ruby. But, appearances are not what they seem. Ruby is not insane. She is an emotionally wrecked and troubled woman who has been sexually abused since she was five. She is also haunted by a malicious Dybou. She spends her time doing all she can to care for the ghost children that have been drawn to her like a magnet.

By all appearances, Ephram is a weak and effeminate man who allows himself to be controlled by women. In reality, Ephram is simply kind and gentle. He proves to be more of a man than any of the others in the town. To Ruby, Ephram at first appears like all the other men. She believes he only wants to rape her, but reality proves differently. He wants to marry her.

By all appearances, Celia is a hypocritical Christian, mocking and lying about Ruby in order to keep her brother away from Ruby. In reality, Celia is hypocritical, but she is also misinformed. She blames her father's sexual deviancy on Ruby rather than on her father. This leads to fears that Ephram, too, will be sexually led astray by Ruby. Celia does everything she can to prevent that from happening.

Sex

Sex is an important theme in the novel "Ruby" by Cynthia Bond. When Ruby is a young girl, she is left in the care of her grandparents, with her grandfather often ill. As a result, she is taken advantage of by other men, and raped repeatedly. At the age of six, Ruby is taken into prostitution by Reverend Jennings under the cover story of working as a domestic. For years, Ruby returns to work as a prostitute, first against her will, and later entirely of her own will in New York.

As a child, Ruby was not only raped and thrust into prostitution, but she was sexually incorporated into the black magic rituals of Reverend Jennings. Jennings and numerous other men delighted in sexually molesting and raping Ruby and various other young girls. In New York, Ruby sleeps with innumerable men and women, of every size, shape, and color. She will have any kind of sex the man wants in exchange for money because she considers what she has to do for the money to be easy.

As a result, Ruby comes to see dangerous sex and rape as normal. In New York, Ruby takes charge of her own body by prostituting herself to only customers she chooses. Back in Liberty, she willingly submits herself to being raped by local men like Chauncy rather than trying to fight it. She is so used to being raped that she imagines that Ephram, at first, will only want to rape her and leave.

The twisted forms that sex takes on also influence the existence of individuals themselves. Indeed, Ruby is the product of a gang rape carried out by the old sheriff and his deputies at the police station the night her sister was murdered due to her race. The Dybou that frequently seeks to sexually exploit Ruby is himself formerly a deviant



sexual practitioner. The Dybou, formerly Reverend Omar Jennings, engaged in an incestuous relationship with his mother and later raped his ten year-old sister.

While Reverend Jennings has no second thoughts about raping female children, he does take issue with his son kissing another boy. It is an act for which Ephram is nearly beaten to death by the Reverend Jennings and underscores how morally corrupt Reverend Jennings truly is. While in New York, Ruby herself begins a lesbian relationship with Abby, the bouncer at a lesbian club. This relationship does not last due to Ruby's prostitution and loose sexual ways.

The Supernatural

The supernatural is an important theme in the novel "Ruby" by Cynthia Bell. The supernatural involves that which is related to, or attributable to, black magic, voodoo, ghosts, demons, phantoms, evil beings, and other unearthly life forms. Through the novel, the supernatural becomes central to the plot, especially through the character of Ruby.

Early in the novel, the supernatural only appears in a small way. Ruby, Maggie, and Ephram visit Ma Tante, a local Voodoo practitioner, who seems more interested in helping Ruby than harming her. Ruby reveals that she is attracting ghosts, and Ma Tante reveals that Ruby has been hexed.

Ruby becomes caught up in sexual exploitation as part of Jennings's black magic rituals. Indeed, when Jennings is later killed, his spirit is nailed to the earth as a Dybou, part of a black magic ritual as he dies. The very perverse sexual nature of what exists between Jennings and Ruby fuels the sexual nature of the Dybou in its attempts to take Ruby's soul.

Ruby's magnetism for ghosts attracts the spirits of over a hundred murdered or dead children, many of them at the hands of the black magic group. Ruby becomes a protector of these children, sheltering them from harm the way that no one ever sheltered her from harm as a child. She allows these spirits to dwell inside her body in order to protect them. Ruby likewise knows each and every one of these spirits, and their stories. Among them is Tanner, a child prostitute killed by the Devil in the form of a man.

Assisting Ruby in protecting the children, and in protecting Ruby herself, is a crow that is frequently seen throughout the novel. The crow is the reincarnation of the spirit of Maggie, dead at the age of thirty-three from a heart-attack. Maggie is able to drive away the Dybou on occasion, and is always able to send out warnings about its presence.

Ephram readily accepts that Ruby has supernatural abilities and that she is in communication with the supernatural world. He is able to drive away the Dybou with a special whistle, and he offers Ruby his help in caring for the ghost children. He even suggests hiding them away in the trees in a specially designed house so the Dybou cannot get them.



Masculinity

Masculinity is an important theme in the novel “Ruby” by Cynthia Bond. Masculinity includes attributes, aspects, behaviors, and actions which are ascribed to male behavior. In the novel, there are two distinct forms of what is considered masculine, one resting with Chauncy and the other men in town and one resting with Ephram.

Chauncy and the other men who ascribe to the first form of masculinity in the novel see masculinity as male control over the home, society, and their choices. As a part of the black magic group, they believe that women are to blame for many of their ills, and so women must be subjugated, including sexually, in order for men to be men and live their lives accordingly. As such, they have no qualms about initiating female children into sex through molestation and rape in order to maintain their dominance. Chauncy and the other men also ascribe manliness to sexual conquests, including visiting prostitutes, and rape. The men of Liberty routinely rape Ruby, with Chauncy doing more raping than anyone else.

Chauncy and the other men also ascribe their masculinity to drinking and carousing around town at will. They are apt to gossip, mock, and deride, and will not bow down to the will of other women unless necessary. Therein, they contrast themselves directly with Ephram, whom they consider to be weak, effeminate, and emasculated by being at the beck and call of Celia, and later, as the boyfriend of Ruby. Ephram is largely overlooked, for he is clearly considered less of a man by the other men.

Ephram’s model of manhood, however, is quite different. He has respect for females. His nature as a caring person demonstrates how he would rather heal than exploit Ruby. Ephram is hard-working, genuine, patient, and honest. He has no worries about who he is as a man because he knows that his masculinity is not defined by drink, rape, and socially instituted peer pressure.

Ephram also understands that manhood is not determined by reckless disregard for others. It is based on earning respect and a good reputation through doing good things for others. The physical extent of true masculinity comes in protection, not abuse. As such, Ephram only ever raises his hands against another man in defense of Ruby and himself, and never with the intent to hurt or harm others for his own gain. For example, the pushing of Ephram in the cemetery out of cruelty can be contrasted with Ephram’s fighting Chauncy to protect Ruby later in the novel.

Styles

Point of View

Cynthia Bell tells her novel “Ruby” from the third-person omniscient perspective. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the third-person narrative mode allows the reader to switch between various characters, situations, and even time periods in the novel by uniting them all with one constant voice. This allows the author the ability to delve into the past as needed and to follow the lives of various characters in the novel. Secondly, the omniscient aspect of the novel gives the reader a bird’s eye view of everything going on, and privileges the reader with information that the characters themselves do not always know. For example, while Ephram knows there is a Dybou harassing Ruby, he does not know the true identity of the Dybou as his own father. Ephram, likewise, has no idea about his father’s dealings with black magic or his father’s sexually-twisted childhood.

Language and Meaning

Cynthia Bond tells her novel “Ruby” in language that is poetic and rich in symbolism. This is done for several reasons. First, the nature of the novel as a fantasy is reinforced by the poetic nature of the writing. Just as the writing is elevated from simple, straightforward prose to poetic language, so too is the plot elevated into fantasy from reality. Second, because the novel is primarily a love story set against a surreal historical backdrop, the beauty of the language employed by the writer reflects the beauty of the love shared between Ephram and Ruby against the darkness surrounding them. Third, the rich use of symbolism in the novel helps to add to the fantasy element by using symbolic items as aspects of the fantasy itself. For example, the ring given to Maggie by Ma Tante is symbolic of the bond established between Maggie and Ruby, and is later reflective of Maggie’s desire to protect Ruby as a crow.

Structure

Cynthia Bond divides her novel “Ruby” into three major parts, with each part further subdivided into a total of twenty-three linear, numbered chapters. Each major part of the novel relates a specific portion of the overall plot to the reader. For example, Part I: Wishbone, deals heavily with the childhood of Ruby and Ephram, while Part II: Two Bits, deals heavily with Ruby’s time in New York, and the real beginning of Ephram’s romantic pursuit of Ruby. Each chapter deals with a specific event, or sequence of events, relating to the overall plot. While some chapters deal entirely with the present, other chapters deal mostly with the past.

Usually, each chapter deals with one principal character. For example, Chapter 20 deals with the Dybou’s back story as the human being Reverend Omar Jennings. The back-

and-forth between characters, places, and times gives the novel a surreal effect and lends believability to the fantasy aspects of the novel.



Quotes

There were two suns at Marion Lake, the one high above and the one floating on the surface.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 4)

Importance: Here, the narrator relates a seemingly simply, but deeply symbolic statement of foreshadowing. There is the reflection of the sun, the reflection of Ruby and Ephram, as other people perceive them to be, and then there is the true nature of the sun, Ruby, and Ephram. People see the reflections of Ephram and Ruby, and not who they really are as people.

Ruby had felt something coming through the pines all day.

-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph 3)

Importance: Here, the narrator speaks to Ruby's supernatural abilities, and underscores the theme of the supernatural in the novel. The person coming through the woods is Ephram, and no great worries or concerns are felt by Ruby about his impending presence. This serves as an omen for Ruby in that Ephram will not be like other visitors to her lands.

Straight-minded folk can walk up any kind of stairs.

-- Grandpa Bell (Chapter 11 paragraph 9)

Importance: Grandpa Bell intentionally angled the steps leading up to the family's house, explaining that straight-minded people can walk up crooked stairs. In other words, genuine people will not be led astray or undone by faulty circumstances: they will continue on to do good despite the path. People who are not true to themselves will stumble and fall along crooked paths. Ephram's ability to traverse the crooked steps without incident speaks volumes about his character and nature as a human being.

I'm most interested in the woman you have yet to be.

-- Ephram (Chapter 13 paragraph 7)

Importance: Here, Ephram reveals that, while he believes the past is important, he also believes that the future is just as important. Ephram recognizes that the past makes people who they are, but also knows that the past does not have to determine who people will become in the future. It is who Ruby may be, rather than who she was, that interests Ephram more than anything else. It gives Ruby a sense of hope.

For the first time in eleven years, that future woman held interest for her as well.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 8)

Importance: Ruby feels hopeful after Ephram explains he is not interested in who she has been, but is rather interested in who she will be. For eleven years, Ruby has felt constrained and trapped by her past, but with Ephram in her life, she is beginning to



realize that she isn't fated to a particular future. The past may be a part of her, but it doesn't have to totally define who she becomes.

Otha Jennings's grave rested five headstones to the right and four up from where Ephram stood.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 1)

Importance: In the cemetery, Ephram is pushed over a tombstone, a symbolic representation of the fact that the past holds sway over the present so long as people let it. Ephram's standing up near his mother's tombstone symbolizes his standing up from the past, his moving beyond it—both his mother's insanity, and Ruby's traumatic history. The nature of Ephram's own family history does not hold sway over who he is then, and who he will become, either.

Ephram had let the rain wash him clean through.

-- Narrator (Chapter 18 paragraph 4)

Importance: Here, the rain falls not merely as a weather event, but as a cleansing force that washes away the sin and pain of the past. This helps Ephram to focus on the future, and reinforces the idea that the future is not necessarily fated to be a certain way due to the past. Ephram, here, is essentially reborn as a new man, and this leads him back to Ruby.

In spite of all this, Ruby and Ephram kept right on living.

-- Narrator (Chapter 21 paragraph 9)

Importance: Toward the end of the novel, the people in town begin to gossip about, mock, and criticize Ephram's relationship with Ruby. Despite the disapproval of the town, Ephram and Ruby are happy with one another for a brief period of time, where nothing else in the world matters besides one another. However, the happiness is indeed short-lived, as the town conspires against them with Celia.

Ruby, you got to know I'm marriage bound, and I am to treat you like the lady you is until that day offer up its glory.

-- Ephram (Chapter 21 paragraph 10)

Importance: Here, Ephram reveals not only his love for Ruby, but his intentions to marry her as well. He wants her to have a good life and a good future, and that all begins with a marriage, which will in turn help to make an honest woman out of her. Not only does Ephram intend to marry her, but he intends to remain chaste with her until they are married in order to demonstrate that he sees her as a woman deserving of respect and chivalry.

But what Chauncy could not know, what the Reverend could never fathom, is that they would never be strong enough to fell a mother in search of her children.

-- Narrator (Chapter 23 paragraph 18)



Importance: In a final confrontation with Ruby, the narrator explains the shortcoming of Chauncy and the Reverend: they underestimate Ruby's desire to protect her ghost children like a mother, to afford them the protection she was never given against Chauncy and the Reverend. As such, though they possess immense powers of their own, they end up being powerless against Ruby, herself.