

A Slipping-down Life Study Guide

A Slipping-down Life by Anne Tyler

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Plot Summary

A Slipping-Down Life, the third book by the critically acclaimed novelist Ann Tyler, was published in 1970. Written in a clean and unassuming style, it describes the life of Evie Decker, an overweight and lonely teenager, who becomes obsessed with a nineteen-year-old rock musician named Bertram "Drumstrings" Casey. Evie is not a big fan of music but she does listen to the radio, to help fill in the empty hours at the house she shares with her gentle but emotionally remote father. One day, she hears Drumstrings being interviewed by a local disc jockey. Evie goes to one of Drumstring's shows with her best friend, the enormously fat Violet Hayes. They then begin attending shows with another girl from the high school, Fay-Jean Lindsay. Evie becomes fascinated by the cool and slinky Drumstrings, especially by the way he speaks seemingly unconnected sentences and phrases in the middle of his songs. At one concert, after another girl jumps on stage and dances with Drumstrings, Evie goes into the restroom and emerges with his surname, "Casey" carved backwards across her forehead. Everyone is startled, especially Drumstrings, to whom she has barely ever spoken. Evie defiantly concocts a plan to attend all the shows with her hair pinned back to display the scars, and she is aided in this plan by David Elliott, the two-man band's drummer and manager. She becomes something of a local celebrity, and young people come to the shows to see her and Drumstrings.

None of this appeals to Drumstrings, who has no interest in Evie, but he accepts it, because he wants the publicity. He is eager to make money in music and get out of town. Evie's father would like to have a plastic surgeon fix the scar tissue, but he is too timid and defeated by life to make a fuss. After the novelty of Evie's disfigurement wears off, the audiences for Drum's shows begin to wane, and his budding career falters. He becomes morose. After he gets in a fight at a club, his father kicks him out of the family home. He proposes marriage to Evie, saying they could cheaply rent a tenet farming shack in the country. Against her better judgment, she agrees. Drum turns out to be a homebody who just wants Evie to take care of him. He shows little inclination to work as a musician or at anything else. Evie keeps trying to create publicity stunts that will kick-start Drum's musical career. In the midst of one such stunt, a fake kidnapping of Drum, Evie learns that her father is in the hospital with a heart attack. She rushes there, but he has already died. When she returns to the shack, she finds Drum in bed with Fay-Jean Lindsay. Evie sends Fay-Jean away and then announces to Drum that she is pregnant. Her father has left her the family home and she says they should move there together. Drum refuses and at the novel's end, Evie goes alone to the house, her focus now firmly on the coming baby.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

A Slipping-Down Life, by Anne Tyler, tells the story of a plump and rather unpopular high school student, Evie Decker, who develops an intense fascination with a young musician named Bertram "Drumsticks" Casey. At one of his concerts, she emerges from the restroom with his surname carved on her forehead, which begins their odd and affecting relationship.

Chapter 1 begins with the statement, "Evie Decker was not musical." She is described as short and stocky, with only one friend, Violet Hayes, whom Evie invites to a rock concert, much to Violet's surprise. Evie responds to Violet's doubt that she has any interest in rock music by saying she listens to the radio, which is true. Evie has an extremely quiet home life, with only her father and a housemaid, and the radio occupies her time. One day, she hears an interview with a musician named Bertram "Drumsticks" Casey, who offers very little information about himself or his music, other than to say that he lies on his bed and makes up the songs. Evie is intrigued. She asks a boy at school if he has heard of Drumsticks Casey, but he says no. Walking home from school alone, she passes a poster advertising a rock show, with Casey's name at the bottom. Violet warns Evie that rock shows can have filthy lyrics and lewd dancing, according to her uncle. When Evie tells about hearing Drumsticks talk on the radio and wanting to hear him play, Violet agrees to accompany her.

Evie leaves the house without either her father or the housemaid, Clotelia, noticing her. She meets Violet, who is hugely obese, and they enter the theater where the concert is being held. Most of the young people are standing, but Violet leads Evie to a couple of wooden chairs. The first group is four young men in pink shirts who play loudly but elicit little interest from the audience, most of whom are still standing. The next group is better received, but Evie is not having a good time. At intermission, she wants to leave, but Violet is enjoying herself. Finally, a blonde boy sets up his drums on the stage that are stenciled with "Casey," and then a young man in black with long, black hair starts playing guitar to the drumbeat. Evie can't make out the lyrics until the dark-haired boy, who is Drumstrings, starts making strange statements into the microphone in the middle of a song. The statements, such as "Why do you walk on my nerves this way?" seem like non sequiturs, and make little sense. Afterwards, Evie and Violet discuss how odd the performance by Drumsticks was, but Evie admits that she liked it. They agree that Drumsticks has oily hair, his pants are too tight, and he walks in sliding way that is unsettling, and then they go to Evie's house for a soda.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Anne Tyler wastes no time in sketching the lonely and quiet life of Evie Decker. She provides only the most important information, such as that Evie is overweight, has just



one friend, and seems to be neglected by her father. Nothing is said of Evie's mother, but the clear implication is that she is not present. Neither is the father given any characteristics, other than that he seems to be inattentive to Evie. Similarly, the interview with Drumsticks is a closed-mouth affair, which suggests that Evie is attracted to him for exactly this reason. She is obviously a withdrawn person, and the unwillingness of Drumsticks to give details of his life seems to capture her imagination, making him mysterious to her. Evie's friend, Violet Hayes, is not only more outgoing and bold but also fatter than Evie. This difference between them implies that Violet has given up worrying about what others think of her, and in that sense has freed herself to enjoy life more than Evie has yet managed to do. When Drumsticks finally arrives on stage, his demeanor is distant and slick, but his strange habit of speaking unconnected sentences in the middle of his songs increases Evie's interest in him. In some way not yet fully apparent, Drumsticks might be in touch with a deep part of his emotional life, which could be the source from which these sentences come. Clearly, Evie is intrigued, because she sees that Drumsticks has the potential to be soulful and perhaps even insightful, which are among the defining qualities of artists.



Chapters 2 and 3

Chapters 2 and 3 Summary

Summer is approaching, and Evie does not relish the prospect of long days at home with her father, a teacher at the high school, who she knows will simply potter about the yard every day. Violet suggests that Evie spend the summer as a camp counselor, but this does not appeal to her. At school, while the girls change for gym class, they talk about famous bands of the day, such as the Beatles and the Monkees. One girl, Fay-Jean Lindsay, says she prefers a musician from the nearby town of Pulqua, named Joseph Ballew. Evie does not recognize Ballew's name, but asks Fay-Jean if he sang at the recent rock show, and she says he did. Evie asks if Fay-Jean knows Drumsticks, and Fay-Jean produces a poorly made pencil drawing of him, which she gives to Evie. Fay-Jean says Ballew and Drumsticks play at a place called the Unicorn on Saturdays, and Evie invites herself and Violet to come along. She pastes the drawing of Drumsticks on her mirror in her room. Fay-Jean drives them to the Unicorn, which is in the countryside. Evie and Violet are over-dressed for the show. Ballew is performing when they arrive. They all get beers, even though Evie is only seventeen. Evie intends to take a photo of Drumsticks. When he comes on stage, he does the strange talking again, while Fay-Jean dances with someone. Evie stands, calls out to Casey, and takes his photo when he looks at her.

After his set, he approaches and asks if she is from a newspaper. She says no, and he walks away. Violet spends that night at Evie's house, where the two discuss the show, and Evie admits that she was extremely nervous when she took the photo and when Drumsticks spoke to her. Violet falls asleep, and Evie snaps a photo of her. Chapter 3 begins with a description of how Fay-Jean always dances at the Unicorn and leaves to sit in cars with different boys, so Violet and Evie start borrowing their fathers' cars and going to the shows separately from her. Violet enjoys the place immensely, but Evie feels out of place. She is interested only in Drumsticks and his strange sentences, which she thinks must mean something. Other girls approach him but Evie cannot bring herself to do so, fearing that she would look and sound silly. When a girl grabs Drumsticks on stage and dances with him, he laughs, and Evie goes to the restroom. Someone screams from that direction, and Fay-Jean calls out Evie's name, which draws Violet to the spot. Evie is smiling in the doorway of the restroom, supported by two girls, her forehead dripping blood. A policeman is there. Violet asks Evie what happened, and she says it is his name. The policeman asks for her name but she misunderstands, and says, "Drumsticks Casey."

Chapters 2 and 3 Analysis

Evie's lack of interest in the coming summer provides evidence that watching Drumsticks perform has been a highlight for her, which now preoccupies her. She shows little interest in the chatter of her schoolmates about famous musicians, but



immediately perks up when Fay-Jean mentions a local rock star. The poor quality of the drawing given to her by Fay-Jean symbolizes how murky the personality of Drumsticks is to Evie. Her act of sticking it on her mirror foreshadows the deepening of the connection between them that will soon occur when his name is written on her face. Taking his photo at the show is important for three reasons. First, it advances the plot, by instigating a first meeting between Evie and Drumsticks. Second, it shows how timid she is, because the simple act of taking his photo seems bold and daring to her. Third, this action makes the point that the image of Drumsticks, the face he shows to the world, is what has captivated Evie. In Chapter 3, immediately after another girl flirts with Drumsticks by dancing with him, and he responds with a big smile, Evie goes to the restroom and emerges with cuts on her forehead. The chapter ends with a psychological cliffhanger, in which it appears that the cuts on Evie's face are related to Drumsticks, but not enough information is given to make clear what the connection is. This page-turning technique is well-executed by the author.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The marks on Evie's head are immediately described in Chapter 4. Made with nail scissors, they span her entire forehead and spell the word "Casey" in ragged letters. At the hospital, the attendants are stunned to see that the letters are written backwards, as if Evie were reading them from inside her own head. Evie declines to talk to anyone about the marks, including Violet, who has come to the hospital with her and is not at all perturbed by the events. Violet leaves the room to call Evie's father while the doctor stitches the cuts, telling Evie they are not serious but she eventually will need plastic surgery to remove the scars. The doctor keeps her overnight for observation, and talks to her father before he visits Evie's room. As Evie gets in bed, she asks Violet if Drumsticks is aware of what happened, but Violet doesn't know. Violet leaves and Evie's father enters. He turns on the light, and Evie offers to show him the cuts. He declines, but she shows him anyway. He glances, drops his eyes, and says he doesn't understand why she would do it. He shows her clothing he has brought from home for her, and she reflects silently that she had always expected him to say he traded his wife, who died in childbirth, for her, but he has never said it.

He stands by the window, a thin and awkward man, and mentions that plastic surgeons are expensive, but Evie says she does not want one. He seems not to hear, and asks if she was drinking, but she says only a half-beer. He asks if she would wear bangs to conceal the scars, but she refuses. Her father, who seems kindly but tired, predicts she will have a different outlook in the morning. She sleeps poorly, and wakes early. In the mirror, her entire face seems transformed and bloodless, but the letters stand out. She holds up her wrists to the mirror, and then gets back in bed, her heart racing. A nurse enters to take her temperature and looks startled by the sight of Evie's forehead, but says nothing. Later, a newspaperman arrives with Drumsticks. He recognizes her, and at the man's bidding, he poses with her for a photo. She notices that Drumsticks smells like marigolds, and there's something cold about him. The newspaperman asks why she did it, but she has no answer, so he suggests it was because she is a fan of Casey's music, and she vaguely agrees. He asks if she planned it but she again has no answer, and he says the text will only be a caption, anyway, which irritates Drumsticks. After the man leaves, Drumsticks asks why she wrote his last name. She says his first name was too long, and he says everyone calls him Drum. He remarks, almost to himself, that the sensation of looking at his name on her face is dream-like, and then he leaves without saying goodbye. The doctor enters, shakes his head, and signs her release papers.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Presumably, Evie would have looked into the mirror to carve Casey's name on her own forehead, which means the letters would be backwards, but rather than mentioning this, the author cleverly notes that it is as if Evie were looking at the name from within



herself. This serves to emphasize the intensely personal nature of the act. Evie's silence about her thoughts or motives adds to the mysteriousness of the backward letters, and also suggests that she is not sure about the meaning of her own actions. She seems strangely calm about the situation, and there is no indication that she is disturbed or in shock, but she wants to know if Drumsticks is aware of what happened, which shows that she is still fixated on him. Her insistence on displaying the wounds to her father is an act of defiance, to demonstrate that she is proud, not ashamed, of what she has done. Even so, her sleep is disturbed, and when she looks at herself in the morning, she also looks at her wrists in the mirror, as if to suggest that she would have cut them if not her face. Later, Evie's inability or unwillingness to tell the newsman why she did it strengthens the impression that she does not understand herself. Her few moments alone with Drum create no sense of camaraderie or even communication between them. When he leaves, he just drifts away, almost in mid-sentence, as if she were somehow unreal to him. Nor does she seem thrilled by his presence. The name on her forehead seems to have tied them together, but the author wisely shows that neither person can feel good about such self-mutilation.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

For several days after she returns home, Evie does not change out of her bathrobe, or clean up her room, or speak to anyone except her father and the maid, Clotelia. Her father wears a disappointed expression, but he and Evie do not discuss their feelings. Clotelia speaks roughly to her, especially about the messes Evie makes around the house, and Evie responds with equal rudeness. Evie reflects wearily that even after four years, Clotelia treats her like a stranger. Mostly, Clotelia likes to watch soap operas on television, and she shows little inclination to do any real work. They watch TV together, discussing the plots and bickering, with Clotelia even telling Evie she is fat. When Violet visits, Clotelia tells both of them that Drum Casey will never come to visit. Evie wants Violet to tell her what they are saying about her at school, and Victoria compares the students' reaction to the time a student shot himself. At dinner, she and her father engage only in unimportant conversation, and Evie eats too much. She stops listening to the radio, instead lying in bed looking at magazines or daydreaming about meeting Drum someday when she is slim and denying that she ever cut letters into her forehead. After ten days, her father speaks to her about going back to school. She tries to get out of it, and then reluctantly says she will probably go the next day.

Her father goes out and Clotelia, who is making coffee in the kitchen, ignores Evie, who goes downstairs and looks up "Casey" in the phone book. She sees no "Bertram," although two Caseys have the letter "B" after them. One is a wrong number, but the woman who answers the second number calls for Bertram after Evie asks to speak to Drum. When he comes to the phone, she tells him she is the girl who carved his name into her forehead, and asks to see him, because she has something to tell him. He wants her to say it over the phone, but she refuses, and he finally agrees to come to her house. When she hangs up, she sees that Clotelia has overheard her, and disapproves. Evie goes upstairs and pores over her clothes, looking for the right thing to wear. She chooses a red dress, and when Drum arrives in a pickup truck, she asks him to take her to school. She discovers that he is nineteen, and does not do much of anything for work. They talk about the photo in the newspaper, and she asks how Drum usually gets publicity. He says his manager, the drummer, handles it. Evie suggests she could come to all the shows, where people could see her face, which would cause talk. He says the strategy might work until her forehead healed, but she says she will not fix the scars, which startles him. When they reach the school, he says he does not like her publicity idea, and lets her out. Several girls see Evie get out of the pickup, and she knows they will gossip, which pleases her.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The psychological effect on Evie of what she has done becomes apparent in this chapter, as she retreats into herself, showing little inclination to engage with the rest of



the world. Clotelia is no help, treating Evie with scorn and showing no understanding of the turmoil she must be feeling. Her father is not unkind but he remains distant and uncommunicative, which leaves Evie isolated in this difficult time, without good advice or a willing ear from an elder. Victoria is still her friend, but she has neither insight into Evie nor the capacity to provide solace. Evie's interest in what the students are saying about her at school indicates that she still feels connected to the outside world, but it also suggests that she hopes this surprising act of hers will somehow provide new status for her. No sooner does she agree to go back to school than she contacts Drum, which shows that her "public" life is now aligned in her mind with him. Not only does she get him to drive her to school, but on the way she proposes a plan that will further cement their public life together, through her attendance at all the future shows. Almost instinctively, Drum rejects this plan. He realizes her strategy would yoke them together, and his amazement when she says she has no intention of removing the scars carries with it an awareness that she wants remain identified with him. By the end of the chapter, it's clear that Evie will attempt to somehow stay with Drum, who seems equally determined to retain his independence.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The chapter opens with a description of the drummer, David Elliott, who some people tried to call "Guitar" as a funny nickname, which didn't take, because David is too serious. He's six feet tall, with light blonde hair and blue eyes, but girls generally are not interested in him, because of this seriousness. He talks about the band's prospects of moving up, in contrast to Drum, who always talks about getting out of his hometown. David, who is an insurance salesman as a day job, does the work of getting gigs and publicizing the band. Drum thinks he drags the beat, but David denies it and tells him to get a new drummer if he feels that way, but nothing ever changes. On a Saturday afternoon, David visits Evie at her home. He finds her on the porch and introduces himself, although she knows who he is. He hesitates, and then tells her that he thinks Drum is quite talented, and asks if she agrees. She says yes, and then he reveals that Drum has told him about her publicity plan. He likes the idea, and he dismisses her concern that Drum is against it. David says he is the band's manager, and he insists that it is bad idea to listen to Drum, who is not good at such things. This convinces her, and David leaves.

That night, David and Drum pick up Evie at her house. She is wearing a skirt and blouse with a hairband that exposes the letters on her forehead. David sends her back into the house to change into a dressy, black outfit, which he says will make her more noticeable at the Unicorn. Drum thinks this is silly, but Evie changes into black. She asks David if she should wear this outfit every time, from which Drum realizes the plan is for her to come every weekend. He protests, but David is unmoved. David tells Evie to read a newspaper when Joseph Ballew is playing, but Drum is adamantly against that idea, and David relents. At the door to the Unicorn, the policeman and the proprietor recognize her. The proprietor is worried but agrees to let her sit alone on a bar stool beside the dance platform. David lights a candle he has brought with him, and puts it next to her. Drum plays first, and Evie stares at his face without blinking for the entire performance. She does not move, and David, who is nearby, signals to her, trying to get her to stand or take a drink, or do anything. She ignores him. She sits slumped, looking dumpy, and people begin whispering about her. David gives up trying to get her to do something. Instead he watches as the audience's attention moves back and forth between Evie and Drum, and he nods with satisfaction.

Chapter 6 Analysis

In this chapter, Evie finally gets an ally in her plan to stay close to Drum. The intention of David in agreeing to the publicity stunt is simply to attract public attention, which is probably quite different from Evie's actual intentions, but at least they have the same plan. She quickly agrees when David says that decisions about publicity cannot be left to Drum, because this gives David the role of fending off Drum's complaints. The



seriousness of David, which apparently is so intense that it overshadows even his good looks in the eyes of girls, is perfect for Evie's purposes. She needs a hard-nosed accomplice if she is to have any hope of breaking through Drum's defenses. David shows his flair for publicity in his decision that Evie should dress up in black to stand out, and in seating her with a candle beside the dance floor, where she will be easily seen by everyone. When Drum starts playing, Evie's motionlessness does not seem to be affected. This is probably just Evie being herself, and it works beautifully, because she is, after all, rather strange. She is also quite clever, for it is Evie who dreamed up this publicity stunt, and realized how she could take advantage of her self-mutilation by presenting it to everyone, creating a notoriety that would help to bind her to Drum. Whether this is foolish or immature of her could be debated, but it does reveal a defiance and bravery in her character that must be admired. While it is almost impossible to deny that Evie has made a bad mistake in carving the letters on her forehead, her response to the crisis is at least resourceful, which helps to make her likeable.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Evie's attendance at the rock show is so deemed so successful that her role is considered to be permanent, or at least until the audience becomes disinterested in her. David wants Evie to change her outfit or do something other than sit motionlessly and stare, but insists on sticking to her natural response. She does not want to playact. The boys pay her a small sum for each night, and when she suggests doing it for free, David agrees but Drum refuses to allow it. Exasperated, David gives up. As school ends with the arrival of summer, the other students all want Evie's photograph in their yearbooks, and after signing her name a few times, she begins to mark the forehead of her photograph with "Casey" written backwards. She does almost nothing during the summer days except wait for the ride to and from the Unicorn, when she can sit with Drum and ask him questions about himself, which is the only way to attract his interest. On the way home from a concert, Evie and David always exchange pater about how the night went, but Drum is silent, unless he is asked a direct question, and then his answer is usually noncommittal. In June, the Unicorn expands Drum's appearance from Saturday nights to Friday nights as well. Drum has to work late Fridays at the A&P store as a grocery bagger, so David and Evie pick him up at his house, which turns out to be above a service station. His mother, startled at the size of the writing on Evie's forehead, talks to her about what a talented musician her son is, and Evie agrees.

Evie becomes accustomed to running upstairs on Fridays to fetch Drum at his house. She and David develop a friendly relationship, especially since Drum rarely speaks. Her questioning of Drum becomes less pointed and more relaxed. At the Unicorn, people stop staring at her or whispering, and she begins to worry that she will be fired. To avoid this dreaded outcome, she asks David if maybe she should stop coming, and he says he will ask Drum. That night, a man from a nightclub in Tar City hires Drum for a two-week stand. At Drum's house, they awaken his mother to tell her the news. Mrs. Casey asks if Evie will go to Tar City also, but David says she is thinking of quitting, and Evie acknowledges this. Mrs. Casey says that Evie might want to go with her and Mr. Casey just to watch one show, but Drum says no, which angers Evie, who says she will never see another of his shows again, and that Joseph Ballew plays better guitar than he does, anyway. Drum stoutly denies this. Evie cries all the way home. When she sees her father in the living room, he says only that she's home late. As usual, she tells him she was with Victoria. He says there is cocoa in the kitchen, and she should remind him to give her shopping money to buy new clothes, because she seems to wear the same outfit all the time.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In this chapter, Evie's situation regarding Drum and David moves from one of triumph as a star attraction at the rock show to the decision that she will no longer attend shows,



because the audience has lost interest in her. This change in her fortunes over a month or so is believable, because it was inevitable. Drum's basic attitude toward her remains consistently one of disinterest that sometimes shades into irritation, even though she uses a time-honored ploy of getting him to talk about himself. His generally closed-mouth nature, which earlier in the story might have suggested deep thoughts, is now revealed to be not much thinking at all. Evie remains captivated by him, but Drum is proving to be a shallow young man, full of himself and his ambitions, whose only interesting quirk is the disconnected sentences he speaks in the middle of his songs, which he cannot explain to Evie. When he rebels against the idea of her going to see a show at Tar City, she demonstrates her hurt in an explosion of anger, but the only thing Drum seems to take from this episode is that she thinks he is not a good guitar player. David is sympathetic toward her, but ultimately, his interests lie with Drum and the band rather than with her feelings. Her father, unaware even that she has been going to the rock shows, does not register that she is upset when she gets home. At the close of the chapter, Evie's short adventure with Drum seems to have ended, leaving her just as bereft of love or support as she was before it began. This is an important turn in the story, because effective plotting requires a succession of problems presented and resolved. In this case, the new problem is the old one, which is that nothing has changed.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Evie cuts bangs that cover the lettering on her forehead. Her father is pleased, and says he knew she would come to her senses if just left her alone. She throws away her black clothes and the drawing and the photos she has of Drum. In the Tar City newspaper, she sees a review of his show that calls him "strictly amateur." She visits Violet, and tells her she cannot believe how silly she has been to chase after Drum. She tells Violet that her father will be taking over another teacher's class at the high school next term. About a week after her parting with Drum, she is at home when Clotelia announces a visitor. It is Drum, who looks tired, and says he got fired from the Tar City job. He claims it was because he was getting too friendly with the proprietor's daughter, and the disagreement ended in a fistfight. His father angrily locked Drum out of the house, and he cannot stay with David, because his mother dislikes Drum, which Evie did not know. She makes him lemonade while he walks around the living room, looking at family pictures. Evie decides to let him sleep on the porch, if he promises to go before her father leaves the house in the morning. Drum is duly gone before her father goes to work the next day, but he soon reappears to ask Evie for breakfast.

While Drum eats, Evie asks why he decided to come to her when he did not have a place to stay. He avoids answering, and then wants to talk about the argument they had. He has decided that even though Evie's presence often makes him feel dispirited, especially because she rarely smiles, she also brings him good fortune. He thinks he would not have gotten fired from the Tar City job if she had come to the shows. He asks if she meant it when she said he was not a good guitarist, and she replies that she just angry, and she could listen to him all day. This satisfies him, and a pattern begins of Drum coming to the house whenever Evie's father is gone, and sleeping on the porch. He says he will not go back to his parents' house. He spends much time listening to Evie talk, which is a delight to her, because nobody had ever paid such attention to her. One day, Mrs. Casey telephones and says she is looking for her son, but Evie says she has not seen him. Meanwhile, Drum and Clotelia are watching soap operas together. During commercials, he listens to Clotelia, as attentively as he listens to Evie. She suddenly asks what Drum wants from her. Drum does not understand, and when Evie persists in asking why he comes to the house, he leaves. Clotelia, speaking to the television, says she does not see her chasing after him, and Evie replies that she isn't sure she wants to do so.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter once again sees Evie's relationship with Drum veer from one end of the spectrum to the other. She starts out systematically eliminating everything that would remind her of him, while preparing her mind to forget him, which is indicated by her dismissive talk of Drum to Violet. The mention she makes that her father will teach at



the high school is a foreshadowing that he will soon play a role in her school life. No sooner has she made progress in ridding herself of Drum than he appears at her door, having lost his job and with nowhere to go. He needs her, which is really all she ever wanted from him, and she cannot resist the chance to help, even though part of her realizes it would be better to let the relationship end. Instead, she is now giving him a place to stay and cooking for him. In return, he offers his presence and a listening expression, but nothing else. When Drum's mother calls to ask if Evie has seen him, her denial appears to be evidence that she wants the situation to remain unchanged, but when she sees Drum listening to Clotelia the same way he listens to her, it seems to spark the realization in Evie that she is nothing more than a convenience to Drum. She challenges him to state his position regarding her, but he avoids this confrontation, and slinks away. Here, the author is presenting a typical phase in a relationship between young people, when the female wants to know if the male is ready for commitment, and he evades the question. The signs are absent that Drum is ready for a serious relationship, and Evie's interest in him looks increasingly likely to end in heartache.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

In Chapter 9, Evie yet again finds herself without Drum's company, as he does not return to sleep in the swing on the porch. At first, she is relieved but later in the morning, she becomes preoccupied with his absence. She sits silently, waiting, and goes outside to watch for him. Late that night, he appears, and says he spent the previous night in the toolshed at David's house, but was chased out in the morning by his mother. He asks if Evie has ever thought about losing weight. Annoyed, she asks why he cares what she looks like, and he says he thought maybe they could get married. This makes her laugh, but it's a forced and pained sound. She declines this proposal, but he argues that she must like him, and he doesn't have a home and his career is going nowhere, and it would be good publicity, and he likes her. She asks what he likes about her, and he says she is a good listener, but she says that is not enough. He repeats that he likes her and he wants to have a house and a change. Evie pauses, making Drum wait for her to say yes. Finally, she says, "Why not?" Drum gives her a cool kiss.

In Chapter 10, Evie has uncomfortable dreams that night and awakens convinced that Drum will not marry her after all. After her father goes to church, Drum appears, and she makes breakfast for him. He complains that there are no biscuits, and when she says she doesn't know how to make them, he tells her to learn from Clotelia, and she agrees. He says he can borrow David's Jeep the next day, to take her to Dillon, South Carolina, for the marriage. She says that is where all the low-lives go, and she refuses, but he says Dillon is the only place where a three-day wait is not required. Before they resolve the situation, Evie's father drives up, and Drum quickly leaves. Violet helps to arrange the wedding, advising Evie to lie about her age when she applies for the license in Tar City. This strategy works fine. Violet drives her to Tar City, and is very pleased by the turn of events. Evie and Drum wait three days for the license, during which Drum locates a shack they can rent for twenty-four dollars a month. When Drum kisses her, it turns out to be not as exciting as she had hoped it would be. On the morning of the wedding day, she dresses and tiptoes out of the house without disturbing her father. Violet and David go with them to Tar City, although David announces that he is against the wedding, because it is too hasty. During the trip, he continues to stress that it is a bad idea, but Evie ignores him. It all seems unreal to her, anyway. Drum has planned on a Justice of the Peace performing the ceremony, but Evie insists on a minister in a church. Drum threatens to get out of the car, but Evie becomes stern, insisting that everyone stop arguing, find a minister, and they will have a bottle of wine after the wedding. Everyone agrees, and a very simple ceremony is held, with Evie receiving a ring as thin as a wire.



Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

By Chapter 9, it is evident that the on-and-off nature of the relationship between Evie and Drum is more than just a plot device. It is a demonstration of how unstable they are as a couple. Evie's initial relief at finding him gone is soon replaced by nervousness, because caring for him represents the only outlet she has for her emotionally closed-in life. Similarly for Drum, Evie is a way out of his troubles. He mostly needs someone to take care of him, as a substitute for his mother. His reasons for wanting to marry are frighteningly childish, yet Evie accepts them. At some level, she recognizes that this is a foolish decision, which is symbolized by the disturbance of her sleep, and when she awakens, she believes he will change his mind, as if it all were a dream. A part of Evie knows that calling off this idea would be for the best. Yet, her objections are to relatively minor aspects of the plan, as if she can voice her concerns without actually jeopardizing the marriage. The mild disappointment she feels when Drum kisses her is another bad sign, given that a lack of passion between a young couple about to marry is an indicator that they are not well-suited in terms of sexual chemistry. David is the only one among the four friends who has no doubt that the wedding is not advisable, but he is eventually silenced by Evie. When the situation becomes fragile over the debate about whether a J.P. or a minister should conduct the wedding, Evie takes charge. Throughout the novel, she has demonstrated strength of character, particularly in her brave response to everyone concerning the letters on her forehead, but her problem is that she puts this strength to wrong purposes. More than Drum, Evie is the one who seems to have potential to do something interesting with her life, but she needs to follow her best instincts in making decisions.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

The couple moves into the tarpaper shack Drum found, which is outside Pulqua, in the middle of tobacco fields that had formerly been occupied by tenant farmers. Evie is glad the place is completely empty and featureless, because she can make it her own. She uses posters from the Unicorn as wallpaper, buys household items from the dime store, and they go to her father's house to ask for furniture. Her father is stunned by the news of the marriage. He has never met Drum, and barely looks at him when he shakes hands. He says all this was unnecessary, because he was going to pay for a plastic surgeon, and he vaguely waves in the direction of the house, telling them to take whatever furniture they want. Drum's mother is far more emotive, shaking her son and telling him he's a fool, but he is oblivious. At the shack, he turns out to be a homebody, happy to have Evie cook for him, and doing little himself but laze around the place. Evie is happy, and even David admits it would be nice to have a place of his own. Evie resumes going to watch the boys play at the Unicorn, where Drum still talks in the middle of his songs, and nobody knows what it means. To help reconcile Drum with his parents, she invites them and her father to dinner. Everyone is polite, although strained, and they have a nice time. Drum's father says he can have his old job back, pumping gas, and Evie's father says he is buying a new car and will give them his old one.

Chapter 12 begins with an altercation at the unicorn, when Zach, the proprietor, tells Drum he can play only on Saturday nights now, not Fridays, because of small audiences. Drum becomes disgusted and stomps out, saying he will not play at the Unicorn again. In the car, he tells David to find another gig for them, but David says no other work is available. That night, Evie lies in bed thinking about the perilous state of their finances. In the morning, she suggests that she should take an after-school job at the library that her father said was available, but Drum does not like the idea, because people will say he must have been cut back at the Unicorn. Evie is silent, but she goes to the library to get more information about the job, and ends up working there all afternoon. She gets home late and Drum wonders where she has been, but she feeds him, and he is content. She goes to work every day after that, enjoying the quietness and organizational aspects of the job. On Friday, Drum needs the car to work late pumping gas, so he picks up Evie at the library and takes her home. He does not complain about her job, because she gives him her pay, and he is out of cigarettes. David comes by and asks Evie to take charge concerning the Unicorn job and make Drum go there on Saturday. She agrees, and after some dispute, Drum allows himself to go and perform. Christmas arrives, and Evie hardly notices the vacation, because she has been attending school only rarely. Drum is unhappy about the lack of progress in his musical career, and Evie decides she wants to have a baby, but getting pregnant is a challenge, because in Drum's defeated mood, he keeps going straight to sleep when he gets in bed.



Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

The start of married life for Drum and Evie holds some promise, even though their first home is a shack surrounded by tobacco fields. True to the up-and-down nature of the novel's plot, they go through a brief period of good spirits, which cannot be dampened even by the dismay of Evie's father or the scolding that Drum's mother gives him. Both Evie and Drum have made escapes from situations that were bothering them: she from the lack of human closeness in her life, and he from feelings of dependence and failure. Even David gives his seal of approval to the independence signified by their new life in the shack, but that independence is illusory. The only furniture they acquire is from Evie's father, who also gives them a car, while Drum's father puts him back to work. Chapter 12 immediately presents the couple with new troubles, when Drum loses one of his work days at the Unicorn, and the reality of poverty begins to seep into Evie's thinking. Drum's unwillingness to let her work is based solely on what he thinks people might think about him, but he drops that pose as soon as Evie gives him her pay. Increasingly, Drum's principles and scruples are proving to be easily put aside whenever they threaten to compromise his self-interest. Another example of this weakness is provided when Evie easily talks him into going back to the Unicorn, even though he had declared that he would never return to play there. By the end of the chapter, the brief satisfaction of the couple in having their own place has been replaced by Drum's defeatist attitude, which is perfectly in keeping with the character of a boy who has not yet learned to respond to life's difficulties with determination. Meanwhile, Evie begins to turn away from Drum as a source of solace by thinking about having a child, but even that simple act is proving difficult to accomplish, as Drum's emotional unavailability is already affecting their sex life.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

At the start of Chapter 13, a preacher named Brother Hope comes to town, who Evie learns is giving sermons about the evils of drugs, liquor, and rock-and-roll that include her name as an example of a local girl who ruined her face during an orgy over a musician. Young people in the families of people who attend the church come to the Unicorn to see Evie and Drum, but it isn't enough to keep Zach from driving to their house one day to say he can't afford to have Drum play on Saturdays anymore. This time, Drum does not even argue. David says Zach should have realized the church crowd was coming to see Drum, and Evie decides the best way to get publicity is to go to the church and make a fuss. David reluctantly agrees, and says he will contact the newspaper photographer. The boys and Evie go to the church together on Sunday, with Evie wearing her hair to expose her scars. They sit in the back as Brother Hope goes through a litany of modern evils, finally arriving at rock music, and mentioning Evie. At this, she leaps up and shouts that he is lying, that she did not ruin her life, she married the musician. A flashbulb goes off in her face, and she remembers the photographer. Drum becomes angry, and tells the preacher that Evie's sacrifice would have been much greater if she was prettier. The three leave, and drive home in silence.

In Chapter 14, the newspaper prints a photo of Evie with a caption about a local girl protesting Brother Hope's condemnation of rock music. Evie throws the paper aside, but David drops by the next day to say the band has been rehired at the Unicorn, because people kept calling Zach to ask if Drum would play. Drum takes it all calmly. His relationship with Evie has been strained by his comment in the church about her not being pretty, although they do not discuss it directly. Evie thinks she might be pregnant. Drum is practicing different music, which sounds more like folk or blues than rock. He is despondent and Evie says she will figure out a new publicity stunt. When David comes over for lunch and Drum goes in the kitchen, Evie suggests that Drum should be kidnapped. David is uncertain, but later she calls Fay-Jean and makes a plan. One evening, Fay-Jean, her sister Doris, and Violet come to the door with David. The girls surround Drum and try to tie his hands with a nylon cord, while Evie explains that they are kidnapping him for a publicity stunt. Drum yells and kicks, but the girls tie him up and take him away in David's Jeep. Evie is alone, rather shaken by the violence of the event, when the high school principal, Mr. Harrison, comes to the door. She tells him Drum has been kidnapped, but he responds that her father is in the hospital. Evie persists in telling him about Drum, until Mr. Harrison finally says her father had a heart attack and is dying. Blankly, she follows him into the car.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

The arrival in town of Brother Hope sets up an opportunity for the author to create another dip and rise in the fortunes of her protagonists. When Drum loses his last day of



weekly work at the Unicorn, Evie rises to the challenge with a daring plan for publicity. She pulls the two boys along with to the church, leaps to her feet at the right moment, and creates just the publicity she had intended. As usual, Drum complains and balks all the way, and he unthinkingly makes a cruel comment to the congregation about his own wife, even as she exposes herself to ridicule and public curiosity for his benefit. Unsurprisingly, he does not apologize and does not even thank her when Zach succumbs to public demand and rehires him at the Unicorn. Instead, he continues in his self-absorbed funk, attempting nothing to improve his lot. Once again, Evie takes it upon herself to help him by concocting an even more daring publicity plan. She realizes that Drum cannot be allowed to know about it, because he undoubtedly would refuse to participate. This time, Drum's opposition is so violent that it leaves Evie shaken, but she remains firm in her commitment to the plan. Throughout the novel, Evie has demonstrated single-mindedness and forcefulness of will in stark contrast to the unfocused dissatisfaction of Drum, and her commitment to him is so strong that it initially overpowers even the frightening news from Mr. Harrison about her father. Yet there is another component to her slowness to grasp that her father is seriously ill, which is that he is her only pillar of strength. Without Evie's father, as emotionally distant as he is, she will be totally alone.



Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

When Evie arrives at the hospital, Mrs. Harrison is there with an old lady named Mrs. Willoughby who lives next door to Evie's father. Mrs. Willoughby tells her that her father died. Mrs. Harrison asks if Evie would like to see him, but she declines. Mrs. Willoughby relates that she was talking to him over the fence when he suddenly slumped. The two ladies offer to stay the night with Evie at her father's house, but she insists on being alone. Evie wanders through the house, touching nothing, until she gets to her room, which is empty of furniture because she moved it to the tarpaper shack. She picks up the phone, calls Clotelia, and asks if she will come to spend the night with her. Clotelia agrees, and then Evie calls David's house. His brother answers, and Evie says she wants to speak with Drum, who is in the toolshed. The brother thinks it's a joke, but Evie says to tell Drum to come home, because her father died. Clotelia arrives and immediately tells Evie to comb the bangs over her forehead. She then asks how many months pregnant Evie is. Surprised, Evie says three. Clotelia asks if she can have a mirror that Evie's father promised to her, and Evie vaguely agrees. Clotelia says she expects that she will be taking care of Evie's baby for her, as her new job, but Evie says she must be crazy. Clotelia says she heard that Evie quit school, but she denies it. Clotelia then says that she must have separated from Drum, but Evie denies this as well. Clotelia wonders why he isn't with her, and Evie says it is complicated. Clotelia makes a disparaging remark about Drum, and Evie tells her to quit harping at her. Evie drinks a cup of cocoa in silence.

Chapter 16 begins with Mrs. Harrison and Evie in a car, heading to the tarpaper shack. Mrs. Harrison apologizes that Mr. Harrison is not with them, because it is a school day, and he will certainly come to the funeral, but Evie understands. When they reach the shack, Mrs. Harrison leaves and Evie hears Drum in the bedroom. She goes in, and finds him with Fay-Jean. Looking stunned, Drum asks where Evie has been, and she says her father died. Fay-Jean gets into her dress and asks if Evie will zip her up, which she does. Fay-Jean asks how she will get home and Evie says she should walk to a bus. Fay-Jean asks for a lift, and Evie closes the door in her face. Evie goes into the kitchen and begins cooking. When Drum comes in, she tells him she is going to have a baby, and they should move into her father's house. Drum refuses, and Evie says in that case, she will go alone. Drum thinks this is because of Fay-Jean, but Evie says the move is for the baby. Drum remains stubborn about not leaving the shack, and Evie goes into the bedroom to pack. Drums enters and tries to talk her out of it by asking her what she will tell people about the name on her forehead. She says it is her name, and anyway, she did not put it there. He asks what she means, and she says in the restroom at the Unicorn she got into an argument with a girl who held her down and slashed the letters on her face. He helps her bring her bags to the car, saying she might change her mind, but she says she never backs down. She drives away. At the Unicorn that weekend, Drum speaks out during a song, saying, "But the letters was cut backwards. Would you explain?" Evie is not there to provide the answer.



Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

The sudden death of Evie's father changes everything in her life, and she accepts it all stoically. She does not cry or in any way lose control of her emotions, and her insistence on being alone shows that she has learned to bear her sorrows without leaning on anyone for comfort. This sad independence is the result of having lived an isolated emotional life, but it does provide the advantage of having taught her to be self-reliant. Even when she walks through the house, she only looks at the familiar trappings rather than touching them, which is symbolic of her isolation. The emptiness of her room, which has a practical explanation, is also a symbolic signifier of the lack of demonstrated love in the home. Evie again shows her practical, organizational side with the two telephone calls she makes. The first one, to Clotelia, seems surprising, given the coldness the maid has always shown her, but such indifference is the emotional condition with which Evie is most familiar. She has become comfortable with it, in the sense that she knows how to cope with it, and it is clear now that this is why she can cope with Drum. Even when she gets home and finds him with Fay-Jean, she remains unfazed. Her allegiance to the coming child has already overshadowed her loyalty to Drum, whom she is willing to bring with her to her father's house. For the first time in the novel, Drum remains staunch in his refusal to go along with her wishes, although it seems highly likely, given his character, that he will change his mind after he has been left alone for a while. Even so, the two apparently are still unreconciled several days later, when Drum plays at the Unicorn. This time, the question in the middle of his song concerns how the letters could have been cut backwards into Evie's forehead if someone else did the carving. What Drum does not see is the symbolic content of his question. How much of our emotional pain is inflicted by others and how much by ourselves?



Characters

Evie Decker

Evie Decker is a teenager in her junior and senior years of high school during the novel. She is bright and strong-willed, but overweight and lonely, with only one friend, who is described as "enormously" fat. Evie's life is marked by isolation, both at home, where her father largely neglects her, and at school, where she is mostly shunned by others. After she hears Drumstrings Casey in a radio interview, Evie surprises herself when she calls his name during one of his concerts and snaps his photograph, but this is only the start of an obsession that will lead her into a series of actions that defy convention while demonstrating to all her loyalty to Drum. This commitment, symbolized by the carving of his surname into her forehead, is so intense that it eventually enfolds Drum in marriage, even though he clearly is not physically attracted to her. Evie's force of will dominates Drum, and that will grows ever-stronger throughout the book. Drum is not the only one influenced by Evie's strong presence. She becomes rather infamous at school, and her attendance at Drum's concerts draws many young people there to see the strange girl with the scarred name on her forehead. Even as her marriage to Drum begins to unravel, Evie continues to concoct ways of helping his musical career, but once she becomes pregnant, her single-mindedness starts to shift over toward the impending child. Evie is a person who has learned to live within herself, and whose requirements of love and reassurance from others are minimal. In that way, she is a sad character, because her emotional life is stunted, and yet at the same time her self-sufficiency is admirable. Throughout the novel, she puts her thoughts and energy into a boy who seems unworthy of such devotion, but toward the end of the story, as she begins to focus on the coming baby, it seems as though she finally will have the right recipient of her powerful feelings.

Bertram

Bertram "Drumstrings" Casey is a nineteen year-old rock guitarist and singer who captures Evie's attention when he is interviewed on the radio. His nickname comes from his penchant for drumming on the guitar strings. He dresses in black, has long, black, oily hair, and slinks when he walks. The songs he writes and performs are marked by his tendency to speak lines in the midst of them that are unconnected to the song and seem to make sense only to him, although even Drum says he does not know how they arise. He thinks of himself as an exceptional musician and has dreams of getting out of town and becoming well-known, but does very little to help turn that dream into reality. Instead, he relies on his manager and on Evie to get work and publicity for him, while he complains and grows morose about the lack of progress being made in his career. After he gets in a fight and is kicked out of his family home, he asks Evie to marry him, which is obviously because he wants someone to take care of him now that his mother is no longer available. He never thanks Evie for all that she does for him, and tells her does not want her to work, but changes his mind quickly when she gives him her first pay.



Drum is not bad at heart, and yet he is selfish, shallow, lazy, and unappreciative. In short, he is a spoiled brat, even though he comes from a poor family, and never has had any material benefits. He practices his guitar fairly often, but nevertheless has not learned self-discipline. Drum will not make the transition from a boy to a man until he learns how to be responsible for himself.

David Elliott

David Elliott is the drummer who plays with Drumstrings Casey, and the manager of the two-person band. He is a serious young man, who thinks about making progress and moving up in the world in contrast to Drum, whose dreams of musical success seem to be mostly centered around getting out of town. David sells life insurance as a day job, which suits his hustling efforts to create publicity and get work for the band. He firmly believes that Drum is a talented musician, although he also is scornful of Drum's lackadaisical attitude, and knows that he will not make progress in his career without being led. Drum is sometimes irritated by David's playing, which he says is behind the beat and drags him down, which is symbolic of David's earthbound, practical nature. He is a good-looking young man, tall and slender with blonde hair, but girls generally show little interest in him, apparently because they are warded off by his serious appearance and attitude. David is the first person to back Evie's plan to turn her self-mutilation into a publicity stunt for the band. He displays creativity and flair in organizing the way Evie dresses for the concerts, positioning her where everyone can see her, and putting a candle at her table. He also goes along with Evie's later publicity plans, and develops a friendship with her, even though his first loyalty remains with Drum and the band. David is the only one of the four main teenaged characters who objects to the wedding between Drum and Evie, recognizing the folly of it. Even so, he participates in the ceremony, and remains friendly with the couple after the marriage. Increasingly, he comes to rely on Evie's ability to control and manipulate her husband. Together, he and Evie are like surrogate parents of Drum.

Violet Hayes

Violet Hayes is Evie's best friend. She is hugely fat but seems not to be worried about her weight or about what others think of her. A likeable character, Violet is a loyal friend to Evie, who never condemns her for the outlandish things she does, even to the point of not being particularly concerned when Evie carves Drum's surname into her forehead. Clearly, Violet is not the voice of reason in the novel, but she provides the most emotional support Evie gets from any other character. When the two start going to Drum's concerts, Violet discovers that she enjoys the atmosphere, and she is an upbeat companion, unperturbed even when unthinking boys call her plump or fat. She not only approves of Evie's decision to wed Drum, but advises her to lie about her age to get the marriage license and even drives her to the registry to apply for it. Violet also participates in Evie's plan to stage a kidnapping of Drum for publicity purposes. In the novel, she represents the staunch best friend who sometimes can be the only bulwark for a teenager going through the feelings of isolation that can accompany difficult



emotional experiences. As such, she is not a wellspring of good advice, but her understanding of Evie and sympathy for her comes from being a peer who shares at least some of Evie's problems. In short, her role in the novel is that of the classic sidekick.

Sam Decker

Sam Decker is Evie's father. He is a quiet and withdrawn man, who seems to have been defeated by life, perhaps in large part by the death of his wife at Evie's birth. In the novel's early chapters, he seems to flit through the house like a shadow, paying little attention to Evie, and is so inconspicuous that even his name is not given. Indeed, throughout most of the book, he is simply called "Evie's father," and his job as a teacher at Evie's high school is of little consequence to her or to the story. Gradually, through his occasional conversations with Evie, it becomes apparent that Sam is a kindly man, with good intentions for his daughter, although he lacks the way or the will to emotionally engage with her. His reaction to her self-mutilation is one of helpless confusion, rather than anger or even despair. He feebly attempts to get her to wear bangs to cover the scars, and he offers to get a plastic surgeon, even though he allows it will be expensive. After her marriage, he lets her take whatever furniture she wants from the house, but his manner is confused and distracted. The most forceful and direct thing he does in the book is to give his old car to the couple after their marriage. Shortly after that, when he dies suddenly of a heart attack, it is as if his emotional absence has now progressed to the next logical step of permanent physical absence.

Clotelia

Clotelia is the cleaning lady at the house of Sam and Evie Decker. She is lazy and imperious, and perhaps worst of all, it seems to Evie that Clotelia has never developed a liking for her even after four years of working for the family. Clotelia does not mince words in her regular criticisms of Evie's appearance and actions. She spends a good deal of time at the house watching soap operas and talking back to the television. She often threatens to quit and find a better job, but it seems unlikely she could ever find an employer less demanding than Sam, who is cowed by her, and who never voices displeasure over her shoddy housekeeping. After Sam's death, when Evie calls Clotelia and asks her to stay the night with her at the house, Clotelia obliges, but it seems to be more out of curiosity than from any desire to comfort Evie. Instead, she continues to criticize Evie and Drum, and asks to take a mirror from the house that Sam, who has died that very night, had promised to her. Clotelia is a self-involved and unsavory character.

Fay-Jean Lindsay

Fay-Jean Lindsay is one of Evie's classmates at school. She shares with Evie an interest in the local musicians, although Drumstrings is not her first favorite. Fay-Jean



drives Evie and Violet to the first rock concert they attend, but the other two girls soon start going without her, because Fay-Jean keeps leaving the nightclub to get in cars with different boys. Evie regards Fay-Jean as a senseless girl, but when Evie concocts the kidnapping of Drum as a publicity stunt, she enlists Fay-Jean as one of the kidnapers. Later, when Evie returns home after her father's unexpected death and finds Fay-Jean in bed with Drum, Fay-Jean is so unfazed that she actually asks Evie to zip up her dress. She then has the temerity to ask Evie for a ride home. Fay-Jean does not even have enough moral backbone to be ashamed of herself.

Ora Casey

Ora Casey is Drum's mother. She is excessively proud of her son's singing and playing, and has great faith that he will become a well-known musician. She is startled by the sight of Evie's carved forehead, but willingly accepts Evie's devotion to her son. When Drum's father kicks him out of the house after he gets in a fight at a nightclub, Mrs. Casey searches diligently for Drum. She would gladly take him back into the family. When Drum and Evie announce that they have run off and gotten married, Mrs. Casey is outraged. Later, she reconciles with them. Her love and support of her son are admirable, but it also is obvious that by coddling him too much, she has played a key role in developing his sense of entitlement.

Zach Caraway

Zach Caraway is the proprietor of the Unicorn, where Drum and David perform. A big-bellied, sweaty man in an apron, he serves beer to the patrons and provides the main justification for Drum's self-image as a professional musician. Zach thinks like a businessman, although he apparently is not a very good one. He switches back and forth in terms of giving Drum work one or two nights per weekend, or none at all, depending on how he assesses the audience turnout, but he does not seem capable of equating the publicity stunts Evie arranges with audience growth. Zach's club is obviously struggling financially. A good-hearted man, he is very apologetic whenever he cuts back Drum's hours, and he continues to rehire Drum, even though Drum has screamed abuse at him.

Joseph Ballew

Joseph Ballew is the headlining musician at the Unicorn. He does not have dialogue in the novel, although he is shown playing on stage, and the others characters discuss him regularly. Drum considers him to be a friend, but still thinks he has no sense of rhythm, while he is Fay-Jean's favorite local musician, and Zach is firmly committed to him as the nightclub's main attraction.



Brother Hope

Brother Hope is a traveling preacher who comes to Pulqua for two weeks, during which he gives sermons at a church about the sins of contemporary society, among which is rock and roll music. He mentions Evie by name in his sermons, as the girl who carved a rock singer's name on her forehead. News of this prompts Evie to confront Brother Hope in the church, in what proves to be a successful publicity stunt.

Bill Harrison

Bill Harrison is the principal at the high school Evie attends. His main part comes late in the novel, when he arrives at Evie's house to inform her that her father has had a heart attack and is in the hospital.

Mr. Casey

Mr. Casey is Drum's father. He appears only once in the novel, when he and his wife come to dinner at Drum and Evie's house, with Evie's father. There, Mr. Casey lets Drum have his old job again of pumping gas, which Mr. Casey has taken away after Drum got in a fight at a nightclub.

Mrs. Willoughby

Mrs. Willoughby is the next-door neighbor of Sam Decker. She is speaking with him over the fence when Sam suddenly collapses from his heart attack. Mrs. Willoughby describes this scene to Evie at the hospital.

Martha Harrison

Martha Harrison is Bill's wife. She is present at the hospital, and later drives Evie home.



Objects/Places

Evie's House

Evie's house is where she lives with her father for much of the novel. Description is sparse. It has a fenced yard, the front porch has a swing, the characters sit together on a couch in the living room in front of the television, and Evie's room is upstairs. The house has little games and knickknacks that Evie's father uses to pass the time. A photo of Evie's dead mother is in one room, and the kitchen has a table and chairs where Evie drinks cocoa and has breakfast.

The Unicorn

The Unicorn is a bar or nightclub in a rural area where Drum and David perform. It is dark and cavernous, without many distinguishing features. The restrooms are in a corner in the back, and the audience can step onto a raised dance stage at the front, where the bands perform.

Drum's House

Drum's house is above a gas station that is run by his father. It is a cramped but clean place, with a flowered armchair, vinyl plants, plastic on the furniture, and a glass-fronted bookcase full of family photos.

The Tarpaper Shack

Drum and Evie's house is a tarpaper shack formerly inhabited by tenant farmers and surrounded by tobacco fields in a rural area. When they arrive, it is utterly empty, without even a piece of crockery left behind. Initially, both young people are happy there. They furnish it pieces from Evie's father's house, with goods bought from the dime store, and with posters from the Unicorn that they paste on the walls.

David's House

David's family home is not described, except to say it has a toolshed in the yard, which is where Drum sometimes sleeps and where the girls take him when Evie stages Drum's fake kidnapping.



Pulqua

Pulqua is the town where Evie lives with her father. The town is not described and the state is never mentioned, although at one point it is mentioned that a neighboring state is South Carolina.

Tar City

Tar City is a bigger town nearby, where Drum gets a short-lived job playing in a nightclub. It also is where Evie and Violet go to apply for Evie's marriage license, and where she and Drum go with Violet and David for the wedding ceremony.

The High School

The high school is attended by Evie, Violet, and Fay-Jean. In one brief scene, Evie talks to a boy who sits behind her in class, and in another scene, she dresses behind a latticed partition in the girls' change room during gym class, while listening to the other girls talk about rock musicians. Generally, the school is an inhospitable place to Evie, even though her father teaches there.

Farinia

Farinia is the town where Drum lives with his family. It is not described.



Themes

Crossroads in Life

This novel's title was not selected haphazardly. The main character, Evie, makes a decision that sets her on a precarious course, and the book's title suggests that her choice places her on a slippery slope. Behind this plot development is the author's awareness that life presents all of us with key situations, in which we must make decisions that can profoundly affect our lives. Often, one or more of such crossroads appear in a person's youth. If bad judgment is exercised, the effects can be disastrous. Evie allows her infatuation with Drum to overwhelm the more sensible side of her nature, which tells her that she would be better off without him. Instead, she agrees to marry him, becomes pregnant, and then they separate, leaving her at age seventeen without other family, little means of support, and a baby on the way. Even if Drum were to return to her, as seems likely, he has demonstrated no interest in working hard to help support the young family. He seems happiest just hanging around the house and letting her take care of him, as if she were his mother rather than his wife. Drum is also at a crossroads. His career as a musician seems to be reaching a dead-end, and at nineteen, he has neither an education nor other skills to rely on. The choice with which he is faced as the novel closes is not just whether to reconcile with Evie, but what to do with his music and his future that would be more promising than his current situation. The author is suggesting that it is vital to recognize a crossroads, and even more important to choose the right path.

The Need to Outgrow Selfishness

Children are selfish creatures, but they cannot be blamed for it. They are still learning to look outward, beyond self-interest, and to fit themselves into the world rather than acting as if everyone and everything revolved around them. A big part of the process of socialization in individuals is the growing recognition that fulfillment comes through helping others and being productive. Many of the characters in this novel are children on the cusp of adulthood, faced with this shift from total self-involvement to acceptance of responsibility for oneself and others. Most of the characters have not yet completed this shift. Drum has hardly even begun to realize that everything he wants will not fall in his lap, as if he deserves it simply by being alive. Fay-Jean is ruthlessly self-involved, even to the point of apparently not recognizing her own viciousness in sleeping with Evie's new husband. Evie is well beyond these two in her progress toward taking on traits of adulthood, especially in her decision toward the book's end to focus on what would be best for her coming child. David has a natural tendency to think about the good of others without losing track of his own needs, which is why he seems so serious to the other teenagers. He is the most grown-up one among them. Violet is also preoccupied with herself, although this is harder to recognize than it is in Drum. She is grappling with how to feel comfortable in her own skin, because of her enormous size, and she is making good progress, but her own self-involvement prevents her from being



aware of Evie's needs and providing the sympathy and sound advice of a good friend. Most of these characters are likely to grow out of their selfishness in time. If they do not, as adults they will remain mired in a viewpoint of childhood that has outlived its usefulness and has become damaging to everyone around them.

Somebody to Love

If any trait best encapsulates Evie's character, it is loneliness. She wanders through the novel as if she were encased in glass, unable to touch or be touched by anyone. This loneliness is what drives her to make the poor choice of marrying Drum, even though he already has proven to be emotionally remote. Evie has become so used to isolation that Drum's obvious disinterest in her is not enough to dissuade her from marrying him. For her, this is a problem of perception that begins at home, with her father. Apparently lost after the death of Evie's mother, Sam Decker is like a ghost in the house. If he only had the ability to hug her, listen to her, and console or advise her, the change in Evie's life would be huge. Instead, he teaches her by example how to live with loneliness, which eventually leads her to seek solace in someone who has no warmth to give her. Often in the book, Drum is described as cool, or as emitting coolness, which is one way the author shows that he will not give Evie the warmth she needs. Even her best friend, Violet, is a chatty but superficial presence to Evie. A person can go through life with few or even no deep relationships, but that life will be greatly impoverished by this lack of love. The author's message is that ultimately, the greatest joys and the greatest returns come from deep, personal relationships. In the end, Evie recognizes this at some level, when she decides to become pregnant. Those around her do not or cannot provide the human warmth she needs, and so, as a young woman, she will make a new life. She will create someone to love.



Style

Point of View

This novel is written entirely in third person from what is sometimes called the limited omniscient point of view. In other words, the author addresses every character as "he" or "she" and explores the thoughts of only the main character, Evie Decker. Even in showing what Evie is thinking, Anne Tyler does not go into great detail. Occasionally, she mentions a plan or thought that Evie has, or gives a basic description of her emotional state, but generally she lets the action reveal the internal condition of her characters, including Evie. For example, she never writes that David is upset, but in one scene she does point out that David whistles under his breath all the way home. Given an argument that has just occurred, it is easy to deduce that David's whistling is an attempt to control his aggravation. The author often uses this descriptive technique to show Evie's state of mind, as well. The effect of this reliance on dramatizing the characters' emotional states through their actions and dialogue is that the author maintains a cool distance from the story. This is appropriate because the plot concerns young people who make a number of errors in judgment. By keeping her distance, the author neither takes sides nor passes judgment on her characters. She simply shows what they do and say, and the honesty and fairness with which she performs this task is evidence of her sympathy toward the characters. Accordingly, her choice and her use of point of view support the author's objective of creating full portraits of her characters without intruding on the reader with the author's own analyses.

Setting

This novel is not so much "set" anywhere as it occurs in an atmosphere or milieu. The exact state in the U.S.A. is never given, although it is apparently next to South Carolina, and the dialect of the characters has a southern or Appalachian twang. The main town of Pulqua is never described, nor are other nearby towns where the action occasionally takes place. The novel's settings are more localized than this. Most of the action occurs in houses, or even specific parts of houses, such as the porch, or the kitchen, or Evie's bedroom. Another major setting is the Unicorn nightclub, which is only sparsely described. The high school, where a few scenes in the book occur, has almost no description at all. The effect of this lack of detail in the settings is to increase emphasis on the main characters, who are indeed vivid. Enough information is provided about where they live and other places they frequent to put the characters into a recognizable context, but beyond that, Anne Tyler is much more interested in what they do and say than in where they are. Drum, for example, wants nothing more than to get out of his hometown, but in refraining from providing details of his town, the author seems to suggest that the physical place is not what Drum needs to escape. Rather, he needs to get out of the frame of mind he is in, or else he will take it with him wherever he goes. The same is true of Evie and many other characters. The author's indifference to details of setting is a way of pointing out that the internal life counts more than the external one.



Language and Meaning

Two interrelated aspects of the writing in this novel stand out. The first is the simplicity of its vocabulary and sentence structure. Rather than giving the impression that the story itself is simple or childish, this unpretentious style is used with great effectiveness to get at the heart of situations in the story. For example, if a place is being described—say, a home or a nightclub—the details given are few and unembellished, but they are carefully chosen to allow the reader to fill in a complete picture of the place from personal experience. Similarly, descriptions of encounters between characters have a directness that leaves no doubt about what has transpired, and yet, the very clarity and precision of the language used in these scenes invite interpretations that go well below the surface. This is because the author's language has the simplicity of elegance, which means its substance and depth open up new ways of looking at its surface. In life, things are never entirely what they appear to be, and Anne Tyler's direct language is aimed at peeling back the layers of meaning. The second aspect of her style is the dialect of her characters, which uncannily depicts people who are not well-educated and yet are not rubes or illiterate. Aside from the precision of the author's ear in creating this dialogue, the way the characters speak reveals much about how they think. Errors in grammar or the incorrect structuring of phrases have uses for Anne Tyler beyond creating authentic characters. They often signal flawed thinking. While this could be interpreted as a suggestion that people with inadequate educations do not think well, it should instead be seen as symbolic of the straight line between clear thinking, direct expression of those thoughts, and the good choices that follow.

Structure

Like the other "craft" aspects of this novel, its structure is well-planned and straightforward. Without opening quotes or a preface of any kind, it moves straight into the first chapter, which is headed as simply as possible, with the numeral "1." The book follows the same pattern through all sixteen chapters, and its movement through time is strictly chronological. It covers a finite period of less than one year, with no flashbacks or other deviation from its steady course. It is not particularly defined by the seasons, and the only concrete marker of passing time is the school season, which moves from Evie's junior year in high school through the summer into her senior year. The whole novel is told in past tense, which aids its uncomplicated and chronological structure. Like the simple setting and language, the straightforward structure of this novel appears to be a deliberate effort by the author to downplay any "literary" aspect of the work that might otherwise distract the reader's attention from the challenges in the lives of the main characters and how they cope with them. It would be difficult to imagine a more stripped-down, direct structure to a novel, because anything more simple than this—for example, elimination of chapter numbers—would move the book into the arena of experimental simplicity. In other words, it would become so structurally unadorned that it would become remarkable, rather than unnoticeable. The author's method is at once simple and sophisticated: to tell the story as clearly and directly as possible. Anything other than the most predictable or unembellished structure would work against this goal.



Quotes

"Evie ate on, a plumb drab girl in a brown sweater that was running to balls at the elbows" (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"I lie on my bed arguing with the strings, like, and sooner or later something comes out. Then my fingers get to hammering, reason they call me Drumstrings" (Chapter 1, p. 7).

"Can you see me going up with those others? I would be planning it ahead, smoothing down my skirt, tucking in my blouse, saying something memorized that would come out backwards, in a reading tone of voice" (Chapter 3, p. 33).

"He entered with his head leading, just as he entered his classroom while students whispered and passed notes and ignored him" (Chapter 4, p. 41).

"Food she didn't enjoy, Evie thought, was not fattening" (Chapter 5, p. 62).

"Her dowdy clothes gave her a matronly look; her scars, what could be seen of them, seemed in the candlelight to be mainly vertical, a new kind of age-line or tear track which made her appear experienced and incapable of being surprised" (Chapter 6, p. 83).

"Time hung in huge, blank sheets, split by Saturday nights" (Chapter 7, p. 87).

"I feel like things are just petering out all around me and I want to get married to someone I like and have me a house and change" (Chapter 9, p. 130).

"They stayed pressed together between kisses, looking out over each other's shoulders like drivers meeting on opposite lanes of a highway" (Chapter 10, p. 138).

"Who would have thought that Drum Casey would be so homey? He wanted cushions for all the chairs and curtains for the windows, a checkered skirt for the stilt-legged kitchen sink and a frilly bibbed apron for Evie" (Chapter 11, p. 146).

"The house has not yet heard of the death. Clocks ticked, the refrigerator whirred, a desk lamp lit an ash tray with a pipe resting on it and the sort-wave radio was speaking Spanish" (Chapter 15, p. 198).

"Evie felt something pulled out of her that he had drawn, like a hard deep string, but she squared her corners as if she were a stack of library cards" (Chapter 16, p. 211).



Topics for Discussion

Evie has hardly ever spoken to Drumstrings when she carves his surname into her forehead. Why do you think she did this? How would you describe her frame of mind at the time?

Toward the end of the novel, Evie tells Drum that someone held her down and carved the letters on her forehead, but Drum later questions why they were written backwards. What do you think actually happened, and why did more than one version of events emerge?

What do you think is going on with the statements Drum makes in the middle of his songs, which he cannot explain? What does this tell you about how his mind works?

How would you assess Evie's relationship with her father? How does she feel about him? Why?

David says he thinks Drum is a talented musician. How do you think David feels about himself, as a musician and otherwise? What do you think he would say his own strengths and weaknesses are?

Violet obviously likes Evie and she doesn't criticize her, but imagine that you were Violet, writing an assessment in your diary of Evie's character. What would you write?

The young people in this novel all seem to be trying to find their direction in life. In depicting their various struggles, what do you think the author is suggesting about the process of gaining self-knowledge?