

# **A Spool of Blue Thread Study Guide**

## **A Spool of Blue Thread by Anne Tyler**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

# Contents

<a href="#">A Spool of Blue Thread Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 14.....</a>	<a href="#">33</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">43</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">46</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">48</a>

# Plot Summary

"A Spool of Blue Thread" by Pulitzer-Prize-winning author, Anne Tyler, chronicles the loves and lives of three generations of the Whitshank family living in Baltimore, MD.

As the story opens the reader sees Abby and Red Whitshank receiving a call from their middle child, Denny, who has disappeared for many months. He tells his father on the phone that he is gay. When Red gasps in dismay, Denny hangs up on him. Abby tells him to call Denny back but they aren't able to because they don't have caller ID. Abby is furious and makes excuses for why Denny might have been gay all along. Red says he regrets marrying a social worker.

The reader learns that the Whitshank family are bound by many things, besides genetic material. They love to tell family stories. These stories include some of the more often repeated, such as how Abby and Red met, and how the Whitshanks of Boulton Street came to live in their great estate. In particular, Red, is fond of telling the story about how the Whitshanks came to live in the house that they still live in because he is able to paint his father as a man of great intellect and cunning. To the outsider, his father looks like an unethical con man.

Abby, who is in her early seventies, is beginning to show early signs of dementia. She often wanders off and can't find her way back, and she's taken to calling their dog, Brenda, by the name of a dog that they had back when the children were little. The reader learns that there are four children in the family: Amanda, Jeannie, Denny, and Stem. Stem wasn't really their biological son but had been taken in when his father, named Lonesome, died and the child's mother presumably couldn't be found. Abby is found wandering in the middle of a severe thunderstorm in the middle of the street with just her nightgown on.

Stem and his family determine that they need to move in to the family estate to help look after Abby and Red, who has had a heart attack. Red still owns and works at the family's construction business, and only a few days after his heart attack, insists on going back to the office. Stem, who works with him, takes him to work and looks after him. Stem and his wife, Nora, have three sons and a collie that they move in with. Nora is very capable and loving, but also practices a very strict form of Christianity that puts her at odds with the Whitshanks sometimes.

Denny, learning of his mother's problems and his father's heart attacks, comes to stay with them as well, which makes it very cramped quarters in their home. Stem tries to tell Denny to leave, and Denny resents it. He tells Stem that he's not the real child and that he doesn't have Whitshank blood. This sets up the conflict between the two, which will escalate later on in the novel.

Abby goes to a pottery class and, deciding to walk home, gets lost. The family search the roads and streets for her and find her seated on a neighbor's porch about a mile away. She goes to see a doctor who basically says that she does not have Alzheimer's

but doesn't suggest that she has anything else wrong with her. However, two days later, she takes the dog for a walk (a dog that she continues to call by the wrong name) and is hit by a car when she runs into the road after the dog.

The family is devastated by Abby's loss. Red doesn't talk to anyone for days afterwards until it is determined that he hasn't turned his hearing aids on. The funeral is adequate for appearance's sake, but the real mourning happens when they return home and Abby is not there. Abby's best friend, Ree, and their neighbor stop by and she asks them all some very pointed questions about whether or not they should keep the house any longer. Red agrees to move into an apartment.

Meanwhile, Stem and Red are going through some of Abby's old papers and Stem finds an old contract that Abby had written. It discusses the identity of Stem's birthmother. To Stem's horror it is one of their neighbors, BJ Autry, who had lived in their neighborhood for decades and had never stepped forward to claim him. Stem is devastated. When he confronts Denny with the information, he realizes that Denny already knew. This infuriates him further.

Denny and Stem come to blows over who is going to stay in the home and who is going to move out. After their fight is over, they both decide that no one should live in the home. Meanwhile, Nora helps Red look for an apartment. He selects a grungy and dim looking little apartment and the girls are appalled. Red says that he is looking at the function of the apartment, not the social status.

The reader is then transported in time back to when Abby first met Red. Their courtship is examined and shows that while Abby was initially with another boy, she eventually chooses Red because, at heart, he is a good and decent person. Then, the reader is transported back even further to see how Junior (Red's father) and Linnie Mae (Red's mother) met. It was not really love at first sight, but more a case of mistaken identity. Junior had thought that Linnie was older than she was. After they'd had sex a few times he learns that she is only 13 and he is horrified. He tells her that she has to keep it secret or he could go to jail. The reader watches as the young couple are discovered and Junior is run out of town. Linnie's family don't speak to her for four years, even though she still lives on the farm with them.

The reader sees Linnie Mae turning 18 and leaving the farm to go to Baltimore to find Junior. She locates him and through a very rocky courtship end up together. Junior starts his own construction company and builds a house for a Mr. Brill, which Junior falls in love with. He manages to make the house look as if it is built in a crime ridden area of the city and Mr. Brill sells it to Junior cheaply.

Jumping forward to the future the reader sees the house being sold, the doors being closed, and Red moving into his apartment.

# Chapter 1

## Summary

The story begins with a phone call from Denny Whitshank to his parents, Abby and Red Whitshank. The reader learns that Denny is their only son but has been a 'black sheep' almost since day one. The reader also learns that the family took in a boy named Stem, who was more like the boy that Red had imagined he'd have as a son.

Abby is a social worker and urges Red to be more understanding when Denny tells them on the phone that he has decided that he is gay. Red blames her lack of discipline with Denny as a child for Denny's homosexuality. A fight ensues. They don't hear from Denny until the following Fall when Denny calls and asks for money for text books since he's going back to college. Red tells him that they won't cover his textbooks and Abby is angry again. Denny does call again right before Christmas to announce that he's coming home for Christmas, but wants to stop and see his girlfriend. Abby and Red are confused as they thought he was gay. They don't say anything about it, glad that he's 'normal.'

Right before Denny arrives on Christmas the Whitshanks receive a letter from the college saying that even though Denny has withdrawn from school they are still responsible for that semester's tuition. This is the first they've heard of Denny's withdrawal from school. When Denny comes home for Christmas he explains that school was just too expensive and that he's not sure he wants to go anyway.

The reader learns that there are four children in the family, but that Denny is the only biological son. As far as birth order goes, there was Amanda, Jeannie, then Denny, then Stem. Denny had always had trouble at school, his teachers continually calling for conferences. He just didn't seem to care about school or learning. He had no friends, was an incredibly private person, and liked to snoop in other family member's things. As a teenager he'd been into drinking and drugs, and he developed a snide way of speaking to authority figures. Red employed him at the family construction business, but he'd proven to be snide and sarcastic with the customers, too.

In 1991, a year after Red fired him from the construction company, Denny eloped with a girl named Amy Lin, a Chinese-American girl whom Red and Abby had never met. Amy is pregnant with Denny's child. The first Abby and Red knew of Denny's involvement with Amy was when the girl's parents called to tell them that their daughter had run off with Denny. At this point in the story, Denny is 16. Abby tells Amy's father that he must be mistaken, but in a few days Amy calls her parents to say that they can't get a marriage license and are stuck in a hotel in Elkton, Maryland. Amy's father brings them home and Amy has an abortion. She is put into an all girl boarding school for troubled teens.



And so begins a series of jobs in many different states. Denny still calls home sporadically, but in 1997 he is still as much a mystery to him as ever. He phones to invite the family to his wedding in NY. He was the chef at a local restaurant and his wife worked there, too. Denny is now 22. Denny's new wife Carla is older than Denny by a few years and had been married once before. Carla is very pregnant. Three months later she has the baby. It is a girl that they've named Susan.

Denny brings the baby to see them on Thanksgiving. He arrives with Susan, but not with Carla. Carla had to stay to help her mother. Denny returns with the baby again on Christmas and this time Carla comes with her. Both Abby and Red think that maybe Denny has settled down. Every month after that Denny would bring Susan down for a visit and his parents are thrilled. Red says something about Denny's work situation which Denny takes offense to and it is another three years before Denny makes contact with them. He still refuses to see them. By this time the other children have gotten married and had children, too.

The 9-11 terror attacks happen, and Abby and Red are terrified that Denny has been involved. They break down and try to find him to find out if he is okay. They learn that he and Carla split up and that he's living in New Jersey. Amanda, the oldest of the Whitshank children, is now a lawyer, and she manages to track Denny down. She convinces him to come home and he does. He does not stay.

Denny continues to visit sporadically, often bringing Susan, who is now four years old. He returns to New Jersey where he works in construction. Once, they think they see him sitting in a car watching them while they are at the summer vacation home. They never know for sure if it was him or not.

## Analysis

In this chapter the theme of Family Stories is demonstrated in the long explanation by the narrator of how the Whitshanks ended up living in the rather upscale area where they live. It is evident that the family is bound together by their common and shared histories, but in many respects, Denny, their middle child, doesn't participate or buy in to this way of seeing the world.

The symbolism of Abby's pink chenille bathrobe is notable. It was once pink, the author writes, but has now faded so much with age that it is colorless. That this is Abby's housecoat is significant and offers a glimpse into Abby's mental and emotional state. It would seem to indicate that Abby's life was colorful and vibrant, but with age, has faded, is less colorful, almost to the point of being unnoticeable. The reader will learn as the story evolves that Abby was once a free spirited child of the sixties who had dreams and ambitions that were never fully realized.

Denny is an enigma to the entire family. Though he is closest with his sister Amanda, Denny seems closed off and is self protecting from any of his family member's attempts to get close to him. Perhaps to wound them, or for other reasons the reader can only



guess at, Denny seems focused on producing the greatest amount of stress for his family as possible. When he is a teenager he gets a girl pregnant and runs away, then later, as a young adult in college, he calls to say that he is gay. Many years later, he calls to invite them to his wedding, almost overnight. They also learn that they are to be parents. There is a pattern of Denny coming into their lives just to make an impact, and then leaving. Abby, a social worker, cannot fathom what his motivation is for treating them in the way that he does.

Still, the reader sees that Denny is not a vicious person. He rarely raises his voice, never speaks badly to either of them. He quietly accepts whatever they say, then separates himself from them. He does not engage in arguing or compromise. He brings his daughter to the home, a daughter that he is very much emotionally invested in, and then doesn't bring her back to see the family again for three more years. It is as if he is punishing them by withdrawing their ability to be in his child's life. It is as if he doesn't want his child to become a part of the Family Stories.

## Discussion Question 1

Describe Denny and his relationship with his family.

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Red seem to prefer Stem to Denny?

## Discussion Question 3

What is Denny's motivation for not visiting more?

## Vocabulary

installing, volunteered, expertise, fulfill, fretted, offhandedly, straggled, oblique, resentment, deflect, shucking, girth, acquired

# Chapter 2

## Summary

The Whitshank family mythologizes themselves through stories, and through this they believe themselves to be better than the vast populace. Red, Denny's father, tells a story about how they came to live in such a nice house. Red's father built the house for some other people but loved the house and hated the people who were living in the house he built, so he spooked them away by staging a break-in and then telling them offhandedly that there had been a large number of crimes in the area. The people moved out the next week and Red was able to purchase the house for way below market value. The whole family has the same qualities and are all quietly calculating.

The other family story that has been handed down through the generations is the story about Aunt Merrick, Red's sister. She'd decided that she was going to rise above her family's humble origins and started running with the popular crowd. When it came time to go to college she chose a prestigious college and was admitted easily. She befriended all of the wealthy girls and adopted their affectations. One friend of hers, Pookie, became engaged when they were seniors to a man named Trey. However, Red recalls hearing phone conversations where the singular virtues of Trey were in question. Merrick fans the flames of discontent between both Pookie and Trey, whose father comes from a great deal of money. Eventually, Trey breaks off his engagement with Pookie and marries Merrick, which is what she had in mind all along.

## Analysis

The second chapter deals with the family's stories. The Whitshank family tell stories that make them out to be better than they really are; larger than life so to speak. Red believes his family is just as good as the high class rich families around them, but through the stories the reader realizes that they are only there due to Red's father cheating the other family out of the house he built. This goes along with the family's similar qualities. They all wait for what they want and have the patience to wait a long time, having no qualms whatsoever about conning or duping someone.

What the family takes from both of the stories offered in this chapter is their collective abilities to be patient, to plan, and plot, and pursue what they want. They were very good at 'biding their time'. This reinforces to the group that 'good things come to those that wait'. What also comes of the stories is a type of 'us against them' mentality that justifies taking advantage of others in a sort of ends justifying the means.

Merrick's story emphasizes this and the theme of Family Stories is demonstrated, here. They proudly pass these stories down from one generation to the next with seeming pride. They are proud of the wile and wit that their family members have used in order to

get ahead or get one over on others. This provides the reader with a glimpse into the family culture of the Whitshanks.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What prompted Junior Whitshank to go to such great lengths to obtain what would become their family home?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What did Merrick plan to do all along, and why did she do it?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is the Whitshank family so proud of their family stories?

## **Vocabulary**

re-configuring, referred, annoyances, exceptional, elastic, sorrowful, lithe, rawboned, testified, eons, drawl

# Chapter 3

## Summary

It is 2012 and Abby is starting to have problems. She is 72 and Red is close to the same age. It is apparent from Red's conversation with Stem that neither he nor Abby are as quick as they once were mentally. Red tells Stem that Abby has given up driving because of something that happened. When Stem presses him for details, Red doesn't know.

The family becomes worried and throughout the year Abby's behavior continues to be worrisome. She often just stares off into space, forgets where she's going, and argues about things that no one has even brought up. When she throws away her idea box, Red begins to really worry. The idea box was a collection of phrases and scraps of paper that Abby had been collecting to turn into poems at some point. When confronted with her actions, she tells them that she's done with writing poems.

Later, she begins calling the dog "Clarence" when Clarence wasn't the name of the dog. Their former dog's name had been Clarence, however. The children consult a doctor who asks them if she's been violent or forgetful, but in general, their mother has always acted a little eccentric and they can't say that she is exhibiting symptoms of Alzheimer's so they just let it go. Red has a heart attack, but within a week or so is back on the construction site working.

The children step in and ask Abby and Red if they might like to move into a retirement community where there wouldn't be so much work for them, where they could enjoy themselves. Stem had noticed that their current home wasn't being taken care of. Red, who is nearly deaf and refuses to wear his hearing aids, tells them that retirement homes are for old people. The children hire them a housekeeper who could help them out at home. Mrs. Girt leaves after a couple of weeks and both Abby and Red refuse to let the children hire another housekeeper for them.

Finally, after Abby is found wandering in the middle of the road at night in her nightgown, Stem and his wife, Nora, move into the family home with them. Denny calls the day that Nora and Stem (whose real name is Douglas) move in with their three boys. Denny is upset that they didn't ask him to move in with them. He announces that he's coming into town the next day.

Abby thinks back to when Stem first came to live with them. The reader learns that Stem's real father, Lonesome, worked for Red's construction company and used to bring the two year old Douglas, with him on the job. The other men later told Red that Lonesome's wife left them and Lonesome is the only family the baby has. Lonesome ends up dying in the hospital, and Red and Abby take Stem in.

## Analysis

In this chapter we learn about Stem in more detail. Stem is the adoptive son of Abby. After Abby starts to have major blackouts and doesn't remember where she is half of the time, Stem's family decides to move in and help look out for her. As they arrive so does Denny, and the tension between them is palpable. This tension is due to the fact that Denny knows Stem is more like the family than he is and Stem was adopted by them, so Denny has feelings of resentment for both Stem and Abby.

As they all gather around Abby, she decides to tell them how Stem came to live with them. The theme of Family Stories is demonstrated in this chapter and suggests that family stories also have a way of binding its members closer to one another, which is why Abby tells the story. She wants them all to remember why Stem came to them. Stem was named Douglas but after living with them for a while they changed his name to Stem. The reader can tell that not having a true mother around has always weighed on Stem. This is evident as even now, as a grown man, he is very aware that he is not the biological son. This has made him try extra hard to fit in, to become the son that Red would have liked Denny to be, to be everything they could have wanted. This will later backfire on him as he learns the details of his adoption and abandonment from his birth mother.

The reader also sees the theme of Family demonstrated in the discussion about what to do about the flagging health and mental stability of both Abby and Red. Finally, Stem, who is not related biologically, is the one that offers to move in and take care of them. Thus, the theme of Family as a way of taking care of one another and of offering support is shown.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Abby keep calling the dog "Clarence"?

## Discussion Question 2

Why might both Abby and Red dislike Mrs. Girt, or the idea of moving to a retirement community?

## Discussion Question 3

What argument does Denny make for his being the one to move in with Abby and Red?

## Vocabulary

chatty, cosmetics, bureau, cherish, listless, lullaby, recollection, adapted, sapphire, liberals

# Chapter 4

## Summary

It is Sunday and Nora, a fundamental Christian, is getting the children ready to go to church. Abby wants to have a family lunch together. Nora and the boys leave for church and everyone goes their own way leaving Denny and Abby to talk over a late breakfast. Abby tells her side of the story to Denny about the incident where she was found wandering the neighborhood. In Abby's version of the story, the storm had knocked over the large, century-old tree at the end of the block, and she wanted to see the crater it had left. She scooted down there to take a look even though it was still raining a little, but after she'd had her look and tried to come home, the front door had been locked and Red had taken his hearing aids out. She pounded but he didn't answer. So, she'd settled down in the hammock and slept there. Then, in the morning when it was lighter, she went back down to see the crater and that's when people saw her and called Red.

She tells Denny that people saw what they meant to see. Denny says that he completely understands how that could happen. Abby also tells Denny that neither she nor Red need babysitters. As lunch approaches a woman comes to the door. She is a recent immigrant to Baltimore and barely speaks English. Abby had met her at the grocery store and invited her to lunch. Her name is Atta.

Atta is from Europe originally and begins to tell the family what is wrong about America and Americans. She says that she was from the sort of family that everyone wished they had, that her family was a collection of intellectuals and scientists. Abby is proud of her new 'stray' but the rest of the family doesn't think much of her. Later, the girls turn on Abby and tell her that they'd asked her to stop bringing home stray people. They accuse her of trying to replace them, as if their own family isn't enough for her. Their neighbor Mrs. Angell joins them for lunch as well.

Mrs. Angell talks about her grandchildren coming to visit and how they marvel at the birdsong that happens in the morning. Mrs. Angell says that she hears it so much that she doesn't even notice it. Abby states that lately it's been so hot that the birds have stopped singing. She hopes that they haven't given up on their music.

## Analysis

In this chapter several issues are uncovered and suggested. First, there is Abby's explanation of how she came to be wandering in the streets after a storm with her nightgown on. Her explanation seems quite plausible and the family are willing to accept it because to question it would lead them to some unpleasant possibilities, namely that she is critically ill. Second, there is the issue of Denny's return. Everyone would seem to have an opinion on it, but don't speak ill of him in front of Abby, as much as possible.



Lastly, there is the recurring issue of the children all feeling as if they aren't good enough to please their mother.

Additionally, at one point, Abby says something that is very telling and indicates that she has grown tired of something. She says that the birds aren't singing as much anymore. When the others suggest that it is just the heat, Abby shakes her head and says that they gave up singing because they were too tired. They've given over the task to the crickets. Abby is metaphorically talking about herself. As a social worker she always had a passion for helping those who were less fortunate. This is what she still does by inviting interesting people to Sunday lunch when she meets them. Her children don't understand this and think Abby is making a commentary about them not being good enough or enough family.

Second, in the previous chapter she's thrown away her shoebox full of poetry ideas. It was full of bits and pieces, ideas, that were never knit together to make a poem. The reader has learned that once upon a time that Abby had been a free-spirited, creative person who danced spontaneously in public, shouted that she loved someone as loudly as possible, and always had time to help out anyone in need. Now, she seems as washed out and colorless as her chenille bathrobe. When she says that the birds have stopped singing, it is Abby's way of noticing that the joy as begun to go out of her life and she feels helpless to do anything about it.

## Discussion Question 1

Why might Atta find Americans unfriendly?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Abby say about the birds singing, and what does she really mean?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the family view their mother's invitations to strangers to come to Sunday dinner?

## Vocabulary

clumsily, paddled, muscular, azalea, perimeter, exuberance, whimper, scuff, hammock, rummaging, sidestepped, chiding

# Chapter 5

## Summary

The tension continues to build as Nora and Denny clash over cooking the evening meal. Nora snaps that there are too many people trying to 'help' in the house, insinuating that Denny should leave. She says that Douglas jumped at the chance to move in and help out, that after what Red and Abby had done for him he wanted to pay them back. Abby takes insult to all of this.

Once again Abby takes Denny aside and tells him that she is fine and doesn't need a keeper. She wishes that everyone would just stop treating her like an invalid. Then, later, she goes to her pottery class with a friend, but afterwards tells her friend that she will walk home. Unfortunately, she has one of her episodes and ends up wandering around, finally finding a neighbor's steps to sit on.

The next day Merrick comes to visit. Merrick hasn't heard that Nora and Stem were there permanently. She immediately begins to speak about her riches and her upcoming European vacation. Denny intervenes and cuts her off from her flagrant bragging session. He and Stem get into an argument about who is staying permanently and who is going. Merrick says that they should just move to a retirement community, a suggestion that sets Red off. She tells Red and Abby that they are being selfish and being a burden to everyone. Then she turns to Denny and tells him that at his age he should actually have a life. Then, she is gone.

The family packs up and goes to their annual beach house the next day. Denny and Stem continue to argue about who is going to stay permanently with Abby and Red, and it comes to a fist fight.

## Analysis

This chapter features two prominent themes: Family and Class. The theme of Family is demonstrated when everyone drops whatever they are doing to go and find Abby, who hasn't come back from her pottery class. When they find her they are kind and gentle and take her home. They don't discuss it with her or make her feel badly about forgetting how to get home.

Later, when Merrick arrives, the theme of Class is introduced. Denny challenges her thought process when she begins lording her riches and luxury items over Red and Abby. Denny calls her out on a number of things that Merrick obviously considers to be part of an uppercrust lifestyle. She derides Abby and Red for not going to a retirement home and then turns her disdain on Denny. To her way of thinking it is not high class to have close family ties, to vacation together, or to have fewer than two homes.



The reader also sees Abby continuing to decline. To make matters worse both Stem and Denny take every opportunity to argue over who is going to take care of the parents. Denny and Stem come to blows and the theme of Family is demonstrated, again, asking the reader to consider what makes a person a member of a family. As Stem shows, it is not just about biology, as in many ways he has acted more like a caring son than Abby and Red's real son, Denny. This is especially true since the reader sees Stem moving into the house to take care of Abby and Red, long before Denny has decided to do the same.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Merrick's personality and character.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Denny dislike Stem so much?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What seems to have been Abby's role in the family for all of these years?

## **Vocabulary**

smear, ointment, stench, impatient, incident, amusement, competitive, socked, shrieked, instantaneously, scraped

# Chapter 6

## Summary

Abby is told that she is going to be seeing a doctor. Abby says Nora went behind her back with Red and made an appointment. While she waits in the exam room she reflects on the fact that she doesn't really like Nora, especially how she keeps calling her Mother Whitshank instead of Abby or Mrs. Whitshank. She is also angry and dejected at how dependent on others she's become and that her lack of confidence isn't what she had expected out of her old age. She begins whistling and then singing a happy lullaby song that had been a favorite of Stem's when he was little, making sure to tone it down whenever people came near.

Abby thinks about all of the people that she used to know and who are now dead. She thinks of her own death, whenever that would come, and how lost Red would be without her. She wishes that they could both die at the same time and that way neither one would have to deal with the pain of the loss. She feels depressed with the thought that all of her children were grown and gone, all capable people. No one needed her anymore. No one confided in her, asked her advice, or made her the center of their lives.

She notes the irony of the fact that of all her children she's focused the most of her attention on Denny because he always seemed to need the guidance most. And of all the children he was the one that complained the most about her not giving him time. She decides to take the dog for a walk. She still continues to call Brenda the dog by the name, "Clarence." While on their walk Clarence breaks away from her and runs into the street. Abby chases him and is hit and killed by a car.

## Analysis

Abby dislikes the fact that as she's grown older, people--especially her own family members--have begun to disrespect her, however good their intentions. She hates the fact that she can't take care of people, which is at the core of her being. Instead, she is the one in need of help. Her old age has not turned out as she had expected it to. The reader can see that she is suffering from some sort of early dementia, as she refuses to see that the dog she is walking is not Clarence, but Brenda. Symbolically, when she begins singing it is showing the reader that she has regained some of her former confidence and that she isn't feeling as beaten down by life as she had previously. In an earlier chapter she'd stated that the birds didn't sing anymore because they were just too tired.

When she thinks about Denny it demonstrates the theme of Family once again. Though she feels that she focused more than a large portion of her time and energy on Denny, he feels that she didn't focus on him at all. She also feels guilty because she believes

that the other children received less attention because she was always trying to figure Denny out, or bail him out of some sort of trouble. As a social worker, she believes that she should have been able to help him, but in her mind, she failed him somehow. She dies with these regrets on her mind. Her last thoughts were of her family.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Abby hope that both she and Red die together in a plane crash?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the use of music and its symbolism in this novel, and in particular, this chapter.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What sorts of things are not as Abby imagined they would be at her age?

## **Vocabulary**

clunky, incarnations, superficial, inconsequential, glitches, sitcom, chirpy, listless, oldsters

# Chapter 7

## Summary

The family gathers after Abby's cremation and tries to plan a funeral. They inevitably turn to blaming each other for not keeping a closer eye on Abby. Stem goes to the study to see if Abby had left instructions for them. He finds a collection of poems and journals, letters, and photos in a bottom drawer. Red joins him and goes through some of the papers and photos. He can't bring himself to read the journals or poems. Stem finds an unmarked manila envelope and reads the contents. Stem goes white as a ghost.

The papers are an agreement between Stem's birth mother and Abby. Abby agrees to keep his birth mother's identity a secret until she is ready to assume full time custody. Stem asks Red of the signature meant that his mother was really BJ Autry, the woman whom they've all known as their neighbor. Stem asks Red if he knew and he claims that he absolutely didn't know. He says that if he had known he'd have demanded that BJ take him back in after she remarried. Stem is even more upset, claiming that Red wanted to get rid of him. He and Red agree to keep the contract's information to themselves.

Red determines that Abby will be dressed in the Caftan that she'd been married in, and that he'd wear the shirt, a Dashiki, that she'd made for him. None of the kids want to tell him that it is a very loud color of blue, and Denny offers to mend it for him. The day of the funeral is awkward for everyone. The priest from the church she had specified didn't really know her. The Whitshank clan makes it through the funeral service and endure the very long reception at their home. Then, in the silence of the home, after everyone had gone, Abby's absence hits them. She is gone.

## Analysis

In this chapter many long-held family secrets come to light. This demonstrates the theme of Family Stories and how they can change over time based on the information that the family are given by those who witnessed the events firsthand. In this case, it is the story of Stem's inclusion into the family. When he reads the contract that Abby drew up with BJ and when he learns that his real birth mother only lived a few doors down from him his entire life, and never made a move to recover him, or even visit much, his world is turned upside down. Any feelings of generosity and inclusion are gone and he begins to see conspiracies in everything. At this moment he feels very isolated and very much the outsider.

It is unclear what upsets Stem the most: the fact that his birth mother didn't want him back, or the Whitshank's ready willingness to give him up without a fight if she wanted him back. The funeral seems to underscore the irony of the moment when they have a priest who didn't know Abby give the eulogy, and then Merrick, who barely knew or liked

Abby, gave a testimonial. Image over substance is the name of the day and it is telling. It is only when they return home that there is no need for keeping up appearances and they truly grieve Abby's loss.

Red honors his life with Abby by wearing the shirt she made for him back when they were married in the late sixties. He also has her dressed in her wedding dress, which would be unconventional in modern times. Both of them are in the color blue, which will become more relevant than the reader knows at this point. It also shows an unconventional side of Red, one that the reader has not seen surface up to this point. This demonstrates the theme of Death, in that one doesn't get to choose how they leave their life, only that they will have to leave it one day. Both Red and Abby thought they would be the first one to go.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Since image is everything to the Whitshanks, what does Red's determination to wear his wedding clothes to the funeral say about appearances?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why are the Whitshanks better able to mourn Abby's loss at home?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is ironic about the funeral?

## **Vocabulary**

presumptuous, firsthand, neglected, entailed, limbo, comical, suspended, stricken, iffy, tantrums

# Chapter 8

## Summary

This chapter shows Red and the family trying to adjust to Abby's death. Stem and Nora discuss the necessity of their needing to stay on now, stating that Red was more independent than Abby had been. Red says that he dreams about Abby and still reaches out for her in his sleep.

Ree, Abby's best friend, comes by in the later afternoon with an apple crumble pie which they all sit down to eat. It is evident that she's as familiar with Abby's kitchen as her own. Red announces that he's going to find an apartment to move into as the house is too big for just him to live in anymore. This is the first that any of the family have heard of this. The girls argue about their father's decision stating that he's acting too meek and too out of character.

Stem announces to the family that he and Nora are moving back into their old home and the Whitshank girls are floored that he would consider doing that. Jeannie calls Denny to find out what he might have said to make Stem and Nora want to move out of the ancestral home. Denny hasn't a clue, and Jeannie goes on a rampage saying that she doesn't understand how he can be so listless and lost, not caring or making connections with anything or anyone. Denny hangs up.

Denny makes dinner and asks Nora as they are cleaning up what has gotten into Stem to make him so grumpy lately. She has no idea and tells Denny to talk to him. At first Denny doesn't want to but Nora guilt's him into it. When he finds Stem they discuss the moving out and Stem lets it slip that Abby knew who his mother was all along and didn't say. He tells Denny who his mother really is and Stem can tell that Denny already knew. He confronts Denny who doesn't deny it. He makes Denny swear to keep it a secret or he will kill Denny. Denny agrees, laughing.

They go apartment hunting and Red finds an acceptable apartment. The kids begin getting the house ready to sell.

## Analysis

This chapter demonstrates the theme of Death, once again, by underscoring the fact that death levels the playing field and that no matter what one's social status, when one is dead, all are equal. It also shows the grief that accompanies a loss such as this. Red's personality changes as a result of Abby's death. Before, he fought tooth and nail to remain in his home. Now, he's tired and ready to leave it. There are too many memories in the house and he doesn't want to stay there.

Ree, Abby's best friend, serves as a does of reality, no matter how kindly served. She forces all of the family to face the future and to make some decisions regarding their

next steps. Stem and his family will move back to their home, and Red determines he will move into a smaller place. Denny will leave the next day as he and Stem are still not getting along.

Denny demonstrates the theme of Family Stories when Stem learns that Denny knew all along who his biological mother was. He accuses Denny of poking his nose where it doesn't belong. Denny could care less about Stem's parentage, but Stem doesn't see it that way and threatens Denny. In this respect, Denny has taken over his mother's collection of family stories that are kept secret. Not all family stories are shared among the family.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Stem's character before and after his discovery about his birth mother.

## **Discussion Question 2**

What had the family assumed about Stem and Nora and the Whitshank family home?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Jeannie berate Denny for deciding to go back to New Jersey?

## **Vocabulary**

able-bodied, crimping, insisted, assembled, errand, engaging, noncommittal, grimaced, virtuous

# Chapter 9

## Summary

In a flashback to the summer of 1959, a young collegiate Abby waits to go on a date with Dane Quinn. Dane picks Abby up in his two-toned Buick to go and help set up for Merrick's wedding. She gets into the car and Dane tells her that his parents have kicked him out of the house. He's been living with a cousin in an apartment. He suggests that Abby come spend some 'quality' time with him at the apartment. She makes excuses and doesn't give him an answer.

When they reach the Whitshank house to set up for the wedding reception, Abby runs into Red who walks her up to the house. He asks her to the wedding, officially. Abby is surprised since she hardly knows Merrick. However, she tells him that she'll get back to him with the answer.

Abby goes to the kitchen to help Red's mother with the big lunch she is planning for all of the workers. The reader can see that Mrs. Whitshank, Linnie Mae, is fond of Abby. While they are working in the kitchen Linne Mae tells Abby how she met Junior, Red's father. Apparently she was 13 and Junior was 26. This shocks Abby, but Linne Mae is oblivious to Abby's shock and continues the story. They were married shortly thereafter.

At the lunch Abby and the others that are there have to sit through Junior's impromptu verbal abuse towards Red. Red continues eating as if he's not heard his father. Later, Abby feels compelled to make him feel better and they talk for awhile. Abby is struck by how he doesn't hold a grudge. She begins to understand that Dane might be handsome and intriguing, but that between the two, Red is the better man.

## Analysis

This chapter demonstrates the theme of Class, as well as Family Stories, as told in a flashback. 'How Red met Abby' is one of the more often told stories in the family, and so it is fitting that the reader, finally, learns of it as well. What the reader notices is that Abby feels very self conscious when she goes over to Merrick's house because it is so nice and in such an upper-class neighborhood. She doesn't think that she'd be welcomed at the wedding, even though she's helping to set up for it. The reader also sees that though Red is Junior's son, that he doesn't have all of his father's notions about Class or propriety.

Next, the reader sees that Abby falls for Dane Quinn, who is in every regard a 'bad' boy. He pressures her into possibly crossing a sexual line with him that weekend, and it makes her feel uncomfortable. She'd had to lie to her mother about catching a ride with him to the Whitshank's home, and it didn't make her feel good. Later, when she witnesses Red defusing a fight, she begins to see that Red is a genuinely good person and she realizes what it is that she wants for herself. And it isn't Dane.



## **Discussion Question 1**

How is the theme of Class demonstrated in this chapter?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does Abby decide after she has spent a day at the Whitshank house?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss Dane Quinn's character.

## **Vocabulary**

breezy, translucent, nylon, compliments, dampening, dabbing, extract, humdrum, tendency

# Chapter 10

## Summary

Continuing the flashback and extended tale, this chapter features the Brill's home being built. This is the same home that would later become the Whitshank ancestral home. When Junior was finally in a position to buy it from the Brills, Linnie Mae hadn't been happy about it. She hadn't wanted to move out of their neighborhood and away from her friends. Junior was sure that once she saw the house she'd love it like he did.

After Sunday church he put his family in the truck and drove them over to the house to see it. Linnie saw the porch swing and wanted to paint it blue. Junior tells her that painting the swing blue is low class. She gives up and then later, when he's off on a job, takes the swing down and paints it blue. When Junior comes home and sees it sitting on a drop cloth, painted blue, he goes ballistic and has it stripped down and revarnished. It was never painted blue again.

The timeline shifts back to before he and Linnie were married. She's at the train station, and he doesn't want to go and pick her up. But she's there and with no one to protect her. He goes to pick her up and yells at her. He hadn't invited her there, he tells her. She says that she knew he wanted to see her. He has no idea what she's talking about. He says she can't stay with him, that his landlady only rented to men. She says that he should sneak her in. She also tells him that she's eighteen, the legal age to get married. Junior has no desire to marry her, and he doesn't even find her attractive, but rather common and unappealing. Though she made attempts to seduce him, he refused her and the night passed slowly for Linnie.

## Analysis

There are two objects that take center stage in this chapter. First, there is the Brill House, which will later become the Whitshank house. Junior speaks about building it in great detail, as if it were a living, breathing entity. His pride in the workmanship is evident. The other object is the porch swing, which he spent an inordinate amount of money on.

Both objects represent his new image that he wants to portray. He has shed his country lifestyle and mannerisms and has decided that he is destined for better things. This is clear in the way that he treats Linnie Mae and is constantly telling her to drop her hillbilly accent. He also forbids her to paint the porch swing blue, which he says is what the illiterate and poor people do in the country. He wants no association, whatsoever, with his past. When he sees that she's gone behind his back and painted it anyway, he is livid and takes it personally. He pays another hefty sum of money to have the paint removed.



Symbolically, the color blue is love. At this point in the story, Linnie Mae has literally been trying to force Junior to love her. When he'd left his hometown for good he figured that he had left everything and everyone behind. Then, when Linnie Mae showed up, he'd had a living reminder of who he had been and where he'd come from. However, on some level he cares for her. Linnie, by painting the swing blue, is not only showing that she loves him, but that she understands him and wants him to stop trying to make himself like other people. The theme of conformity is demonstrated in Junior's desire to present a certain image, and Linnie's desire to make him live an authentic life.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the use of the color blue in this chapter.

## Discussion Question 2

Who is more delusional in this chapter, Linnie or Junior?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of conformity in this chapter.

## Vocabulary

fretwork, transom, two-pronged, wingspan, chandelier, dissuaded, impracticality, prism, ingenious, pocket-doors, guzzled, stammering



# Chapter 11

## Summary

Junior wonders what he did to deserve being stalked by Linnie Mae. He figures that his first mistake had been not asking her age back when they first met. The second mistake, he figures, was having sex with her before he'd found out her age.

When he had found out her age he'd been terrified that he was going to be arrested. He told Linnie Mae as much and she'd agreed to keep it a secret. Three weeks later, after having not seen her again, Junior is picked up by a friend of Linnie Mae's who shows up to take him to see Linnie Mae on her family's farm. Junior is terrified but he goes anyway.

He had been afraid that Linnie was pregnant, but she tells him that she isn't and that she just wanted to tell him that age wasn't a big deal. She seduces him and they start to have sex in the barn loft. Her father catches them together. He trains his rifle on Junior and makes him run home completely naked.

By the time Junior had arrived home he truly hated Linnie Mae. Junior leaves the next morning for Baltimore and looks up an old friend there. He puts him in touch with a man that built houses for the rich.

## Analysis

In this chapter the reader gains a clearer understanding of the circumstances that bonded Linnie Mae to Junior. The reader also sees that Junior's characterization includes someone who is pretentious, ambitious, and opportunistic. These are all traits that he uses to seduce Linnie Mae back when he believes her to be of legal age.

After finding out her age he makes her promise to keep it a secret, which he later finds out that she did not. Three weeks pass and when he receives the note to come and see her, Junior fears the worst. In a fit of relief that he has not been summoned by her father, or to be told that she's pregnant, he allows Linnie Mae to seduce him once again, only this time they are caught in the act and Junior is run out of town. This indicates that Junior is continuing to be opportunistic and is more than a little impulsive. He will always try to get away with things, and he is a risk taker, something that will come into play later on in his life.

The theme of Death is demonstrated in this chapter, though it is not a literal death. Junior's way of life in the small town is over and he must leave everything behind. This is not an unwelcome change as he had planned to leave anyway. However, he would never hear from his family ever again.



## **Discussion Question 1**

What might Junior hate Linnie Mae?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Who is at greater fault in this chapter, and why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Discuss the theme of Death in this chapter.

## **Vocabulary**

surreptitiously, bodice, laden, potbellied, reckon, beeline, keen, volunteered, urgently

# Chapter 12

## Summary

The next morning after Junior picked Linnie Mae up from the train station, Junior hurried to get her out without anyone seeing her. She continued to insist that they were going to be together and he kept trying to tell her that he wanted nothing to do with her and that she should go home. She didn't seem to be hearing him.

He told her to stay near the train station or a coffee shop until he got off of work. She didn't. She went back to the apartment building where the landlady saw her and promptly evicted Junior when he returned home from work. He was beyond angry, but Linnie Mae said she found another place to stay. She told the woman that they were married. Junior hadn't thought he could get any angrier. He was wrong. The new place cost more than the last place and didn't include meals.

He tried to tell her that she had to drop her hillbilly accent and way of talking if she wanted to fit in there. She never did. Junior and Linnie settled into the new house with their landlords and stay there for a few years. Linnie made friends easily and soon knew everyone living around them. Merrick was born shortly after they moved into their own home.

## Analysis

The theme of Class is addressed in this chapter, as Junior tries to tell Linnie Mae that she can't act in Baltimore the way she used to act in Hampden. She needs to act like a city girl. Linnie Mae doesn't act as if she even hears him and does what she pleases, anyway. Her immaturity shows, as well as her naïveté, when she assumes that everyone is kind and helpful.

While she does find them another place to live, she has to lie to do it, which shows that she is beginning to adopt some attributes that will enable her to survive better in the city. However, it doesn't please her to have to lie or trick people, especially if they are nice to her. What the reader sees is a girl who is desperately in love with a boy and is willing to go to extreme lengths to please him.

Lastly, it is curious that Junior doesn't just put her on the train and send her home. This would seem to indicate that, though he doesn't say it, he cares for Linnie Mae.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the character, Linnie Mae, and her importance to the overall novel.



## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Class in this chapter.

## Discussion Question 3

Why doesn't Junior just ship Linnie Mae back home?

## Vocabulary

evicted, presence, twining, inclination, jolted, gawkiness, canister, uncapped, handily, souring, chimney, exchange, organ-grinder

# Chapter 13

## Summary

The timeline jumps forward to the time when Junior has had the blue porch swing taken down to the local hardware store for stripping. The reader learns that he is now 42 and owns his own construction company. The porch swing is delivered the next morning and it is ready to be varnished. Junior does it himself, imagining what Linnie will say when she sees it.

He finds out that night that she had been by the house to take some things over. She has most undoubtedly seen the swing, and yet she refuses to comment on it and it drives him crazy. However, he doesn't want to come out and ask her about it because it may give her an excuse to argue with him again.

Moving day comes and they go to the new house. As they step onto the walkway Junior is stunned. There's a long trail of blue paint leading up to the porch. Linnie acts innocent, but Junior can tell by the way she is walking that she has made her point.

## Analysis

This chapter shows how mean-spirited Junior can actually be. While Linnie wants the porch swing blue, to remind her of home, Junior wants nothing to do with his old life, and the new image he wants to portray doesn't include blue swings. At this point they have been married for a while and already have both Redcliffe and Merrick.

It is notable that he has not chosen colloquial or typical rural names for his children. This suggests that he is still very much into committed to promoting an image. He has completely stripped the porch swing of the blue coloring and has restored it to the picture perfect swing he had envisioned. What is interesting in this chapter is how much time he spends wondering how upset and angry and hurt Linnie will be and how upset he becomes when she acts as if she could care less. She denies him any reaction whatsoever.

As a color, the blue symbolizes a true and steady love, or a love of life, a vitality. Linnie provides that for Junior, even if he is not aware of it. Thus it is no surprise when the reader learns that at some point in the night, Linnie has sneaked over to the house and taken the remaining blue paint and dumped it up the walkway to the front porch. With this defiant act, and then by denying any culpability in committing the act, Linnie has made clear that her love for him and their family will not be so easily dispatched, nor will her respect for their families and place where they came from be forgotten.

The author writes that even into the present day there is a residual speck or two of that blue paint on the walkway.



## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does the porch swing matter so much to Junior?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why has Junior chosen the names that he has for his children?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Linnie serve as Junior's polar opposite in many ways?

## **Vocabulary**

resembled, Chattanooga, varnish, armrests, rasped, foreseen, seize, conceal, injustice, expedited

# Chapter 14

## Summary

It is present-day October and the children want to put up the Halloween decorations, which include six little Halloween ghosts. Nora tells them that this can't happen as they will be moving before Halloween actually gets there. Red would be moving into his apartment that coming Sunday.

Denny tells them that he's leaving earlier than Sunday because of an impending hurricane that might shut down the trains. Jeannie becomes upset that he would leave before Red is set up in his new home. All of the family that are there having dinner take turns taking verbal shots at Denny.

The next morning Jeannie comes to drive Red over to his new place. Denny is still there but is headed out to the train station. No one wants to give him a ride and he's about to call a cab when Nora offers to take him.

As they are driving to the station Denny tells her about sewing his father's shirt for him, the one that he'd wanted to wear to Abby's funeral. It was a funky shade of blue and when he'd found out that he'd needed to mend it he'd gone into his mother's sewing closet to see if there was even any sort of thread that would match that funky color and before he could even start sifting through things, this spool of blue thread fell off the shelf and landed right into his hands. He tells Nora that he felt as if his mother had handed him that spool of thread and that she understood that things were cleared between them.

## Analysis

The theme of Forgiveness is demonstrated in this chapter as Denny is finally able to let go of his anger toward his parents, especially his mother. This comes as a direct result of mending his father's shirt for his mother's funeral. Finding the blue thread, as if his mother had directly handed it to him, was symbolic for him. First, it was a particular shade of blue, symbolically linking the past to the present, as well as representing the love that binds one generation to the next. As he mends his father's shirt, he is also mending his relationship with both of his parents.

It is notable that it is Nora who gives Denny a ride to the bus station, instead of one of his biological family members. They are all still upset with him for leaving before Red had been moved into the apartment or the house sold. However, the reader can see, even if Denny's family cannot, that it is what needed to happen. Denny had accomplished what he'd set out to accomplish. He'd made his peace with his family, even if they hadn't made their peace with him. Forgiveness, then, is demonstrated as something that can often be a one-way street and that the responsibility is to offer the forgiveness, even if it is not taken.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How has Red changed over the course of the story?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss Denny finding the spool of blue thread and why it is so significant for him.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What could be one reason why the author chose to call this book, "A Spool of Blue Thread"?

## **Vocabulary**

wafted, clamored, vacating, periodic, renewal, consolidated, bedraggled, maneuvering

# Characters

## Red Whitshank

Red Whitshank is the son of Junior and Linnie Mae Whitshank. He will later marry Abby Dalton in the early sixties and they will start their family. Red's father, Junior, had purchased the home that eventually becomes Red's home one day by conning the original owner out of it. It became a family story that was passed down from one Whitshank to the next.

Red meets Abby when Merrick, Red's sister, is about to be married. Abby is there with another boy, but after spending a day at the Whitshank house, she witnesses Red's good nature and willingness to help people and she falls in love with him. She will later become a social worker, and it is this gentle nature that draws her to him.

Red's full name is Redcliffe, which his father gave him so that he'd fit in, in the neighborhood where they lived. Always image conscious, his father Junior had been very particular with his children. He has determined that Redcliffe, who prefers the name Red, go into law or banking, like most of the people in their upper class neighborhood. Red doesn't. He goes into the family business of construction, much to Junior's dismay.

## Abby Whitshank

Abby Whitshank is shown to be a warm and caring individual. A product of the sixties, she brings into the present day a belief in reincarnation, vibrational alignment, and karma. She is also very creative and keeps bits of paper with phrases on them that she thinks will make great poems one day. Her eyes are extremely blue, which is a significant color in the family and in the story.

Abby is also shown to be subservient to Red, putting her dreams and her creativity on hold for most of her life. It is a telling sign when she takes her shoebox full of poetry scraps and throws them out, unused. One of the early images that is associated with her is that of an old chenille bathrobe. Once pink and vibrant, it is so old at the point that it is introduced to the reader that it has lost almost all of its color. Abby is like this for most of the book.

Abby also indicates that she's losing not only her mental faculties, but also her will to continue to live. At one point, after she'd thrown out her poetry box, she remarks to a friend that the birds don't sing anymore, that they'd just gotten too tired to do it anymore. This would seem to indicate that she is finally resigned to the fact that her inner creative life will never be supported and she's just tired of trying to give it a voice and a space. At the end of Abby's life, the reader gains a glimpse as to the woman that she might have been, or probably was at times, when she begins singing while she is walking the dog. Unfortunately, this is her last song as she is stuck and killed by a driver when Abby runs



in front of the car chasing the dog. Abby had already shown signs of early dementia, when she was lost and wandering during the rainstorm. She had also been more forgetful than usual, and still, the family couldn't stand to consider the fact that she might be critically ill. They preferred to believe she was just getting eccentric in her old age. Abby, even if she suspected something, did not express her concerns out loud.

## **Denny Whitshank**

Denny is Red's older son by blood. Denny and Stem do not get along seeing as Denny views Stem as an intruder and never forgives his mother for letting him live with them. It is never really known if they bury the hatchet. Denny has bounced from one job to the next, never settling in one place longer than another.

At one point he declares that he is gay, and then several years later tells his parents that he is getting married to a woman in New York. Later, they learn that he's had a child, but is divorced. At the time of the book's ending, the reader learns that he has a long term girlfriend in New Jersey.

Denny not only has issues with his family, but internally, he struggles with his own identity. This is obvious in his various lifestyle choices throughout the novel. There are some interesting parallels between his mother, Abby, and Denny, in that both of them were artistic in nature, and were both thwarted and diverted from pursuing that as anything more than a hobby. It has lead both Abby and Denny to places of deep despair. It is out of this despair that the rage and anger simmer under the surface towards Red, and even towards Stem whom Denny feels has replaced him.

## **Stem Whitshank**

Stem, or Douglas, is the other brother who was taken in by the Whitshanks. Abby knows Stem's real mother and he has wanted that information for a long time. After Abby dies, Stem finds out who his real mother was, and friction increases between brothers. He and Denny fight over the house but both end up losing it.

Stem's character offers the reader a deeper insight into the mindset and belief system of the Whitshanks. It also indicates that both Red and Abby are nothing like Junior (Red's father). Red's father would never have taken in Stem, but Red, despite his gruffness, did agree to take in Stem. Stem, from the moment he was brought into the family, worshiped Red like Red's own son Denny never did. This is why it is such a shock to Stem at the end when he learns the truth about his adoption, what everyone initially thought about bringing him into the family, and why Stem can't seem to bring himself to get beyond the truth of his beginnings.

## Amanda Whitshank

Amanda Whitshank is the older daughter to Red and she has a small role but helps the main characters get through tough decisions. She is often the one that provides a logical and emotional anchor when there are issues involving what course of action should be taken next. Of all the sisters, it is she who is closest to Denny. He often confides things to her that he doesn't share with anyone else. This works both ways as she also tells him about various troubles that she faces. What emerges is a strong bond between siblings that accepts the other without question.

## Junior Whitshank

Junior Whitshank is the father of Red making him the grandfather to Denny and Stem. He used to live in the estate and left it to Abby upon his death. Junior is introduced in the form of long flashback sequences about how the Whitshanks came to live in the family home. He is depicted as a coming from extremely impoverished circumstances, one of many children, whose only value was as an additional work hand on the farm.

As a result of this, Junior's ability to empathize or have emotional connection with people is underdeveloped. When Linnie Mae continues to push him, he wants to push back because this has been his way of survival for his entire life. In many respects, he stays with Linnie Mae because it is what is expected of him. From what emerges of the Linnie Mae and Junior relationship, it is that both of them seemed to be in a loveless marriage, but that they both made the most of it.

Junior is opportunistic, a risk taker, and is not above using people or conning them to get what he wants. This is evident in the way he tricks the Brills into leaving their lavish home and selling it to Junior. The way Junior views the house is telling in that it shows the reader that with the acquisition of the home he feels that he has 'made it'. It is a symbol of his ability to be someone and to matter in the world. It is this world view, that image is everything, that he has passed down to his own children. It is mirrored the most in Merrick.

## Linnie Whitshank

Linnie Whitshank is the Grandmother of Denny and Stem, she is Red's mother. She was 13 when she met Junior and is the reason for his having to leave town in a hurry. Linnie, however, is not an unintelligent person. Like Junior, she is a risk taker and also wants to leave town by hook or crook. In her case, she manages to locate where Junior is living outside of town, then scrapes together enough money to track him down in that town and insist that he take her in.

Later, though she is shown to be a survivor in all sorts of tough situations, she, unlike Junior, is able to empathize and connect emotionally with others. This is shown by the fact that she is able to make friends easily, that everyone likes to come to her kitchen



and spend time with her. This is also indicated in the view that people with more should help those who have less. This belief system is evidenced in her son, Red, in that he felt a type of compassion for Stem when he ended up without parents at all.

## **Merrick**

Merrick is Red's sister and Junior's daughter. She is just like her father and is pretentious and condescending. In many ways, Merrick personifies Junior's mindset (her grandfather). She is not above using people for her own means, and she often wants what others have just so she can feel powerful. When she marries it is because she has stolen a very wealthy young man from her best friend, who was also engaged to the same young man, until Merrick came along.

The way that Merrick views Red's family is interesting. She wants to feel connected to them, but not so connected that their lower class ways rub off on her (or that is what one infers). This is true even at Abby's funeral where she gives a eulogy, claiming to have known and loved Abby, that she was her best friend. This was never true and the family are appalled.

## **Nora**

Nora is Stem's wife. She is a secondary character, though she always seems to show up and step into the gap that many of the biological Whitshanks are unwilling to fill. She is a good cook, a natural beauty, and very religious.

## **Carla**

Carla is the ex-wife of Denny. She and Denny didn't see eye to eye and split.

## **Ree**

Ree is a long time neighbor and best friend to Abby. When Abby passes away Ree brings over an apple pie and speaks frankly to the family, just as Abby would have.

## **Susan**

Susan is Denny's child that he has with Carla. Denny is very devoted to Susan and brings her to visit the Whitshanks often. She lives in New Jersey with her mother.

## **Clarence**

Clarence is the name of Abby's dog that is long gone. Toward the end of her life she becomes confused and calls their newer dog by Clarence's name.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Spool of Blue Thread

This is the spool talked about in the title and throughout the book. It symbolizes the love of family that goes throughout the generations of Whitshanks. The color blue is significant in many places throughout the novel, but in each case it represents family. The first time blue directly involves Red and Abby is on their wedding day when they both wear blue outfits. Abby has kept this specifically colored thread in her closet for all of these years, just so it would match their wedding clothes should she ever need to mend them. The blue thread becomes a metaphor for the 'ties that bind.' Blue is often considered to be the color that indicates truth or being true, as in 'true blue.' Thus, when the blue thread is discovered and used, the character using the thread sees the truth of life with Abby and the love between Red and Abby.

## Whitshank House

This house represents the family in that they had to resort to trickery to get it in the first place. Once the house is sold they all can start to be who they truly are. The house, itself, was a testimony to the underhanded nature and perspective embodied by Junior. To some extent, both Red and Merrick, reflected that view. With Abby's passing, however, Red has realized that his perspective has changed and that he no longer has any desire to remain in that house. By coming to this decision, Red has also indicated that he has changed his perspective towards using people, or embracing his father's view about life in general.

The color blue is used in the house, as well. As the reader will learn, Linnie Mae wanted the porch swing to be blue, but Junior wouldn't allow it. In a fit of pique, she dumps blue paint all along the walkway where it remains to the present day. This would seem to represent the fact that Linnie Mae's mark on the house and the shaping of the family are still very much present in its current inhabitants.

## Fabric Halloween Ghosts

These are ordinary fabric ghosts who represent the six family members and their dying memories once they leave the house. They are positioned on the front porch just as they had always been positioned for decades. It is a tradition that the younger grandchildren don't want to give up. What this would seem to indicate is that these ghosts, while representing the family members, they also represent traditions that ought to be kept. In other words, not all family traditions should be kept, and not all family traditions should be discarded, either.



## **Clarence**

Clarence is the dog that Abby had when the kids were little. He represents her past.

## **Abby's Idea Box**

This is an old shoe box that Abby has kept for decades. In it she has thrown bits of paper that she meant to turn into poems one day. She throws them away without making her poems. This is a truly sad event in the book. This box had held bits and scraps of creative projects and ideas that Abby wanted to give voice to. When she realizes that she will never be able to give them voice or bring them to life in the poetry that they were purposed for, she throws them away. Symbolically, she is giving up.

## **Red's Apartment**

This is a symbol of Red moving on. He is able to release the Whitshank house, and its curse, so to speak, of manipulating people to get their way.

## **Apple Pie**

Ree brings over an apple pie to express her condolences for the Whitshanks' loss, but in reality, Ree's pie is a dose of reality. It is a dose of reality in that it is solid and connects them to something that their neighbor has been doing forever. While providing comfort, and support, what it really is doing is reminding them that they are still living and still have decisions to make. These decisions Ree gives voice to while they are seated around the table eating the pie.

## **The Car**

This is the vehicle that ended Abby's life. Abby was chasing after the dog and didn't see the car coming before it was too late. In many ways, this also represents how Abby has been her entire life. She was constantly run over by various people and ideas coming into her life, plowing into her so that she doesn't have any resort except to give in to it. This was true in her courtship by Red, her decision to give up working, and her giving up on writing poetry. This is also true when she agreed to take in Stem. All of these 'car' moments rendered her 'dead' in some small way because it diverted her from what it was she truly wanted to do.

## **Burglar Gear**

This is the gear Junior uses to break into the Whitshank house before he owned it in order to spook out the original owners so he could have the house. The gear physically

represents Junior's desire to use people and situations to his advantage. It is also quite symbolic because in all respects he is 'stealing' the house out from under the Brills.

## **Abby's Bathrobe**

In Chapter 1 Abby pulls on a Chenille bathrobe that used to be pink, but now is faded into a non-color. This represents Abby's life. She used to be full of color, but over the years has faded and lost the color of who she is and what she values. Because her entire married life has consisted of keeping Red happy and raising the family, she's functional, like the robe, but no longer as vibrant.

# Settings

## Baltimore

The city in which the story takes place. This is also the city where Junior first runs when he must get out of town fast because of Linnie.

## Bouton Road

This the road that the Whitshank family house was built and where the majority of the book's action is focused.

## Hampden

This the area where Junior Whitshank and Linnie Mae used to live before he built the family estate.

## The Barn

This is where Linnie leads Junior in order to tell him that she still has feelings for him. Junior gets caught with his pants down and is run out of town.

## Red's Apartment

This is a small, dumpy little place, but Red seems to like it. It represents the fact that while he acknowledges that there is a time and a place for putting forth a good image, but there are equally good times when image should not be a factor.

# Themes and Motifs

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness figures into the inner workings of this novel. First, there is the lack of Forgiveness between Linnie Mae's father and herself after he catches her with Junior in the barn. Later, when she comes to stay with Junior, Linnie tells him that her father didn't speak to her for four years. Junior is also upset with Linnie and is unable to forgive her at first for the humiliation that she'd gotten him in to, which also included him having to leave the only home he'd ever known. He does later forgive her, something that Linnie's father was never able to do. What this tends to show is that each successive generation in the Whitshank family is more forgiving than the next.

Secondly, there is the Forgiveness between Red/Abby and Denny, their middle son. Denny is most like his mother in temperament. He is full of creative ideas and often bounced between many of them when he was a young man. However, because he didn't fit into the mold that his father had in mind for him, Denny felt replaced by Stem (a child they later adopted). This led to a decades-long struggle between Denny and his family. It is only after Abby's death that Denny is able to let go of his hurt and his resentment towards his parents and to see their love through all of the pain of his youth.

Stem also has Forgiveness issues. Of all the characters in the novel, his character has the most change, and not for the better. The author depicts him as the 'perfect son.' He lives up to the image that Red has of what a boy should be, and he excels where Denny fails. He goes into the family business which thrills Red. Later, he completely changes after he learns that neither Abby nor Red would have minded giving him up to his real birth mother had she wanted to take him back. That they knew his birth mother and didn't tell him when he was of age infuriates him and he feels robbed. He is unable to forgive. This would seem to suggest that the blue thread does not bind where he is concerned.

## Family Stories

The family defines itself through the stories that are told, but their true nature is where the stories fall apart. Each person tells a story about the other family member about what they deserved or didn't deserve. One can see that there are several faces and presentations of these stories and that they serve different functions within the family.

The family stories that Abby often tells are those that remind the members of the family about how much they love one another. A good example of this is when she needs to derail Red from one of his rants. When he gets wound up she will start talking about how they first met and immediately the atmosphere changes.

Then, there are the family stories that Red tells. These are more pretentious and fabricated with each telling. One of his perennial favorites is how his father, Junior,



conned the Brills out of leaving the house so that his father could purchase it cheaply. Only Red and Merrick are proud of this story.

There are also those Family Stories that are only fully known by certain members of the family. A good example of this is Stem's birth mother and how he came to be with the Whitshanks. His real mother had been a loudmouthed, low class woman that they'd all made fun of throughout the years. Stem never knew that she was his mother until he uncovers Abby's contract with her. He is appalled and suffers from the knowledge of this story. Therefore, the terrible destructive power of a Family Story is shown.

## Class

The theme of Class enters into the novel early on and continues to appear throughout. This is first noticeable when Junior feels as if he is destined for better things than Hampden. Then, when he ends up in Baltimore, he is determined not to be singled out or looked down upon as a country bumpkin. He works hard to lose his accent, and he adopts a grammatically correct way of speaking. He points out to Linnie when she comes to stay with him that she must learn to change her ways as well.

Later, Merrick, in comparison to Red, has the same feeling of superiority when it comes to her lifestyle and the people she mingles with. Even her marriage was plotted and planned to land her in high society. She does not make close emotional connections with anyone, and each move is calculated and based upon what she can gain from it. This is evident in her speech at Abby's funeral.

Secondly, there are Red's children. All of them, with the exception, of Denny, care what everyone thinks about them. They don't like to show their 'dirty linen' in public. So, to the outside world, they are the perfect family. However, behind closed doors the reader sees that they have the same sort of problems that every normal family has.

Abby herself is not immune to this type of view of life as a Whitshank. As a young girl visiting the Whitshank mansion, she feels inferior and insignificant inside of it. However, when she spends time with Linnie in the kitchen, she begins to realize that they are mostly like normal people. Still, she thinks that to live in such a nice place that they must be somewhat superior to others in the town.

## Family

The theme of Family is explored in many ways throughout this novel. First, the theme of Family is shown as a destroying agent. This is shown in both Junior and Linnie's families. Junior remarks later on in the book, after he's had children, that having experienced the feelings that a father can have for his children, he resents the fact that his own father and mother pretty much used him and his siblings as hired hands on the farm, offering little in way of support, nurturing, understanding, or love.



Linnie's family was destructive as well, shaming Junior and refusing to speak to Linnie from that point onward. They are neither supportive or loving, and it drives both young people from their homes at an early age. Both have a sense of having been disposable and unwanted. It is part of what binds them.

Then, there is the theme of Family that uplifts and comforts. The reader sees this in the treatment of the grandchildren, as well as the support that Red and Abby's children give one another throughout the novel. It is also seen in the way that Abby and Red take in Stem, even though he is not their biological child. Though he later resents it, up until he learns the truth about his birth mother, Stem had always benefited and achieved success because of his belief in the family and living up to the family's expectations.

Lastly, there is the theme of Family as an inheritance. Just as the house has been inherited from one to the next, so, too, have some of the family's tendencies, as well as the way that they love. One of those is the telling of Family Stories, which is a form of shared history, a way of saying 'this is who we are.' Additionally, there is the thread of love, a blue thread as it were, that binds them together through this shared family history.

## Death

Death is presented as a theme in many forms throughout the novel. The first instance is the death of a relationship. This is first seen in the opening chapters when Abby and Red discuss Denny and how different he is from the rest of the children. Time and time again the reader watches as Denny continues to engage in activities designed to elicit a response from his parents. Instead of reacting as he wanted and needed them to, Red and Abby don't react at all. The relationship between them suffers a type of death. He doesn't need them any longer and makes that quite plain by his long absences.

Abby's death by the car is a blatant nod to the theme of Death. However, prior to her untimely demise, she'd already suffered a type of Death, a death of her dreams. She'd been a very creative person in her youth, and collected scraps of ideas for poems in an old shoe box. Right before she died, she threw them away unused.

Lastly, there is a death of an era of Whitshanks living in the Whitshank house. When Red leaves none of the children really want to live there any longer. It is old, has no central heating or air, and while it well built, it is not modern or as beautiful as it once was. Junior's dream was to establish himself and his family as socially elite, which he did, but in one generation, most have returned to more humble means. So, there is a death of Junior's ideas and belief system.

There is also a type of Death that occurs when resentments and old grudges are put aside. Denny exemplifies this best when at the end of the story he is able to put aside his anger and decade's long resentment toward his parents for bringing Stem into the household.

# Styles

## Point of View

The book is written from many points of view from each family member. These seemingly disjointed stories eventually come together to create a plot and a cohesive story line. When each character speaks, it is given from the first person perspective, limited view, so that the reader is able to place themselves in that character's 'skin' for the moment to see some of the same events as the other characters, but from a different angle. The reader must keep in mind that very often the character who is speaking may only have part of the story, or may be assuming much of what they considered to be the truth, without actually knowing the whole story. When an event, such as Abby's decline, is viewed from several characters' perspectives, one begins to piece together an almost omniscient point of view.

## Language and Meaning

The language is straight forward and common, no advanced words are in use and if there are, the context clues are good enough to determine their meaning. Words that the reader may be unfamiliar with will stem from the flashbacks to earlier eras, such as the early 1950s, and the use of songs from those time periods.

Additionally, the reader will see language used as a weapon and to support class distinction in the novel. Junior drops his colloquialisms and urges Linnie Mae to do the same because he doesn't want others to consider them inferior for having come from a rural setting. Linnie Mae doesn't adhere to this philosophy and it remains a thorn in Junior's side the rest of their married lives. One sees this philosophy toward language echoed in the character, Merrick, Red's daughter. Neither Red, nor Abby, seem to focus so much on language, as they both considered themselves products of the early sixties, rather than the fifties.

## Structure

The book is broken into four parts, and would seem to mimic the four seasons. The first part of the book introduces the characters, and even though the reader is catching them in the middle of a crisis, taken as a whole, Part One would seem to correspond with the season of fall. This is where the reader learns many of the inherent issues that each family member has with one another, shows the decline of Abby and the aging of Red and how they both hate the idea of growing old.

Part Two corresponds with winter. This is where Abby dies, relationships seem to be headed for an ending, and family secrets are uncovered. This is the section that delves into many of the past family stories, the stories that bind the Whitshank family together.

Part Three corresponds with spring and a renewal. Abby has passed away, but it is after her death that much is discovered about her, her desires, and the reader learns more about how certain philosophies became deeply ingrained into the family perspectives. Stem discovers his early beginnings and has to deal with what that means to him. Each character, in some way is going through a change and emerging into a new discovery of self.

Part Four corresponds with summer. New beginnings are beginning to flourish, much of the strife and heartache have been settled, and everyone's future looks promising. The reader sees many of the family members able to forgive one another, make peace with issues they cannot change, and new emotional bonds have been forged.

Each section corresponds with a particular series of events. The reader is given a glimpse into the life and times of a single family, the Whitshanks, and how their belief system and world view are developed over the course of several generations.

## Quotes

But still, you know how it is when you're missing a loved one. You try to turn every stranger into the person you were hoping for.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph Page 39)

**Importance:** This is when Denny has disappeared for many years and then at the family's summer vacation they think that they see him sitting in a car watching them. At first they rationalize that they just want it to be him.

The disappointments seemed to escape the family's notice, though. That was another of their quirks: they had a talent for pretending that everything was fine. Or maybe it wasn't a quirk at all.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph Page 57)

**Importance:** This quote comes after the reader learns about the two great Whitshank family stories involving Junior and Merrick. Both had boded their time and then in the end not been happy with what they received.

...that's nothing compared to what happens when a house is left on its own. It's like the heart goes out of it. It sags, it slumps, it starts to lean toward the ground. I swear I can look at just the ridgepole of a house and tell if nobody's living there. You think I'd do that to this place?

-- Red (Chapter 3 paragraph Page 71)

**Importance:** Red says this when his children ask them to consider moving out of their ancestral home and into a retirement home or condo. Red is saying, in this quote, that a home is more than a collection of its materials.

I love that feeling," he said. "You don't know your place in the world; you're not pegged; you're not nailed into this one single same old never-ending spot.

-- Denny (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 130)

**Importance:** This quote by Denny is when he is speaking to Great Aunt Merrick about her traveling. He says that the reason people travel alot is because they don't like being pinned down to any one thing.

Independent? Bosh. That's just another word for selfish. It's stiff-backed people like you who end up being the biggest burdens.

-- Merrick (Chapter 5 paragraph Page 132)

**Importance:** This was said by Merrick after Red tells her that retirement homes are for old people. Merrick simply goes on to say that she is saying what needs to be said, because no one else is saying it.



The trouble with dying," she'd told Jeannie once, "is that you don't get to see how everything turns out. You won't know the ending.

-- Abby (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 154)

**Importance:** This statement foreshadows Abby's own death at the end of this chapter.

One thing that parents of problem children never said aloud: it was a relief when the children turned out okay, but then what were the parents supposed to do with the anger they'd felt all those years?

-- Abby (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 156)

**Importance:** This quote was Abby's internal musings as she is out walking her dog.

Who said, 'You're only ever as happy as your least happy child?

-- Abby (Chapter 6 paragraph page 160)

**Importance:** Abby is thinking about her own happiness as she's walking the dog. This is one of the last things she thinks about before she is killed.

But it was easier, somehow, to reflect on them all from a distance than to be struggling for room in their midst.

-- Abby (Chapter 6 paragraph 162)

**Importance:** Abby says that it is easier to consider and think about the family when she's not in the room with them.

She couldn't bear to think that their family was just another muddled, discontented, ordinary family.

-- Abby (Chapter 6 paragraph Page 165)

**Importance:** This shows that Abby, too, likes to think that her family is different and somehow above all of the petty concerns of other families.

Why select just a certain few stories to define yourself? Abby had a wealth of them.

-- Abby (Chapter 6 paragraph 168)

**Importance:** This quote reiterates the theme of family.

It makes you wonder why we bother accumulating, accumulating, when we know from earliest childhood how it's all going to end.

-- Amanda (Chapter 8 paragraph Page 218)

**Importance:** This is said by Abby's daughter, Amanda, and shows great insight.