

The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend Study Guide

**The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend by
Katarina Bivald**

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Plot Summary

The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend by Katarina Bivald is a lighthearted and unexpected love story that transforms a small town in Iowa. Broken Wheel is like so many small towns in America, left behind by progress and far enough off the beaten path that it is slowly dying off. Sara Lindqvist works in a bookstore in Sweden and meets Amy Harris, a resident of Broken Wheel on line, their friendship developing over their shared love of books. Amy invites Sara to come and spend a few weeks with her, and when Sara's job at the bookstore ends, she has little reason to refuse.

Sara travels to Broken Wheel and arrives to discover her friend Amy succumbed to an illness and died before her arrival. As Sara is a stranger in Broken Wheel, she has no idea what to do, but the residents of the small town step up, determined to make her stay one that is memorable even though Amy is no longer there. Insisting that it was Amy's wish, they convince Sara to stay in her home and carry on with her plans for a vacation, offering her their services and attention for the duration. Though Broken Wheel is not a tourist destination, and there is little to see, Sara is still invited to a tour of the area; a picnic; and an afternoon of watching slash burning near by.

Local residents do everything they can to make Sara's stay a pleasant one, but their efforts are more than Sara can take, and she resolves to return their kindness somehow before she goes home. She approaches the town about opening a bookstore using Amy's vast collection, despite having to work there for free because of the restraints of her Visa. While most of the residents think she is wasting her time, Sara is determined to share her and Amy's love for books with the town Amy spoke so highly of in all her letters. In no time, her sunny disposition transforms this small town from one where there was little to hope for into one where the future looked bright.

As Sara grows on local residents, they conspire to keep her in Broken Wheel by pairing her off with Tom Harris. Tom has no intention of participating, giving Sara the idea that he dislikes her from the very beginning, but the residents of Broken Wheel are not only determined, but also have little else to focus their attentions on. Before long, they manage to convince Tom to marry Sara so that she can stay in Broken Wheel. Knowing that immigration laws are stringent, they follow Sara around town, documenting her search for a wedding dress and during other events in an effort to show that she and Tom are truly a couple in love. The authorities are not so easily fooled however, and the town soon finds itself at the heart of an immigration investigation into whether or not Sara would be allowed to stay.

The investigation brings the town together, revealing that true love exists between Sara and Tom. The wedding finally takes place, and love blooms in several unexpected arenas as Sara and her unending optimism takes the town of Broken Wheel from certain extinction to one of unending possibilities.



Section 1: Books 1: Life 0; The Broken Wheel Newsletter; and It is a Truth Universally...

Summary

Amy writes a letter to Sara, briefly mentioning the book she'd sent and commenting that her books have traveled further than she has.

Sara stands on Hope's Main Street waiting, a large suitcase leaning against her on the ground and a rucksack lying by her feet, and considers all the reasons Amy could be so late. A woman approaches her and when Sara is unable to reach Amy, she suggests Hank, who is sitting outside the diner, take Amy to Broken Wheel. He throws her bags into the car and they drive through acres and acres of corn while Sara looks out the window for any sign of the town Amy described in her letters to her. They finally reach Broken Wheel and Sara may have missed it entirely had Hank not stopped. A diner is one of the few shops not closed. Hank offers to take her back to Hope but Sara gets out, telling herself everything will be fine, and watches him pull away.

In the diner one customer sits looking out the window. A woman behind the counter lights a cigarette and introduces herself to Sara as Madeleine, but to most she is known as Grace. Sara asks if she knows where Amy Harris lives and Grace announces that Amy is dead, Sara has no idea what to do. Grace tells her that the funeral is in progress now, and asks 'Poor George' to take her there so she can find someone who will know how to proceed.

At Amy's house Sara is welcomed and given a plate of food and she sits on a chair in the hallway feeling like an intruder. Caroline Rohde introduces herself, and tells Sara that after Amy died they had no idea how to reach her but regardless, Amy had left instructions that their plans not be changed. Sara was to stay in the guest room. Caroline promises that they'll decide what to do the next day and Sara is hustled upstairs. Suddenly Sara finds herself alone in Amy's house.

In June, Amy had written to thank Sara for sending her "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo", and sends her 'To Kill a Mockingbird' in response, calling it a first installment to repay her.

Sara's phone has five messages, all from her parents. When Sara finally returns their calls her mother asks Sara what Amy is like, and Sara is unable to admit that her on line friend is dead, so instead she just says Amy is nice. After hanging up, Sara walks through the house feeling like an intruder. She showers and soon after, the minister drives up looking nervous. He tells her Amy's death is a blow to the whole town and again makes it clear that Amy expected her to stay there. He asks if she has enough



food in the fridge and she assures him she does. Next he offers her a vehicle to use but Sara admits she has no license and he finally goes. The next person to arrive is Jennifer Hobson who introduces herself as the person in charge of the Broken Wheel newsletter as she makes a pot of coffee. She rambles on about people Sara doesn't know, and asks her if she has any comments or impressions regarding their town. Sara admits she's only seen the diner and Jen assures her that regardless, she'll create something and be sure that Sara's comments are expressed nicely in the article she writes.

In August, Amy writes Sara again, this time sending 'The Help' by Kathryn Stockett and discussing her opinions about racism, telling her about the only black man they have in town – her friend John.

Across from Grace's diner is an old cinema, long since closed. Now it is used as a meeting place for what remains of the town council on every other Thursday. Twelve years have passed since a movie has played there, although the inside is still in good shape. Now Caroline, Jen, and Andy sit and debate issues like how to keep their tourist entertained and who will be her driver for the duration of her visit. At first, Jen innocently offers up Tom as a suggestion for driving Sara around, her innocent offering not fooling Caroline who knows that Jen is trying to set Tom up with Sara. Caroline offers George up as a driver instead, offering to take up a collection to help pay the fuel.

In October, Amy wrote to Sara describing Broken Wheel, and describing her fellow residents as a 'prosaic, literal bunch' that had no predilection for big words or flourishes. As such, when Fourth Street was renamed as Jimmy Coogan Street in 1987 she was glad, as Jimmy was a real joker and it gave the town some dignity in her opinion.

Analysis

The main character, Sara, is introduced as a plainly dressed bookworm who appears out of place in the town of Hope as she waits for her online friend Amy Harris to arrive as planned to pick her up. Sara is taking her first real vacation and although she is described as appearing totally disinterested in her surroundings, nothing could be further from the truth. Sara simply uses her book as a way of preventing contact with strangers, having learned in the past that most people won't disturb a person who has their nose in a book, but it doesn't prevent her from taking in her surroundings and noticing everything around her. Needing this buffer between herself and those around her reveals how insecure she is.

Amy is already more than two and a half hours late, but Sara still isn't really worried. She formed an impression of Amy based on her taste in literature and her use of proper, old fashioned writing paper to communicate with her and as such is reasonably sure that Amy isn't a serial killer or a psychopath and by the same token wouldn't be the type of person to leave her stranded in a place where she knows no one. A woman approaches, and after discovering that Sara is going to Broken Wheel, she begins dispensing advice such as not paying for her accommodation until the end of her stay;



and keeping her money hidden, as the folks in Broken Wheel aren't like the good people in Hope. This is a direct contradiction to everything that Amy has told her in her letters.

Hank is told to take Sara to Broken Wheel and he appears to have the same attitude where Broken Wheel is concerned, citing a friend who grew up there, but who now works in Des Moines where he admits he is much happier. Amy has written countless letters to Sara extolling the virtues of the town and its residents, but all Sara has seen so far is acres and acres of corn. Sara would never have noticed the town at all if Hank hadn't stopped. The town is so small that the single traffic light suspended from a cable over the street is all that there is to show that there is more than thru traffic occurring in this area. Hank likely expects Sara to return to Hope with him, but when she stubbornly decides to stay, he warns her that she will regret her decision and leaves. The overall attitude that both of the residents of Hope have shown her regarding Broken Wheel makes Sara wonder what she is getting herself into, and foreshadows that she may come to regret the entire decision to come to Broken Wheel.

Madeleine is introduced in this segment as well, but she answers to Grace instead. Sara's initial impression of her is clouded by the cigarette she is smoking – something outlawed in restaurants in Sweden for many years already. Grace appears to be the only employee in the diner and in the first few minutes of conversation, Grace tells Sara that Amy is dead and Sara immediately questions her decision to come to Broken Wheel. Once again she finds herself at the mercy of a strange man in a strange town who is corralled into getting her to where she is going as soon after meeting Grace at the diner, Grace insists that 'poor George', the only diner in the establishment, give her a ride to Amy's house where her funeral is in progress.

Broken Wheel itself is a typical small town in which the economic state of the country is more apparent, revealed in the many closed shops that Sara notices on Main Street. The only business that appears to be holding its own is the diner, and even that only has one person in it which again speaks to the poverty in the area. Small towns such as this one reveal the state of recession in the country before most cities do, the small population exposing lack of jobs and income more readily than larger urban areas. This small farming community is no exception. The old cinema is now used primarily as a place to hold town council meetings.

Small town courtesies immediately apparent when Sara is given a life to Amy's continue when she gets there. Despite being an outsider to the area, she is welcomed, given food and kept company by George which is touching as he seems as out of place as she feels. Sara had been prepared to spend two months with Amy, but now that Amy is gone, she questions the depth of the connection she felt to the woman. Suddenly it feels as though it was all a falsehood.

Caroline Rohde is introduced, approaching Sara and shaking her hand and observing that the plans made by Amy weren't exactly practical, implying that Amy was aware that her time was short and that she knew she was close to death's door. This is confirmed for Sara when Caroline adds that Amy insisted their plans not change despite her death.



Sara was to stay in her house as planned. In no time, Sara is alone in the dead woman's house.

Letters from Amy to Sara reveal the titles that they exchange with each other. She also informs Sara that her good friend John is the only black man in town who runs the only place that sells milk, claiming it is impossible not to like him. As such, she believes that Broken Wheel harbors no racism, and John has admitted that things have greatly improved in that area, suggesting that he has known much worse conditions related to his race. Another letter admits that there isn't much to the town of Broken Wheel. Amy liked her town, but beyond Main Street, only three streets exist that cross it – Second, Third, and Fourth Street which was renamed Jimmy Coogan Street in 1987. Although it isn't much, she admits, Amy likes it, as she was born and raised there.

The downfall of Broken Wheel is further revealed in the description of the town council meetings, compared to what once was. While in the past, there had been elections to the positions of council and those elected felt a certain prestige in the appointment; there had been money allocated and the use of it debated; and the morality of the town considered in all changes, things were much different now. Only a few of the 637 residents in Broken Wheel cared enough to be interested in what happened in town and there was no money to allocate or argue over. Despite the growing disinterest, a few townsfolk continued to meet every other Thursday. With the loss of Amy, Caroline feels as though she is the only voice of reason left in these meetings, and misses her acutely.

Hope has had more success financially because it had become a commuter town for people who worked in Cedar Rapids. One of the council members, Jen Hobson dreams of creating the same opportunities for Broken Wheel eventually, but having come from Spencer originally, she is not a true resident, even though she and her husband, who was born in Broken Wheel, had lived there for ten years. Caroline suspects that Jen sees living in Broken Wheel as a failure of some sort. Jen insists they entertain Sara, and Jen fields the idea that Tom's help be enlisted to keep her busy. The underlying truth is an effort at matchmaking in an effort to ensure Sara enjoys her time there and Caroline suggests that George be paid to show her around.

The title 'poor George' is explained when his name is offered by Caroline as driver and tour guide for Sara as an alcoholic who had nonetheless been sober for a month. Caroline insists that George be the one to drive Sara around.

Discussion Question 1

What are the most noticeable differences between the towns of Hope and Broken Wheel and why?

Discussion Question 2

What secret did Amy keep from Sara, and what might have been the reason for her to have withheld this information?



Discussion Question 3

What do the members of the town council decide to do with Sara and why do they feel it is necessary?

Vocabulary

psychopathic, sadomasochistic, indulgent, surreal, congregated, oppressive, euphemism, predilection



Section 2: Asphalt and Concrete; A Tourist in Their Town; and Books and People

Summary

Sara met Amy when she bought her first book from an online bookstore. Amy had declined payment so Sara had sent a book to her instead and it was the beginning of their friendship.

On her first morning in Broken Wheel, Sara takes a book out onto Amy's porch along with a cup of coffee, trying to tell herself that Amy isn't really dead. She would have read the day away, but George pulls into the driveway and announces he is her chauffeur and will take her anywhere she wants to go. He takes her on a tour of the town, which is short and unremarkable. Later she walks through the town looking for Jimmy Coogan Street, but is disappointed to see that there is nothing to see.

Amy's letters tell Sara about school teacher Miss Annie who started a mobile library on her cargo moped, going out into the community each Saturday with what few books she'd been able to acquire. When the school itself closed, that ended. The town of Hope has a library and three stores that sell home furnishings, but no bookstore, she tells Sara. Amy tells Sara in her letter in January 2010 that she considers her youngsters to be the ones who were young when she was an adult. Claire, Tom and Andy are all over thirty but not all directly related to her. Tom is her nephew, born to her brother Robert. Claire has a 17-year-old daughter and while some folks thought the father was Tom, Amy is more inclined to think it might have been Andy, despite the fact that at around the same time he moved to Denver. When Andy returned, it was with Carl, and their relationship eliminated him in Amy's mind as suspect.

Sara would be surprised to know she's the talk of the town. While she couldn't be described as beautiful or cute, Sara has eyes that are large and expressive. One day after her arrival, Sara is the primary topic of conversation between at least two of the elderly residents. Gertrude and May probe Grace for information about Sara, wondering whether or not she plans to stay, and May offers that Sara may meet someone, although the idea alarms Gertrude.

Sara is at a loss when it comes to operating the gas stove in Amy's, and having never used one before she doesn't dare turn one on in Amy's house. Andy calls and invites her to the Square for a drink or two. She agrees and Sara is ready by five, wearing grey trousers and a black sweater that shows her slim build and a hint of cleavage. When the car arrives to pick her up, it is Tom driving, not Andy. He seems tense and reluctant, not at all the way Amy describes him in her letters and there is no doubt in Sara's mind that he doesn't like her. She almost changes her mind, but Tom opens the door for her and



she gets in. He makes an effort at polite conversation, but Sara's guard comes up when he observes that she likes to read and probably has a book in her pocket. Sara admits that she finds people in books to be an improvement over the real thing, but Tom disagrees. He argues the people in her books aren't real, but Sara has no idea what is so great about real people. In books, people are friendly, charming, and live their dreams. They are more entertaining; more romantic; and even more tragic than the real thing. Tom tells her that the books she recommended Amy order arrived two days before her funeral, and his comment ends their discussion.

When Sara and Tom get to the Square, he helps her out of the car, warning her that Carl and Andy are 'together', but that isn't news to Sara. Neither is the fact that Carl is indecently handsome, but she is still stunned when she first meets him. That isn't the only surprise of the evening, as Sara also learns that Amy had been bedridden for some time and knew there was a distinct possibility she would die while Sara was there. Sara drinks more than she ever has before, partially to cover her nervousness, and partially to cope with the probing questions Andy and Tom ask regarding her decision to come to Broken Wheel. By the time Tom gives her a ride home Sara requires a balancing hand as she goes out to the car. He takes her all the way to the door where she says goodnight.

Once inside, Sara realizes that there have to be books in the house somewhere. She opens Amy's bedroom door and is stunned to discover an entire library worth of books. She sits in Amy's library bedroom for hours thinking about Amy and grieving for her despite the fact that they'd never met, happy to find the connection that brought them together.

Analysis

Sara's trip to Broken Wheel is forcing her to do some soul searching where her own life is concerned, and had, in fact, begun questioning her choices from the moment she first learned that Josephssons was closing. Somehow she'd lost ten years of her life along with the shop and while she was aware she could work in another bookstore, she wondered if it was enough. Other than Amy, Sara's life seemed empty. In an effort to cope, Sara does what she always has – she picks up a book and goes out to the porch to read. There was something so comforting in the fact that no matter where you were or what your situation was, the books remained the same.

George takes Sara on a tour of Broken Wheel, apologizing for the fact that there is little to see since the 'crisis' which is how he refers to the fact that the interstate was built and made the main street through town redundant. The town strikes Sara as sad; as though generations of disappointment had become part of the bricks and mortar of the place. The differences between Amy's descriptions and reality are vast and Sara keeps hoping to catch a glimpse of the place that Amy described so vividly. After George drops her off and goes to the diner, Sara wanders around herself but although she later tells Grace that Broken Wheel is a 'pretty town', it is clear that she doesn't really believe it. Grace suggests she run while she still can and fills him in on local gossip including George's



failed marriage and subsequent drinking problem. Despite that, Grace refers to George as a good man. Grace continues to dispense a bartender's style of advice using Caroline as an example when she insists on forcing her will on those around her to make up for bowing to the expectations of others for the first half of her life.

Amy's letters regale Sara with stories about their mobile library, although she admits that their town has never been one of readers – too practical she figured. She also speculates as to why a town like Hope would have three furniture stores but no bookstores while Broken Wheel had no furniture stores whatsoever. She gives Sara the local gossip, going back to when she was younger and ending with anecdotes about the younger generation now living in their town. Soon Sara found herself looking forward to meeting the people that Amy referred to as her youngsters.

Broken Wheel has never entertained a tourist before, so Sara is the talk of the town when she gets there. The elderly residents gather at the diner, pumping Grace for information and May believes Sara will meet someone foreshadowing her involvement with someone before her visit to Broken Wheel is over.

Sara feels guilty for not paying someone to stay in Amy's house, but she has no idea who she would pay for her stay. Townsfolk assure her that Amy would never have taken a dime from Sara, regardless of the arrangements they'd made beforehand.

Andy calls to invite Sara out for drinks at the Square, and had Amy not written to tell her all about Andy and some of the other residents in town, she may have refused, but Amy's descriptions of some of what she calls her youngsters has Sara excited about the evening, rather than fearing it as she usually might have. She cautions herself not to act stupid, reminding herself that they have no idea that she's already been prepped where the residents of Broken Wheel are concerned. When Tom comes to the door instead of Andy, Sara is understandably confused. His face reveals laugh lines that are definitely not being used when he comes to the door and her instincts tell her that he doesn't like her, although she can't think of a reason that he might feel that way. His attitude however deflates the excitement she felt, making her feel stupid instead for taking such care in dressing and caring what they might think of her.

Tom says little, but makes the comment that she likes to read, and Sara can't help but observe that people are better in the stories she reads. They live their lives to the fullest, love more deeply, have more fun and are friendlier. He observes that despite all of that, they aren't real, but Sara can't understand what is so great about reality. Reality is that Amy is dead. Reality is that she is stuck in a car with a stranger who doesn't like her. Reality isn't all it's cracked up to be in Sara's opinion and she realizes that the thirteen books she brought along with her will never last the duration of her visit.

When they get to the Square, Sara sees customers in cowboy hats and feels her enthusiasm returning until she turns to Tom to comment and the look on his face stifles her joy. Andy is revealed to be an outgoing and friendly man, who seems to relax in his own environment and allow his personality to shine. He introduces her to Carl who is as handsome as anything Harlequin romances have ever written about, and for that brief



moment, Sara's life is like something out of a book, but then reality intrudes again as she remembers that Carl and Andy are a couple.

Sitting with Amy's youngsters in the Square, Sara learns that Amy knew she was dying long before she invited Sara to come and they assure her that she wanted Sara to stay regardless. Tom is clearly discouraged with everything that is Broken Wheel. It is clear from his attitude that he feels as though his life is at a dead end. Sara continues to drink, consuming far more alcohol than she ever has before, but hoping the whiskey will help. By the time the night is done, Sara requires a steadying hand to get to the car and from it to the house.

Once inside Amy's home again, she ventures into Amy's bedroom having learned that Amy had been bedridden for some time. It is in there that she comes face-to-face with the friend she made on line. Amy's bedroom is a library in its own right, with more books that Sara could have believed lining shelves and covering surfaces everywhere. It is this room that finally allows Sara to grieve for the friend she lost.

Discussion Question 1

What does Sara begin to question when she learns that Josephssons is closing, and what positive change occurs as a direct result of her love of books and her job there?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sara look forward to, and why does she at first feel as though she has the upper hand in this situation? How does that change?

Discussion Question 3

How does Sara interact with strangers by her own admission, and why does she believe that books surpass real life?

Vocabulary

ambiguous, incomprehensible, redundant, sanctimonious, abolitionists, dismissively



Section 3: Comfort in Bridget Jones; Favors and Return Favors; and A Bookshop...

Summary

Jen arrives early the next morning, catching Sara with a hangover, and makes several suggestions as to how Sara could amuse herself in Broken Wheel, all involving Tom in one way or another. She finally climbs out of her stupor enough to realize that Jen is trying to set her up despite how incompatible she feels they are. She is horrified by the idea that someone may have corralled him with the same suggestions and wonders if that has anything to do with his frosty demeanor.

George continues to show up each morning to see if Sara wants a ride anywhere, and when he arrives she is reading on the porch. They talk about reading and about books in general – particularly how they offer escapism of sorts and she offers to loan him a book. He asks about the one she is reading but Sara isn't certain that Bridget Jones's Diary is the best first choice for him. She tries to decide if he would like a Jack Reacher novel or a Michael Connelly perhaps and finally decides just to give him the book she is reading. She asks Andy to show her how to use the gas stove and he does so happily. Afterward, he drops her off in town and goes to Amazing Grace for coffee while she shops for food now that she is able to cook. She goes into the hardware/grocery store next door and nods at the man behind the counter, realizing that he must be 'John' whom Amy had written to her about.

Between Grace's and John's stores is an empty shop and Sara asks George about it, learning that it's the shop Amy's husband had. He hadn't made much of a success of it and Amy closed it the same day he died almost fifteen years ago. Amy continued to clean it until she became bedridden three years earlier, George says, and then surprises her when he tells her it was a hardware store.

That night, Sara uses the gas stove in Amy's house to cook herself the first warm meal she'd had since she arrived. Feeling better, she spreads Amy's books throughout the house so that there was a small stack of them on every surface. Just after nine that evening, a car pulls in and Sara realizes that it is Tom. He gets out and says he just came to check on her, finally realizing what a shock it must have been for her to arrive to discover Amy is dead. Sara asks him why the town of Broken Wheel would have two hardware stores and Tom hesitantly admits that Amy's husband was unhappy and he opened the hardware store in an effort to force John out of business. He finally relaxes and slowly joins her on the porch, sitting down beside her. They talk about the past, and he tells her about some of the stores that had opened and closed in his time. When Sara learns that the local school had been turned into a meth lab, her feelings about



Broken Wheel clash a bit with the descriptions Amy gave her through her rose-colored glasses.

In April of 2010, Amy writes to Sara and answers a question she'd asked. Had she lived a happy life? The short answer was yes. She believes she'd been lucky, surrounded by friends and kind people. Though she'd never had children of her own, she'd often had the opportunity to help out some of the youngsters in Broken Wheel.

Sara continues to feel as though she owes the town. The situation only compounds itself as everyone continues to pay for things when she comes in. Her drinks were on Tom at the Square; John wouldn't allow her to pay for the food she wanted; and when she and George wound up in Grace's for lunch, she put her foot down insisting that she would be picking up the tab. Flustered, George is about to relent when Grace goes by and tells them their meal is on the house. Without showing her frustration, Sara graciously allows it and later at Amy's she paces the house considering her options. She decides that if they won't let her pay her way, she will find a way to return their generosity by providing return favors. She starts with John. After ten years of cashier experience, she decides to offer to help out and give shop owners some time off. John tells her he doesn't need help, and Andy says much the same thing. To compound the issue, he insists on paying for her drink and offers her whiskey or dinner perhaps as well. Sara gets out of it by saying George is coming to get her, and is beginning to think this town isn't normal.

Sara's parents call and announce it is time for her to come home. She finally admits that Amy is dead, and that cements her travel plans in their minds. Sara firmly refuses, telling them that she's made friends and plans to stay until her time is up. Frustrated with her, they tell her that when things go wrong, she is on her own. The next day she finds herself standing in front of Amy's empty store again, and an idea comes to her. She approaches the town meeting at the theatre and tells them that she wants to open a bookshop in Amy's old store. She tells them she'll clean it up, paint it, and run it for the time that she is there, stocking it with Amy's beloved book collection. All proceeds would go to the town and she would donate her time as her visa didn't allow her to work or earn an income. After some initial reluctance, they finally agree and she begins the clean-up process immediately. George takes control when he realizes she is temporarily overwhelmed, beginning by cleaning the windows to allow the light to come in, and he works with her all day. They talk comfortably throughout the day, George sharing some of his thoughts and feelings about his wife and daughter with Sara.

Analysis

When Jen visits the next morning, Sara is suffering from her first hangover, and is a little slow to realize that Jen is trying to set her up with Tom. Horrified, she wonders if they are doing the same thing to him as it would certainly explain his less than social attitude where she was concerned.



George takes his role as her chauffeur seriously, and comes by each morning to see if she needs him to take her anywhere. He sees her reading and admits that often he feels that there are simply too many decisions to be made each day implying that he would prefer a simpler life. Sara confesses that books provide a perfect escapism – an excuse to do nothing. She loans him the one she is reading. Being responsible for Sara's mobility gives George a sense of purpose and meaning that allows him to begin the process of seeing himself as someone of value again.

In town, Sara meets John for the first time, and knows instantly who he is. It isn't difficult to discern considering that Amy told her he is the only black man in town, and she introduces herself to him. John, like everyone else in town, refuses to allow her to pay for the groceries she is picking up, despite her objections. Regardless of how Amy had described him to Sara, John seems distant and detached to her, and in fact doesn't shake the hand she offers when she introduces herself, and doesn't even meet her eye until she argues the issue of payment. Then he simply tells her that her letters meant a great deal to Amy, especially as she neared the end of her life.

Sara waits for George to return and it occurs to her that the town of Broken Wheel was built with much more in mind, and perhaps that is the reason that it feels so abandoned now. She asks George about one particular empty shop and learns it was originally Amy's husband's shop. It is immediately clear that George had little use for Amy's husband, a man he clearly disliked. He admits that it had once been a hardware store and tells Sara briefly about the solitary racial battle Amy's husband had waged against John, attempting to oust him from Broken Wheel, but despite his best efforts, the rest of the town refused to participate. Instead, it is clear by George's response that when Amy's husband passed away, the town breathed a collective sigh of relief, as did Amy, John reluctantly tells her later on when she asks him about it.

Sara came to Broken Wheel hoping for an adventure. She wanted to experience something so remote from her usual safe life that she would be talking about it for years to come, although she had no idea who she would be telling it to. Either way, even though Amy was not there to share the vacation with her, Sara is happy to have done something; gone somewhere; finally opened herself up to something new and exciting.

Amy's wide ranging book collection changes the entire atmosphere of her home and Sara is quite content now that she has spread them throughout the house. Somehow, by doing so she managed to make it feel more like what Sara expected to find when she came to spend a few weeks with Amy. Now even the regular house noises that had frightened her at first seem more welcoming.

Tom shows up and somehow things seem a little less tense between them. He had come to make sure she was alright realizing that to travel so far only to find your hostess is dead must have been quite a shock for her. Sara is convinced that Amy's spirit is still so strong in the house that Tom can't help but respond to it.

Sara asks Tom how the few remaining shops manage to survive, and he admits that for the most part they don't. He tells her about the many shops that once existed, and



admits that there isn't much to see in Broken Wheel anymore. He warns her not to harbor any illusions about the town, even telling her about the meth lab that began operating in the local school after it had closed.

Sara's character continues to reveal itself as she becomes increasingly uncomfortable with the constant handouts everyone in town seems obliged to insist she take. Recognizing the tenuous economic situation, she wants to pay her own way, but no one is willing to take her money. She finally decides to offer favors in return instead, but that has troublesome repercussions as well. When she goes through town offering to help out in the establishments that refused to take her payment for goods or services, the elderly duo of Gertrude and May interpret her actions as a sign that she is in need of financial help. Sara is suitably embarrassed when she discovers this.

The empty shop next to the hardware store calls to her, and she stands there looking inside and wondering what kind of business would survive in Broken Wheel. She considers and rejects several different options, recognizing the difficulties faced with such a small client base. She has an idea, standing there, that just might work however, and asks Tom to take her home without sharing it.

Sara's sheltered life in Sweden becomes more apparent when her parents call and insist that she had been in Broken Wheel long enough. At this point, they have no idea that Amy is dead, and had been since Sara arrived. She is forced to argue with them, and finally puts her foot down when she tells them she plans to stay until her return ticket can be used. Soon after, she approaches the town counsel in a moment of courage and announces her desire to open a bookstore in Amy's closed shop with the intention of selling Amy's book collection. The proceeds would be entirely donated to the town Amy loved so much, as Sara's visa didn't permit her to work at all.

Discussion Question 1

What finally helps Sara to feel more like she is visiting Amy despite her recent death, and what causes this change in how she feels about the house, her stay there and why?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sara learn about the empty shop between John's hardware store and Amazing Grace's?

Discussion Question 3

What does Sara decide she can do to return the generosity of the residents of Broken Wheel, and how does her plan backfire?

Vocabulary

susceptible, prosperity, blasphemy, emphasizing, inscrutable, anecdote, insignificant



Section 4: George's Theory ...; Caroline Organizes...; and A Different Kind of Shop

Summary

George believes that the disappearance of his daughter Sophie was the catalyst that began the economic crisis they were in. Before Michelle left him, she'd informed everyone in town that Sophie wasn't his, and he immediately became 'poor George' in everyone's minds. Now, having been sober for six weeks, he is determined to help Sara with the bookstore, and to rid himself of that moniker once and for all.

Caroline begins visiting houses to collect some of the items required to get a bookstore off the ground. She is looking for armchairs, and a variety of lamps. Thankfully, this is not the first time Caroline has organized a collection and she rarely has trouble getting the things she needs. Having visited five houses already, she approaches Susan and Henry's house, sure that it will be its usual gold mine of items. Susan gives Caroline a plate of cookies and a coffee, and then they hunt through their stash of items for anything that might be suitable. She thinks about the past, and how people in town had always gone out of their way to help each other to cope with the unexpected chaos life occasionally wrought. Susan calls out from the cellar to say they'd found four armchairs, and Caroline knows just where to store them.

When Jen calls Sara, she assumed that they'd found the items she was looking for, and when she gets there Jen asks if she wouldn't want something more stylish than mismatched armchairs, but Sara is insistent that it be cozy, not stylish or elegant. She wanted people to feel comfortable. As such, she was hoping to find fabric reading chairs. Jen lets Sara in and spread throughout the place is all kinds of armchairs, footstools and an assortment of tables. Jen isn't thrilled that Caroline had been telling people to drop any donations they have at her place but Sara laughs. She tells Jen all she need is a couple of armchairs and a single table. The rest, she tells Jen can be donated to the church. Bookcases are also a requirement, but she had given that task to Tom. Tom manages to come up with three bookcases, but Sara tells him she needs at least another half dozen.

Amy's collection is as varied as they come, and provides reading material for everyone. Sara begins sorting through them talking to Amy as she goes along. She tries to set aside the ones she wants to read as she goes along, but the pile is too big. She sleeps in the guest room that night, and in the morning she stands in the doorway of Amy's room and wonders if this is truly what Amy would have wanted trying hard to dispel the niggling doubt she was feeling. Later that afternoon, Tom arrives. The bookshelves are empty and boxes of books sit waiting. Tom begins to haul them downstairs. It takes three days to paint the shop and to assemble bookshelves, books and furniture. Even



the counter was painted sunshine yellow, looking almost magical when you enter. The bookshelves Tom had painted white and the final result was that it looked like the home of a young couple starting out. Somehow that appealed to her. When the bookshop is finally ready, she stands there alone and asks Amy if she thinks they'll be happy there. She promises her that they'll spread her stories and books throughout the town together.

Analysis

George is increasingly determined to make the transition from 'poor George' as he is known around town to someone who is worthy of Sara's trust by doing the best job he can of cleaning and helping her get the empty shop ready. Like everyone else in town, Broken Wheel has left its mark on him. George knows that the darkness in him began when Sophie disappeared, but no one in town believes him. After working with Sara for the day, he talks to the spirit of Sophie on the way home, telling her about Sara and determined not to let either of them down or break his promises to them. He especially won't break the promises he makes to Sophie.

Caroline does her part once again for the community, going door to door to solicit locals for items needed to make the bookstore a reality. She feels tired this time, perhaps because now she was doing it alone. In the past, Amy had taken over the support on a day-to-day basis for the women in town who needed it, and when catastrophe struck, Caroline would get the rest of the town together to help out. She'd done this all her life, beginning just before she became a teenager. She thinks about all of the people the town had come together to help over the years, remembering how quickly cooking food, cleaning and child minding had come together. No one had ever been expected to suffer alone. She wonders if this kind of charitable work had been what stopped her from getting married. So many years she'd watched her mother helping out where relationship problems were concerned. Soon it seemed that she'd just gotten old while she wasn't looking. Her mother had died, and she'd simply stepped up and done her part. Caroline's generous spirit had kept the town helping each other her whole life and giving Sara the same helping hand came naturally to her.

Tom isn't the only one talking to the memory of someone else. While he talks to Sophie's spirit, Sara talks to Amy's. Sara has a clear picture in her mind of what the bookstore should be, and she is determined to make it a reality. She paints the walls and counters sunshine yellow and the result is a bright, cheerful place that is welcoming even without anything in it. When she adds the shelving units, and the mismatched armchairs, the result is fresh and comfortable. In fact, to her it looks more like the home of a young couple with limited funds, or one in which the furnishing had survived generations. She liked both ideas and although she'd felt some doubts earlier when sorting through Amy's books in her bedroom, she was beginning to believe that she and Amy would spread the love of books they shared with all of Broken Wheel before long.



Discussion Question 1

Why does Tom talk to Sophie and what benefit might he get from this one-sided conversation?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Caroline believe she never married, and how does she feel about the situation now?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sara initially have doubts about the bookstore and how does she feel about it now that it is done?

Vocabulary

tenacious, resilient, tribulations, inexplicable, condescending, imperceptible, superfluous



Section 5: A Town Dying; Foxes and Sons; and To Read or Not To Read...

Summary

Tom goes to John's small apartment over the hardware store, realizing how long it had been since he'd been there. They'd always done their visiting at Amy's. Now, with Amy gone, Tom was surprised to see that nothing had changed. Everything was exactly the same. John makes coffee and Tom asks him how he feels about Sara staying in Amy's house and using her books to open up a bookstore next door. John is quiet for a moment, and then admits that he likes her and that she seems happy. He adds that she isn't staying however, and that they shouldn't try to keep her in Broken Wheel. Tom agrees a bit strongly, but then asks John why he doesn't think it would be right. John doesn't answer, but instead observes that there are no jobs to keep young people around, and as such, the town was dying. Amy's letter to Sara in July 2010 tells her a great deal about John's history and helps her to understand him better.

George drives Sara to the bookstore in the morning. She decides ten o'clock is a good time to open, and arrives an hour early. George hangs back letting her experience the new store for the first time from a customer's prospective. Sara can't help but smile, loving the way it all came together. Sara is proud of what she's accomplished as she looks over the shelves of paperbacks, remembering what it was when she started. George goes for his morning coffee, leaving her there to contemplate life. Sara liked preowned books the best and in a lot of ways, this shop is her dream bookshop. The rows of books remind her of the story of Penguin Books – a company started by a man who wanted decent portable reading material when he traveled. He opened a company to fill that niche and because the paperbacks fit exactly in uniform pockets, they were a fast favorite of soldiers. Paperbacks were uplifting and Sara is convinced that soon everyone in town will be reading.

Determination in Broken Wheel finds a new outlet when Sara begins setting up the bookshop, despite the fact that no one in the town really knows what to do with it once it is ready to open. Despite this, the residents pool their resources, collecting furniture; helping to clean and paint; and all of that is despite the fact that no one intended to buy a book when it was completed. Jen and Andy discuss the issue and both are ready to offer a book to either George or John, neither displays interest in purchasing for themselves, finding excuses and insisting they are too busy to read. Grace is even blunter as she sits in one of the two armchairs and tells Sara that she will never even come close to breaking even. Despite comments like these, Sara isn't worried. She didn't put the bookstore together intending to make a profit or even break even. Gertrude is equally merciless with her comments, suggesting Sara is crazy if she thinks anyone will buy a book. May, on the other hand, idly offers that perhaps a love story would be nice, but Gertrude says they are nothing but lies, leading young girls astray with fables of Prince Charming. Despite the general attitude surrounding the shop,



George splits his time between Grace's and the bookstore and is now reading the second Bridget Jones story which has him laughing out loud at times. Andy isn't as easily taken in, and asks Sara bluntly if she's sold even a single book yet. Sara is sure that she will, but that makes Andy laugh. They sit down with a coffee and discuss the history of the town and its residents, and Sara almost chokes on hers when he asks her how she and Tom are doing.

Analysis

Tom feels as though John is walking a fine line and barely hanging on since Amy's death. Lately he'd tried to visit him, hoping that if he visited a few times a week, John wouldn't fall off the precipice he seemed to be hanging from. John hardly left home since Amy's death. Tom asks him how he feels about Amy, and John's response is a clear reflection of the emotional state he is in. John tells Tom that the town is dying and as such, it isn't right to try to encourage Sara to stay there. Losing Amy is something that John sees as part of a larger cycle – one that is swallowing their town bit by bit. This hopelessness and joyless outlook is clearly indicative of his level of depression.

In Amy's letter from July 2010, she tells Sara about John's history, explaining the turmoil and upheaval of segregation in Birmingham, Alabama in the sixties. She admits that he only told her about it because she'd gotten him drunk first, but he'd told her that Broken Wheel was the first town he ever felt safe in. For that and so much more, Amy couldn't forgive the way black people have been and still are treated.

Sara goes into the bookstore for the first time and feels a real sense of accomplishment. The bookstore is comparable to her dream bookstore and she is proud of what she's done. In her mind it won't be long before she has managed to uplift the entire town of Broken Wheel. By distributing the wealth of Amy's books, Sara hopes to be able to enrich this seemingly stagnant town. Her love for paperbacks is what brought her and Amy together, so it makes sense that their combined effort would have as strong an impact as Allen Lane, the founder of Penguin Books had on reading.

The town of Broken Wheel is divided as to the opening of the new bookstore. Some are openly critical of it, telling Sara that it will never turn a profit and that people will never be interested in buying books while others are picking up books for the first time. Sara isn't concerned with making money at all. She simply wants to return the kindness the town had shown her since her arrival, and a bookstore seemed like the perfect opportunity. While some residents are quick to suggest that a book might be right for someone else who has time to read, others openly criticize her efforts as a waste of time. Sara doesn't feel that way. She isn't interested in making money, and in fact her Visa won't allow her to do so. Her only interest is in repaying the town somehow and the love she and Amy shared for the written word seems like the perfect way to do that despite the mixed reactions she is getting from townsfolk.



Discussion Question 1

What is it that makes John believe the town of Broken Wheel is dying, and how does Tom feel about his assessment?

Discussion Question 2

What kinds of things does Sara know a bookshop in a local shopping mall would need in order to survive and how does that differ from the shop she opened?

Discussion Question 3

How do the residents of Broken Wheel feel about the new book store, and why does Sara see herself on the same level as Allen Lane from Penguin Books?

Vocabulary

precipice, imperative, segregation, arbitrariness, indiscriminately, emporium, laconically



Section 6: On Romance...; The Commitment of Trees; and What's in a Name?

Summary

Tom has no intention of asking Sara out, regardless of what Andy or Jen are concocting between them, but he can't stop thinking about her. He forces himself to pay attention as his boss Mike tells him he is moving to his sister's to work for her husband in a different field entirely, and if Tom wants to work, he has little choice but to go with the company in Hope that is taking over, without his seniority. The other two company employees approach him and he admits that he will likely take the job. Before he can get into his car, Jen approaches and asks her how things are going with Sara. He doesn't answer, wishing they'd leave him alone. A few days later he is passing the bookstore and sees Sara sitting in an armchair, tears falling quietly down her face. He hesitates, but then opens the door and asks if she is okay. She looks up and admits it's foolish to cry over a sad book, especially when she'd read it before and knows it has a happy ending.

In Amy's letter to Sara in August, 2010, Amy commiserates with her for losing her job. She tells her a bit more about the 'youngsters' in town.

The residents of Broken Wheel are slowly getting used to Sara and the new bookstore, though many wonder why she suddenly appeared. One afternoon two of the town's children happen to see her reading in an armchair. They stand there, waiting to see if someone will notice them and chase them off, but no one does. George asks what they're up to and they admit they've been standing there an hour, waiting for her to look up. The oldest announces he plans to stay until she does. Meanwhile, Sara reads on, unaware of them. She is so engrossed that she continues to read as the group outside grows. Soon even Jen is taking photos for the newsletter and Grace hauls out a barbeque calling Andy and Carl who bring a few cases of beer to the impromptu town party. Finally, Sara closes her book, noticing the crowd outside for the first time. A ripple of applause breaks out. Jen prompts her for a quote for the newsletter, and Sara watches Tom on the other side of the crowd as he talks to a young woman.

Caroline joins them, and talks to Sara and then Claire comes over and introduces herself. Finally Tom walks over to Sara and asks her how it feels to finally have the bookstore up and running. She admits no one has purchased anything yet and Tom tells her that if she wants people in this town to start reading, she will have to be much more inventive.

In Amy's letter to Sara in October 2010, they discuss the value of books quoting from some of her favorites and revealing just how similar she and Sara are. The bookstore



quickly becomes known as Sara's, despite its true name and for the first time the newsletter Jen writes is pinned up in Hope as well. Hope is the kind of old fashioned, decent looking town that politicians love to hold up an example of traditional American family values and since the town is located across party boundaries, both Democrats and Republicans used it as their poster town while neither visited the town of Broken Wheel.

Sara looks for ways to bring in townspeople, using bold and provocative signage and before too long she begins getting customers from Hope and surprisingly, most of them actually buy books. She can't help but notice the attitudes, but ignores them, trying throughout it all not to think about Tom. One day Jen enters and tells Sara that she'd told Tom to ask her out. Sara is mortified. Even John stood outside one day, looking in the window and Sara smiles at him, but just then a customer from Hope enters and she doesn't have the chance to ask him how he feels about the bookstore.

Sara talks to Andy and Tom about the customers from Hope, and how they seem to think no one in Broken Wheel has any interest in reading. Tom agrees, but Sara isn't offended. Andy realizes that the point she is making is that Hope people come in with an air of superiority that she resents. Together, they hatch the beginnings of a plan to prove them wrong, deciding that on the following Saturday there would be a book sale and when the residents of Hope arrived, they would discover people from Broken Wheel reading everywhere they looked, even if Sara had to give the books away to them to get them started. She even brings in two books on gay erotica for Andy, who takes both prompting Sara to dance a few steps happily after he leaves. She even manages to convince the Minister to take part in her campaign to convince Hope that Broken Wheel reads – and loves it!

Throughout it all however, Sara has somehow lost the will to continue avoiding Tom. In fact, she can't seem to get him out of her mind and wonders if this sick feeling she has where he is concerned is falling in love. The idea is horrifying, especially since she is convinced that he thinks she is strange.

Analysis

Tom doesn't want to think about Sara but somehow he can't stop. He finds himself thinking about her rather than paying attention to what is happening at work, and idly as he is doing other things as well. The truth was that he liked her, despite his best efforts not to. Then Jen comes over and asks how Sara is doing, and that only strengthens his resolve not to get drawn into the romantic notions of others. The trouble with that is that whenever he is around her, he finds himself relaxing, and when he sees her smiling, he wishes that it was at him, and then catches himself.

Sara causes a stir in town, not merely by her presence, but by her actions as the townsfolk surreptitiously observe her reading in the bookstore on day. Her attention is so rapt that she doesn't notice the growing crowd of people watching through the window, even when it turns into an impromptu block party outside the bookstore. When



she finally finishes her book and looks up, she learns that they'd timed her – she'd been reading while they watched for five hours and thirty-seven minutes – the poster girl for a bookstore. Someone gives her a beer and Jen is taking pictures, but for some reason all Sara can focus on is Tom and wishing he were the one talking to her. Caroline hesitates on the outskirts of the crowd, suddenly feeling like a teenager again, self-conscious and vulnerable, afraid of making a fool of herself. She finally goes over to Sara and talks to her about the name of the bookstore.

Claire introduces herself to Sara. She sees Sara looking at Tom and encourages her, admitting when she became pregnant as a teenager, more than a few townsfolk thought he was the father. Of course she neither confirms, nor denies it.

Despite Sara's best intentions, she finds herself drawn into this town and its people, understanding Amy's attachment to them more and more as each day passes. For the most part, she is becoming a part of them as well. They talk to her more frequently; discussing town issues with her and including her when plans are made to put the residents from Hope in their place. Much like the residents Sara met in Hope as she passed through when she first arrived, the residents of Broken Wheel tend to have a similar attitude about Hope, believing on some level that it exists simply to annoy them. Both towns tend to be somewhat smug and condescending where the other is concerned. As such, when Sara talks to Andy about the attitudes she gets from Hope residents, and their superiority when they come in to find the bookstore empty, Andy decides to do something. He calls Grace and they come up with a way to defend the town's honor. Though Grace normally would not have gotten involved, she can't resist the opportunity to mess with Hope. They put their plan into action, and before long Sara is surprised to discover that she is making progress. The town of Broken Wheel is talking about books. She is determined that before long they will not only be reading, but will enjoy it as well. It doesn't matter that their motivation is just to mess with the residents of Hope or that they are simply trying to protect the town's honor. They're picking up books, and those that aren't, Sara is giving books to.

Discussion Question 1

What causes the impromptu street party outside the bookstore, and how does George inadvertently cause the residents of Hope to begin coming to the bookstore as well?

Discussion Question 2

What does Sara do in order to provoke interest in reading where Broken Wheel residents are concerned, and what example of its effectiveness are revealed if any?

Discussion Question 3

How does Andy begin a campaign to mess with Hope residents, what prompts his involvement, and what is the outcome of this plan?



Vocabulary

hypocritical, overcompensated, obscenities, humiliating, depiction, gesticulating, condescending



Section 7: The Readers of Broken Wheel...; Encouraging Homosexuality; and Caroline 0: Books 3

Summary

The entire town conspires to make it appear as though Broken Wheel was an educated and well-read town in which it were normal to see people reading in the park; with their nose in a book in the restaurant; or browsing the aisles in the bookstore. Hope visitors shop the aisles and even the weather cooperates. May chooses one of the busiest times of day to come in and ask for a romance novel, seeking a Harlequin in particular. When the last Hope customer is gone, all Sara can do is laugh. Jen talks to Sara, Andy and George about what a success it was and suggesting they ride the wave of effort they've begun and begin an information newsletter, citing the effort is what had been missing. They consider putting news from the Square in and Sara quietly suggests they put a picture of Carl in to attract visitors.

In Amy's letter to Sara in November, 2010, she tells Sara a bit about Andy and how he found the humor in life even as a child, and how Tom tended to be more serious. Amy was happy to have been the one Andy turned to when he wanted to leave Broken Wheel.

A customer from Hope comes into the bookstore and tells Sara that his mother claimed she would burn in hell for carrying books about homosexuality. He is nervous so Sara tells a small white lie, saying she is bisexual. After browsing, he brings two books up to the counter and lingers before leaving, saying he'd hoped to meet others there. He introduces himself as Joshua, and Sara sends him to the Square where maybe Carl and Andy can point him in the right direction. Carl and Andy mention seeing him later on when Sara comes in, and comment on the still waters where she is concerned, obviously hearing she was bisexual. That Saturday, there are a surprisingly large number of overweight women in town. They come in groups, a few buying books and Grace acts like everything is turned upside down, saying that not long ago these women would have come for a drink, not a book – it was unnatural.

That night Sara goes home and finds Tom waiting for her. He tells her that Carl sent him, needing her help. He drives her to the Square and they are both stunned to find about fifty women in the bar. Carl calls her to him and tells her that he knows she deserves all of the credit for this. Sara leans into Tom who is obviously enjoying himself, and Carl begs her to help him. Sara pulls herself away from Tom who holds on, recognizing the sudden danger he is in and begs her not to leave. It is a different perspective from behind the bar and Sara is directed to pour whiskey generously. Three hours later she is happy to leave, tired and hot, Tom having left at some time earlier without her noticing. Carl thanks her for helping, and she apologizes. Andy wonders if



the customers will return, and Sara assures him they likely would, particularly if he organizes the dance he spoke of. Someone volunteers Sara's help, and Sara suggests Josh might be of service as well. The whole thing is the talk of the bookstore the next day. Caroline is convinced it would be improper; and will only lead to a lack of morals. Sara suggests they combine it with a market for the church to set the tone for the evening. Caroline can't help but approve. Josh comes in to thank her, saying Andy and Carl had called and offered him work, saying they'd pay him in kind. Sara almost spits out her coffee.

When Caroline discovers Sara is selling gay erotica, she marches right into the bookstore and accuses her of selling porn. Sara tries to explain the difference between erotica and porn and Caroline can't believe that not only is she defending it, but Sara claims to have read it as well. Caroline begins to have a feeling that she might be wrong and leaves saying she needs to think about the things Sara has said. Caroline talks to the minister, asking him if it is wrong to condemn the idea of something without having actually investigated it. After that, she goes back to the bookstore and asks Sara to sell her one of the books she'd complained about. At home later, she finds herself drawn to it and repulsed by it at the same time. She puts it out of sight of company in her room, and finally decides to read a chapter, strictly to research it.

Analysis

The efforts put out by people in Broken Wheel to make themselves look more educated turns out both surprising and hilarious at the same time. People who posed in the park with books on their laps fell asleep reading them; customers in the restaurant left theirs behind; and the highlight was May's request for a Harlequin romance. At the end of it all, Sara can't help but laugh until she almost cries. Regardless of the methods, the sale had brought people to the area. Jen realizes the power that they have – the ability to change the fact that the town is dying. The town is what they make it, she realizes, and begins the uphill battle of coming out with a regular newsletter. After talking about it, the enthusiasm for the idea grows. Sara idly suggests that Carl's picture be used to advertise the Square and Jen runs with the idea.

A customer from Hope comes in and checks out the shelf labelled gay erotica. He tells Sara that his mother believes she'll burn in hell but Sara loves the fact that on some level she's managed to get people talking. She can hardly believe that on some level she is being considered as an advocate for homosexuality when she'd never even see the Pride Parade in Sweden. The bookstore is rapidly becoming what Sara always wanted – a place where people can meet, talk and exchange ideas and book recommendations, or just sit down to read for a while. Sara impacts the town of Broken Wheel on many levels as her time there continues. By putting together the bookstore, she'd managed to start the town reading – something they all said would be a waste of time and when she advertises gay erotica, she brings a wider variety of customers in.

She recommends Carl be used as the Square's poster boy, and the Square sells out to unattached women that evening. She sends Josh over to Carl and Andy to see if they



know where he can go to meet like-minded people, and he winds up employed part time with them. She suggests a dance and is roped into volunteering to help set it up. Then she suggests they combine it with a market for the church to set the tone for the event, and that suggestion is also happily employed. It seems as though Sara is the catalyst for change in this small town, expressing herself in ways that impact those around her, profoundly at times. For example, the photo of Carl is so effective that he all but insists she help them tend bar for the rest of the evening as they can barely keep up.

Grace reveals a bit more about her character when she tells Sara wistfully that there was a time when the women who were now coming to the bookshop in groups would have come to her. She refers to them as strong and real – the women who built this country and although she is happy to see them coming back to town, she is dismayed that they came for books of all things and not liquor. She is convinced that books are all filled with ‘namby-pamby’ men, sugary sweet and full of constant feelings. There aren’t any real life struggles represented. Sara disagrees. As it turns out, the group Grace is talking about are only killing time until the bar opens.

Later at the Square, once the final drink is been poured, Andy is still in remarkably good spirits, already wondering if the night was just an anomaly or if the customers would come back now that they’d been there once. Sara suggests they would likely return if he followed through with the idea of adding dancing, and Carl admits he has no idea how to dance, but Andy does and begins planning.

Caroline reveals her feelings for the bookstore as well, deciding to take Sara to task for carrying what she considers to be pornography. Sara isn’t easily intimidated and tells Caroline the difference between porn and erotica, but Caroline refuses to listen. Sara insists that it is literature with occasional use of love and friendship and some sex, just as there is in other books. What is shameful, she continues, is that people are so willing to judge either people or books without any personal or intimate knowledge on the subject, accusing Caroline of being decidedly un-Christian and un-American even. This outburst by Sara is enough to have Caroline rethinking her motives to such a degree that she sees no alternative but to acquaint herself with the material she was objecting to and buys a book from the erotica shelf which stuns Sara.

Discussion Question 1

What does Jen realize after the Saturday book sale and how does that realization continue to impact the town?

Discussion Question 2

Which characters learn something about themselves in this segment and what do they learn?



Discussion Question 3

What controversy does Sara start and how does she feel about it?

Vocabulary

disseminated, apprehension, paraphernalia, despondently, demonstratively, reconnaissance



Section 8: Dream Inflation; Not a Date; and Broken Wheel Gets Ready...

Summary

In January 2011, Amy writes to Sara and tells her more about Tom and his history. She tells her that in her opinion, Tom is a lonely man, although he'd never admit it. She also tells Sara briefly about the night Andy stayed with her before leaving the state to put some distance between himself and his father.

Sara would often talk to Amy when no one else was in the shop and one day she asks Amy a rhetorical question and from the door Tom answers. She gives Tom a coffee and asks him if he thinks John objects to the bookstore, since he hadn't so much as come in, but Tom admits John doesn't care about much these days. As he gets up to leave, Sara impulsively asks him over to Amy's for dinner and he accepts, telling her he'll be there at seven. Just before closing, Gertrude and May came in and both left with new books – May with Harlequins and Gertrude with the second and third parts to *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Sara closes the shop and goes to John's hunting for items she can use for her dinner with Tom, even adding a bottle of wine at the last minute. After paying for it all with a minimum of conversation, Sara offers her condolences for his loss of Amy. Neither of them knows what to say from there, so Sara leaves.

In February of 2011, Amy writes to Sara about inspiration, and how big a role it can play when a town is otherwise struggling to survive. She sends Sara 'Dewey: The Small-Town Library Cat Who Touched the World' as an example.

Both Tom and Sara find themselves hoping that the other isn't thinking of this dinner as a date; certainly not because they'd bothered to shower or supply wine. They have a companionable dinner together and then Sara asks Tom about John and Amy and whether or not they'd ever been involved. Tom admits they were in love, but beyond that he didn't know. It reminds Sara of the *Horse Whisperer* in which a similar scenario played out in unrequited love. As she is saying goodbye, Sara asks Tom what his dreams are, but he insists he has none.

In March of 2011, Amy writes to Sara about John, telling her about his mother and his siblings describing what they were like when they met. She also reveals that he was definitely the braver of the two of them.

The town of Broken Wheel begins to prepare for the market; Caroline taking care of the market itself; Andy looking after the party that followed; and Jen handling the marketing. Most everyone in town is roped into helping in one way or another. On the way home George sees Claire standing in her kitchen window with such an expression of resignation that he can't just walk by. She answers the door and kicks things out of the way for him, excusing the mess. They talk for a while about dreams and expectations,



Claire seeming disappointed with life in general. Then they discuss how things have changed since Sara arrived, and Claire can't help but admire how nice the bookshop is in such a short time as she looks around her own place, disillusioned. The bookshop is quiet as townsfolk prepare for the market, and Tom finds Sara alone. He admits that he's thinking about moving to Hope where his job is, and Sara is stunned. At that moment, Jen and Andy happen to be walking by and look in, noticing the two talking. Jen happily admits her plan is working. Andy wonders what Tom will do when her Visa expires and what will happen to the dream she was trying to create.

Analysis

Opening the bookstore is chaotic at first, but Sara enjoys the little shop and the comfortable environment it became. Despite how much she enjoys the small shop, she finds herself somewhat sad as well that Amy hadn't played a larger part in the whole thing. She constantly thinks of things she would have liked to ask her, and is acutely aware of how little she really knew about her long distance friend despite two years of regular correspondence.

Another thing that Sara is aware of now that she has so much time to contemplate her life and the direction it has taken is the fact that she has no real goals or dreams unlike the people she had worked with in Sweden who were saving for trips or to buy a house, planning for children or getting ready for marriage. While everyone around her dreamed and made plans for the future, Sara read. Sara has no such dreams, for reasons that she can't quite understand. In fact, her time in Sweden actually seems empty to her now, and she has little beyond hazy memories of what she'd done with herself while there. She wonders aloud about dreams and Tom unexpectedly answers her. Sara wonders if there is value to dreaming – does it actually improve the quality of one's life but Tom doesn't think so. His opinion is more that dreams never made anyone happy. Sara worries that her only real interest is in reading, and can't help but wonder if she missed the time that her life was supposed to have begun, too busy with her head in a book.

Sara surprises herself when she invites Tom for dinner, and he is equally surprised with himself for having accepted. Both would have been amused to learn that they thought and felt almost identically about the whole issue. Both looked forward to spending time in the other's company; both are horrified that the other might consider this to be a date; both are somewhat lonely in their lives, without dreams or direction; and both have lived their lives so far without the kind of dreaming and planning for the future that most people are caught up in.

Gertrude is still accompanying May whenever she comes to the bookstore, but only so that she can mock her choices of reading material, at least in the beginning. Sara had given her a book however that contained none of the fairy tales that romances have, selecting *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* for her as there are certainly no romantic undertones in it. The next time the two women come in, she asks for the next one,



having stayed up all night to read the first. Learning there are two remaining, Gertrude is convinced she won't sleep until she's read them all.

Sara is still concerned with how John feels about the bookstore, concerned that he hadn't so much as stopped in once since she opened, but Tom reassures her insisting John has little interest in anything in life at the moment. Tom's generosity is revealed as he takes a load of planks over to Pete's house, hoping to drop them off without his knowledge. Tom knows that Pete will feel bad if he is unable to pay for the lumber, and Tom knows he hasn't the money to do so, but their front porch was falling apart. In the past, Pete's wife had sent him home with preserves and precooked meals to pay for construction materials, but Tom knew they were struggling even just to put food on the table and as such, he didn't want to add to their difficulties. At the same time, he didn't want to compromise their pride either, by making them feel as though they are getting a handout. Pete's wife Katie sees him and insists on sending him home with a jar of applesauce. He lies to make her feel good about giving it to him, telling her he'd only just finished the last one, but that isn't strictly true. Tom has no idea what to do with the apple sauce and the jars are adding up in his cupboard.

Sara and Tom have a nice evening together, none of it awkward or uncomfortable. They talk about John and his history in Broken Wheel. Sara learns that they were much more than friends but that proprieties of the day wouldn't permit them to display their feelings openly. Despite that, Amy loved John. They'd lived just blocks apart for most of their lives, loving each other as friends and wishing for so much more, but never finding the right time and place to connect in a meaningful way. Racial attitudes made a marriage between them impossible, and once it became a more accepted norm, they had already lived their lives and had accepted the friendship that they had as their lot in life. It is obvious now that John has many regrets, all of them surrounding Amy.

Sara continues to positively impact the town of Broken Wheel. She lends not only her suggestions and ideas, but also helps out where she can and brings an enthusiasm and positive outlook to any situation. Without Sara, the bookstore would never have come to be; the townsfolk would never have rallied to convince the residents of Hope that they were literary and urbane; a newsletter would never have been started or advertised the Square in a way that brought crowds to the door which leads Carl and Andy to plan a dance evening at the Square; and when a dance evening worries locals, it is Sara who suggests combining it with a market day benefiting the church to set the tone for the rest of the evening's entertainment. It seemed that once things were looked at in a positive light, it was possible to brighten even the darkest corners, despite recession and economic downturns and the more people who became involved, the easier it was to see things in a better light.

Jen happens to see Tom and Sara together in the bookstore and is thrilled to see her plan is working, but her plan doesn't account for the fact that soon Sara's Visa will expire and she'll have to go home. Andy, who is more of a pessimist, brings it to her attention.



Discussion Question 1

What impact has Sara had on Broken Wheel since her arrival?

Discussion Question 2

What do Tom and Sara have in common and why is Jen's plan incomplete at best where they are concerned?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sara recommend that a market day be held and how does she manage to convince the town to go along with her idea?

Vocabulary

inexplicable, imperceptibly, antagonisms, harmonious, dismissively, pessimistic



Section 9: The Small Matter of a Visa; Run-of-the-Mill...; and A Lawyer Gets Involved

Summary

Jen brings up the matter of Sara's expiring Visa at the very next council meeting. Caroline asks Jen if Sara wants to stay, suggesting maybe Sara should be asked, but Jen is convinced that she does want to even if she hasn't said anything directly yet. Andy thinks they should investigate the matter first to see if it is even possible. When the meeting ends, Caroline waits until the coast is clear and then goes to the bookstore. She sits down with Sara and asks her directly when her Visa expires; wishing Amy was there to do this. Sara tells her it runs out at the end of November and her ticket home is on the last day of October, departing from New York. She adds that she isn't sure if she's allowed to change it, and Caroline has learned all she needs to.

In March of 2011, Amy writes to Sara, telling her about her husband, admitting he wasn't exactly a happy man. She admits that a great deal of that unhappiness likely came from the fact that his parents had deserted him at the age of thirteen.

Autumn in Broken Wheel is an explosion of colors and Sara is aware of how short her remaining time there is. Only four weeks remained and Sara hates the idea of leaving. She looks up and notices the perfect book for Grace, and putting a book jacket on it she hurries over to the diner and puts it on the counter. The bookstore seems empty and cold to her, and she looks forward to closing. A storm rolls in and rain begins, pelting the ground as Sara walks back towards Amy's house. Somehow the prospect of going from one empty building to another is one she can't face at the moment, so she walks by the house and heads towards Tom's house, rationalizing her decision the whole way. She reminds herself of the earlier conversation when he mentioned leaving Broken Wheel, and had the feeling that she could talk to him about how she felt and he would understand, but when she gets there and knocks on the door, no one answers. She tries the door and finding it unlocked, manages to convince herself that it would be perfectly natural for her to wait inside. When Tom gets home, he finds her asleep on the sofa. He pulls a blanket over her and falls asleep beside her. When Sara wakes, and realizes he is beside her, she leans in close and calls his name, waking him. As soon as he is conscious, he tells her that he has no intention of having a holiday romance, or a long distance one, having done both in the past. Mortified, she backs away, trying to cover her embarrassment. The more that he protests however, the more he finds he wants her close and before long he is kissing her, and holding her in a way that belies his earlier statements. When Sara finally heads home, she remembers how he feels and everything they said to each other, and knows that she still has time. It made her want to sing and shout out at the world. Tom watches her leave and curses his lack of



strength and willpower. He knows that the best course of action is to avoid her until she leaves, but will have to dig deep for the willpower to do so.

Caroline, Andy, Carl, George, and Jen go to the lawyer's office together and pump him about the legalities for extending a Visa into something more permanent. The lawyer is already wishing he hadn't taken this call, but Caroline had helped him in the past so he feels as though he owes her. He tries to explain the legal aspects of immigration, and it is clear the group is disappointed to learn that Sara doesn't qualify. In desperation Caroline mentions how devastated Tom will be and the other's join in agreement. The lawyer sees a way out, and tells them that provided she has valid Visa; and that Tom and she had not conspired in advance to avoid deportation; and that they got married before the Visa expired, Sara would then be legally allowed to stay with her husband. Finally having heard something they like leave the lawyer to his lunch and file out. Jen is adamant that Sara and Tom have to get married if Sara wants to stay and Caroline asks them not to say anything to Sara or Tom, trying to minimize the amount of damage already done. Caroline wonders aloud if Tom has any desire to marry her at all, but Jen reminds them it would just be on paper, and Tom should sacrifice himself for the overall good of the town. Andy announces that they'll propose at the dance, adding that it will be the party of the century.

Analysis

Jen takes it upon herself to bring up Sara's expiring Visa in town council. She wants someone to fix things so that Sara can stay if she wants to, although Sara herself hasn't said anything. Jen worked so hard to put Tom and Sara together and now that she can see some progress in that area she wants things to work out between them. Only more time together will make that work. Caroline listens, already sick of all the planning and plotting that surrounded Sara. She thinks about how Tom and Sara stood quietly together during the street party – something two people who weren't comfortable together would have trouble with – and how Tom had visited the bookstore himself. She has to admit that Jen might be on to something and in that moment realizes what she has to do. She goes over to the bookstore after the council meeting and asks Sara directly about her Visa, but in that moment she is again aware of how much she misses Amy who would have been a much better choice to deal with this than she is.

Amy's letter to Sara in March of 2011 talks about her husband and reveals what was likely a joyless marriage for Amy. Her husband, she claims, never laughed. He had a history that explained it of course, but underneath the acceptance and understanding that Amy had for her husband is a wistful longing that her life had amounted to more; that she could have loved harder; laughed longer; and just had more joy in her life than she had.

Sara is beginning to feel melancholy about leaving Broken Wheel as her departure date looms over her. She considers going home, and realizes that she has no one to share any of her accomplishments in Broken Wheel, or talk to about the new friends she's made. Sara is fairly sure that if she hadn't sent her sister a postcard, she would never



have known that Sara was gone. The entire train of thought is discouraging to her. Then she sees a book on the shelf and realizes that it is a perfect book for Grace – something that exemplifies strong women like the ones who built the country. She puts a jacket on the book and takes it to the diner, dropping it on the counter and leaving after telling her it was about strong women. Going back to the bookstore, she feels a sense of belonging there again, but it is short lived.

Sara can't bring herself to go into an empty house, so she continues to Tom's instead. He isn't home however, so she lets herself in to wait and dozes off on his couch. Sara already feels much more at home in Broken Wheel than she ever had in Sweden, and her growing feelings for Tom are only part of that. The fact that Sara goes into his home implies a familiarity that she feels but that hasn't been acknowledged and foreshadows a confrontation with Tom. When she wakes to find him asleep beside her, she can't help but lean towards him, wanting to kiss him awake, but Tom wakes with other ideas. He has been trying to talk himself out of the way he feels about her from the start, and it's getting harder and harder to maintain any kind of distance from her. He tells her he doesn't want to start anything with her, but then kisses her despite himself, berating himself for it afterward. While Sara leaves feeling uplifted and positive, he watches her go feeling a sense of weakness and lack of self-discipline. The sexual tension is explosive and foreshadows a coming intensity to their relationship that neither will be able to deny.

Caroline and her entourage visit a lawyer to see what can be done about extending Sara's Visa, but there are few options. In fact, the lawyer insists that there is little that can be done until Caroline mentions that her boyfriend Tom will be devastated. They continue to stretch the truth to the breaking point as the lawyer asks questions, and finally get an answer they like. If they met after she arrived; and if they are in love and want to get married; and if there is a wedding before her Visa expires, it is likely she will be able to stay. As soon as Jen learns that, she is determined that a wedding will occur whether Tom wants it or not – for the good of the town of course. Jen is already planning it in her mind when Caroline cautions them all to keep this a secret for now. The rest think she is looking for a surprise attack as the right approach with Tom and Sara but Caroline is more interested in damage control. The dance is the night chosen to spring this on the soon to be happy couple, and foreshadows a dance they will all remember.

Discussion Question 1

Based on this segment, how do Tom and Sara truly feel about each other, and what does that suggest for the future, if anything?

Discussion Question 2

How does Sara feel about returning to Sweden, and how does she compare the time she's spent in Broken Wheel with her life until that point?



Discussion Question 3

Why is it almost impossible for Sara to get a permanent Visa in America, and what are the residents of Broken Wheel willing to do to make this happen if necessary?

Vocabulary

improvised, claustrophobic, obstinacy, intrusive, imperceptible, excruciating, delegation



Section 10: An Unexpected Offer; Grace and Idgie's...; and People and Principles

Summary

George decides to do something nice for Claire and while she is at work he lets himself into her house and begins to clean. He starts with the dishes, because they were the thing that seemed to be most aggravating to her. After they were put away, and counters were wiped down, he sweeps the floor, vacuums and hangs up jackets and bags. When he's satisfied, he tells Sophie that he's still kicking. Meanwhile, Claire stops in at Grace's although she hadn't been there in several years. They talk about relationships, men and the coming market. Caroline asked Claire to have a cake stand. Claire has no idea where she can get the homemade style cakes she needs, having no talent to make them herself. Grace admits she'd like to test a theory on Claire and asks her if a person is strong and able, do they have an obligation morally to help those who are weaker and less able? Claire hesitantly agrees in principle, and to her surprise Grace admits that she can sort out the cake situation for her. Claire immediately offers to pay, but Grace declines. George sees Claire's car coming and nervously waits for her to open the front door, hoping what he did brings a smile. He hoped she would understand the gesture, but thirty minutes later she arrives on his doorstep looking less than pleased. She actually came to thank him, and tells him so, but then bursts into tears and George is baffled. He sees that she's brought red wine and offers her a glass, telling her he'll have coffee. He admits to having temptation occasionally, but not with red wine. Still, he worries about the dance, and Claire promises to help him stay in check if he wants to go. Then she tells George that what he did for her was the nicest thing anyone ever had. After she leaves, George corks the red wine and sets it aside telling Sophie that he thinks he can promise he won't drink again.

Caroline visits her niece Claire and is surprised to find the place extraordinarily clean and a terrific rum-raisin cake, but when she asks Claire about the cake, it becomes clear that she hadn't baked it. Finally Claire admits that Grace had actually baked it and had agreed to bake all of the cakes she needed. Caroline goes directly to Grace's and tells her that her cake is fabulous. So much so that she wants Grace to have a cake stand at the market. Grace goes directly over to Sara in the bookstore after Caroline leaves, and tells Sara everything that happened beginning with Idgie and the hobos and how they were making her soft. When she finishes, Sara admits it sounds great, and Grace continues to grumble, but as she does she realizes that she can't back out now and leave Claire hanging either. Once she realizes that she will be baking the cakes and will likely have to sell them at the market, she tells Sara that if this is the thanks she got, she'd never help out again. Sara commiserates at how ungrateful Caroline sounds, giving her all that recognition – how dare she. Grace realizes Sara is messing with her.

Caroline wrestles with her conscience in this segment, unable to stop thinking about the book she'd read. She tidies up the church, quietly asking God what He thought about



Sara. The God she'd grown up with was strict and had little time for nonsense, and she wrestled between feeling guilty for having read gay erotica (and found it to be more long-winded than erotic), and for the difficulty she is having in keeping her thoughts respectful. When she leaves the church, the day is so pleasant that she sits on a bench in the park for a time, enjoying her surroundings. Again the book comes back to mind. She is so self-absorbed that she doesn't notice when Josh sits down beside her until he turns and asks if he can keep her company. He smiles and she can't help but smile back. They talk lightly at first, and then the conversation goes from the weather to people in general, and Caroline observes how much simpler life would be without so many people in it. Josh is amused by that thought, reminding her she'd still have herself to live with. He tells her that he is from Hope, and has been hired to help at the Square for the dance, adding that he hopes he'll see her there when he leaves, promising to buy her a drink if she is.

Analysis

In this segment, George is shown for the friend that he is. On some level, he is still trying to claw his way back to living life after the loss of his daughter, and his descent into alcohol. Embarrassed by his fall from stability, he seeks a way to work his way back to the solid citizen he once was. Touched by Claire's exhaustion and how overwhelmed she seemed when he saw her, he decides to do something nice for her and while she is gone, he cleans her house. The simple work and the knowledge that he is helping a friend helps to lift his spirit in the way that he hopes it will lift hers when she returns. Despite having the best of intentions, he is still nervous when he sees her come home, hoping that she isn't angry with him for invading her space without permission. George is not the only one who extends a helping hand to Claire in this segment. When Claire tells Grace that she's been roped into creating a table of cakes for sale at the market, and adds that she has no idea how to bake, Grace takes a page out of the book that Sara gave her and offers her services. In the book she read, the lesson learned was that those who can should help those who can't in a perfect world, and it is the obligation of those who can to extend themselves. As such, she offers to bake the cakes for her at no charge. Claire heads home and the next act of friendship and generosity assaults her as she walks in the door. Claire is so overwhelmed by George's generous gesture that she walks to his house with a bottle of wine and confesses that it is the nicest thing that anyone had ever done for her.

Caroline's relationship with her niece Claire and their differences are briefly exposed in this segment as Caroline goes to Claire's home for a visit the next day. Caroline is surprised to find the place neat and tidy, and stunned to see a cake already baked that is fantastic. At that moment, she is convinced that her niece has finally turned a page in life and is becoming the woman Caroline had hoped she would one day. In that moment, she feels closer to her niece than she ever had before, and it doesn't take long for her to uncover the fact that Claire had little to do with the finished cake. Once Caroline learns the truth, she confronts Grace and after admitting her cake is fabulous, she all but insists that Grace be the one to run the cake table at the market. Grace is horrified by the idea. She doesn't really want to advertise her skills in the kitchen, and



she certainly didn't want anyone to know that she'd baked the cakes for Claire. When Caroline finally leaves, she storms over to Sara's to tell her that it is all her fault. If she hadn't brought over the book in the first place, Grace would never have felt an obligation morally to help out where she could. Sara isn't intimidated by the outburst and instead reveals her strength of character by teasing Grace until she lightens up and realizes that recognition for the effort she put out might not be as horrible as she thought.

Caroline is unable to get the book she read out of her mind. She can't stop thinking about the boy in the story, and how his feelings were so forbidden while other people drank, had multiple pregnancies and generally treated each other with disdain with complete impunity. Of course, a part of her still sees the entire subject matter the same way as most people do – forbidden, immoral, and subject matter that is unbecoming. She spends time cleaning the church and hoping she is able to shield her thoughts from God, and afterward finds herself in the park having a philosophical discussion with Josh about morality, weakness, forgiveness, and religion. Though the conversation is lighthearted, it carries undertones Josh is unaware of as Caroline wrestles with her personal opinions of the book she'd just read and how it skews her moral compass to a degree that she hadn't expected. By expressing his interest in seeing Caroline at the dance, the author foreshadows her likely attendance, despite the reservations she has.

Discussion Question 1

What unexpected events occur in Claire's life, and what is the driving force behind them?

Discussion Question 2

How do Sara's book recommendations affect Grace and Caroline, and how do they impact their behavior?

Discussion Question 3

How does absolution come into conversation in the park, and what affect does the conversation have on Caroline?

Vocabulary

lethargically, presumptuous, improbable, deign, indulgence, ambiguity, absolution



Section 11: The Book of Books; Marry Us!; and The Comfort of Candide

Summary

Sara can't believe that she let Jen talk her into wearing a costume, and somehow she couldn't help feeling humiliated and embarrassed at the same time. 'The Book of Books' is what Jen calls her creation but Sara feels like it makes her look like a bookish scarecrow when she sees her reflection in the mirror. All she can hope is that Tom doesn't show up and make her embarrassment complete. Main Street is decorated, and market stalls line both sides. Sara tries to hide in her shop at first, but the market calls to her and she is surprised to find the street crowded with people. Claire and Grace are manning the cake stand together and Sara stands talking to them. She is almost beginning to relax when Tom arrives. He manages not to laugh at her costume, and she admits it could have been worse. Caroline feels redeemed by the success of the market. When Josh arrives, she can't help but be pleased to see him again. She smiles despite herself and he asks her whether or not she'd decided to come to the Square that evening.

Jen and her husband are the first of the Broken Wheel residents to arrive at the Square. Grace follows soon after and begins discussing the book Fried Green Tomatoes which was the book Sara had left with her that had made such an impact on her. Tom keeps hoping he will be able to simply avoid Sara for the last two weeks of her stay, but it seems as though the entire town is insistent on talking about her. When she shows up, Tom can't help but admire how beautiful she looks and grimaces when he catches her eye. Sara's confidence falters slightly when she sees it, but then she is herded to the bar by Jen and Grace. Sara can't help but admire how handsome Tom looks but deciding that their kiss had been an accident, and convincing herself that all she really wants is his friendship. She leaves Grace to talk to George and at the same time Tom heads over to talk to Claire. They wind up as part of an awkward foursome and he smiles at her as though the act had been deliberate. Just then the music stops and she is standing in a spotlight. Before she can grasp what is going on, a banner appears behind the bar that in hand painted red letters shouts 'MARRY US!'

Sara can't help but smile and Caroline is so surprised that she can hardly smile back. Sara laughs, feeling a sense of belonging as Jen and Andy explain their madcap scheme to help her so that she can stay in Broken Wheel. When they announce that they've chosen Tom as their representative, Sara still finds the whole situation amusing until she sees Tom's expression. He looks almost angry, despite the fact that he is smiling. Sara tells herself that it doesn't matter. The town had accepted her, and liked her well enough to concoct this scheme and she planned to enjoy it. Around the room strangers are congratulating her and when she can't ignore Tom anymore, she walks over and smiling calls their plan mad. Her voice is light, but Tom asks her what she's thinking, and insists on driving her home. He had already collected her jacket, and



ushers her towards the door. She asks him if he'd like to dance first, and disgusted looking, he all but pushes her out the door. As soon as they get outside, he asks her what she thinks she's doing. He reminds her again that he isn't in love with her, and she is not in love with him, she answers. He asks how long she plans to stay, and she wants to say forever, knowing she has nothing to go back for, but she stays silent. She admits that maybe the townspeople weren't joking, but he couldn't seriously expect that she would insist he marry her. It is only nine o'clock when he pulls away muttering that she doesn't know these people like he does. The party is still going strong.

Analysis

Sara can't believe she let herself get talked into wearing a costume to the market. She feels stupid in it, and can't seem to discourage Jen from creating it. As such, rather than feeling relaxed and confident when she sees Tom again, she feels ridiculous. She grouses about it, but stops when she sees the look on his face. Grace and Claire stand at the cake table together and Sara feels as though her outfit is equally effective as a deterrent against both crows and men. Sara's embarrassment is entirely related to whether or not Tom sees her in costume, and she is oddly unconcerned as to whether or not anyone else does. The market is a crowded success, revealing how efficient word of mouth in small towns can be. Alcohol is not served at the market, but the amount of hip flasks noticed by Sara foreshadows a larger, drunken population at the Square later regardless of their best efforts to avoid it. Josh arrives and Caroline can't help but smile when he approaches her, feeling like an idiot for doing so. He repeats his hope that she attends the dance later that evening.

The Square is ready and people begin arriving. Grace begins a discussion involving some of the characters in *Fried Green Tomatoes* – the book Sara recommended to her – and compares the main character 'Idgie Threadgoode' with her grandmother. Tom can't understand why the subject of Sara comes up again and again despite how hard he is trying not to think about her. It seems as though everyone is waiting expectantly for her to arrive. He is already finding it difficult to imagine Main Street without her or the bookstore. Sara is surprised by the warmth of the welcome she gets when she arrives. It is almost as though they would have noticed if she had simply stayed home, and the feeling is new to her. She catches Tom's eye and almost falters when she sees him grimace. It is enough to have her telling herself that all she wants from him is friendship, and that their kiss hadn't meant anything more than the simple accident it was. She hopes that once they have a laugh about it, they can go back to being friends. Tom studiously tries to avoid her, constantly reminding himself that he only has to last two weeks. When they inadvertently find themselves standing in the same circle, Sara glances at him and he smirks in a way that makes her feel like he thought her coming over was a deliberate attempt to get near him, and she is about to give him both barrels when a spotlight hits her and a banner reading 'MARRY US!' appears along the full length of the bar.

Andy explains the idea to Sara and she smiles in such a way that Caroline almost believes their plan will work. The whole thing is such a crazy idea that Sara can't help



but laugh about it. Jen tells her that they've chosen a representative of course, as she can't very well marry the town, so they appointed Tom and Andy almost slips and uses the word sacrifice in that sentence, but when Sara looks over his way, hoping to share the giggle they are all having, he looks angry and embarrassed. She tries to diffuse the situation, but Tom isn't seeing things the same way as Sara is. Sara sees the makeshift proposal as acceptance by the town and it gives her a feeling of belonging that she's never known before. Tom feels like he is being forced into a relationship, and tells her that there is no way that a relationship between the two of them could happen. She quickly agrees. Tom knows the people in Broken Wheel well enough to take them seriously while Sara is still trying to enjoy the fact that it appears as though she's finally been accepted by almost all of the town. She loves that they like her enough to go to this extreme. Tom wants nothing to do with it, and does all he can to get Sara out of the Square, but when he insists he'll take her home, she resolutely digs her heels in and refuses to get into his car. All Sara wants is go back inside and dance, and enjoy the company of the people she's come to think of as her friends.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Sara so embarrassed by the costume made for her to wear at the market and what had she hoped for instead?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Tom so frustrated in the Square when Sara's name keeps coming up in conversation and why is it that he is so uncomfortable about it?

Discussion Question 3

What are the chances that a marriage between Tom and Sara is in their future based on this segment and why?

Vocabulary

humiliation, immorality, relegated, incomprehensibly, disconcerted, improvised, resolutely



Section 12: Sweet Caroline; Good Times Never Seemed...; and A Book for Everyone

Summary

Caroline knows that deep down, the real reason she went to the dance was in the hopes that she would see Josh. Josh sees her and puts a pink drink in her hand. She thinks about the look on Tom's face earlier, and thought she'd seen Sara leave with him earlier, but then she came back and it seemed as though everything was fine. She is about to join Grace and Sara when Josh gestures towards a table, bringing two bottles of beer with him. He thanks her for coming, touching her hand and sending a flutter to her chest. She sips at her beer, watching the people still on the dance floor until he offers to give her a ride home. They don't speak on the way home but when they get there, Caroline doesn't want the night to be over yet. He thanks her for coming and before she has time to think about it, he kisses her softly. He touches her face gently and kisses her again.

Caroline has a good talk with herself the next morning, beginning as soon as she wakes up. Just after lunch, Josh knocks on her door and tells her that he just stopped in to make sure that she wasn't hiding out at home, afraid to run into him. She tells Josh that the kiss was wrong and explains that she is too old, and that she doesn't have the right equipment, embarrassing herself in the process. He asks her if it is because he is bisexual, and Caroline just keeps insisting it isn't right and that she is much too old for him. He tells her that she's beautiful, reminding her it was just a kiss, but she doesn't want to talk about it. He steps towards her and pulls her to him, drawing out their contact and waiting until she has the nerve to look him in the eye. Then he slowly kisses her. Part of her is thrilled and the rest of her is terrified. She pulls away and he promises her that he will be returning on Tuesday so she should decide by then.

Caroline isn't alone in her confusion. George gets up feeling terrific, replaying the evening in his mind. Claire had kissed his cheek when he'd dropped her off like a real friend, and George couldn't help but smile as he thought about it. When the doorbell rings, he thinks it might be Claire, and is stunned to find Michelle on the doorstep instead. She looks smaller and older than he remembers, and behind her, Sophie is getting out of the car – a teenager now. Michelle goes inside while George goes out to help Sophie with their bags. She introduces herself to him, and he tells her that she used to call him Dad. Michelle insists she call him George now, and once inside, he offers her a pop, or anything else she might need.

Sara manages to survive the day that follows the market, avoiding Tom when he shows up to help with the cleanup. The next day when she gets to the bookstore, Sophie is waiting outside in the rain. Sara invites her in and they talk about books and the store in



general. After she leaves, something about their conversation stays with Sara, and she creates a new shelf that she titles 'Amy's Shelf', filling it with books she and Amy had exchanged. Sara cleans the floor, idling wondering why Tom didn't even seem to want her as a friend. Jen comes in and tells Sara to sign the form she puts in front of her called a 'Petition for Alien Relative'. Tom's name is already on it and she is about to argue that Tom seemed to be an unwilling collaborator; she remembers how angry and unreasonable he was about it and decides to let Jen deal with him. She signs it and before Jen leaves, Sara gives her a book she'd set aside with her in mind. It was a guide to self-publishing, in case she wanted to make a book out of her blog. Jen doesn't know what to say.

Analysis

Caroline doesn't begin to relax until the evening starts to die down, and the noise level abates a bit. She can't believe that she is so eager to see Josh, and it has been many years since she truly believed that a strong and intelligent woman is able to have a life that is normal. Part of her feels like running before Josh catches sight of her, but then she catches his eye and it is too late. He brings her a pink drink, and despite her intentions to avoid alcohol, she consumes it and part of a beer that he brings her after things slow down a little. Caroline is a bit worried about Tom's reaction which foreshadows disappointment for the town and their marriage proposal, but although Sara leaves with him briefly, she returns shortly afterward and seems as though everything is okay so she hopes that it is. When Josh sits down with Caroline, and touches her hand, she feels a thrill internally that has been dormant for many years. This feeling is compounded when he gently kisses her when he takes her home. At first, she freezes, and something inside tells her that she should leave right away, but the rest of her is unable to move. He kisses her again, and she feels no desire to tell him he's done anything wrong.

Caroline tells herself that she should know better, and that next to her, Josh is so young that she is only embarrassing herself. The whole episode reminds her of the fiasco that occurred when she lost her virginity in 1984 during another episode of weakness. On that occasion, she had also allowed herself to get tangled up with a man and had dropped her guard. Afterward, he'd shown her how little he cared about her feelings, and she'd become the butt of much laughter until the town became bored with the subject and found someone else to ridicule. Now that she'd kissed Josh, she felt sure it foreshadowed more ridicule in her future and she is determined to make sure that doesn't happen. When Josh shows up just after lunch, she tells him that their kiss was a mistake. She cites the difference in their ages as being the biggest problem, but Josh teases her about it gently and before she can make him understand, he pulls her into his arms and repeats their indiscretion. The biggest problem with it is that Caroline enjoys the experience and it awakens feelings in her that she thought she'd either grown out of or simply lost to time and circumstances. Josh gives her until the following Tuesday to make up her mind, but Caroline isn't sure about what. She isn't the only one shaken the morning after the dance. George wakes feeling better than he has in some time. He'd taken Claire home and after she kisses his cheek, George feels as though



he's finally managed to become a friend to her. This is a big step up from the useless drunk he was not that long ago. Sophie and Michelle are introduced as George gets an unexpected visit from them. Michelle teases him a little before entering the house and Sophie is a teenager now who no longer knows who he is. Part of him is embarrassed for the things he'd said to her over the years, talking to her even though she wasn't there. When Sophie introduces herself to him, he has an overwhelming urge to talk to Sophie about the whole thing. He thinks about the things he would have done had he known they were coming, and is glad that the place is at least presentable.

Sara finds herself avoiding Tom on the day after the dance, having no desire to repeat the conversation they'd had. Sara tries not to let Tom and his attitude discourage her. Mostly, she is just tired of Tom and partially of herself as well. Sophie introduces herself to Sara when Sara discovers her outside the bookstore on the second morning after the dance. Sara continues to spread her magic, one reader at a time as she tells Sophie that she is sure there is a book for everyone. Sophie admits she once lived in Broken Wheel, and that her mother has little good to say about the town or its inhabitants, calling them inbred morons who have nothing better to do than meddle. Sophie questions Sara about the providence of the bookstore and its books, opening Sara's eyes to a glaring omission as well. Right after Sophie leaves, Sara creates a shelf titled 'Amy's Shelf' and fills it with the books they'd recommended back and forth to each other over the years. After she leaves, Sara cleans until Jen shows up with a form for her to sign. She is reluctant to do so, but considering Tom's behavior, and his assumption that she had something to do with the entire plan, she decides to let him deal with Jen, and signs it with a flourish. She also gives Jen the book she set aside, proving there is a book for everyone when Sara gives her a book that is a guide to self-publishing. The gesture is so thoughtful that it leaves Jen absolutely speechless.

Discussion Question 1

What reservations does Caroline harbor where Josh is concerned and why?

Discussion Question 2

What happens that makes George believe that he has managed to find his way back to being a respectable human being and what is ironic about the fact that he wants to tell Sophie about it?

Discussion Question 3

What impression does Michelle have where Broken Wheel and its residents are concerned, and what evidence supports this opinion if any?

Vocabulary

ludicrous, instinctively, humiliatingly, clichés, enthralled, revolutionary, unrequited, infatuation



Section 13: Not Something You Talk About; For the Good ...; and The Smell of Books...

Summary

By Tuesday, Caroline hasn't given Josh any thought at all and she is surprised when he actually shows up. Even the joy she feels at the sight of him confuses her. He asks her how the wedding plans are progressing, but Caroline hadn't had any part in it. Finally he asks her if she thinks it's time she kissed him. She gets to her feet, confused and he stands up calmly as well. Just once, she tells herself as she leans in and kisses him. Her fingers fumble as she opens the first button on his shirt. She can see the desire in his eyes, and it only emboldens her. He pulls her to him and they kiss again.

George tries hard to adjust to life with Michelle and Sophie around. Michelle took over his room and mostly kept to herself, but Sophie was another story. George had to be careful not to talk to her out loud as had become his habit lest she answer, having heard her name. She tells him little, answering questions he asks, but seldom offering until after her visit to the bookstore. She tells him that Sara claims there is a book for everyone, and asks George if he thinks there is one for her. When he can't think why not, she thanks him, calling him Dad for the first time. Michelle corrects her, but Sophie just grins. She tells George that her mother thinks the town looks down on her, and that her boyfriend Ronald Lukeman will come after her. Sophie isn't all that sure, but worries she is being disloyal.

Jen does her best to convince Tom that he has to marry Sara. After Jen works on him for half an hour and Tom is not dissuaded, George and Andy join in, telling him it isn't necessary for him to love her, and he only has to commit himself for a couple of years. As far as George can tell, no one is giving Sara any thought in all of this, so he stands up to leave but before he goes, he pleads Sara's case, reminding them all of how much she means to the town. When no one seems to be swayed by his arguments, he announces he'll marry her himself then. It takes Jen a minute to catch up, but then she can't think of a good reason George shouldn't. Although George is sure that Sara would rather marry Tom, the important thing was that she would get to stay. Then Jen remembers telling the lawyer that Tom was Sara's boyfriend, not George. Feeling defeated, George turns to leave when Tom finally says he'll marry her. Relieved, George leaves.

Sophie come into the bookstore as Sara is unpacking. After browsing for a time, Sara asks her what kind of book she is looking for and Sophie admits that she likes dragons. Sara resolves to find the perfect book for her. Jen shows up next and tells Sara that she's going to need a wedding dress, suggesting she go to Madame Higgins who according to her has sold wedding dressing in their town forever. Sara tells Jen that the



whole wedding idea is madness but when Jen asks her if she wants to stay, she doesn't hesitate to say yes.

Gavin Jones looks over the documents in front of him. He doesn't remember the town of Broken Wheel, but he is good at his job so if there is anything funny going on, chances are good that his instincts will pick up on it. He doesn't think there is anything untoward about the paperwork, but if there is, he's sure he'll catch it.

Analysis

Josh is slowly waking a part of Caroline that she thought was long dormant, and though she fights it at first, she slowly comes to realize that perhaps how she feels is not as terrible as she has been telling herself it is. In truth, this all began with the gay erotica that Caroline bought from her at the bookstore so that she wouldn't criticize something without being aware of what it is. It took her two days to start the book, but once she did, she found it almost impossible to put down. Then Josh came along, opening admitting that he is bi-sexual and causing emotions and sensations to flicker to life, becoming a flame before she considers the consequences. When he comes to see what her answer is the following Tuesday as promised, he tells her that she will have to take the lead this time. She surprises him and herself when she gets to her feet and does just that – something so out of character for the middle aged church going woman.

At the same time, George is feeling a bit adrift in his own home. He is actually reasonably comfortable with Michelle's company, having lived with her before but Sophie is a teenager who doesn't remember him at all, and her company is unnerving in several ways. George no longer has feelings for Michelle, but his feelings for Sophie are strong and the last thing he wants to do is disappoint her or upset her in any way. He knows that no matter what else happens this is his one chance to build a relationship with her that will be lasting and as important to her as it is to him. Michelle on the other hand appears to be waiting for her boyfriend to prove how much he cares about her by coming to retrieve her. Sophie doesn't believe that this is something that is in Ronald's character.

Andy, George, and Jen work on Tom, giving him every argument they can think of to get him to step up and marry Sara so that she could stay in Broken Wheel with them. George listens as Jen presents one argument after another while Tom just sits there. For George, this is even worse than the lawyer's office was. Tom argues that they don't love each other, and Jen squarely blames him for that, telling him that had he made any effort, she would have loved him long ago already. Jen reminds Tom that Sara will have to leave otherwise. Andy just sits there quietly but George is getting increasingly irritated. No one seems to be taking Sara into consideration at all. He reminds Tom that there isn't anyone better in his life right now, and Jen reminds them that there is nothing wrong with Sara who is perfectly nice. They weren't asking him to love her after all. Jen asks if it is money that Tom is waiting for, because if that were the case, they'd be able to put something together. Finally, the subject matter is too crass even for Tom. George steps up and announces he'll save the town and marry Sara but Jen reminds him that



they told the lawyer her boyfriend was Tom. George reminds Tom that they need Sara, and he finally relents and agrees to marry her.

Gavin Jones is the person who will ultimately decide Tom and Sara's fate. He is described as diligent, honest, determined and instinctive. While he sees nothing untoward about the paperwork, his demeanor foreshadows trouble for Sara and Tom's wedding plans.

Discussion Question 1

What does George find to be the most difficult part of adjusting to having Michelle and Sophie around and why is it such a struggle for him?

Discussion Question 2

What arguments are used by Andy, George and Jen against Tom when they try to convince him to marry Sara and which argument finally wears him down?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the possible problems that could interfere with a marriage ceremony between Sara and Tom?

Vocabulary

conspiratorially, perseverance, persuasion, appalled, escapism, cynically, contradiction



Section 14: Nothing to Tell; A Conspiracy is Suspected; and Just for Sex

Summary

Caroline lies naked beside Josh, and certain realities come home to her. First and foremost, the physical encounter she'd had all those years ago could not even be held in the same plane of being as what she had just enjoyed, and secondly the realization that Josh would find a man or woman his own age and no one could ever know about her and Josh. They'd laugh, she tells him, her head on his shoulder. Josh assures her there's nothing to tell, easing her mind.

Gavin Jones talks to his neighbor over the fence. The man is usually intolerable with his opinions regarding immigration and immigrants, but this time he actually gives Gavin a lead. Of course it came with his opinions as well of course, but when Gavin sees Sara featured as having opened the new bookstore in Broken Wheel, he is intrigued. He wonders if this is the same Sara, and is her whirlwind love affair on the level. He goes to Broken Wheel to find out. His first stop is Grace's but when he coaxes her to talk, he begins with her history in Broken Wheel and by the time she took a breath, Gavin was looking for an exit. He gets outside to find the bookstore closed as well.

Sara and almost everyone she knows in Broken Wheel go into Madame Higgins's boutique to shop for a wedding dress. Jen is taking pictures to document the event while Andy stands near a table he'd set up with wine and plastic glasses telling jokes about Sara's time in Broken Wheel so far. He recounts the look on her face when the town had proposed and jokes about their choice of husbands for her citing that they could have roped Carl or himself into it instead. He adds that they could have chosen Josh instead which is equally crazy, saying Broken Wheel would never put up with that. Josh begins defending himself when the others agree reminding them that bisexuality exists as well. George tries to explain to Claire why he hadn't come around lately, but she already knows Michelle is there and says so but George comments that it is Sophie that has kept him away, not Michelle. Claire doesn't say much. At this point, all Sara wants to do is convince Jen to call the whole thing off, but she turns to find Tom next to her. She tells him quietly that he doesn't have to go through with this wedding, but he surprises her by admitting he'd already signed the form. Standing there, looking into his eyes, she realizes that she loves him and the internal admission brings her peace. He tells Sara that Jen booked them into the church for the following Saturday, joking that she can always say no when the minister asks. He does add that they'll have to live together, but admits he'd decided not to move to Hope so she wouldn't be forced to move at least. Meanwhile, Jen asks Andy if he thinks Josh is in love with Sara, based on his reaction earlier but Andy doesn't think so. Jen insists that there must be a woman in his life, and looking up she sees him talking to Caroline. The more they examine the



two of them, the more likely it seems. Finally Andy just asks Josh if he and Caroline are together adding what a madcap kind of idea that is. Josh agrees, saying there is nothing going on between him and Caroline, saying that she isn't at all interested in him beyond the sex.

Analysis

Caroline is in her bed with Josh in the middle of the afternoon, and idly wondering if her moral compass is broken. The experience was so liberating, so sinful and wonderful at the same time that her inner voice is quiet. Reality intrudes of course, and she is horrified at any thought that someone might find out about them. This exchange between Caroline and Josh foreshadows a more public revelation in their future.

Gavin's character is developed as a dedicated and driven man who truly enjoys his job. A tip from a neighbor about a possible immigration fraud points to Sara in Broken Wheel and Gavin's instincts tell him he doesn't have the whole story. Grace has an opportunity to talk about herself and her family's history in Broken Wheel with a complete stranger, and she enjoys the chance to share familial anecdotes with him until she has him all but running from the diner.

Madame Higgins's boutique is invaded by half of Broken Wheel as they cram in to find and document the search for a wedding dress. Sara is swept along in the tide as she looks for a dress on one hand alternating with her desire to call it all off, if only Jen would listen. Andy isn't taking any of this too seriously either as he stands off to one side, telling anecdotes of Sara and her time with them. He even jokes about their choice of husbands for her, suggesting how alternatives might have been chosen instead. This brings Josh into the conversation who protests his candidacy with such vehemence that he draws Jen's attention. Jen quickly interprets that there is a woman in his life, and from there she has no problem whittling down the possibilities until only Caroline remains. Tom tells Sara that he's signed the paperwork and calmly discusses their after marriage life together while Sara is still trying to convince him that he doesn't have to go through with any of it. Despite trying to let him off the hook, Sara also comes to the conclusion that she actually loves Tom, even though she's been fighting that feeling from the very beginning. The look on Tom's face makes her feel as though he is seeing her for the first time. Caroline is careful to avoid any physical contact with Josh, but despite that Jen manages to figure out that something has changed. When Andy hears her suspicions, he can't help but approach Josh, thinking that he'd rule Caroline out if indeed Josh was interested in someone. Josh confirms that they are not seeing each other, but merely having sex which foreshadows considerable embarrassment for Caroline.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Caroline fear anyone finding out that she is sleeping with Josh, and how does he keep his promise to her while still revealing the truth?



Discussion Question 2

How does Gavin learn that he should investigate Sara, and what happens when he tries to do so?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways is it becoming evident that Tom has changed his outlook where Sara is concerned, and what suggestions does he make for the future?

Vocabulary

idiocy, infatuation, anecdote, voluminous, resolute, precipice, chastity



Section 15: Mrs. Hurst; Amy Harris Gets Involved...; and The Darkness Catches up...

Summary

Amy sends Sara a quick note as she only has a single sheet of paper left until John brings more to her. She tells Sara that she had Tom take down a bunch of books and having smelled them, she's surprised to learn that Sara is correct. Different categories of books smell different from each other. Tom didn't much understand what Amy was doing, but John did. She shares the value of John's friendship with Sara and gives her the advice that if she ever decides to marry, to hold out until she finds a man with eyes that are filled with laughter. The note concludes with Amy's sincerest wishes that Sara would consider coming to visit their little town.

Tom takes Sara home to pack up whatever she would need to stay at his house, and then shops for the ingredients he needs to make dinner. Sara is touched when he makes her corn dogs and sloppy joes for supper. She can't help thinking about Caroline and the look on her face as she'd walked out after Josh's comment in the boutique. Again she tells Tom that they don't have to live together after – that they won't have the complications of feelings and he agrees. Sara even adds that he can continue to see women, but Tom says nothing. She offers to sleep on the sofa, but Tom reminds her that they won't learn any of the intimate details about each other that way. They undress in the dark and she lies there praying that in life she would be a main character rather than a minor one. She wants to be the protagonist – the character for whom things worked out in the end.

In May 2011, Amy sends Sara a letter tell her that she's happy to hear that she is saving for a visit, but insists that money is unnecessary and it was far more important that she come soon and that she was welcome to stay as long as she liked without cost.

On the way to work the next morning, Tom reveals that George had been the one most influential in convincing him to marry her. She has a coffee with Grace who tells her that her family had always been outlaws. Caroline lets Josh in the second time he comes around. She tries to explain her feelings to him, insisting that life isn't fair and he apologizes for allowing the others to provoke him. He asks how he can fix things, but she is adamant that he can't. Josh tells her to leave him if she wants, but not to blame it on what others are saying. She says goodbye coldly and closes the door on him his regret. John goes into the bookshop and talks to Sara about Amy. He tells her that Amy wouldn't have wanted her or Tom to marry without love, having done it herself. She asks why Amy was too weak to be with John, and on the way out John admits it was him, not Amy who had been weak.



George comes home from the dress fitting episode to find Ronald Lukeman in the driveway, Michelle and Sophie's bags in the back of the car. He introduces himself, and minutes later they are gone. Sophie gives him a small hug while George struggles to catch up. They pull out and he goes inside to find two brief notes thanking him and saying goodbye. Neither included an address, and somehow losing Sophie this time is even worse than it was the first time. His thoughts didn't turn to alcohol this time, but he can't manage the energy to do much more than curl up in bed. He tries to tell himself that a week with her was better than never seeing her again. There is a knock at the door and he wonders if it is Claire, and then wonders if maybe it was Sara needing a ride somewhere.

Analysis

Amy writes to Sara, telling her how she feels about John, saying that he is without doubt the most extraordinary man she's ever met. She reveals that he is sitting there with her as she writes the letter which confirms that they are close friends. She also admits to a mystery illness that she refers to as a 'stupid little complaint' which keeps her bedridden at times, but when Sara first arrives and discovers all of the books in Amy's bedroom and nowhere else, it is fairly clear that she had been bedridden more often than not of late. She also reveals her desire to have Sara come to visit, promising her that she isn't a confused or fanciful old woman who has no idea what she is saying or has become overly sentimental.

Tom settles into the idea of becoming Sara's husband while Sara is increasingly anxious about the whole thing. Now that Tom is on board with the idea, he insists she move into his home, sleep in his bed with him, and behave as any married couple would. Sara continues to offer him a way out, suggesting she'll sleep on the couch; telling him they don't have to stay together afterward; and even insisting he can date and she'll stay out of the way. He cooks for her, amused by her backpedaling and Sara daydreams about how things could be between them. She has to keep reminding herself that he isn't interested in her despite the front that he is putting on for immigration purposes. Later, lying in bed beside him, she can't help but wonder if she is a bit player in this story, or a main character, remembering that in most books the bit players simply fade out and they don't usually get the guy or resolve their issues. They don't talk about Caroline, but Sara remembers how vulnerable she looked as she stormed out. Everyone had taken Josh's comment as a joke in poor taste, but Caroline had simply left without a word.

Amy writes to Sara again in May of 2011 and makes it very clear that Sara's visit is an all-expenses paid vacation. She insists that there is no way she will let her pay her way to travel to another country so that she can be bored by an old woman. She also makes it very clear that she wants Sara to come sooner rather than later, revealing between the lines how short her time left truly is.

Sara begins to believe that she might just be able to stay in Broken Wheel, the idea dizzying. She begins to consider how she will support herself, only too aware that selling two or three books a day won't be enough. She considers using the internet to



boost sales, and then discounts the idea as just kidding herself. Tom is in good spirits while Sara slept little and is tired and cranky as a result. She asks Tom why he didn't like her at first, but he disagrees, telling her he was grieving and couldn't bring himself to care about anything at the time. He reveals that George was the one who convinced him to marry her and apologizes for his attitude when she first arrived. He drops her off and Grace invites her to have a coffee with her. She admits that she can't understand why Sara would want to stay with them, and tells a story about her grandmother, and how at one time her family sold liquor which branded them as outcasts. It is clear by Grace's tone and demeanor that she enjoys the notoriety despite the fact that all she sells now are hamburgers. Josh visits Caroline, trying to apologize for his comment in the boutique, but Caroline has come to her senses. She can't seem to make him understand that she will be the object of ridicule as a result, and will likely be part of who she is for some time to come. Josh thinks she is exaggerating and insists that if it became part of her reputation, it would still be an improvement over being known as the poor lonely woman or the walking church cliché. That is enough for Caroline and she says goodbye to Josh, closing the door on him.

John visits Sara at the bookstore, finally giving it his seal of approval, but he tells her that Amy wouldn't want her to marry Tom, or Tom to marry her. He makes it clear that she would be against a marriage of convenience where love doesn't enter the picture, clearly revealing that this was the lifestyle Amy herself had lived. John is sure that Amy would insist love play a part on both sides, but Sara argues that if that were the case, she would have had a relationship with John after her husband died. John reveals that he was the one too weak to make that kind of commitment, not her. George goes home after the fitting at the boutique to find Ronald Lukeman in his driveway, and Michelle and Sophie on their way out. In a heartbeat, his life goes from bright to dark again, and he is unable to tell Sophie everything he is feeling before she gives him a quick hug and leaves with her mother. George had just begun to think that maybe Sophie would be a part of his life now, and was enjoying her company immensely. Now, in the blink of a moment, they were leaving again, and it tears George apart. He goes inside after they leave, lonelier now than he had been when they left the first time. Depression descends on him and he crawls into bed where he stays for the next two days feeling empty and lost. Sophie hadn't even left a number she could be reached at. Someone knocks on his door, but he can't even summon enough interest in life to open the door although he does suffer a pang of guilt thinking it might be Sara needing a ride somewhere.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways does the relationship between Tom and Sara change, and is this a change for the better or not?

Discussion Question 2

What reputation do Grace and her family have in Broken Wheel and why does Grace covet it so?



Discussion Question 3

Why does George withdraw emotionally, and how is this event different from the first time?

Vocabulary

vulnerable, protagonist, reciprocated, perversely, provocative, prosaically, incomprehensible



Section 16: Broken Wheel Drowns ...; Broken Wheel Has a Headache; and If Anyone Knows...

Summary

With just one day until the wedding, Sara is suddenly and acutely aware that she can't stay in Broken Wheel. Josh tries to talk to Caroline and is again unsuccessful, so he retreats to Grace's wishing he had something to drink. Grace asks if Caroline dumped him and Josh's face answers for him. She tells him no one will believe Caroline was the one to end things, her schadenfreude evident when she adds that the whole subject makes her day. Josh feels worse by the moment. He finally sets off in the direction of Hope drinking a bottle of Grace's home distilled liquor along the way. George finally gets out of bed, unable to just lie there anymore, and stares at the remainder of the red wine Claire left behind. He knows if he starts drinking now, he'll need much more than what is left. Grace and Andy will probably refuse to sell him liquor so he resolves to walk to Hope. He runs into Josh who offers him a glass of his hooch. George takes it telling Josh the darkness has returned, and Josh mutters that he should have stayed with men. George drinks to Sophie while Josh drinks to Caroline, admitting he wanted her. When Tom gets to the bookstore, Sara is already gone. John waves him over and tells him that he couldn't let them sacrifice himself, but Tom admits he agreed to it. By the time he gets back to his car, Tom is frustrated with Sara and her inability to make up her mind. She isn't at his house either and he takes a bottle of whiskey out to the porch with a glass. He thinks about how Sara seemed to fill the void left behind when Amy died and how the bookstore will close again and the town will go return to its death spiral. He can't stop thinking about what an idiot he is. Caroline sits in her kitchen, trying to convince herself that she isn't depressed. She thinks about how Josh knocked on her door again, and how she'd ignored it. She can't believe how sad she feels.

The next morning William goes outside to putter in his garden, thinking about the wedding to occur later in the day. He sees a foot twitching under a bush and calls out to discover Josh laying there. William offers him coffee and asks him if his behavior has anything to do with what happened at the boutique. When Josh confirms it, William insists he shouldn't give up, but Josh wonders if he should have given up much earlier instead. He leaves after his coffee. George wakes up outside as well with Claire kicking his foot. She reminds him that Sara is getting married later, and this isn't the time to fall apart. He tells her Sophie left him but Claire has no sympathy. Then she softens, reminding George they can find Sophie for him, adding that Sara would probably help. She drives him home and waits until he's ready to shower before telling him she'll be back in an hour. Josh tries one more time, hoping to at least say goodbye to Caroline, but she still refuses to answer the door. He tells from the stoop that he didn't want to bother her and promises after the wedding he'll leave for Denver. He just wanted to say goodbye.



Amy writes to Sara in July 2011, telling her that if she is intent on paying, Amy will accept no more than three hundred dollars and that only if she promises that they'll do something together with it.

Sara changes in the back room of the church after George drops her off. Then she sneaks out the back door and goes over to the bookstore. She makes two signs quickly – one for Amy and Sara's Books with their favorites, and one titled Happy Endings When You Need Them. She gets back to the church and all of Broken Wheel is there. Passing by John, she tells him that she isn't going to marry Tom. He looks as serious as she does when he walks over to her, and she hardly registers what the minister is saying. She feels like she should stop William, but he looks so happy. Caroline sneaks in and Josh freezes when he sees her. Then Grace stumbles in with a hunting rifle, drunk and unsteady. Someone coughs and everyone turns as a man at the back announces he's looking for Sara Lindqvist and Tom Harris regarding a permanent residency application. He asks if they're married yet, but Tom says they are in the middle of it when the man insists he has an objection even though William hadn't gotten to that part yet. The church is filled with voices of concern as the man admits that even if they got married he would likely have to deny her application based on what he'd seen so far. Grace stands up and points the rifle at Gavin Jones, calling out 'Towanda!' Andy tries to calm her down, telling her the safety is still on while Gavin takes the opportunity to call the authorities.

Analysis

One by one, the townsfolk of Broken Wheel are suffering and turning to anything they can for relief, however short it is. Sara realizes that she can't marry Tom, mostly because Amy wouldn't approve according to John. Her world crumbles around her as she considers returning to Sweden, the thought one that she finds depressing. Sara isn't the only one suffering from a bout of depression. Josh tries repeatedly to get Caroline to listen to him, but Caroline won't even open the door. He calls through it, trying to explain how he feels, but nothing helps. Finally, he manages to get a bottle from Grace, and begins the walk back to Hope drinking it on the way while Caroline sits in her kitchen wondering why instead of angry, all she feels is sad. George is ready to fall off the wagon as well when he returns home to discover Michelle and Sophie leaving. He knew that this time Sophie wouldn't come back again, and after spending two days in bed, he wants nothing more than a drink or twenty. He runs into Josh on the way, and they commiserate – Josh revealing how much he wants Caroline, and George revealing how empty his life is without Sophie. Tom is prompted to pull out a bottle as well after going to pick up Sara only to discover she'd already left. John waves him over and tells him he'd freed him from the obligation of marrying her, having told Sara that Amy would be displeased with the marriage. Tom can't believe she is changing her mind again, and at home his thoughts linger on her despite his best intentions. He knows that when she leaves, the town will finally die once and for all. It seems as though the entire town is suffering emotional chaos.



William's character is developed a bit more in this segment as he is shown as a man who enjoys putting his hands in the earth, and growing his own flowers. It is a joy for him to smell the earth and work in the mulch in the early morning, even though some of his parishioners believe it is undignified for the minister to be on his knees in the garden. The irony that he spends his time on his knees indoors seems lost on them. When William first discovers Josh lying under a bush on church grounds, he is convinced that Josh is waking from a night of debauchery, and looking at his face, he sees a resignation there that stops his theological discussion in its tracks, so instead he offers Josh coffee and makes light of the fact that he'd slept outdoors. William had heard about the conversation at Madame Higgins's, and quietly suggests that Josh shouldn't give up so hastily. William admits that Caroline is a formidable woman and Josh isn't surprised that the minister is so well informed. William tries to tell Josh that often people can be cruel to women who don't ever marry, and Josh admits that he often finds himself agreeing with her. Despite that, William sees determination in him rather than resignation when he leaves. The need Josh had for him this morning leaves William feeling euphoric, as he'd forgotten how much he enjoyed being needed. George is also off the wagon, and wakes up outdoors. Claire isn't impressed and has little sympathy for him when he begins to bemoan the fact that Michelle and Sophie left again. It is clear by her response that she'd been helping him through morning after events in the past and is without patience or sympathy for this self-destructive behavior. Still, she pushes him to pull himself together for Sara's wedding. Josh is no longer angry when he approaches Caroline's door for the last time to say goodbye. She still refuses to open the door, even after he tells her he's leaving right after the wedding.

In July 2011, Amy writes to Sara again, insisting that she'll accept only a set amount for the time that Sara will be there, provided they use it to have fun together. It is increasingly clear that Amy wants Sara to come soon and she promises they'll meet her when she arrives.

Sara feels ridiculous in her wedding dress but thankfully, there isn't anyone else in sight. She creeps into the bookstore and stands in the gloom trying not to let her tears fall. She stands there, trying to engrave it all onto her mind from the smell of the books and armchairs to the light that floods in the front window. She gives herself a mental shake to pull herself out of the sentimentality that threatens to swamp her whenever she thinks about leaving this place and these people. Part of her is hoping for a miracle, but either way she knows she will have to be strong. Her final signage addition is a category that the entire town seems to need right now as they could all use a happy ending and that includes Sara herself. Sara wants to interrupt William, but between the smile he beamed at them, and the spontaneous applause that broke out in the church, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Mostly, Sara wants to cry. Sara is saved from having to say anything when Gavin Jones speaks up from the back of the church. William tries to derail him but Gavin is determined to stop this wedding before it occurs. He is convinced that this is a sham, and if he had to make a decision in that moment, he would have denied Sara residency. In fact, he informs the group, even if he hadn't learned about the bookstore he likely would have recommended rejection. He informs the group that a wedding for the purposes of residency is illegal, and to make matters even worse, Grace, having consumed too much liquor to be thinking clearly, stands up



and aims her shotgun at him, foreshadowing even more legal problems for Broken Wheel and its residents.

Discussion Question 1

Which of the residents of Broken Wheel feel the need to drown their sorrows in this segment, and why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Caroline refuse to talk to Josh, and how might learning how Josh really felt change things, if at all?

Discussion Question 3

What is ironic about Sara's newest shelf titles based on recent events in Broken Wheel?

Vocabulary

theological, debauchery, formidable, immortalized, euphoria, reconciled, spontaneous



Section 17: Objections and Broken Wheel's Next Foreign Correspondent

Summary

Gavin sits in his office in Hope, beginning to realize that nothing is simple in the town of Broken Wheel. Gavin can only assume Tom accepted money from Sara to marry her so that she could stay. The policeman is mostly amused by it all. Gavin interviews Andy and Carl first. They tell Gavin that Sara and Tom were meant to be and everyone knew it even before they themselves realized it. Gavin asks if they organized it as well, and there is no remorse in them when they admit they had. When Gavin asks about the bookstore, they assure him that although Sara spent time there, she'd never been paid and the store belonged to the town council, or to Amy Harris. The weapon was a simple misunderstanding. Gavin doesn't bother to ask them anything else, and excuses them. Next, he calls Grace in.

Grace has nothing but good things to say about Sara and insists that she and Tom have been inseparable since she arrived. When asked about the weapon, she tells him it was just a way of celebrating. He excuses her too. Caroline is called in next and when she looks over at Josh, he joins her. The smell of him puts her stomach in knots. He puts a hand on her back and tells her quietly that he's changed his mind. Gavin asks them the same questions and Caroline tells them much the same things as he's already heard. Gavin asks if they are together as well, and Caroline tells him they are just friends, but Josh argues the point fiercely. He tells her he has no intention of going to Denver to make her life easier and adds that people can laugh if they want to. His determination is obvious and in front of Gavin they continue to work out the fact that they will continue to see each other despite whatever attitudes the town has about it. The policeman is beginning to wonder if there is something in the drinking water of Broken Wheel and when Josh frankly admits that the sex is great, and Caroline adds that she 'came to it late in life', he all but spits out his mouthful of coffee in surprise.

Gavin tries to regain control, asking them about Sara and Tom and about the rifle, and again gets mostly the same answers. After excusing them, Gavin and the policeman discuss the lack of evidence against the couple so far. Sara and Tom sit in the waiting room where she tries to talk to him, but he shakes his head telling her they can't fix things by talking. She jokingly asks him if he wants to dance instead and to her surprise he gets up and gallantly offers her his hand. She gets to her feet and they waltz around the waiting room in each other's arms, fitting together perfectly.

When the song finishes, Tom is called in. He tells Gavin that it was his decision to marry Sara so that she could stay, admitting he loves her. When Sara is interviewed, she tells Gavin that it was all her fault, and that she practically forced Tom into the marriage. When Gavin tries to confirm that she'd only done it to stay in the country, she tells them that she loves Tom and that she'd tried to call it off but she couldn't bear the idea of



leaving him. She admits that she told the town it was for residency, and knows Tom doesn't love her. Gavin finally tells her to go home to Broken Wheel and they would be in touch.

When she gets outside, she sees Tom waiting for her and walks over determined to have the conversation they should have had long ago. She tells herself she won't cry and when she nears he opens his arms and she steps in and he holds her. She tries to laugh and he hugs her closer telling her it will work out, admitting everything is his fault. They talk about relationships and Sara admits she isn't very good at them. He admits that he's loved her from the beginning, and kisses her. Gavin and the policeman don't see any of that, but John does and watching them kiss changes how he feels. He talks to Grace when he gets back to Broken Wheel, trying to decide how Amy would feel about all of it, but Grace tells him he just thinks too much.

Analysis

Gavin is certain that he's caught someone trying to cheat her way into residency and is determined to prove it, but the interviews don't go the way he expects them to. Regardless of who he interviews, he is told that Sara and Tom are a perfect match, and love each other. They all tell him that Sara doesn't earn anything in the time she spends at the bookstore, and that Grace was planning to celebrate with the shotgun, not cause someone bodily injury. Gavin and the policeman are also treated to revelations from Caroline and Josh as they admit their feelings for each other regardless of popular opinion and the confession from both Tom and Sara given separately that they love each other. Each claims to have tricked the other into marriage, but not so that Sara is able to have residency, but so that they wouldn't lose each other. The policeman and Gavin are shaking their heads by the time the last interview is complete, and have no idea what should be done now. The entire situation is surreal and Gavin has no idea what to do now so he tells Sara to go home to Broken Wheel, assuring her that she would hear from them soon.

While the interviews didn't go as he'd planned, Gavin manages to provide a setting in which Josh and Caroline are able to admit their feelings honestly, and come to the conclusion that what the rest of the town thinks just doesn't matter. Tom and Sara manage to admit the way they really feel for each other, but not yet to each other which foreshadows yet another conversation on the subject. It is clear to anyone who might have seen them dancing in the waiting room that they are in love regardless of what they'd told each other and themselves to date. There is no chance that two people can respond to each other with such intensity of emotion without love. By the time the interviews are done, everything is different.

Tom is waiting for Sara outside and he takes her into his arms when she comes to him, unable now to stay away from her. His feelings are a matter of record now and there is little point left in trying to hide the fact that he has deep feelings for her. Sara can't hide how she feels anymore either, despite how worried she is that somehow she'd taken advantage of Tom. He holds her, telling her not to worry – that they'd take a collection



and come to her in Sweden if they had to and Sara is unable to hold the tears back. When Tom kisses her, neither of them notice that John watching from the doorway. More surprised than anyone, he returns to Broken Wheel and discusses the situation with Grace, telling her he isn't sure what Amy would have wanted now. It is clear that they feel strongly for each other, and that Amy would have supported those feelings had she known. As he tries to work all of this out while talking to Grace, she simplifies it for him, telling him that sometimes he just thinks too much. Collectively, the interviews foreshadow a different ending for most of those who were interviewed.

Discussion Question 1

What questions does Gavin ask each group that comes in, and what is consistent about their answers?

Discussion Question 2

What conclusions do Josh and Caroline arrive at and how do their revelations affect Gavin or the policeman?

Discussion Question 3

What do Tom and Sara admit separately, and then again together after the interviews, and how does this change anything, if at all?

Vocabulary

inseparable, imperceptibly, nonchalantly, gallantry, ominously, reproaches



Section 18: A Conspiracy is Admitted and Epilogue

Summary

Gavin is surprised by how calm Caroline is, completely unfazed by the summons to his office. He tries to explain Sara's case from a legal perspective but Caroline insists the law has no business interfering with people who want to get married no matter where they came from. Gavin brings up the town conspiracy and Caroline calmly suggests he arrest them all then. Getting into the spirit of it, she tells him he could charge them all with encouraging a crime, because they'd definitely done that. When he tells her that Sara and Tom had both confessed, she barely thinks twice before telling Gavin that so many thought they'd committed a crime that there was nothing they could do but confess. The conversation is way out of Gavin's control now. After she left, all Gavin could think was that he hated Broken Wheel. He considers arresting them all as the policeman observes that Broken Wheel is full of love and asks Gavin what he's going to do. Gavin is conflicted, but he drops the charges for the rifle, accepting that it was celebratory and consoles himself, trying to be philosophical about the whole thing. He knew he couldn't win them all.

In a letter to Sara in August of 2011, Amy begins to tell her about Jimmy Coogan. She tells Sara that Jimmy was the first Coogan to have a suit; the first to dye his hair; the first to be able to read or to own his own land. She promises to tell Sara about him and his family when she gets there, and adds that she can hardly wait to see her.

Sara can't be convinced to wear white a second time despite Jen's protests. She agrees to wear the white cowboy hat that Claire loans her, which irritates Jen even more. Caroline and Josh attended, along with Grace and her rifle, although this time she is sober. John is in attendance again, but this time seems happy about it. George is there as well, although his eyes still reveal the sorrow that is so fresh. Claire stands by him, and when Sara turns her eyes back to the front, Tom winks at her and she almost laughs. Somehow their happiness is infectious. Jen never doubted the outcome of course, and is already planning the newsletter for a wedding special. William is almost at the end of the service when the door opens again and Sara smiles, glad to see the only one missing had finally arrived. George turns as Sophie calls out 'Dad' and Claire makes room for her. Sara winks at Claire. The two women had conspired to have Sophie there, sending her an invitation to the wedding along with the second Eragon book Sara had sent. Happy endings are everywhere and Sara marries Tom and Broken Wheel creating their own happily ever after.



Analysis

The town of Broken Wheel collectively comes to its senses. Caroline is strong and confident as she talks to Gavin after he summons her. The revelations of the relationship she and Josh were exploring gave her an inner peace she'd never known before, and she is calm and in complete control as she answers Gavin's questions unperturbed.

Gavin has no desire to discuss this case with any of his colleagues, too embarrassed to even ask their opinions. Instead, he tries one more time to question Caroline, but she proves too competent to rattle. She even suggests that Gavin arrest them all for their conspiracy. Gavin is frustrated and outmaneuvered, finally giving in after Caroline has an answer for everything. At the end of the interview, Caroline stands and tells Gavin that there is no one who is more concerned with law and order than she is. She leaves and Gavin realizes that he hadn't gotten a single answer. He almost decides to arrest them all, but then he considers how his colleagues would respond and gives up. Even the policeman observes that the town of Broken Wheel is full of love. Calling the whole thing very romantic, it is clear that even the policeman is on their side so Gavin decides to take a more philosophical approach.

In Amy's last letter to Sara, she talks about Jimmy Coogan, and how he'd been a pioneer in his family – the first to reach many milestones and therefore worthy of having a street named after him. She is clearly thrilled that Sara's visit is nearing and the event is giving her purpose and joy.

Happy endings are everywhere in Broken Wheel as relationships are repaired or started; people are brought together and joy is evident. It is as though the joy Sara feels for life permeates the entire town and for the first time in her life she belongs and feels loved. She has the happy ending she always hoped for and even Sara would admit that real life can sometimes be considerably better than books (although not often). Caroline and Josh come to the church together, no longer caring who sees them or who knows that they care about each other. Grace still brings her shotgun and even John seems okay with the wedding now. George is with Claire and managing to bottle his sorrow but he has no idea that Claire and Sara had conspired to change things. They invited Sophie to the wedding and her arrival almost has George in tears, especially when she calls him Dad. Tom and Sara stand at the front of the church, ambassadors for the emotional happiness of their small town. It is clear that Broken Wheel is far from at its end.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Caroline so able to deflect Gavin's questions and maintain control of the situation?



Discussion Question 2

How does Tom and Sara's wedding affect the town of Broken Wheel overall?

Discussion Question 3

What smaller conspiracy occurs in Broken Wheel and what happens as a result?

Vocabulary

unperturbed, presumably, prosecuted, incredulity, philosophical, compromised



Characters

Sara Lindqvist

Sara lives in Sweden, in a town called Haninge. She first appears to be a plain looking, thin woman who is dressed much too warmly for the time of year. She seems to have little care as to her appearance or keeping up with the latest styles, or whether or not she is making a good impression on the strangers around her. She has hair that is a mousy shade of brown that she holds back carelessly in a clip. It still manages to hang down around her shoulders in a tumble of curls. She has large, gray eyes and although it may appear as though she has little interest for anything beyond the book in front of her, in reality, she has taken her surroundings in carefully and could describe it with ease.

Sara loves to read and began her job at a bookstore called Josephssons Bokhandel when she was seventeen years old. Now she has almost two thousand books of her own, and brought thirteen of them with her to Amy's house. After ten years at the bookshop, her love of reading has not abated even a little and each book now has two memories in her mind. The first when she sold it, and the second when she read it for herself. When the bookstore closed, Sara decided to take Amy up on her offer to come to the USA, and now finds herself there alone.

Sara has a younger sister named Josefin who works for the district court in Sodertalje as a trainee lawyer. Eventually, she would become a solicitor. Her mother worries more about Sara than she does about her younger sister Josefin who seems to have her life on track while her older sister seems to need direction.

Sara opens up the Oak Tree Bookstore partly in memory of Amy and partly to give something back to the people in Broken Wheel for their continuing generosity. The bookstore starts slow, but gathers the town together and has them believing in themselves again. Sara somehow adds the missing spark to a town that has long been in decline, and it doesn't take long before they take notice and decide they don't want her to leave.

Sara inspires a book sale and when it is a rousing success, the rest of the town begins to consider other ways to entice people to come to town. They decide to hold a dance at the Square and to set the mood for the event, they hold a market during the day with proceeds benefiting the church. This event is also a great success, and the townsfolk use the dance as an opportunity to propose to Sara, inviting her to marry Tom so that she can stay with them in Broken Wheel. Sara is touched and while Tom appears reluctant at first, he soon changes his opinion and even a visit from immigration authorities is unable to derail what is finally revealed as true love.



Amy Harris

Amy lives in Broken Wheel, Iowa. She and Sara Lindqvist begin corresponding over books in the beginning, but after many conversations on line, Amy convinces Sara to come and spend some time with her in Broken Wheel.

Amy's brother Robert once ran a newspaper that was called the Bent Farmer, but he never made it in a career of journalism like he wanted. He has a son named Tom, Amy's nephew, who still lives in Broken Wheel.

Amy has an illness that confines her to bed from time to time, and more so as she came to the end of her long sickness. She dies just before Sara comes to visit at her behest, and she leave instructions to her friends and neighbors before she dies. Amy instructs them to encourage Sara to stay as she had planned, and to stay in her home, and that is exactly what they do.

Sara stays, discovering Amy's bedroom full of books. An avid reader, Amy had acquired multiple shelves of a real assortment of books and they become the basis for the bookstore that Sara opens, memorializing Amy and her love of books forever.

Madeleine (aka Grace)

Grace works at the diner in Broken Wheel and is the first person in the town that Sara meets after Hank drops her off. She is a larger woman, weighing at least 150 kilos, and smokes cigarettes – doing so even while on shift and inside the restaurant.

Grace was given the name Madeleine by her mother who was named Grace, but Madeleine felt that it was a name suited to old-fashioned, proper ladies; the kind who carry embroidered handkerchiefs with their initials on them. It is not the kind of name for a woman who spends her days flipping burgers or keeping rowdy customers in line with a sawed off shotgun. When asked, Grace admits that this kind of work is a family tradition.

Grace isn't supportive of the Oak Tree Bookstore when Sara first opens it, refusing to believe that there are any books that accurately reflect the strong kind of women who built the country they now enjoyed. Of course Sara takes this as a challenge and finally gives her a copy of Fried Green Tomatoes.

Grace admits to being able to bake, and finds herself baking for a stand at the market. This all happens because she read a book that suggested those who can should feel an obligation to help those who can't.



Caroline Rohde

Caroline is the first person to introduce herself to Sara at Amy's house. She is forty four years old, and her demeanor is resolute and determined – she is a woman who comes right to the point. Caroline has a handshake and posture that seem almost military, and she is gorgeous. She has features that are as pronounced as a sculpture with deep, almond shaped eyes and high cheekbones. Her thick hair is beginning to grey and her skin almost shimmers. She wears a black scarf made of silk around her neck giving her a glamorous, timeless look. Her age is difficult to discern, and when she speaks, she commands the attention of everyone in the room.

Caroline's mother had attitude and was cocky although Grace also describes her as being 'damned dull' as well. Caroline had spent her life bowing and scraping to the expectations of others, but now that her mother is dead, she spends her energies trying to force others to live life to her expectations. Caroline has never had children of her own, and never married either. At least once she hit the age of forty, people in town stopped expecting it of her. Caroline has always been running something, and as a former teacher, she'd pretty well run the school until it shut down.

Caroline was embarrassed by an episode that occurred in 1984 when she fell for a handsome man two years older than she was. She'd tried to fit in, trying not to be boring by showing up at party in a new dress. She drank, smoked, and then naively lost her virginity to him in the back of a Buick. Later, the same man had his arm around another woman, and Caroline's face revealed her embarrassment and lack of defenses. She'd been unable to defend herself from the laughter that seemed to follow her for the remainder of the summer. Meeting Josh and allowing him to kiss her after the dance brings all of those memories back to her in a flood.

Josh and Caroline wind up in bed together, and it doesn't take long before Caroline fears that the town will make her the laughing stock if they find out. Josh sets her mind to ease but soon after he gets into an argument and insists that he and Caroline are not in a relationship - she is just using him for sex.

While Josh quiets all suspicion, he also puts Caroline in the spotlight and she not only refuses to show her face in town afterward, but refuses to speak to Josh again after telling him it is over. Caroline overcomes her unreasonable shame and guilt, finding her way back to Josh when Gavin Jones interviews them regarding Sara and Tom's relationship. There, she openly admits her feelings for Josh and they behave like a couple from that point forward.

Jen Hobson

Jen has been living in Broken Wheel with her husband for ten years now. She runs the town's only blog, and sits on the nearly non-existent town council. Jen was born in a northwestern town in Iowa called Spencer, but her husband was born in Broken Wheel.



As such, after they married, they'd returned to his hometown – although it is often clear that Jen saw their move as a step down.

Jen is a born organizer and prides herself on the fact that if she puts something together, it works. This reputation is put to the test when she decides to get Tom and Sara together so that Sara can stay in Broken Wheel and they can all live happily ever after. She begins by trying to arrange for them to spend time together even in the first few days that Sara is in town.

When Tom is reluctant, Jen is inspired to try harder. Jen is responsible for creating the flyers that advertised the bookstore when it opened, and the success it generated convinces her to begin Broken Wheel's newsletter. The newsletter advertises the Square and then later, in an effort to continue generating visitation to Broken Wheel, she also helps to promote the market and the dance.

Jen is largely responsible for the proposal that occurs at the dance as well. The banner is strung out inviting Sara to marry Tom and stay in Broken Wheel. Although the relationship between the two has its ups and downs, Jen is not surprised to attend their wedding in the end as that had been her plan all along.

Andy Walsh

Andy is the last remaining Walsh family member to live in Broken Wheel. He runs the Square which is the most popular bar in town with his very close friend Carl. Andy had once worked and lived in Denver but had returned to Broken Wheel with Carl to take over the bar.

Andy and Carl are a happy couple and an accepted part of the community. When the Square begins to attract a larger clientele, and in preparation for the dance, they hire Josh to help pour drinks. By doing so, Josh is further exposed to Caroline, and it could be said that Andy and Carl are partially responsible for their happiness, just as Andy is for his part in getting Sara and Tom together as well.

Carl

Carl is Andy's 'good' friend and came back with Andy when Andy returned to Broken Wheel to run The Square with him. He is described by more than one local as extremely nice despite the fact that he is unbearably handsome. Sara's first impression is that he belonged on the cover of a romance novel.

Sara idly suggests his picture should advertise the Square in the Broken Wheel newsletter, and when Jen follows her suggestion, Broken Wheel experiences an explosion of customers - most of them women who wanted to meet Carl.



George

George lives in a house between a disused gas station and the heart of Broken Wheel. He is described by Grace as a man who's had a rough time. His wife left him which is the reason he started drinking and while at first he was able to keep his job at the slaughterhouse for a few years, he was finally asked to leave when the constant alcohol abuse caused his hands to become too unsteady to continue. Sober now, he has been on the wagon for a month, Sara is told.

George was the oldest of his siblings, but despite that his father had given the farm to the others rather than to him, convinced that he didn't have the aggressive nature required to survive and keep the family farm alive. George is convinced that his downfall began when he lost Sophie, although he had known from the beginning that she wasn't his natural child. Despite that, he'd been a terrific father. No one ever mentioned his not getting the farm, or never rising to a supervisory position at work. He was respected. When Michelle moved out, taking Sophie with her, George fell into a bottle and became known as Poor George.

After Sara moves to Broken Wheel, George is inspired to lose the moniker that still stuck to him despite his growing period of sobriety. He helps Sara by first becoming her driver - available to take her anywhere at anytime - and then later by helping her to clean, paint and construct the shelving for the bookstore Sara opens in Amy's memory. He also helps Claire one night, inspired to ease some of her responsibilities by cleaning her house while she works. She later tells him it is the nicest thing anyone had ever done for her.

George is just reaching a point where he can hold his head up when Michelle and Sophie show up on his doorstep. Michelle and her boyfriend Ronald had been fighting and she'd left him, convinced that he would come for her. Meanwhile, she simply expected to stay with George. George doesn't mind at all, although it takes him some time to get used to the teenage version of Sophie. Just as they are starting to form a bond for real, Ronald shows up and just as easily as they arrived, they were gone again.

George falls apart, but only briefly as Claire will not tolerate him feeling sorry for himself. She and Sara are later responsible for tracking Sophie down and inviting her to the wedding, and thanks to Claire, he is sober and ready to be Dad to her.

Sophie

Sophie is George's daughter although not of his genetics. She arrives just seven months after Michelle marries George, and he takes her on as though she is his own. He loves her immensely, and can still remember the expressions she had; how soft her skin was; how her hair smelled and her laugh. Sophie disappeared, and from that day forward, nothing made sense to George. When Michelle returns to Broken Wheel with Sophie, she is a teenager, and is the most beautiful person George has ever seen. She



doesn't remember George at all and introduces herself when he goes outside to the car to help her with the bags.

Sophie meets Sara when she browses the bookstore, and mentions that she'd like a book about dragons. Sara comes across Eragon and sends it to her. The second book in the series is also sent to her along with an invitation to Sara and Tom's wedding. She comes, obviously as interested in reforming a relationship with George as he is with her.

Gertrude

Gertrude is one of Broken Wheel's elderly inhabitants who enjoys the thrill of new gossip with her friend May. Gertrude smoked and drank, although she refrained from smoking in the diner the way Grace did. Despite this courtesy, she constantly smelled as though she walked in a cloud of cigarette smoke. Gertrude also loved food that was full of additives and fat – a combination that had yet to kill her, although both of her husbands had been hopeful. It wasn't long before passive smoking and bad diet put an end to them and Gertrude had been widowed twice.

Although Gertrude and May are a lot alike, even living in similar apartments, their tastes do vary in some areas. Gertrude favors a décor that is complete with tapestries embroidered with positive and cheerful messages, while May finds those to be idiotically cheerful. Gertrude also likes both oil and acrylic paintings, regardless of their depictions. Gertrude's taste in furniture leans toward reliable and sturdy.

May

May is Gertrude's friend, and like her is one of Broken Wheel's elderly residents. May's hair is thin and white and she wears it fastened up into a bun like a sweet old grandmother despite the fact that she'd worn it that way for the better part of fifty years. May had never married and had always shown more interest in men than in children.

May and Gertrude are similar in many ways but May prefers light and delicate furniture, but both women have dark apartments that are overfilled with furniture, and stuffed with plants which contribute to the lack of light.

Tom Harris

Tom has deep grey-green eyes like the color of a November sea and surrounded by a web of fine laughter lines but he isn't smiling much and they radiate little warmth when Amy meets him. Tom is being pushed into spending time with Sara.

While trying to avoid Sara, Tom finds that at the same time he is unable to stop thinking about her. When he returns from work one evening to find her asleep on his couch, he sits beside her and dozes off as well. When he wakes, they kiss and this only increases his confusion where Sara is concerned. On one hand he feels manipulated to spend



time with her and to marry her even, but on the other hand he can't believe how comfortable he is with her.

Tom doesn't actually reveal the truth of how he feels until the wedding is interrupted by Gavin Jones who believes that Sara is trying to enter the country under false pretenses. Then he admits he loves her and after she admits she loves him as well, they are married and Gavin approves her application to stay.

John

John is the only black man in Broken Wheel according to letters that Amy wrote to Sara. He has a salt and pepper beard with grey hair and runs the hardware / grocery store. When Sara goes into his store for the first time and introduces herself, he refuses to let her pay, telling her that her letter brought Amy great joy, especially as the end neared.

John came from Alabama in the late sixties with his mother and siblings. John doesn't talk about his father, and rarely mentions the past but Amy tells Sara about it and she knew that it affected his behavior and decision making even now.

Sara talks to him about Amy, asking him why she never had the courage of her convictions; why she couldn't openly admit that she was in love with John. John quietly corrects Sara, telling her that it wasn't Amy who was afraid to be open and honest about the way they felt about each other - it was him, and he is obviously regretful.

John tries to talk Sara out of marrying Tom at first, insisting that Amy wouldn't have wanted her nephew to marry someone he didn't love. Sara assures him she won't marry Tom but when they finally manage to admit their feelings to each other, they kiss and John happens to witness this exchange and changes his objections as a result.

Madame Higgins

Madame Higgins is the owner of the only clothing store that Broken Wheel has.

William Christopher

William Christopher is the only minister in Broken Wheel. As such, he has the dubious honor of holding all and any denominations of services as are requested.

William enjoys doing his own gardening, keeping the church grounds looking good despite the objections Caroline has to seeing her minister on his knees in the dirt.

William is happy about the upcoming wedding, and is especially joyful to finally complete the ceremony for them.



Josh

Josh is a resident of Hope who is first introduced in this story when he comes to Broken Wheel's new bookstore. He asks about gay erotica, and Sara shows him what she has to offer. Josh is also hoping to meet people and Sara sends him to the Square suggesting he talk to Andy and Carl who run the place. Josh hits it off with them, and soon after they are calling him in to help them work an occasional shift.

Josh meets Caroline in the park and they sit together on a park bench and discuss theology for a time before he leaves, hoping to see her at the Square after the market. Josh is only twenty five years of age, and when he kisses Caroline for the first time, he awakens feelings in her that she was sure were long dead.

Although they struggle at first, largely due to the expectations of public opinion where their relationship is concerned, Josh and Caroline find their way together in the end, regardless of how everyone else feels about them. Love again conquers all.

Gavin Jones

Gavin is a competent and smart man who is an exceptional bureaucrat. It is his job to make sure that rules were made and then followed, and he did his job well for several reasons. Gavin has excellent instincts and knows when something is wrong. He also takes his instincts seriously, and is prepared to investigate if necessary. He also has a formidable memory which allows him to pick up and retain information. He reads the papers, memorizing items of interest which help him to sort out any discrepancies later on.



Symbols and Symbolism

Broken Wheel

Broken Wheel is symbolic of most small towns in America – towns that have been made obsolete by the cities that are nearby and that are slowly dying out as a lack of jobs force the younger generations to go further afield to make a living.

Amy's House

Amy's house is located within walking distance of the center of Broken Wheel. When Sara arrives, expecting to be Amy's guest for several weeks, Amy is dead and Sara finds herself adrift in a strange country, in a town where she knows no one. Despite that, townsfolk welcome her and she is surprised to discover their expectations that she not only stay as planned, but that she stay in Amy's house as she instructed. Amy's house comes to symbolize the embodiment of small town hospitality.

Oak Trees

Oak trees are a beautiful part of the countryside surrounding Broken Wheel and are considered to be one of the highlights of the area, although not exactly a tourist destination. After Amy dies, Sara opens a bookstore that she calls Oak Tree Bookstore.

Books

In this story, books are symbolic of everything that makes life good for Sara and for Amy. They use books as a form of escapism; a way to travel, to fall in love, or to broaden their horizons without ever leaving home. Sara is convinced after Amy's death that her books will provide the perfect method by which to get the rest of the town reading.

Sunshine Yellow

Sunshine yellow is the color that Sara decides to paint the inside of the building that she wants to convert into a bookstore. To her, it represents and creates a bright and sunny environment that she hopes is welcoming. She paints the counter top the same color and hopes it reflects a magical feel to customers when they first come in.



Letters To Sara From Amy

The letters to Sara from Amy before her death are interspersed throughout this story providing a snapshot of who Amy was and how Sara came to know some of the residents through her.

The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is the first book that Gertrude read and it inspires her to immediately return to the bookstore for the second and third in the series.

The Book of Books

The Book of Books is what Jen calls the costume she makes for Sara to wear to the market to advertise the bookstore. Made of flannel, it makes Sara feel like a bookish scarecrow, but Jen insists it represents the town and its bookstore.

Fried Green Tomatoes

Fried Green Tomatoes is the book that Sara decides is perfect for Grace as it symbolizes the strength of the country's women. The book leaves such an impression on Grace that it changes her opinion of books in general and of Sara overall.

Strong Women

When Sara encourages Grace to read, Grace admits that she thinks books are full of lies and mislead people. She is insistent that there are no books about strong women – the kind of women who built the country they live in. Sara finds her a book that suits her and drops it off at the diner changing Grace's mind about books.

Marlin 336

The Marlin 336 is the weapon that Grace proudly announces she owns when Gavin interviews her after the debacle at the church. She insists that she brought the rifle to the church for the purposes of celebration, much as many small towns did on the fourth of July.



Settings

Hope

Hope is the name of the town in which Sara arrives, and expects Amy to pick her up. Amy doesn't show up and after over two hours of waiting, a woman approaches her and asks if she needs help. When she learns that Sara is waiting for Amy to pick her up, she enlists the aid of a regular in the diner named Hank to take her there instead. Hope is a satellite community that survives because as a commuter town for the busier town of Cedar Rapids.

Broken Wheel

Broken Wheel is a small town in Iowa that is slowly sliding into obscurity. With a population of just 637 people, the town is unable to sustain much of an economy alone, dependent on farming and service industries in order to survive. The town cinema has long since been closed and has been used as a meeting place for the town council which has also been reduced by attrition to less than a handful of people. Broken Wheel is the town in which Amy Harris lives, and is the place to which Sara travels from Sweden to spend the summer.

Broken Wheel, in Sara's estimation is a waste of concrete, brick and asphalt. The buildings are all single story, as there was never enough growth to warrant more and the wide road that travels through the middle of town has long since been made redundant by the interstate nearby. The entire town seems sad and disappointed. Some shops have windows covered over by boards and other are broken and just left as is. It is about a twenty minute walk to go from one end of Broken Wheel to the other.

Josephssons Bokhandel

Josephssons Bokhandel is where Sara works in Sweden. The bookstore is located only half an hour from where Sara was born and she had begun working there when she was only seventeen.

Jimmy Coogan Street

Jimmy Coogan Street was known as Fourth Street until 1987 when the name was changed. The street was named after a real joker according to Amy, and gave the town a certain amount of dignity.



Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace is the name of the diner in Broken Wheel run by Madeleine who answers to the name Grace rather than her own.

Broken Wheel Truck and Transportation (BTT)

Broken Wheel Truck and Transportation is where Tom works. His boss Mike ran the family company for years, even sponsoring the local baseball team and voted business of the year in 1997, but now he and Tom discuss the sale of the company to a business in Hope that wants to take over the industry for the entire area - so much so that they are offering a job to anyone how has qualifications. The longtime family business ends and Mike admits that he is taking a job with his sister's husband in the home electronics industry.

Oak Tree Bookstore

Oak Tree Bookstore is the name that Sara gives to the bookstore she opens in Broken Wheel with Amy's book collection.

The Square

The Square is the bar that Carl and Andy run. It is the center of town and the place where residents gather for community news from locals. Sara goes there in an effort to meet people.

Bloomfield

Bloomfield is where Michelle and Sophie live.

Madame Higgins's Boutique

Madame Higgins's Boutique is where Sara goes with Jen, Andy, Grace, Josh, George, Claire and Caroline to find a wedding dress.



Themes and Motifs

Contradictions

When Sara first arrives in Ohio, she is stuck without a ride to Broken Wheel in a town called Hope. While there, she is offered help by the woman who runs the diner. When she discovers Sara is stranded, she immediately arranges for Hank, a customer who is there drinking coffee, to drive her there. Both the woman from the diner and Hank make it fairly clear that residents of Broken Wheel shouldn't be trusted and that she should keep a close watch on her wallet. These statements are a direct contradiction to what Amy has written to her regarding her home town, and Sara isn't sure what to think, but she decides not to make any assumptions and carry on with the plans she and Amy made. When she gets to Broken Wheel, Hank offers to return her to Hope where she can get a room and where it is at least civilized, he implies, but again Sara refuses and thanking him, gets out of the car.

In Broken Wheel, Sara goes into the diner called Amazing Grace and asks if they know where Amy Harris lives. Madeleine, known as Grace to everyone, tells her she picked a heck of a time to come and visit, adding that Amy is dead. Sara is stunned silent, and hardly knows what to do next, but Grace helps her out by suggesting that she should go immediately to Amy's house where the memorial should just about be winding up. With little in the way of options, and still trying to wrap her mind around the distance she had come to visit a woman who is dead, she allows Grace to wrangle a ride to Amy's from George who is sitting in the diner. So far, both towns are on fairly equal footing where hospitality is concerned. George takes her to Amy's where Sara is assured by the townsfolk who are there that Amy fully intended that Sara stay regardless of whether or not she was still there to share the visit. She is shown to the guest room and shortly afterward, the house clears out and she is alone.

Sara isn't alone for long as the residents of Broken Wheel immediately rally to decide how best to occupy her time. Sara is the first tourist the town has ever seen, and they are determined to make sure she has a good time. Each and every business owner is quick to give her whatever products she tries to buy; she is unable to pay for a drink or a meal; and even her groceries are given to her by the shopkeeper, John, who assures her it is the least he can do for the joy that Sara brought into Amy's life.

This, of course, is a direct contradiction to the commentary made by the two residents of Hope that Sara met on her way to Broken Wheel, and a reader can't help but wonder if perhaps this was just their attempt to convince Sara to stay with them instead, thereby increasing their population numbers.



Small Town Crisis

Broken Wheel is a typical small town in Iowa that is struggling to survive. It had already reached its peak where population and growth is concerned long before Sara left Sweden to visit Amy there, and like many small towns off the beaten path was on its way to obscurity. This is a situation that is discussed by John and Tom not long after Sara decides to open a bookstore on the main street through town, locating it between Amazing Grace diner and the hardware store.

Sara travels to Iowa, leaving Sweden for the first time on any real vacation, with the intention of spending several weeks with Amy. Unfortunately, before she arrives, Amy passes away but she makes sure to tell everyone around her that she still wants Sara to stay despite the fact that she won't be there. In truth, she'd been aware of that possibility when she'd invited her, but hadn't told her. Amy's death leaves a large hole in this small town, and John is one resident who feels this acutely. He becomes withdrawn, and reclusive. Tom worries about him, and visits him several times a week in an effort to stave off depression, and on this particular occasion, he asks John what he thinks of Sara's plan to honor Amy by using her vast book collection to start a bookstore in her town. John immediately tells Tom that Amy isn't staying, and shouldn't be encouraged to do so because the town is dying.

John explains himself, telling Tom that like many small towns in America, a lack of employment opportunities forces the youth of the town to move on eventually in order to survive. With few people moving into the town, and even fewer having children now, the population dwindles. The middle aged residents become senior citizens, and begin to die off and the town's population decreases even further. With the loss of Amy, John is morbidly aware that her death is similar to the canary in the coal mine – indicative of the decline of small town America.

Tom isn't sure he agrees with John, convinced that depression is playing a large part in this new attitude. Tom isn't convinced that they should encourage Sara to leave. The truth is that he likes her, and enjoys the time he spends with her. While he hasn't exactly broadcasted his feelings, and in fact has mostly kept emotional distance from her, he believes that she might want to stay if encouraged by locals even a little bit. Her enthusiasm displayed while setting up the new bookstore reveals that she might be interested in staying, and in Tom's mind, they should be encouraging new people to stay in an effort to rebuild Broken Wheel. He asks John why he believes they shouldn't coax her to stay, but John doesn't answer and gives the impression to the reader that he might not have an answer that makes sense.

Small towns across the country face this kind of uphill battle every day in an effort to avoid extinction. They must find a way to attract people to stay if they want their town to be more than a footnote in history.



The Value of Books

Amy and Sara meet by way of correspondence as a result of their shared love of books. They both love to experience new authors and enjoy sending reading material back and forth to each other, each recommendation leading to the next suggestion. Amy feels such a connection to Sara that a correspondence between them begins and before too long Amy invites Sara to come and spend some time with her in Broken Wheel.

Sara has always enjoyed books more than real life. She found they provided her with a richer, more intense experience than life which often paled by comparison as far as she was concerned. As such, while her co-workers planned their futures and went out, dating frequently, she sat with a book instead. Despite not having been a more social person, Sara doesn't feel as though anything is missing in her life.

By the time Sara arrives in Broken Wheel, Amy has succumbed to a long illness, but their shared love of books continues to influence Sara. After spending time in Broken Wheel, she comes to love the people and wants to do something to return their kindness. She decides to use the vast collection of books Amy has to open a bookstore in her memory, and leave it behind as her gift to them.

The most difficult task Sara has beyond convincing the town council that a bookstore is a good idea, is convincing the residents of Broken Wheel that books are wonderful - that they open the mind, the heart and the imagination to new experiences and that there is a wealth of knowledge at the fingertips of anyone who has the courage to take the first step. She begins by making signs and grouping books into categories that she believes will attract attention. Some signs attract more than others of course and are meant to do so, as occurs when Sara puts up a sign advertising gay erotica after Josh comes in and requests it.

The bookstore is everything Sara hopes for and more. Not only does she inspire everyone to pick up a book eventually, but she also manages to defend herself against Caroline and her accusations that she is selling porn by sending her home with a book from the 'Gay Erotica' shelf. Caroline is surprised, both by the book and by the fact that she enjoys it.

Grace insists that the bookstore is a complete waste of time, sure that Sara will never get it off the ground. She insists that books are for people who like fantasies about love that has no basis in reality. Grace would rather see a book about strong women, but they don't exist, she tells Sara. Sara decides to give her a copy of Fried Green Tomatoes which not only proves Grace wrong, but also inspires her to help Claire with the cake stand at the market.

Books can bring an entire community together, and can inspire them to broaden their horizons. They can bring knowledge, inspire travel, teach new skills, or just provide escapism from day to day life if that is what is required. All is all, an asset to any town.



Love Conquers All

In this story, love is a force that overcomes all obstacles. It begins with the love that Amy Harris has for the town of Broken Wheel. She'd grown up in this small town, and in her correspondence with Sara, she'd shared the depth of her attachment to the community and those who share it with her. She regales Sara with tales of her loved ones, sharing their foibles, and stories about hardship which endears Sara to them before they even meet her.

Sara comes to Broken Wheel expecting to spend a few weeks with Amy, only to learn that she'd died while Sara was on her way. Disappointed, she considers leaving, but those who are attending Amy's memorial service in her house when Sara arrives convince her that Amy wanted her to stay regardless.

Sara stays and discovers that Amy was well loved in her town of Broken Wheel, and her loss is felt acutely by many. These friends, neighbors and extended family members do their utmost to make Sara feel welcome and to look after her every need. Thus begins Sara's love for Broken Wheel and its inhabitants.

Broken Wheel is a town that is dying when Sara arrives. Most of the youngsters move away as soon as they are able, the search for employment taking them to the nearby cities. As the elderly residents die off, the population declines. Sara isn't resigned to one future over another for the town however. To her, the town is in flux and all that is required to bring it back to life is some effort. Sara opens a bookstore in Amy's memory, and begins the process of giving back the love she'd been shown since she arrived. By giving the town the gift of the books she and Amy shared and loved, she is sharing Amy with them as well as giving them a lasting treasure - the gift of books.

By opening up the town to something new, Sara becomes something of an inspiration. Plans are made for sales, dances, and markets that bring people into Broken Wheel in much larger numbers. The ability to attract people to town is multiplied by Jen's creation of a newsletter, and soon Broken Wheel is no longer a town on death's door.

To keep Sara from going back to Sweden, the townsfolk try to arrange a marriage between her and Tom Harris - Amy's nephew. Tom is more than a little reluctant, and fights the idea all the way to the altar. Then he finally admits that he'd loved Sara since the first time he'd seen her. Sara had already realized her feelings for him and with the town's help, they get to the altar.

Josh is a resident of nearby Hope, and is hired by Andy and Carl at The Square to help with the increase in business. As a result, he meets Caroline and falls hard for her. She can't stop thinking about him either, but the difference in their ages is a real stumbling block for this church going woman. When their affair becomes public knowledge, she is mortified and calls it off, but love conquers all such obstacles and this is no exception. The strength of their love for each other brings them back to each other with enough strength that Caroline no longer cares what the town thinks.



Love even overcame race in this story as Amy confesses her feelings for John, and her death reveals his feelings for her. Although John never overcame his fear of publicizing these feelings, they could not be denied, and anyone who knew them at all, knew that they cared deeply for one another.

All in all, love is a driving force in this story. George loves his step-daughter Sophie so much that he almost loses his way when she pops into and then back out of his life, but though he thinks she is gone forever, Sara and Claire have other plans. They contact her and invite her to Sara and Tom's wedding, bringing her back to George without her mother.

Love conquer all. It is a driving force that can overcome any obstacle; cross any distance; beat any odds. Love is the way.

Believing is Becoming

Belief can move mountains; cross oceans; reach for the stars. With belief, a person, or group of people, can accomplish anything. The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend gives several examples of how belief changed circumstances with life altering results.

In the first example of belief, a girl leaves her homeland for the first time to spend weeks with a woman she'd only met online in a country she'd never been to before. Sara Lindqvist has lived a geographically sheltered life, with little exposure beyond what books had to offer in the way of education. To travel so far on her own took a leap of faith on Sara's part; a belief that the woman she was going to vacation with was real. Her willingness to believe brings her to Broken Wheel.

Sara is not alone in displaying the power of belief. Amy asks her friends and neighbors to make Sara welcome, and believing in Amy like they do, the town reaches out to her, doing all that they can to make her stay memorable. They believed in Amy's assessment of friendship with Sara and took her in as one of their own. By making her welcome, Sara finds herself wanting to give them something back. She gives it considerable thought. A bookstore is what she realized the town really needed and Amy's vast library of books could be the stock, she proposes to the council.

Sara believes. She believes that she can give back to the people who were so good to her. She believes that books are a lifelong gift, if only a person were to become interested to begin with. Many told her it wouldn't work. Many admitted they didn't read. Few came in at first, but Sara believed. She believed that this collection of Amy's favorite books, and those that she added were appreciated already and should be appreciated again. She believed that she could open the town up to reading, and set about a plan to make it happen. She succeeded.

Jen believes too. She believes that she can create the circumstances that will allow Sara to stay. As much as Sara feels welcome and at home in Broken Wheel, they already can't imagine life without her in it. She is the spark that creates life in this town, and with her around, the residents of Broken Wheel believe they have a chance and



can survive the death march of many small towns just like them across America. Jen doggedly pursued that ideal from the start, trying to set Sara up with the most logical choice for her - Tom. Even when it appeared that they would never give themselves a chance, she believed it could happen. It did.

Caroline believed. She believed that she was a church going woman who lived her life within the parameters that church would approve of. She was a chaste woman who never dated; never engaged in physical liaisons. For many years, she is this woman. and believes it is her. Then Josh comes into her life. He opens her eyes to feelings she thought were long ground into dust. For a brief moment, she believes. Then the church going woman surfaces again, seeking balance; fearing change, but Josh believes. He believes that Caroline feels the same way for him as he does for her and he believes in the possibility of them. The strength of that belief brings them together again as Caroline sees that there is more than the church going woman in her.

Belief is powerful. Whatever you truly believe in, can be made reality through effort and belief. What we believe, we become.

Styles

Point of View

The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend is told entirely from the first person perspective of its main character, Sara Lindqvist who takes her first extended vacation ever, deciding to visit Amy Harris in Broken Wheel, Iowa for a period of several weeks. Interspersed between the chapters which chronicle her time in Broken Wheel are letters from the woman who inspired Sara to take this trip - Amy Harris. Sadly, Amy dies just before Sara arrives, and the friends who met online never get to meet in person. The letters appear throughout the story, revealing background and Amy's opinions of people and current issues are offered. Amy's insights allow Sara some advantage when it comes to getting to know the locals.

This small town offers the reader a glimpse into life away from the mainstream of large city influences. Businesses are few, and streets are quiet after dark. There is only one main street and it is controlled by a single stop light which is always red. This is the kind of small towns that America was built on and that still exist down back roads all across the country. They are a collection of strong and hardy individuals who are able to fend for themselves in a crisis, and who believe in the honesty and decency of most people.

Small towns in America are generally on a downward spiral unless their residents have the drive and ambition to put their home back on the map. When Sara comes to Broken Wheel, she brings a joyful enthusiasm with her that had been lacking for some time in this small town. Her attitude and can-do demeanor inspire Jen to expand the newsletter and make an effort to create more tourism in Broken Wheel. Her efforts are rewarded as the word goes out that there are things to see and do in Broken Wheel, and the spiral continues to inspire her and others. By inspiring others, and themselves, the town begins to show signs of life again. People in Broken Wheel pull together to work toward the common goal of improving the opinion Hope residents have of their town, and are surprisingly successful.

The town soon regains its 'can do' attitude and becomes a town that is on the rebound from a tough economic stretch. Sara and Tom getting married and staying in Broken Wheel provide the first young couple to turn the tide and stay in town instead of leaving. This marks the beginning of Broken Wheel's revival.

Language and Meaning

The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend, written by Katarina Bivald is a story that could have taken place in any one of hundreds of towns across the United States. Broken Wheel is a small town with one main street bisecting the few businesses that still survived. With a population of under 1,000 people, the town is one in which



everyone knows everyone, and most people who live there have done so for their entire lives. This is the town that Sara comes to and falls in love with.

The author uses a bookstore to advance acceptance of alternate sexualities, promoting reading material labelled as gay erotica. Though Caroline is offended, assuming pornography is involved, Sara sets her straight and after considering what Sara told her, Caroline takes an example from that shelf home to read for herself. To her surprise she likes it, but she wouldn't want anyone else to know. She has the same attitude where her relationship with Josh is concerned at first, but he manages to give her the strength to pursue happiness regardless of where it presents itself.

Small town America is as quaint as it is terminal in most cases. A small town of this nature struggles to give employment to the few children who are born there, and they venture out to the surrounding cities to seek their fortunes, seldom returning. As such, the elderly residents who remain slowly die off, and the town is left with vacant buildings that nobody wants and that lose value every year they stand empty. All of this is conveyed and more in this average American town in Iowa. The story reflects how small towns lose the will to fight for their very existence, but in Broken Wheel, the residents of this Iowan town were given a wake up call.

As is the case in any small town, the residents are a collection of eclectic individuals that include a couple, Andy and Carl, who run The Square - a local bar and town hangout; Caroline, who was the victim of small town small minds in her teenage years as the result of a sexual encounter, and in this story revisits her sexuality for the first time since with a young man who is somewhere around half her age; George, who is struggling with alcoholism and depression related to a breakup in which his step daughter Sophie is lost to him for many years; Grace, who runs the diner and always has one hand on a rifle and the other on a distillery - a family tradition for generations in this area; and Tom who put his life on hold to run the family farm when his father no longer could, and never really managed to restart it.

A tourist from Sweden comes to Broken Wheel, seeing it through the eyes of someone who had never been there before. In her short stay in this small town, she comes to love it and the residents who remain, and inspires them not only to try, but to believe that their little town is worthy of survival. Sara comes from Sweden and opens a bookstore on the main street, giving it to the town as her gift for their generosity and kindness. With ideas and energy, Sara inspires this small town to be proud; and to announce it loud. A story of strength, hope, love and possibilities, it is a book to recommend.

Structure

The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend is a story that encompasses 359 pages which is further divided into 52 chapters including the epilogue. Each chapter averages fewer than 7 pages each and throughout the story there are an additional 23 letters from Amy to Sara in Sweden spanning from April 2009 to August 2011 and located an average of every 16 pages. These letters average 2 pages in length and the last letter



was written on August 5th, 2011. This letter expressed Amy's excitement at seeing her friend and her promise that someone would meet her in Hope.

Each chapter is titled rather than numbered, named to reflect the content of the segment. For example, a chapter titled 'A Tourist in their Town' directly points to Sara's arrival in Broken Wheel, Iowa while 'Favors and Return Favors' reflects how Sara tries to repay townsfolk for their unending generosity. 'A Bookshop in Their Midst' is the chapter in which Sara uses Amy's books to open a shop in town, and the segment titled 'A Town Dying' reflects John's observations that without employment for youngsters, the town will simply die off, and was already showing signs of this. The letters interspersed between these chapters offer insight into characters that Amy reveals to Sara before she arrives, so Sara feels a connection to several of them before she meets them.

In the first six chapters, Sara arrives in Broken Wheel and is invited to stay in Amy's house as planned despite the fact that her hostess passed away just before she arrived. In chapter seven, Sara becomes aware that Jen is trying to set her up with Tom and is horrified. In chapter eight, Favors and Return Favors, Sara decides to return the kindness the town has shown her and makes a decision to open a bookstore, and in the process galvanizes the town. Caroline collects armchairs and tables while George helps paint and set up the bookstore with Sara. In chapter thirteen, A Town Dying, John and Tom talk about Amy and about life. John reveals his opinion that the town of Broken Wheel is in its death throes.

In chapter seventeen, the town becomes aware of the power of books as Sara sits in the bookstore, deeply engrossed in a book while slowly the town gathers in the road outside. The event begins when two boys go by the shop and stop to stare in the window. Rather than having someone chase them off, they were able to watch Sara read and she seemed unaware of them. It became a game. How long would she sit there? How long would it take before she noticed them? George is next on the scene and when the boys confess their intentions, he begins watching with them. A crowd gathers. Jen comes over and takes pictures for the newsletter and Grace sets up a barbecue, inviting Carl and Andy to provide the suds. Without doing anything other than reading in a chair, Sara provokes a block party.

Sara's ideas continue to bring in visitors and in chapter nineteen, The Readers of Broken Wheel Recommend, she floats a suggestion that Jen take a photo of Carl to advertise the Square. Jen does, and the result is a torrent of women who come to get a look at Carl up close. Chapters twenty and twenty one deal with Sara's decision to advertise gay erotica as a nod to Josh who had asked her for it. Caroline gets a lesson in the difference between pornography and gay erotica, and discovers the latter to be an engaging read although she wouldn't want anyone else to know. Chapters twenty-four through thirty-three take Sara and the town of Broken Wheel from preparing to hold a market, the market day and the dance that followed it in which the town proposes to Sara on Tom's behalf and his response.

From chapters thirty-four to thirty-seven, Caroline learns that she still has a sexual appetite and appeal, falling for a man almost half her age who is a bisexual no less. For



Caroline, this is several steps out of her comfort zone. Sara and Tom spend time together, trying to get to know each other and Caroline tells Josh they're done before they've really gotten started. Sophie leaves with Michelle and George spirals in The Darkness Catches up with George, and it seems that sorrow is catching as the next two chapters are of loss and pain.

The final few chapters cover the immigration investigation and the wedding that reveals all. Caroline takes a chance on life and Sophie takes a chance on George, Broken Wheel has hope for the future.



Quotes

It's not much of a town, Broken Wheel.

-- First Woman to speak to Sara in Hope (chapter 1 paragraph 14)

Importance: This is the first person that Sara talks to after arriving in Hope and expecting to see either Amy or a friend of hers there to pick her up. When that doesn't happen, the same woman arranges for someone she calls Hank to give Sara a ride to Broken Wheel helping her to form both a bad and good impression right away.

Never live your life according to the idiots' rules. Because they'll drag you down to their level, they'll win, and you'll have a damned awful time in the process."

-- Grace (chapter 4 paragraph 50)

Importance: Grace gives Sara this nugget of advice after telling her the story of her mother and father, and how they did all they could to try to fit in and the lesson they took away from that experience.

I think that life and sorrow go together like farmers and rain: without a little, nothing will grow."

-- Amy Harris (Between 7 and 8 paragraph 4)

Importance: Amy writes this and other pearls of wisdom that come with age and illness to Sara. It is an insight into how Amy coped with life; with her illness; and with other sorrows that she had experienced in her life.

Don't worry. We'll spread books and stories in Broken Wheel together.

-- Sara Lindqvist (chapter 12 paragraph 59)

Importance: Sara verbalizes this comment as one of many observations she makes in conversations with Amy -- something she began when she first learned Amy had died and wondered whether staying was the right thing to do.

If there aren't any jobs then the young people and the families won't stay, and if the families don't stay then there aren't any new young people, and there's no town without young people."

-- John (chapter 13 paragraph 19)

Importance: John gives Tom his small town rundown, explaining why the town is dying and gives Tom the economic realities of the future he sees for the town of Broken Wheel.

The people from Hope don't think the bookstore is going to succeed.

-- Sara (chapter 18 paragraph 59)

Importance: Sara makes this comment sitting in the Broken Wheel after more than one



customer from Hope arrives and gives Sara the impression that she will fail no matter what. Their attitude irritates Sara and makes her want to prove them wrong.

You should include a photo of Carl in the newsletter in that case.

-- Sara (chapter 19 paragraph 37)

Importance: Sara makes this idle comment to Jen's brainstorming about what the newsletter for Broken Wheel could advertise. When she mentions the Square, Sara puts the suggestion of Carl's photo as a draw to the general public out there, and Jen runs with it.

I'm not going to be able to sleep for days.

-- Gertrude (chapter 22 paragraph 52)

Importance: Gertrude comes in and asks Sara for the sequel to *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*. Although she was convinced that no book existed that would interest her or be worthy of her valuable time, when Sara gets her started on this series, Gertrude is unable to put it down. She makes the above statement after learning that there are two, not one more book in the series.

If we can't invite our friend to live in our country, what was the whole War of Independence about?

-- Jen (chapter 25 paragraph 3)

Importance: Jen becomes aware that Sara's Visa is about to expire and she is determined to do something to enable her to stay in Broken Wheel.

Isn't it funny that you can be together with men who are so wrong for you that afterward you feel like you've been "cured" of them?

-- Claire (chapter 28 paragraph 19)

Importance: Claire makes this observation while talking to Grace at the diner. She becomes Grace's test subject as she applies something she learns from a book Sara gave her - If you have a talent or skill it is your responsibility to give of your gift to those with less ability. The book inspires Grace to bake the cakes that Claire needs for the cake table at the coming market.

I don't know the exact rules, but if you get arrested you'll never be allowed back in the country, and you'll definitely be fined.

-- Tom (chapter 31 paragraph 33)

Importance: Tom is caught off guard by the banner that the residents of Broken Wheel let fly in the Square that evening that shouts *Marry US!* He leaves the bar shortly afterward, and berates Sara for having any part of such a scheme, telling her what some of the possible consequences are in an effort to snap her into her senses.



I just wanted to make sure that you weren't hiding out here because you were afraid of seeing me.

-- Josh (chapter 35. paragraph 15)

Importance: Josh stops in to see Caroline, having seen no sign of her in town, and worried that something had changed between them as a result of their kiss when he brought her home. The comment angers Caroline because it hits her a little bit too close to home.

If you had just damned well done something she would have been head over heels in love with you by now!

-- Jen (chapter 38. paragraph 5)

Importance: Jen berates Tom for not doing anything to encourage Sara from the very beginning after he comments that she doesn't love him and he can't marry her just to enable her to stay.

I mean, Broken Wheel's pretty tolerant, but people aren't so crazy that they'd go along with that.

-- Andy (chapter 42 paragraph 7)

Importance: Andy jokes about the alternate choices they could have made for a partner for Sara - this comment directed at Josh as a choice. Josh isn't thrilled with the insinuation that he isn't suitable to have a romance with a woman and corrects Andy.

Don't worry, no one'll believe she was the one who ended it.

-- Grace (chapter 46 paragraph 7)

Importance: When Josh goes into Amazing Grace's looking for a little sympathy, he is surprised by the venom and sour grapes that come through with Grace's response. She resents that Caroline has always been so prim and proper, and now revels in the fact that she is falling slightly herself.

Do you think, if we'd thrown ourselves into a relationship right from the beginning... would it have been any different?

-- Tom (chapter 50. paragraph 14)

Importance: Tom asks Sara if she believes they would have pulled it off had they been together from the start, feeling bad for dragging his heels throughout the whole thing and possibly costing them a chance to have Sara stay.