

She's Come Undone Study Guide

She's Come Undone by Wally Lamb

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Plot Summary

Dolores remembers that she was four years old when her father gave in to the demands of Mrs. Masicotte to become her employee. He'd painted for her before that as a contractor. When he went to work for Mrs. Masicotte, he painted his truck peach, painted her name on the side, and began collecting rent on her properties on Saturdays. Dolores recalls that the watching television became her focal point and that she seldom wanted to do anything else. Television would hold her attention for years, often to the point of being destructive.

Dolores' life is a series of hurts and heartaches. Each time life hands her another problem, she seems to sink lower into her own pit of despair. It begins with the death of her baby brother, apparently during birth, which sends her mother into a deep depression. She only emerges after Dolores throws a fit, declaring that she hates her grandmother. Next comes her parents' divorce. Dolores blames her father, Tony, and can't forgive him for leaving them. Then Dolores' mother, Bernice, slips back into a serious breakdown and is hospitalized. Dolores goes to live with her grandma, Thelma Holland—the same grandma Dolores had declared she hated.

Bernice is eventually released from the hospital and the two live with Grandma. At thirteen, Dolores is raped by a man renting their upstairs apartment. Bernice comforts her by offering her any kind of food she wants and Dolores does little but eat and watch TV, quickly leading to serious obesity. Her guidance counselor, Mr. Pucci, wants her to go to college, and Bernice writes the essay that gets Dolores accepted. Before it is time for Dolores to go, Bernice is killed in a tragic accident. Dolores is devastated. She yells at her father at the funeral home and refuses to attend the service. Then she decides to go on to college because it was her mother's dream.

At school, Dolores is the focus of ridicule. A lesbian janitor tells Dolores she loves her and they have oral sex one night. Shortly after, Dolores kills the woman's fish and leaves town. She spends the next seven years in a mental care program.

While at college, Dolores' roommate, Kippy, got letters from her boyfriend, Dante. Dolores steals the letters and it's by chance that she discovers where Dante is teaching school. She arranges to rent an apartment across the hall from him and makes the move. They meet and Dolores is soon pregnant, but Dante pushes her into having an abortion. They marry, then Dante is fired from his teaching job, accused of an inappropriate relationship with a student. When Dolores arrives home early from work one day, she discovers the girl, undressed and on the bed with Dante.

Dolores' grandmother dies and she moves back to the old house where she reconnects with Mr. Pucci and Roberta, the tattoo artist who had lived across the street during Dolores' teen years. She eventually meets a man, Thayer, and the two marry. Though they are unable to have children, Dolores finally finds happiness—from within.



Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

Dolores remembers that she was four years old when her father gave in to the demands of Mrs. Masicotte to become her employee. He'd painted for her before that as a contractor. When he went to work for Mrs. Masicotte, he painted his truck peach, painted her name on the side, and began collecting rent on her properties on Saturdays. Dolores recalls that watching television became her focal point and that she seldom wanted to do anything else. She also remembers those times as wonderful, though her parents occasionally fought. Dolores says that she began to think of it in terms of television and believed that her parents were like Lucy and Ricky Ricardo of "I Love Lucy" —they loved each other but were just noisy.

When Dolores is in second grade, her mother was expecting a baby. Grandmother Holland picks her up at school one day, saying that there wasn't a baby anymore, and that her mother is in the hospital. Her mother stays in her room after that, though her parents continue to fight. One night, Dolores has a nightmare. Both her parents and her grandmother run into her room. She says, "I hate her", meaning her teacher, but then points to her grandmother. The next morning, her mother makes pancakes for breakfast and her father drives her grandmother back to Rhode Island.

When the family moves to Treetop Acres, Tony becomes obsessed with his yard, working outside anytime he isn't working for Mrs. Masicotte. Dolores has a new best friend, Jeanette Nord. Jeanette's mother cooks for the girls, sings along to their songs, and teaches them to do the twist. Dolores' mother stays at home alone all day with only her parakeet, Petey. One day, as Jeanette's cat is licking its erect penis, Jeanette tells Dolores about French kissing. Dolores says that her third grade teacher had been pregnant, but she hadn't know how conception occurred until Jeanette took it upon herself to share that knowledge, which Jeanette had gotten from her own mother. Dolores decides that the process is disgusting and that she'll never have sex.

One night in July, Tony announces that he plans to have an in ground swimming pool installed. The announcement prompts a fight between her mother and father and Dolores leaves on her bike. Her father hits her mother and releases her parakeet. When she returns, her father reminds her that what happens in their house is not to be told to anyone. Then Dolores' mother sees blood on Dolores' shorts and says, "That's just what I need right now." Dolores' mother goes to Rhode Island while the pool is being completed but Dolores remains at home. As they're swimming, Tony asks "what are those things?" as he tweaks Dolores' nipple. He then takes her to Rhode Island to spend a few days. As Dolores and her mother are returning home on the bus, Dolores learns that her parents are going to divorce. She attends a slumber party at Jeanette's but makes fun of another girl, gets in trouble from Jeanette's mother, and leaves before anyone else is awake.



When Dolores' mother has a nervous breakdown, Dolores calls her father for help. He sends her to live with her grandmother in Rhode Island. Dolores and her grandmother are cautiously polite, both remembering Dolores' outburst about hating her grandmother. Dolores' mother had told her that Dolores' uncle, Eddie, had died as a young man. Now Dolores sees his picture on the wall every day and becomes somewhat fascinated with his death. While Dolores hates school, she makes an unlikely friend in Roberta—the woman who runs a tattoo parlor across the street from Dolores' grandma. Dolores does try to make friends with the Pysyk sisters who live nearby, but the girls are rude, driving Dolores further into her shell. Grandma Holland calls the Pysyks "displaced persons". Dolores says that she's also a displaced person but that she can't quite feel grateful to her grandmother for taking her in. Dolores then gets a package from her mother, still in the hospital. It's a painting of a leg with wings. Dolores is enthralled but her grandmother is appalled. Dolores started seventh grade in a Catholic school and is in class with one of the Pysyk twins, Rosalie. Both Rosalie and Stacia Pysyk continue to make fun of Dolores. Dolores discovers that in her health book, someone has drawn pubic hair on a picture of a girl and a penis on the boy. She trades books with Rosalie without being detected. During confession, she tells the priest that she has seen the drawing and that she's sorry for having seen it. Beginning that afternoon and for weeks thereafter, Rosalie is to stand with her nose to the blackboard for an hour after school.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

Even at that early age, Dolores was jealous of the time her father spent away from her mother. Even though Tony took Dolores along on Saturdays to collect the rent, she hated the time there and was often bad. She would tease Mrs. Masicotte's dog, Zahra, or scribble in expensive story books. Dolores doesn't understand her parents' fighting, but looking back can say that she had an "unbearable craving," though she also can't say for what. The fact that Dolores was willing to say that she hated her grandmother was likely because she so desperately wanted things back to as it was before her mother lost the baby.

Dolores' relationship with her father seems wrong. Though he never makes any overt passes at her other than to tweak her nipple, there seems to be something not quite right between the two. The reader will never get any deeper look into that aspect of the relationship. Though Dolores is full of bravado about the divorce—she asks her mother who gets to keep their Cadillac—she eventually begins to shake uncontrollably and wonders what she might have done to make her father decide to leave her. Dolores' relationship with her mother is also strained. Her mother asks Dolores if she's pretty, obviously needing some reassurance after her husband leaves her for another woman. But Dolores can't give that comfort and says she's ugly, though she then says it's a joke. Dolores does find her mother's parakeet outside the house the morning after the slumber party and takes it in. The act appears to have no other motive other than kindness because Dolores has said that she doesn't like the bird or the way her mother seems obsessed with it.



There's little doubt that Dolores is having trouble making friends. While she seems not to be an overly unattractive girl, she simply doesn't have the personality to encourage friendships. She made friends easily with Jeanette, but can't seem to repeat that once she moves to Rhode Island with her grandmother. Instead, she spends a lot of time trying to survive the teasing put out by the Pysyk twins and picked up among her other classmates.

Dolores hasn't been close to her Grandmother Holland and now finds it quite awkward to live in the house with the old woman. Despite the fact that she seems to hold only animosity for her grandmother, she can't help but feel a bit sorry for her when the painting of the flying leg arrives. In that moment, Dolores seems to want to do something she's seldom wanted before—to offer comfort. In her turn, her grandmother occasionally offers comfort to Dolores, though these times are few.



Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

Dolores' mother, Bernice, is released from the hospital and there's a tentative peace between Dolores and Bernice, as Grandma Holland disapproves of her daughter's bad habits—including smoking. She's unsuccessful at finding a job but walks each evening. Dolores never goes with her mother and says her return is always a surprise—that she's looking for signs of "weird" and is braced for the news that Bernice has gone back to the mental hospital. Meanwhile, Dolores is third in the class with regard to grades and always among the last three chosen for teams of any kind. It's in that climate that Bernice shares some of her thoughts—that Grandma Holland had helped make her less self-assured and that she'd hated the time Tony spent with Mrs. Masicotte. Dolores takes a chance, reaches over for her mother's cigarette, takes a drag, and begins talking about her problems with the Pysyk sisters. When her mother has an interview as a receptionist for a pest control company, Dolores reassures her that she'll get the job. But when her mother doesn't return home by supper time, Dolores expects that she's run away or even committed suicide. She turns to her grandmother and shouts that if her mother's gone crazy, it's Grandma Holland's fault. Grandma is also shaky and Dolores realizes that she's also worried. When she returns, she reveals a new hair-do but says she skipped the interview. Then Dolores' mother gets a job in a tollbooth and encounters Tony who calls Dolores.

When Grandma's upstairs tenant dies, Jack and Rita Speight rent the apartment. Everyone in the family is taken by the couple and all three agree to share dinner at the Speights one night. The evening is light and everyone—even Grandma—laughs a lot. Later, Bernice and Dolores go on a shopping trip and Dolores turns the talk to her uncle, Eddie. Bernice says that Eddie would hold Dolores and call her "Fred", teasing Bernice because the child wasn't a boy. Bernice said she cried when she learned that Eddie had drowned, but that she can only remember Grandma slamming things. Dolores says that Grandma was a "cold bitch".

Dolores realizes that she and Jack will typically be leaving for school and work at the same time. She imagines getting a ride to class in Jack's MG sports car and figures that will boost her popularity. Dolores again says she hates school and tells her mother that she might be sick, that she feels cancer growing in her stomach. Her mother jokingly asks if Dolores might be pregnant, but Dolores says her mother is the one with all the boyfriends.

One evening, Jack borrows a screwdriver to work on a fan. He and Dolores sit on his porch and talk, Jack saying that he might have to move because of his job. Dolores says she doesn't want him to move because the house was boring before they arrived. Jack then confides that Rita is pregnant, but asks Dolores not to tell. He says that Rita has miscarried twice. At one point, he reaches over and touches her foot, asking if she's ticklish. He tickles for a moment, then climbs on top of her. Dolores starts crying but



Jack says he was only trying to cheer them up. The next morning, Jack arrives with donuts for breakfast and offers to drive Dolores to school. On the way, Jack apologizes and reminds Dolores that she's not to tell about the pregnancy. She points out the Pysyk sisters and Jack honks the horn, waving at them to be sure they see Dolores in his car. That day, Dolores meets Norma French, a rough girl who talks about her boyfriend Kenny and curses continually. That evening, Jack drives up to Dolores on her walk home and offers her a ride, which she accepts. She then takes a puff from his cigarette and he says she's "naughty".

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

After Dolores' conversation with her father, she is very upset and Grandma offers to play a game with her. Dolores says she simply wants to be held. Though it apparently surprises Grandma, she complies. The two are becoming closer despite themselves. While Grandma at times seems spiteful and rude, she seems to seriously care for Dolores and is likely just trying to do the best she can for a teenage girl she knows little about. The next time Tony calls for Dolores, Grandma informs him that Dolores is "at a playmates." Despite herself, Dolores is curious about her family, including her uncle who died. It's Roberta who has known Grandma and the rest of the family for many years and who becomes Dolores' chief source of information.

Dolores has heard Rita and Jack having sex and is enamored with the sounds and the idea. Meanwhile, she's become increasingly interested in her Uncle Eddie. As Dolores masturbates in her room one night, she pretends that her hands are first Eddie's, then Jack's.

Dolores' encounter with Jack leaves her shaken but she's obviously also interested. She tries to convince herself that she felt his knee or elbow against her, rather than his erection. Though she runs away, she's soon friends with him again and accepts a ride home from school. Dolores also finally meets someone at school who doesn't immediately hate her. The rough girl, Norma, tells Dolores about her boyfriend and that he's likely about to drop out of school. There's little doubt that this friendship is headed for trouble, but Dolores is so desperate for a friend that she likely can't see that possibility.



Chapters 7, 8 and 9

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Summary

Jack begins showing up to give Dolores a ride home several days a week. Some days, he is moody. Other days, he strokes her hair and make jokes. Dolores lies, saying that she's staying late at school to make up for the hours she spends riding around with Jack. She begins to gorge herself on junk food after school. She daydreams of Rita's death, resulting in Dolores taking on the role of wife and mother to Jack and his child.

Dolores meets Norma's boyfriend, Kenny, but is uncomfortable and tells Norma that she no longer wants to be friends. A few nights later, Bernice makes Dolores talk to her father. She tells him to pretend she died. The next day, Jack teases her about keeping him waiting and she snaps back that she couldn't just leave class. Jack then tells her that he has one more month before he's out of a job. Jack takes Dolores for a ride into the country to an animal shelter. Jack says the dogs there are sad, but Dolores thinks they look riled and dangerous. Then Jack begins rubbing Dolores' back and kisses her. Jack shows her a pornographic magazine but Dolores keeps insisting that she wants to go home. Then Jack begins to run his penis inside his pants and tells Dolores to look. He then rapes her. On the way home, he raves about killing his wife, leaving a note that will implicate Dolores for his own suicide, and tells her that she's partly responsible. Then he tells her that he feels closer to her now.

In November, Rita tells Bernice, Dolores, and Grandma that she's pregnant, then miscarries a few days later. Dolores things that it happened because of her actions with Jack. Dolores eventually goes to Roberta and tells her about the rape. Roberta then takes Dolores back home and tells Bernice.

After Bernice finds out about the rape, she takes Dolores to the emergency room but declines to press charges, telling the state police that Dolores is only thirteen years old and just needs to forget it happened. Jack "sneaks away" the following weekend, taking the Speight's household items. Dolores demands to be allowed to home school for the rest of the year and her mother agrees. Dolores is forced to talk with a psychiatrist, which she hates. When Dolores starts public high school, she skips many days, feigning illness. Bernice is filled with regret for her daughter's rape.

During Dolores' high school years, she becomes dependent on her guidance counselor, Mr. Pucci. One day, he calls Dolores into his office and she discovers that her mother is also there and that they are to discuss Dolores' future. Mr. Pucci suggests college, despite Dolores' grades and conduct. He says that if she doesn't attend, she may regret it. Bernice demands that Dolores plan to go to college and refuses to hear otherwise. Bernice writes an essay and turns it in with Dolores' college application to Merton College in Pennsylvania. It's that essay that gets Dolores accepted. Dolores still refuses and her mother eventually cuts off the cord to her television, promising to have it fixed only when Dolores completes the physical requirements to attend college. It's Grandma



who locates a doctor who'll do an incomplete physical, with "None of that other monkey business". The doctor tells her that she's only five-foot, five-inches tall, and weighs two hundred, fifty-seven pounds. He tells her that she must lose weight for medial reasons. When the television repairman fixes the TV cord, Dolores sits watching her favorite shows and stuffing herself with junk food. Dolores then comes up with a plan to get out of college—she simply won't graduate high school. Then she receives one hundred dollars from her father. Bernice and Grandma prepare for Dolores' graduation but she doesn't go. Instead, she purchases a slab of roast beef that costs \$79 and gorges herself.

Dolores then gets a letter from Kathy Strednicki who is assigned as Dolores' roommate. Dolores whines some more, telling her mother that she might become so depressed at college that she may slit her wrists. Bernice tells her that if she doesn't want to go, she should just not go, that she'd thought she could force the issue but was obviously wrong. At 3:15 that next morning, Dolores is awakened by voices. It's police telling Grandma that Bernice was killed just outside her tollbooth. Dolores is amazed that people she knows visit the funeral home to pay their respects. One night, Jeanette shows up but becomes hysterical with laughter and runs from the building. The next night, Tony is there. Dolores yells at her father until he leaves. Dolores skips her mother's funeral then writes a letter to the girl destined to be her college roommate. She tells her that they seem to have a lot in common and agrees to pay half the cost of Indian print curtains and bedspreads. She then mails the letter, pledging that it's for her mother.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 Analysis

Dolores is sometimes anxious to accept blame for things that are not her fault, but other times blames others for her own misfortunes. It's a pattern that will continue throughout her life. In the case of Jack, she doesn't at first tell anyone that he raped her. As is typical of human behavior, she then begins to blame herself. But she soon turns to share that blame with Jack and believes that the two of them are to blame for Rita's miscarriage. It's interesting that Dolores goes to Roberta when she's ready to tell someone. Roberta will play an important role in Dolores' life in her later years as well. It's also interesting that Dolores puts up with Jack's moods during all those rides after school. She does her best to comfort him, assuring him that he'll get another job and that his new employers will be lucky to have him. A self-confident person would likely have stopped agreeing to be around Jack because of those outbursts and ravings. In that light, it's possible to say that Dolores may truly have allowed herself into the situation that led to the rape. On the other hand, she was only an eighth grader, a child, and didn't fully understand Jack's emotional state. It's also likely that she continued to put up with him because she was so desperate for friendship.

As is typical, Dolores immediately begins to accept the blame for her mother's death. She says that her mother might have walked out in front of the truck on purpose, simply to get some peace from Dolores. She believes that if she had just agreed to go to college without the arguments, that her mother would be alive. Dolores eventually puts



her hand to a hot flat iron, inflicting pain on herself. It's as if she needs that physical pain in order to withstand the emotional pain.

Dolores still blames her father for leaving them. She can't at all see that there could have been two sides to the story. It's interesting to consider what might have been different if her father had had the courage to tell her his side when they were spending their week together at their pool.



Chapters 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Summary

Dolores tells her grandmother that she's going to college and her grandmother asks why Dolores put her mother through all the grief if she was simply going to give in and go. Grandma doesn't express an opinion either way, but presents Dolores with her college checkbook. Dolores invents a completely different life for herself as she's writing to her intended roommate, who calls herself "Kippy". She says that she has a boyfriend, Derek, who is from England, and a part-time job. Kippy confesses in her own letters that she is still a virgin, though her boyfriend Dante is pressing her. Dolores writes that Derek is doing the same, though she doesn't want to end up pregnant and living in England with Derek.

Before Bernice's death, Grandma had put a deposit on a trip to Amish country with her friends, and it's now time to go. She almost backs out but Dolores presses her to go, thinking that the few days in the house alone would be good. Grandma talks about Bernice and Eddie then, and their love of trips as children. Dolores enjoys hearing and holds her breath, hoping her grandmother will continue to talk. Grandma goes on her trip, leaving Dolores in charge of overseeing the paper hanger who will replace wallpaper. Dolores receives a letter from Mrs. Arthur Music, the man who killed Bernice, along with a photo of their family to prove that he was a good Christian man and a check for \$500.

Dolores decides to visit Mr. Pucci, but another man named Gary answers the door. When Mr. Pucci arrives, he's a bit angry that Dolores showed up at his house and he takes her home. On the way, she accuses him of having a homosexual relationship and then tells him that she is afraid to go away to college.

The paper-hanger is Larry and he is, according to Dolores, "irritating-weird, not psycho-weird". He asks her name so that he can stop calling her "yoo-hoo" or "excuse me", and manages an air of familiarity that Dolores can't resist. Larry says that his apartment has become infested with fleas and Dolores invites Larry, his wife Ruth and daughter Tia to spend the night with her. Neither Larry nor Ruth seem repulsed by Dolores' size, a fact that she considers several times. Dolores is torn, wanting to watch Larry cook and loving the conversation she's having with Ruth. Dolores shares a joint with Larry, getting high and giggly. That night, she wakes as they are making love and can see their silhouette.

The next day, Dolores tells Ruth that she isn't certain she wants to go to college. Ruth encourages her, telling her that she should look upon it as an adventure. Dolores points out her size, saying that she doesn't need any personal growth. Ruth doesn't laugh at Dolores, but tells her that she doesn't know what good thing might happen if she does go away to college.



Dolores arrives at Merten College an entire week early. She knocks at the door of her dorm and a fat lady appears. The woman isn't friendly and tells Dolores that it's a wonder a "fatty like you" can fit in the tiny state of Rhode Island. Dolores returns with a "fuck you" and the lady walks away. Later, the lady, who Dolores learns is Dottie, returns and tells Dolores that she'll allow her to spend the night in the dorm. She warns that she shouldn't watch television or have lights on after dark. Dottie calls Dolores at a quarter of ten that night and says she'll bring cream cake early the next morning. She tells Dolores that she's lucky Dottie didn't have plans for the evening so that she could call. Over cake for breakfast, Dottie tells Dolores that she may be a fat slob, but that Dottie immediately recognized that Dolores was a "clean" fat slob. Dottie makes fun of the painting Bernice had done and Dolores realizes that she should probably ship it home.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

When Grandma talks about Bernice and Eddie, Dolores is excited. Dolores says that she comes to feel for the older woman. When Grandma says that she doesn't understand why she outlived her children, Dolores is sympathetic. Though they've had their moments together—playing cards when Dolores was younger—the two women have yet to truly connect. Dolores and Grandma are each trying to cope with Bernice's death in their own way. Dolores has written letters, making herself into the kind of person her mother would want her to be. Grandma has cleaned. It's important to note that Dolores decides not to go to the funeral. While Grandma is at least a bit angry, she doesn't focus on the decision.

As usual, Dolores seems to be more concerned about herself and her own feelings. For example, she accuses Mr. Pucci of being homosexual in one breath and asks him to console her fears of college in the next.

Dolores spends the time with Larry and Ruth truly enjoying herself. She is accepted—vital to anyone's self-esteem—and she realizes that they accept her. For someone who has never had friends, that acceptance is something to be coveted and Dolores does. She admits to being torn—wanting to be in the kitchen watching Larry cook but not wanting to leave the conversation she's having with Ruth. When Dolores arrives at college a week later, she's thrown together with Dottie, a twenty-nine-year-old cleaning lady who allows Dolores to stay in the dorms though they are technically off-limits for another week. Dottie also accepts Dolores, though it's a different kind of acceptance. Dottie wants desperately to be accepted herself, so she points out her acceptance of Dolores. She calls Dolores a fat slob, but says she recognized that Dolores was also clean, and that's the fact that makes Dolores acceptable to Dottie.



Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary

Dottie and Dolores spend the week together. Dolores helps clean and Dottie continually brings food. On the day Kippy arrives, Dolores has a hangover and is passing foul-smelling gas. Kippy and her parents are aghast at Dolores. During the first dorm meeting, Rochelle, the dorm president, warns the girls to be wary of Dottie, who is a lesbian. Dolores quickly vows to lose weight in order to be perfect for Kippy. Later, Kippy is injured in a game and Dolores becomes her slave, fetching anything she needs and even attending her classes to gather her assignments. Dolores says that she has a gland problem, then confesses that it's not true. She then tells Kippy that her mother died, but Kippy is skeptical.

Often, Kippy has a visitor, Eric, and Dolores is to leave the room so that the two of them could be alone together. One day, Dolores is taking Kippy food when she happens to meet Dottie. Dolores has avoided the woman since Rochelle said Dottie was a "lezzie", and Dottie asks why. Dolores recalls a kiss Dottie gave her while the two were drunk during that first week on campus. Then Dottie tells Dolores that Kippy makes fun of Dolores behind her back. Dolores says it can't be true but when she arrives in the room, Kippy asks for an Orange Crush. Dolores says she's busy and suggests Kippy get her own. Dolores quickly begins skipping class and finds herself in trouble because of her attendance.

One night, Dolores gets a phone call from Dottie who begs her to come for supper that Saturday. She doesn't get anywhere until she tells Dolores that she'll reveal what Kippy has been saying about her. Then she tells Dolores that she loves her. That night, Kippy talks to Dolores, asking about Bernice's accident. Dolores is just thinking that Kippy is sincere when she asks if Dolores would wash a load of dark clothes the following day.

Dolores has begun opening Kippy's letters from Dante and she finds one that has photos of Dante in the nude. In the letter, he says that not making love before Kippy left could have been the biggest mistake of his life, and that he loves her. Dolores then gets high with a girl named Naomi who talks of socialism and injustices in the world.

On Halloween night, Dolores is headed outside when Eric grabs her and begins trying to dance with her. Despite Dolores' protests, Eric rubs his crotch against her while his friends yell obscenities such as "hump time". Dolores uses her knee to kick Eric in the crotch twice. When she later returns to her dorm room, Eric has destroyed her possessions, including the picture her mother painted. Dolores cuts a small square of the picture then runs outside. Not knowing what else to do, she calls Dottie, who picks her up. The two go to a restaurant then to Dottie's house. Dolores learns that Dottie has a son who died. Dolores notes that there's a segment on television about whales that simply swim up on the beach where they'll surely die. Dottie begins to touch Dolores who protests until Dottie asks what difference it could possibly make. They have oral



sex together. Later, Dottie sleeps but Dolores goes into the kitchen where she is about to slit her wrists. She sees the picture of Dottie's son and changes her mind. Then she kills all the fish in Dottie's tanks and leaves the apartment. Across the street, Dolores agrees to pay a man \$400—money she got from the man who killed her mother—for a ride to Cape Cod where the whales continued to beach themselves.

Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

While Kippy is busy accusing Dolores of lying to her in their letters, she herself is something less than honest. Dolores asks what happened between Kippy and Dante regarding sex and Kippy says that they made love at a place called the Ridge. Dolores will much later discover that it's not true. Kippy is also two-faced, thanking Dolores as she runs errands for the injured Kippy, but talking about her behind her back. From Kippy's first reaction to Dolores, it seems reasonable to expect that Kippy would make fun of Dolores, but Dolores seems to have hoped that Kippy would come to like her. It's almost as if Dolores expects that she can "buy" Kippy's approval.

The relationship between Dolores and Dottie will quickly become complicated. Dottie does seem to be a lesbian. She desperately wants Dolores' friendship and it's Dottie who tells Dolores that Kippy talks about her behind her back. Dolores wants so desperately to be accepted by her peers that she tries to avoid any semblance of friendship with Dottie. When Eric performs what Dolores later calls "a rape dance" with her, Dolores is angry but also afraid. She recalls Jack Speight and the rape that happened when she was just thirteen. While she's outside, she hears Eric say that he's going to get even with Dolores, increasing her fear. She turns to Dottie. Perhaps she does so because she knows there's a kindred spirit or maybe because she knows that Dottie won't be mean to her. After Dottie has performed oral sex on Dolores, she goes to sleep. Dottie has already said that she loves Dolores, though Dolores doesn't return the sentiment. The reasons for Dolores killing the fish aren't clear at this point. She'll later say that she's had a tendency to hurt anyone who is nice to her and that may very well be true in this instance.



Chapters 16, 17 and 18

Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Summary

Dolores heads to Wellfleet at Cape Cod where the whales are beaching themselves. Domingos, a man who lives in Dottie's neighborhood, agrees to drive her there for \$400. When they reach Wellfleet, Domingos goes to the beach to see one of the whales. Dolores says she doesn't intend to go, but does and is amazed by the sheer mass of the beast. When the whale begins to writhe, Dolores screams until Domingos helps her back to his cab. When he drops Dolores at the motel, she discovers that he's left three of the \$400 she agreed to pay him for driving her to Cape Cod. She begins to cry, saying that the best people always leave her. Dolores writes a postcard to her grandmother, saying that she simply couldn't take it anymore, then to her mother's childhood friend, Geneva. Then she tears up both. Instead, she gets the phone number from information and calls Geneva. Geneva is very nice but Dolores abruptly ends the call and thinks, "rich bitch".

Dolores returns to the beach where the whale is now dead and deserted. She's sitting there when someone—apparently a patrolman of some sort—tells her that there are people worried about her. He then radios in that he has Dolores with him.

The next section of the book begins at Gracewood Institute. Dolores spends four years at the private mental hospital and three more as an outpatient of the program. It's here that Dolores meets Dr. Shaw after going through two other psychotherapists. Geneva Sweet pays for the hospital and flies in to see Dolores. Grandma visits weekly and Dolores believes that Grandma has kept the mental hospital a secret from friends. It's while Dolores is working with Dr. Shaw that she realizes that she killed the fish because she was angry at Eric. Dolores works through many of her issues, including admitting that she over eats when is angry. Dolores begins to lose weight. During one session with Dr. Shaw, Dolores is to pretend that she's a fetus and Dr. Shaw is her mother. Dolores is in the Gracewood pool when Dr. Shaw is almost electrocuted. Dolores notes that Dr. Shaw is the only parent who never left her. As part of her therapy, Dolores "relives" her childhood. On the date that symbolizes her tenth birthday, she chooses an Etch-a-Sketch and is immediately enthralled with the possibility of creation on the toy. She draws constantly and gets so good with the Etch-a-Sketch that she begins saving her masterpieces and buys new Etch-a-Sketches.

In the summer of 1973, Dolores moves into a group home called Project Outreach House. With no job, Dolores is "stuck" with household chores, including cooking, grocery shopping, and cleaning. During one of the therapy sessions in the pool, Dolores reveals that her mother had once called her father a "whore" because of the time he spent with his employer, Mrs. Masicotte. She rails about the secrets she's lived with, including the fights between her parents, and how her mother consoled her after the rape by providing more junk food. When Dolores finishes, she and Dr. Shaw hold each other and cry for a long time.



Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Analysis

On the way to Cape Cod, Dolores and Domingos stop at a diner and Dolores finds herself telling a complete stranger that Domingos is her husband and that he likes her fat because there's more of her to love. Dolores' need for approval continues to be an issue and she'll use any means to get it. From her hotel room, Dolores seeks out Geneva, but it's likely that she is really looking for a connection with her mother. When that connection proves dissatisfying, she lashes out. Geneva becomes Dolores' benefactor, paying for the mental hospital. Dolores notes that her grandmother spends eleven dollars for a cab ride each week to visit Dolores. They have a neighbor who frequently gives Grandma a ride, but Dolores believes Grandma hasn't told anyone about Dolores' breakdown because she's ashamed. There's no real indication that it's true, but Dolores clings to it—another case of her lack of self-confidence and her willingness to believe the worst of those who love her.

As Dolores begins to work with Dr. Shaw, she's skeptical but eventually makes progress. The fact that Dolores is finally able to analyze her own feelings and actions is a positive step. She's also placed an enormous amount of trust in Dr. Shaw and one wonders what would have happened had he also let her down. The Etch-a-Sketch phase is interesting for several reasons. It becomes a passion and Dolores spends every spare moment at the screen. She becomes very proficient at making pictures. It's likely that a sense of accomplishment—even at this very basic level—is necessary in the healing process for a person who has never been able to accomplish anything on her own. The weight is another interesting point. Though there's no indication that it became a huge issue for Dolores, she is losing weight and that's bound to increase her self-confidence.



Chapters 19, 20 and 21

Chapters 19, 20 and 21 Summary

Dolores comes to a better understanding of her mother, then comes to a tenuous peace with her memories of the two people she hates most—her father and Jack Speight. Then she accepts a job at a photo lab. Dolores notes that the employees weren't supposed to return pornographic photos, but she slips them through. She also comes to "know" the Ficketts, who photograph each other in coffins. Dolores begins consulting a psychic and wants to quit her sessions with Dr. Shaw, saying that she's tired of digging into the past and wants to consider the future. She's down to one hundred, thirty-eight pounds and has accumulated dozens of Etch-a-Sketches. When she works on the toys at the park, people stop to watch.

It's while Dolores is working in the photo lab that she is handed a roll of film that includes photos of a school field trip. The teacher is Dante—Kippy's boyfriend from so long ago. Dolores had continually opened Kippy's mail from Dante and feels as if she knows him personally. Dolores begins to think of Dante as her future, though he looks nothing like the man she'd drawn on the Etch-a-Sketch.

Dolores rents an apartment from the elderly Marguerite Wing, directly across the hall from Dante. When she arrives, there's a key and note taped to the door, inviting Dolores upstairs for cocktails the next day. When she arrives, she meets the elderly Chadley Massey, Mrs. Wing's lover, who promptly propositions Dolores. Dolores says, "Cut it out you old motherfucker" and Massey in turn calls Dolores a "tight-assed bitch". Dante immediately invites Dolores to dinner at his apartment then asks if she wants to go to bed or keep it casual. She agrees to "make love" then Dante asks if she's on the pill. She says yes, though it's a lie. Dolores cries but Dante is gentle and they culminate the evening in sex.

Dolores gets a job at a grocery store and begins doing laundry and ironing for Dante. Dolores and Dante continue to have sex, though Dolores is not using birth control. They seem to ease into living together though they continue to have both apartments. They have their first argument when Dante is griping about something and Dolores doesn't seem to know how to offer comfort. When they reunite, they have sex on the floor and Dante is rough, but Dolores says she's so grateful for his love that she'll take it on any terms. Then Dolores discovers that she's pregnant but she doesn't yet tell Dante. When she tells him, she lies and says that it happened despite the birth control pills. Dante says he doesn't want children. He writes her a love poem but refuses to talk about the possibility of having children together.



Chapters 19, 20 and 21 Analysis

There's little doubt that Dolores feels some pride in her Etch-a-Sketch drawings. She has even attracted a group of people who stop to watch her when she draws in the park. By now, Dolores is recreating the classic masterpieces on the toy machines. Dolores is again seeking something as she consults a psychic. She seems to have always been reluctant to take initiative and responsibility and now she seems to want someone else to tell her where her future happiness lies. Nadine challenges Dolores to draw something on her Etch-a-Sketch that will make her happy. As Dolores draws a man on her Etch-a-Sketch, she asks Nadine if this is the man she'll marry. Nadine is noncommittal, leaving the question basically unanswered but Dolores takes it as a "yes" because she so desperately wants direction. However, when she accidentally discovers Dante's whereabouts, Dolores is ready to forget the Etch-a-Sketch man. She immediately makes plans to move to Montpelier, Vermont. Until she's on the bus she never considers that Dante might be attached to someone.

Dolores and Dante seem to hit it off from the moment of their first meeting though Dolores is uncomfortable with the initial moments of sex. Dante is patient, no doubt earning Dolores' love because she so desperately wants that type of kindness. Again, Dolores seems to give no thought to the consequences of her action—she knows only that she wants Dante but hasn't considered whether she'll ever confess that she knew about him from reading his mail all those years ago.

Dolores has quickly come to realize that Dante isn't the perfect person as she'd pictured him. Though he quickly becomes a big part of her life and she of his, Dante isn't at all committed to making Dolores happy except on those occasions when it suits him. Dolores has seen signs of this but she's so afraid of being without him that she isn't willing to give up on their relationship.



Chapters 22, 23 and 24

Chapters 22, 23 and 24 Summary

Dolores makes an appointment for an abortion but is torn. She is certain the baby is a girl and she begins referring to her as Vita Marie. She toys with the idea of slipping away and having the child but fears that she'll lose Dante during that time. She finally makes a list of the things she loves about Dante—his hands, voice, sex, dedication to work, "he loves me back" and "he made me somebody new". She weighs that against things she loves about Vita Marie and has nothing on that side of her list. Dante goes on a skiing trip the day after Christmas while Dolores stays at home and prepares for the abortion. Mrs. Wing, the landlady, goes with Dolores for her appointment. Dante then asks Dolores to marry him. Dolores is emotionally drained and aches for her loss, but is unable to truly talk with Dante about it.

Grandma and Dante's parents arrive for the wedding. Grandma gives Dolores a locket she'd gotten from Dolores' grandfather on their second anniversary. She also gave her two thousand, two hundred dollars in cash. Grandma talks briefly about her life and both say they wish Bernice could be there for the wedding.

In 1978, Paula—a girl who works at the grocery store with Dolores—and her husband Boomer are building a house. Dolores and Dante go with them to look at the lot. Afterward, Dante makes fun of Paula and Boomer, denies that they could eventually buy a house of their own, and points out how inconvenient it is to have a child. Meanwhile, Dolores gets a promotion and a raise at work and she plans to use the raise to start saving toward a house. When the account begins building, Dante announces that he's thinking of taking a leave from teaching in order to write. Dante spends the majority of the money on a van. Dolores soon writes her grandmother a letter with the "exciting news" —that they'd used her wedding gift to buy a van and were planning a trip. They do take a trip, though Dolores does most of the driving while Dante reads, ignoring her.

At a diner at Pike's Peak, Dolores starts talking to a woman Dolores recognizes as Mrs. Fickett—the woman who had submitted photos of the couple in coffins that Dolores had developed. Dolores doesn't say that she recognizes them. Dolores knows that she's been keeping secrets, such as the fact that she worked at a photo lab while she was under the care of a mental health facility. When they arrive home, Dante announces that he was fired in June after being accused of having an inappropriate relationship with a student named Sheila. Dolores wants to hire a lawyer to fight the school, but Dante says he agreed not to fight and the school agreed not to press charges. Dante lays around the apartment while Dolores works two jobs. They sell the van, buying a cheaper car. One day, Dolores arrives home early and finds Sheila in the apartment with Dante—Sheila doesn't have her jeans on. The two are sharing a hot dog, though Dante is a vegetarian. Dante leaves and Dolores doesn't answer his calls for six days. Then she receives word that her grandmother died and calls him, asking for support.



Chapters 22, 23 and 24 Analysis

Dolores continually excuses Dante's shortcomings. When he buys a van without telling her—using money she'd saved for a house—she is first angry. Then she writes her grandmother a letter, telling her that "we" decided to buy the van and that she's excited about taking the trip. When she discovers that Dante has been fired, she writes her grandmother that Dante is going to take a leave of absence to focus on his writing. It seems that Dolores is continually looking for that perfect person she'd imagined Dante to be. She is also afraid of revealing her past secrets to Dante. Ironically, though their relationship is now draining Dolores, she's afraid of losing it. It's not until she finds Sheila in her apartment with Dante, almost nude, that she becomes angry enough to make demands.

It's interesting to note that it seems Dante expects that Dolores will continue to support him, no matter what. It's almost as if he feels entitled to her love and dedication. When Dolores catches him with Sheila, Dante's first statement is to explain why he's eating a hot dog—meat. Dante has spent years telling Dolores that he's a vegetarian and expects her to believe him when he says he's conducting an experiment regarding eating meat. It seems that it doesn't even occur to Dante that he should first try to explain Sheila's presence.



Chapters 25 and 26

Chapters 25 and 26 Summary

Dante drives from his parents' home to pick up Dolores, then drives her to her grandmother's house in Rhode Island. The visit the same undertaker who had made arrangements for Bernice's funeral. Dante makes the decisions and Dolores signs the forms. They return to Grandma's where Dolores discovers that almost all the furniture is gone. Dante continues to tell Dolores that he's sorry for having had sex with Sheila, that he loves Dolores, and that he wants them to reunite. Dolores points out that Dante had been dishonest—telling her that he hadn't done what he was accused of. When Dolores finds her letters to her grandmother, she looks back at her fairy tale accounts of her life with Dante, sees that dishonesty, and thinks that she probably earned Dante's dishonesty.

One of the visitors to the wake was Mr. Pucci. Dolores talks to him briefly, then walks him to his car. Mr. Pucci says that he thinks of Dolores whenever someone mentions the landing on the moon, because he was in Dolores' house that day, giving her an African violet after her mother had died. He says that he often thinks of Dolores when someone mentions the moon landing and that he's forgiven her of any wrong. She thanks him for standing by her when she was "so messed up".

Dolores and Dante visit with the lawyer, a former classmate of Dolores' who doesn't recognize her, and learn that a "smallish" bank account and the house have been willed to Dolores. Dolores says to sell it but Dante says not yet and Dolores gives in.

After the funeral, several old women return to Dolores' house. When they leave, Roberta puts in an appearance. She's older and in poor health. She tells Dolores that during a recent snow storm, Dolores' grandmother called Roberta to be certain she was alright. Roberta says that she and Dolores' grandmother were both actually "crusty old broads", with more in common than anyone could have believed. Roberta does a "polka show" at a local radio station and she and Dante take an instant dislike to each other. On the way home, Dolores suddenly "comes undone" and tells Dante that she was raped at thirteen, that she lost weight while at a mental hospital by imagining that mold was growing on her food, and that she remains a vegetarian because of the abortion. Then she tells him that her roommate at college was Kippy Strednicki and Dante gets angry, yelling obscenities at Dolores until the manager comes over. Then he leaves Dolores at a Burger King in Massachusetts.

The division of their possessions is handled over the phone and Dolores receives a box of items from Dante, addressed to "Dolores Davis, Certified Lunatic". Roberta agrees that the divorce is the right thing to do but tells Dolores she should have held out for the car—a green Vega. Dolores gets a job at a novelty shop and begins spending a lot of time with Roberta. Eventually, Dolores is going to the radio station with Roberta, helping push the necessary buttons that are difficult because of Roberta's Parkinson's disease.



Dolores then takes another part-time job, working for Mrs. Gutwax at her bakery. Her son, Ronnie, is somewhat taken with Dolores.

Dolores eventually buys a television and satellite dish, though Roberta is urging her to buy a car. When the delivery and installation is complete, Roberta appears on the porch to lecture Dolores about her decision. They have an argument and Roberta falls from the top step. Dolores begins to do poorly at her job at the novelty shop because she spends long hours watching television at night. The owners fire her. She works full time at the bakery until the day Ronnie asks to kiss her. They kiss until Ronnie has an erection, then Dolores writes her resignation letter and leaves the store. At the end of that summer, Dolores gets a letter from her father's third wife saying that Tony had died.

One afternoon, Dante arrives with Dolores' old black and white television set. The house is a wreck with moldy food lying everywhere. He has a girl with him and as he's leaving he tells Dolores that she needs to get herself under control. Dolores looks around and realizes that she's falling back into old habits. She gets a seventy-five percent refund on the satellite and buys a gas-guzzling car. Dolores finds tapes in the car and when she plays one, discovers it's the sound of humpback whales. She and Roberta reconnect as Dolores is again finding her way.

Chapters 25 and 26 Analysis

Dolores is preparing to go to the funeral home for visitation. Dante had been napping and Dolores thinks that if he's still asleep, she'll go without him. She's not being considerate of the fact that he's just made a long drive but knows that there will be many of the same people present who were at the funeral home when Bernice died—when Dolores had a screaming fit at her father. Dante believes Dolores' father is dead. As they sit in the funeral home that night, Dolores is relieved and maybe even surprised that no one is "mean" to her and no one gives her away. Later, one woman asks if she has children. When Dolores says no, the woman predicts that it's female trouble related to when Dolores was overweight, but Dante isn't in the room to hear it.

Dolores says that being back in Rhode Island seems to have made her back into the person she was when she lived there. At one point, she tells an old lady that her grandchildren are "cute in a hamsterish way", prompting all the old ladies to leave the house. She recognizes many of the landmarks and at least some of the people. She begins to tell Dante about Roberta when he yells at her to "shut up", then snaps that he was just forming a poem in his head and Dolores made him lose it. Dolores doesn't say anything back but it seems that she's again beginning to understand that Dante hasn't changed, that he's ultimately selfish, and will only be considerate to Dolores as far as it takes to get what he wants. Back at the house, Dante abandons Dolores while she's entertaining the mourners and goes off to write down a poem.

Ironically, it's Dante who makes her see that she's slipped completely out of control—watching television around the clock and overeating. Dolores seems to be lonely but is

also seeking self-satisfaction in the wrong places. She's already realized it but now decides that it's time to do something about it—and immediately does.



Chapters 27, 28 and 29

Chapters 27, 28 and 29 Summary

Dolores returns to the novelty shop and quickly advances to assistant manager. Her employer, Mr. Buchbinder, insists that he help pay tuition and Dolores goes back to college, taking English 101 as her first class. Dolores tells Roberta that she's not cut out for college, laments the twenty-four ninety-five she spent on the textbook and says she'll be forty-two before she graduates, if she takes class at her current rate. "And how old will you be by then if you don't graduate?" Roberta asks. Dolores is then painting Roberta's toenails hot pink and she says that she has an essay due the next week, that she's to describe an everyday task she performs. She says that she might describe painting her toenails, then runs upstairs to write her essay. Roberta points out that she has only three painted toenails as Dolores is leaving. That night, the ceiling falls in. Roberta convinces Dolores to take a part-time job at a Chinese restaurant, delivering meals Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

Dolores has met a man named Thayer in her class. The teacher, Roy, reads both Dolores' and Thayer's essays as the best in the class. Thayer is a giant of a man, too large to fit in the desks. He sits on the floor during class. After class, Dolores talks to Thayer but the conversation is stilted. He asks her out, tells her he has a thirteen-year-old son and is divorced. He then fixes Dolores' ceiling for a fraction what other contractors had quoted.

On Christmas Eve, Dolores makes a delivery of Chinese food to Mr. Pucci. She agrees to go in for a drink and finds that Gary—Mr. Pucci's roommate from all those years ago, has AIDS and has wasted away to almost nothing.

Thayer continues to ask her out and finally asks if she's turning him down because of his size. One day, Thayer and his son, Jamal, arrive at Dolores' house. Both Jamal and Thayer improvise a rap song, finally convincing Dolores to have dinner with them. A few nights later, Dolores stops by Mr. Pucci's house when she sees his light on in the middle of the night. She hands him an African violet and they begin taking nightly rides together. By this time, Gary has died and they don't talk about how he died, focusing instead on his singing voice and knowledge of travel. Many nights later, Dolores and Mr. Pucci talk about Gary and Mr. Pucci says that he's HIV positive. Dolores has dinner with Thayer. On their second date, she stays most of the night and tells him everything—that she was fat, that she'd been raped, that she'd spent time in a mental institution, and about her mother's death. On their third date, Dolores asks Thayer to make her pregnant. He hesitates and she takes it for a no. He says that he wants to be responsible and consider the ramifications. Then he asks her to do it "the regular way," including marriage.

In October of 1985, Dolores turns thirty-four and spends her time worrying—that Roberta will fall or the ceiling will cave in. By this time, Roberta is living with Dolores full



time. Mr. Pucci falls down the stairs at his high school and is hospitalized. A hospital employee tells the school board of his disease. Dolores becomes friends with Mr. Pucci's family and friends and draws Roberta into the mix.

Dolores and Thayer begin having sex monthly based on the days Dolores believes herself to be ovulating. Thayer swears his love but Dolores holds him at arm's length. They argue, Thayer continuing to say that he wants to get married, and Dolores sends him away. She's positive that she's pregnant but then starts her period again.

Dolores is called to Mr. Pucci's hospital bedside and she knows immediately that he's dying. He advises her to accept love where it's offered. Six months after his death, a moving company delivers Mr. Pucci's juke box to Dolores' house. It's while she's sitting in the machine's purple glow that Thayer walks in. Dolores tells him that she drew him once—complete with his new glasses—on an Etch-a-Sketch, and that she'd believed that he would make her happy. She then proposes.

Over the next two years, Thayer and Dolores are unsuccessful with their attempts to have a child. The doctor tells them to make a decision regarding another attempt at artificial means, but Dolores says their savings account already made that decision for them. Then Dolores and Thayer go on a road trip, though Thayer won't say where they're headed. Along the way, Dolores says that Jack Speight undid her, then she almost undid herself, then she undid some of the damage. He takes her to Cape Cod on a whale-watching expedition. They don't see any until just before the trip ends. Then Dolores, alone on the deck, is the first to see one.

Chapters 27, 28 and 29 Analysis

Dante had been an English teacher and it could be the reason Dolores selected English as her first college class. Dante had constantly corrected her grammar and speech and had likely worked on Dolores' self confidence. It's while she's in the class that she observes Thayer—a tall, heavy man who sits away from the rest of the class. Dolores tells him one day that he shouldn't set himself apart that way—that it's not healthy. When he asks how she would know, she says that she once set herself apart in that same manner because she was fat. She immediately begins to apologize. She believes that she's insinuated that Thayer is fat and knows how much it hurts to be called fat. While Thayer doesn't seem to lack the self-confidence Dolores had, he does ask her if she keeps turning down his date requests because of his size.

Dolores is undoubtedly finding herself. She's finally settled in with friends who accept her and who she can accept. It's likely that the latter is as necessary as the former. Dolores has always had trouble accepting others but she seems to have finally learned that her outbursts may very well cost her those friendships she so desperately needs.

Dolores and Roberta may seem an unlikely friendship, but remember that Roberta was the one person Dolores didn't fight with during her teenage years at her grandmother's



house. Roberta seemed to accept Dolores then without question and that seems to hold true in their current friendship.

While Dolores is still holding onto some of her sense of betrayal at the loss of her mother, grandmother, unborn child, and marriage, she seems to be finally accepting her true role in those things rather than blaming herself for things that aren't her fault.

The role of the whales is likely symbolic. Dolores' psychoanalyst once suspected that Dolores expected to find her mother under the dead whale. It's probable that Dolores was searching for that sense of security she took from her mother. Even as shaky as her mother's support was, it was the most stable thing she had.



Characters

Dolores Price

Dolores Price remembers that she was four when her family got their first television and that she was frightened by it. Over the course of her lifetime, she would own several televisions and some of them would simply rule her life, as that first one did. She recalls that her mother would tell her to go outside and play, but that she would always rather watch TV. Dolores' parents, Tony and Bernice, were often violent with each other and Dolores was subjected to that. It likely colored her later relationships, especially when her father reminded her that the things that happen at the Price household are not things that she should tell others. Dolores is not above being manipulative. When her mother loses a child, Dolores' Grandma Holland comes to stay with the family. Dolores only knows that she wants things to be as they were before. She wakes one night from a nightmare about her teacher but when her parents ask what's wrong, she says that she hates her grandmother. The next day, her grandmother is gone. Dolores later stays with her grandmother and the incident puts the two at an uneasy point when they are together. That same manipulative attitude is present when Dolores steals letters from Dante to his girlfriend and later arranges to move into Dante's apartment building in order to meet him. Growing up, Dolores becomes dependent on food for comfort and seemed incapable of making friends. She also tends to blame herself for things she's not responsible for, but blames others for things that are really in her control.

Dante Davis

Dante's teenage girlfriend is Kippy Strednicki, who becomes Dolores' college roommate. Kippy tells Dolores about Dante in letters before the two meet, but isn't truthful about the relationship. As Dolores comes to hate Kippy for her rude, hateful, and cruel remarks regarding Dolores' weight, she begins to steal Dante's letters. In one of the letters, Dante—who is planning to be a minister—says that he's sorry he hasn't yet made love to Kippy. Dante is a teacher when he and Dolores later meet. Within hours of meeting her, Dante asks Dolores to have sex. They are soon living together. While Dolores is absolutely keeping secrets from Dante, Dante is also keeping some of his own. Dolores begins a savings account, hoping to someday buy a house. Dante finds out and uses the money to buy a van without discussing it with Dolores. Dante is fired from his job as a teacher after being accused of having an inappropriate relationship with a student. He tells Dolores that it didn't really happen and she believes him. Then Dolores arrives early to find the girl—half dressed—at Dolores and Dante's apartment. Dante later says he's sorry, but puts the blame at the girl's door, saying that "kids today" are sexually mature and that the girl seduced him. While Dolores is coping with her grandmother's death, Dante is upstairs writing poetry.



Bernice Price

Bernice is Dolores' mother. It's Bernice who tells Dolores that she and her husband, Tony, plan to divorce. Though Dolores lives with her mother at first, she is shipped off to her grandmother when Bernice has a nervous breakdown and is hospitalized. Bernice doesn't know how to handle the long-term situation when Dolores is raped at age thirteen. She gives in to Dolores' demands to be schooled at home and showers Dolores with junk food as a comfort. It's not until Bernice is told that Dolores is capable of going to college that Bernice puts her foot down on an issue related to her daughter. She then demands that Dolores go to college and even writes an essay required for the application. She even denies Dolores her television until she agrees to get the required physical in order to attend. Despite their disagreement about college, it seems that Bernice and Dolores have at times reached an understanding. When Bernice is killed, Dolores is devastated. Though Dolores toys with the idea that her mother stepped out in front of the truck on purpose, there's no indication that Bernice was suicidal.

Grandma Thelma Holland

Thelma Holland is Dolores' grandmother, Bernice's mother, who lives in Easterly, Rhode Island. Grandma's son, Eddie, drowned when he was a teenager. She didn't cry in public after his death, but slammed pots and pans around her kitchen. When her daughter, Bernice, was killed, Grandma begins cleaning and remodeling. It takes Dolores a long time to realize that's how Grandma deals with something no parent should have to deal with—the death of a child. Grandma claims to hate the tattoo artist who lives across the street, Roberta. But when a snow storm hits, it's Grandma who calls Roberta to see if she's alright. Grandma recalls that in her marriage, she was always the serious one.

Tony Price

Dolores' father, who left his family when Dolores was a child. Tony lived briefly with a woman named Donna and the two operated a flower shop together. He later married again and was living with his third wife when he died. Tony and Dolores spend a week together just before he and Bernice divorced. He is supposed to have told Dolores about the plans for the divorce, but doesn't. There's no explanation for his decision. For most of her life, Dolores blames Tony for the breakup of the marriage.

Jack Speight

Jack and his wife, Rita, move into Grandma Holland's upstairs apartment when Dolores is just a young teenager. She is enamored with Jack and his sports car. Jack begins giving Dolores rides to and from school, though Dolores lies about it to her mother and grandmother. Jack is moody but Dolores deals with the changes because she's so desperate for a friend. One day, Jack takes Dolores to a deserted area near a dog



kennel and rapes her. When Dolores tells, Jack and his wife sneak quietly away. There's no indication whether he told Rita of the accusation.

Rita Speight

Jack's wife who lived in the upstairs apartment of Grandma Holland's house. Rita told Grandma and Bernice that she was pregnant just days before she miscarried. There's no indication that Rita knew that her husband had raped Dolores. Dolores blames herself for the death of the child, somehow connecting that to what she and Jack did—almost as if she believes that she was also responsible for the rape.

Roberta Jaskiewicz

The woman who lives across from Dolores' grandmother. Roberta runs a tattoo parlor and Dolores' grandmother seems to hate Roberta, though she does check on Roberta once during a snow storm. It's Roberta who tells Dolores some about her family. Roberta had given Dolores' Uncle Eddie a tattoo and Grandma Holland had yelled at Dolores afterward. Roberta becomes an important person in Dolores' life after Dolores moves back to her grandmother's house in Rhode Island.

Uncle Eddie

Eddie is Bernice's brother and Dolores' uncle. He drowned as a teenager when Dolores was a baby. Dolores is told that Uncle Eddie would hold her, teasing her mother because the child wasn't a boy, and calling Dolores "Fred".

Mr. Fabio Pucci

Dolores' guidance counselor in high school. Dolores says that Mr. Pucci has stood beside her through many tough times, including suspensions, overdue library books, and excessive absences. It's Mr. Pucci who believes Dolores can handle college. Mr. Pucci is gay and lives with a man named Gary who dies of AIDS shortly after Dolores moves back into her grandmother's house. Dolores and Mr. Pucci then become fast friends and he calls for her as he's in the hospital, dying of AIDS. It's Mr. Pucci who says that you can never be certain about people. He talks about someone who'd always been nice to him but was mean once it was discovered that Mr. Pucci had AIDS. Another man had always been mean but began bringing Mr. Pucci a milkshake every Sunday morning. Mr. Pucci told Dolores that she should accept love whenever it comes.

Thayer

Dolores meets Thayer in her college English class. Thayer ends up doing some repairs for Dolores at her house and asks her out. Dolores declines the first several invitations



and Thayer eventually wants to know if it's because of his size—he's a large man and has to duck at doorways. Dolores eventually marries Thayer who ultimately is kind to her.

Arthur Music

The truck driver who runs over Bernice, killing her.

Larry, Ruth and Tia

Larry is the paper-hanger replacing the pink flamingo wallpaper at Grandma Holland's house. Ruth is his wife and Tia is their daughter. It's Ruth who encourages Dolores to go on to college despite her fears, claiming that something good might happen. Larry and Ruth seem to accept Dolores for who and what she is and are not at all repulsed by her excessive weight.

Dottie

The lesbian janitor at the college who later tells Dolores that she loves her. The two have oral sex. Dottie's passion is her fish and Dolores kills them all as she's leaving the woman's apartment.



Objects/Places

Carter Avenue

Dolores and her family live in a rented house on Carter Avenue when Dolores is a young child. It's where they live when they get their first television when Dolores is four. The house is owned by Mrs. Masicotte, Dolores' father's employer.

Jefferson Drive

Where Mrs. Masicotte lives.

Treetop Acres

The subdivision where Dolores moves with her parents when Dolores is ten and a half. They lived in a yellow ranch house at 26 Bobolink Drive.

Tenafly, New York

Where Tony moves with his girlfriend after he leaves Dolores.

Easterly, Rhode Island

Where Dolores' grandmother lives and where she goes to stay when her mother has a nervous breakdown.

Wellfleet

The town in Cape Cod where whales are beaching themselves and where Dolores heads after she abruptly leaves college.

Pike's Peak

Where Dolores sees the couple who have been photographed in coffins.

Gracewood Institute

Where Dolores goes for mental care after having a nervous breakdown at Cape Cod.



Holyoke, Mass.

Where Dolores and Dante stop at a Burger King following Grandma Holland's funeral. It's here that Dolores gets angry at Dante and tells him all her "secrets"; that she was in a mental hospital, her father is dead, she was raped, and that she'd read his letters to her college roommate.

Merton College

Where Dolores goes away to school, and where she meets Kippy and learns about Dante by reading his letters, and where she kicks the boy named Eric in the crotch. It's also where she has oral sex with the lesbian janitor named Dottie.



Themes

Coming of Age

This is a typical coming of age book. Dolores ages on several levels over the course of this story. First, she ages naturally. She begins with memories of herself as a four-year-old and of their first television set. She progresses chronologically, including the summer of her parents' divorce, her enrollment in high school and then college, her breakdown, her marriage to Dante, and ending with her marriage to Thayer and the fact that she's come to peace with herself. When Dolores leaves college so abruptly and has a nervous breakdown, she's put back through her life by her psychoanalyst, Dr. Shaw. Dr. Shaw has her "re-live" her life, beginning as a fetus. The method is apparently helpful, though Dolores will later deny that. Dolores also ages mentally, though it takes a long time for her to reach that point. She seems very childish through most of her teenage years and isn't above throwing a fit to get what she wants. It typically works, especially after she's raped, because her mother and grandmother simply don't seem to know how to cope with the long-term recovery process. It could be said that some events that probably should help Dolores grow up don't. She can't accept her mother's death and is bitter about it for ages. She can't seem to differentiate between the things she's responsible for and those she isn't. For example, she believes that she caused the death of Jack Speight's unborn baby because she allowed him to rape her. Through all the heartaches and tears, Dolores does find her way and grows into adulthood, both physically and emotionally.

The Quest for Happiness

Dolores is asked by a psychic to draw something that would make her happy. Dolores draws not a "something," but a "someone". Using an Etch-a-Sketch, she begins to draw a whale, but changes her mind, turns the whale into a face, adds hair and glasses, and commits the face to memory before erasing it. The quest for happiness seems to be the most important thing in Dolores' life. When she is very young, she notes that a friend's mother knows the words to all the girls favorite songs and cooks them wonderful lunches while Dolores' mother, Bernice, sits at home. While Dolores never voices the opinion that she wishes her mother were more like the mother of her friend, she implies it. When Dolores' mother dies, Dolores is heartbroken. She decides to go to college because her mother wanted it and she believes that by living her mother's dream, she can be happy. As a college student, Dolores discovers that her roommate's boyfriend, Dante Davis, seems to be a thoughtful, attractive young man. Dolores steals Dante's letters and later arranges to move into an apartment in the building where Dante lives. She sees signs that Dante is selfish and unkind, but won't give up that dream of happiness. In that case, she's pinned her happiness on someone else and is devastated when he lets her down. She is equally excited about the prospect of having a child, but Dante forces her to choose and she has an abortion rather than risk losing Dante.



The Quest for Acceptance

Dolores is desperate for acceptance from an early age and does all sorts of things in order to meet that need. However, Dolores often turns on those from whom she seeks acceptance. In some cases, it seems that she doesn't even know why she takes particular actions. Her need for acceptance manifests itself in various situations. For example, Dolores is on the verge of becoming friends with a very rough girl named Norma French. Norma smokes at school, curses, and talks about her older boyfriend. She is obviously trouble and isn't someone Dolores particularly likes, but Dolores is willing to befriend her because she's desperate for friends. They don't become overly close. That need for acceptance is why Dolores makes herself out to be someone she isn't when writing to her roommate, Kippy Strednicki. She pretends to be things that she believes Kippy will like. She says that she's reinvented herself in those letters and that she's someone her mother would approve of. It's interesting to note that there are constant conflicts between Dolores' need for acceptance and her actions. When the janitor named Dottie tries to befriend Dolores, she isn't willing to become Dottie's friend because it means the other students won't like her—but those students don't like her anyway. When Dolores has the chance to have a child who will be someone to connect with for life, she agrees to an abortion because she's afraid of losing Dante. At the end, Dolores realizes that she has to be happy within before she can have a happy life.



Style

Point of View

The book is written in first person from Dolores Price's point of view. This point of view is at least slightly limited because the reader doesn't know what others are thinking and only knows of the actions of others when Dolores is present. The limit is not a huge problem for the reader because the story is meant to be truly from Dolores' point of view. The point of view is somewhat less limited by the fact that there are pieces of dialog and exposition that explain what happened whenever there are gaps.

The fact that the story is in first person means that the reader has the opportunity to look at the inner thoughts, dreams, and fears of Dolores herself. Though that may seem to be very helpful, Dolores is often confused herself and doesn't know why she does a particular act. That confusion may become a problem for the reader.

Setting

The book is set in the New England area and takes place over the lifetime of Dolores Price, ending in the 1980s. Dolores describes the house at Carter Avenue. They live in that rented house when Dolores was four years old and the family receives a television as a gift from the woman her father, Tony, has agreed to work for. The family soon moves to Treetop Acres, a subdivision owned partly by Tony's boss. The Prices have a large lot and it's at that house that Tony has an in ground pool installed. When Tony leaves, Dolores and her mother continue to live at the house on Treetop Acres until Dolores' mother, Bernice, has a nervous breakdown and goes into a hospital. Dolores then moves to Rhode Island to her grandmother's home, where she stays until she goes to Merton College. She travels to Cape Cod and then spends time in a mental health facility called Gracewood. She spends some time in Vermont, but then returns to her grandmother's home in Rhode Island.

One of the chief scenes is at Wellfleet, a Cape Cod town. Dolores goes there to see the whales that are beaching themselves. It's there that Dolores has a nervous breakdown and is admitted into a mental health care facility. That beach and those whales become important to Dolores. A therapist suggests that she was actually searching for her mother "under the dead whale". Dolores and her husband, Thayer, return to Cape Cod after they're married to see the whales.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in a very straightforward style ,though the meaning is sometimes obscure and difficult to understand. There are many passages that are simply left to the reader to evaluate. For example, Dolores has oral sex with a woman named Dottie. Despite the fact that she reaches climax, she gets up and kills Dottie's fish before she



leaves town. There's never an explanation other than Dolores was angry at Eric, a college student who had made fun of Dolores earlier that evening. That explanation may not make total sense but is all the explanation that's actually offered.

There are several sections of symbolism that are important to the story but are not always overly obvious. The whales are among the most obvious. Dolores goes to a beach where there's a dead whale and her therapist suggests that she was searching for her mother. Dolores says that she knows that her doctor wants her to understand that she was searching for her dead mother under the whale, and she seems to agree that it could be true. At the end of this story, Dolores and her husband, Thayer, again visit the ocean and this time Dolores sees a whale swimming in the ocean. The whale—which Dolores calls "she"—rises out of the ocean and splashes back down. Dolores calls the descent "gentle," perhaps as a coming home. The first whale—dead—could be interpreted as being symbolic of Dolores' mother and even what she thinks of her life. The other whale—living—is what Dolores' life has become.

The book as a whole is readable and flows smoothly.

Structure

The book is divided into three sections and twenty-nine chapters. The first section is Our Lady of Sorrow and goes through the life of Dolores beginning when she was four and going through the time when, at thirteen, she is raped. Part two is Whales and goes on through when Dolores has a nervous breakdown on the shore at Cape Cod. Part three is called The Flying Leg and begins with Dolores' own time in a mental hospital. The chapters are of varying lengths.

The plot is convoluted and sometimes difficult to follow. Despite that, the story flows fairly well. The reading is not difficult but it's often hard to understand Dolores' actions. Brought back to its most basic level, the story's plot is simply to follow Dolores' life from childhood to adulthood. But Dolores is an angry young woman and makes many situations much more difficult that they had to be. Dolores' family interaction is complicated as are her relationships with everyone until she's older. Dolores' quest for acceptance and love are main themes of the book, but it seems that Dolores sabotages herself, often leaving the reader confused as to the reason for her actions and her purpose.



Quotes

"Old. I'm almost forty, probably as close now to Mrs. Masicotte's age as I am to the age of my parents as they sat on that lawn, laughing and blowing dandelion puffs at me, smoking their shared Pall Mall cigarettes and things Mrs. Masicotte was the answer to their future—that the black-and-white Emerson television set was a gift free and clear of the strings that would begin our family's unraveling".

Chap. 1, p. 4

"I was on the brown plaid sofa, watching TV and Scotch-taping my bangs to my forehead because Jeanette said that keeps them from drying frizzy. Across the room on a Barcalounger, my mother was having her nervous breakdown". Chap. 3, p. 35

"You can be two things if you're a woman, Dolores. Betty Crocker or a floozy". Chap. 4, p. 55

"Mr. Pucci had seen me through eight smoking suspensions, \$230 worth of unreturned library books, sixty-seven days absent during my senior year along, and four years' worth of unreasonable teachers". Chap. 8, p. 115

"The past four years had changed Grandma. She knew how to handle sass, not rape. From the moment I'd returned from the emergency room that night, Grandma had treated me as a stranger, someone exotically dangerous. She spoke only once of 'that business with him', sliding her good rosary beads onto my nightstand 'in case you need them". Chap. 8, p. 120

"In my gathering consciousness, I stared at their marriage, their wholeness. I saw, for a second, my parents—the things Ma and Daddy must have done, the kind of wholeness they must have had. Then lost. Losing that was what had made Ma crazy". Chap. 11, p. 169

"For half an hour I sat in the lounge, trying unsuccessfully to think of ways to kill myself in Wayland, Pennsylvania. You couldn't just ring some stranger's doorbell and ask to borrow their car keys and their garage. I considered cashing in on my heart murmur—going outside and galloping around the dormitory until my heart burst. But the long bus ride had exhausted me". Chap. 12, p. 176

"It was a pattern with me, really, I thought: Dottie's fish, Rita Speight's baby. I killed off



whatever people loved. It was entirely possible I'd driven Ma to it, too—better off dead than living with a monster daughter". Chap. 16, p. 234

"I knew that he was after: he wanted me to lift up my rotting whale to see if Ma was under it. He was always looking for Ma". Chap. 16, p. 263

"I'd gone to her directly from Dr. Shaw's office—gone without an appointment to find out if happiness was a football you caught or something more complicated, something you had to invent". Chap. 19, p. 290

"With any luck, we can reserve one of those glorified Big Mac containers for our very own—right next to Boomer and Paula. The Mertzes and the Ricardos, happy as pigs in shit". Chap. 23, p. 349

"So whenever anyone mentions the Kennedy assassination, I think of my cousin Dominick. And whenever anyone talks about that moon landing, I think of you. You and I are locked together for life, kiddo. It's fate; not a damn thing either of us can do about that". Chap. 25, p. 386

"I put the stairway light on just in time to see another plaster chunk let go. It smashed on the floor near the bed, scattering in a thousand directions. I ducked-and-covered and ran in to get her up off the bed. Another slab fell. I felt like a soldier at war". Chap. 27, p. 424

"I'm not offering you happily-ever-after. I'm offering you . . . happily-maybe-sometimes-ever-after. Sort of. You know, with warts and shit". Chap. 28, p. 453

"Accept what people offer. Drink their milkshakes. Accept their love". Chap. 28, p. 457

"Nose first, her grooved body heads straight for the sky. Her muscular tail clears the water; her fins are black wings. The fall back is slower—grace instead of power. She cracks the ocean and, in a white explosion of foam, reenters". Chap. 29, p. 465



Topics for Discussion

Describe the week Dolores spent at home alone with her father. Her father was to have told Dolores that her parents planned to divorce but didn't. What could have prompted him to keep that information from his daughter? Do you believe things might have been different had Tony told Dolores about the pending divorce?

How does Dolores fit in at her grandmother's house as a teenager? The school? Why does she seem to like Roberta?

Describe the relationship between Dolores and her grandmother. Why did Grandma Holland leave the Price house after Bernice's miscarriage? Does that put a strain on the relationship between Dolores and her grandmother? Is there a time when that relationship is good?

What is Mr. Pucci's role in Dolores' life during high school? Compare that to his role in her life as an adult. Mr. Pucci says that he and Dolores are connected by fate. What does he say that prompts him to think of her? Does that seem likely? Why or why not?

How does Dolores first know of Dante? How does she come to know him better? Why does she steal his letters to Kippy? Is the relationship between Dolores and Dante honest? What are the biggest lies between them? When and how does Dolores tell the truth about her own past?

Describe what happens to Dolores when she gets the television and satellite dish at her house. Why does it happen? What happens to change it?

Who is Eddie? Why does Dolores become interested in him? What do others say about Eddie?

Describe at least three of Dolores' self-destructive acts. Why do you think she changed her mind about suicide at Dottie's house? She mentions suicide at other times as well. Does she ever intend to go through with it?

Describe how Dolores got the Etch-A-Sketch. What does she start doing with the toy? When the psychic Nadine tells her to draw something that would make her happy, what does she draw?