

So Big Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Selina Peake grows up as the only child of a gambler, Simeon Peake. Her father sends her to live with spinster aunts for a short time but realizes how unhappy Selina is and reclaims her to live with him. When Simeon is doing well, they live in luxury. When he has a run of bad luck, they live frugally, though Simeon always manages to pay for Selina's tuition at a finishing school. Selina is at the boarding house where they are staying when she learns that her father has been shot and killed when an angry woman meant to shoot someone else.

Selina is left alone with only a small nest egg her father saved for her. She becomes a school teacher in High Prairie a rural community made up mainly of Dutch families outside Chicago. Klaas Pool picks her up and takes her to his house, where she'll be living for the duration of the school year. On the way to the Pool farm, Selina discovers that the fall crops are beautiful. Once she arrives, she discovers that the life of a truck farmer is difficult with long hours and little reward. Selina plans to spend a couple of years teaching in High Prairie before returning to the city to take up a teaching job there. Instead, she is soon married to a local farmer named Pervus DeJong.

Pervus has a 25-acre truck farm with poor land and harsh conditions, including on tract that's prone to flooding. Selina enters her marriage with plans to make her home beautiful and to never allow herself to become the work-hardened woman typical of the region. She soon realizes that she can't make either of those plans come to fruition. She gives birth to a son that they name Dirk and then to a daughter who dies. Within a few years, Selina is working in the fields alongside Pervus and his one hired helper. She has ideas for the land but the couple has neither the time nor the money to make these ideas into reality.

Then Pervus dies, leaving Selina to figure out a way to make her truck farm pay off enough to provide for Dirk. She's determined that he will have the opportunity to do whatever he wants with his life and that he won't ever have to toil in the dirt for a living. She soon discovers that she's going to have to take charge of the farm or starve. She goes into Chicago for a market day and manages to sell only a fraction of the produce she has available. She hits a local grocer who buys some more of her produce but then happens to meet her best friend from her childhood, Julie Hempel, who is now married.

Julie is horrified at Selina's situation and her father, a wealthy self-made man, loans Selina money to get some of her ideas in place. The farm is soon doing well enough to send Dirk to college and then to architecture school. Dirk finds that he's making very little as an architecture and moves into the banking business where he makes a great deal of money. Selina wants Dirk to see the beauty in the world around him and to make something beautiful for himself, but Dirk wants only to make money in the financial sector.

Dirk is involved with Julie's daughter, Paula, though Paula is married to a wealthy older man. Paula pushes Dirk to become more successful and they spend a great deal of



time together. Then Dirk meets a young artist named Dallas O'Mara and becomes fascinated with her and with her world. He suddenly sees Paula for the controlling woman that she is. He fails to see that Dallas and his mother share a common view of the world but begins to see the world through Dallas's eyes. She is quickly the most important person in his life and he wants to be equally important to her, but she has plans for herself that include leaving the country. The story comes to an end with Dirk in agony over his unrequited love but coming to discover that there's more to life than making money.



Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

As the story opens, the reader is briefly introduced to the child nicknamed Sobig and his mother, Selina Peake DeJong. His name was Dirk DeJohn and he was called Sobig until he was about 10 and began to insist he'd outgrown the nickname. When Dirk was very young, she would ask him how big he was. He would hold out his arms as wide as possible and say, "So Big." That's how the nickname came into being. His mother was always busy with work but always took time to pay attention to him. She imagined a bright and wonderful life ahead of him. It seemed she should have been happy when Dirk grew into a successful businessman with custom tailored suits and an elegant lifestyle, but she always felt she'd both failed him and been cheated by his particular kind of success.

Selina Peake's mother died, leaving her in the care of her father, Simeon Peake. He is a gambler and when he is doing well, they live elaborately. When he has a run of bad luck, they often stay in boarding houses and live very simply. They travel a lot during Selina's early years. Simeon sends Selina to live with two spinster aunts for a few years but realizes that she's miserable and takes her back. Selina loves her life with her father. She is sometimes left to wait for him to return and always does, knowing that he'd be "disappointed" if she isn't there, waiting for his return.

In 1885, Selina and her father arrive in Chicago where they live for several years. Selina enrolls in Miss Fister's Select School for Young Ladies. Even when Simeon is not doing well at gambling, he manages to pay the tuition to keep Selina in school. She becomes close friends with Julie Hempel. Her father is August Hempel, called Aug by everyone who knew him. He was a street butcher during those early years but made shrewd business decisions and became the owner of a huge meat company that made him a millionaire.

Selina and her father often attend plays and she reads many books. One day, she tells Simeon that she likes plays and books because "anything can happen" Simeon points out that this is very much like life. Simeon wants Selina to experience all kinds of things and says she becomes "richer" through these experiences. She embraces this philosophy and, after reading "Pride and Prejudice," decides she's going to become a writer like Jane Austen.

One evening, Julie invites Selina to stay for dinner but Selina declines, saying her father is disappointed if she isn't home when he arrives. She goes to the boarding house where they're staying and is in their room when some men arrive, carrying her father's body. A woman had meant to shoot someone else, but shot and killed Simeon by accident. Simeon leaves Selina two diamonds and 497 dollars in cash. Julie asks what Selina plans to do and Selina says she'll try to find a position as a teacher in a rural school. Julie is appalled.



In Chapter 2, Aug Hempel helps Selina get a job teaching school at High Prairie. It's a rural Dutch community near Chicago where most of the families are farmers. The children are needed to help on the farm until the last of the crops are in, meaning the school year doesn't begin until November. Klaas and Maartje Pool are to serve as the host family for Selina during the school year. Klaas takes Selina to High Prairie in his wagon.

Klaas is very quiet during the drive. Selina points out a cabbage field, saying the colors are beautiful. Klaas is amused by her comment but she insists that they are beautiful. She asks about his family and learns that 2 of his 3 children will be attending school. There is a boy named Roelf who is 12 and Klaas says Roelf is needed to work on the farm. The daughters, Geertje and Jozina, will go to school.

As they continue their drive, Selina notes a mist rising up off a lake and almost comments on how pretty it is, but she stops herself. She remembers that Klaas laughed at her comment about the cabbages, and decides she won't say anything about the mist.

Analysis

There is only a single chapter devoted to Selina's early life but that time is very important to creating her as a character. Her father is also a very important influence in her early life because he helps her realize that her attitude can make her life into an adventure. This colors the rest of Selina's life and this is part of the reason that she wants Dirk to have the opportunity to be happy in his life. The books Selina reads are also an influence on her life and this is one of this story's themes.

There is a scene of foreshadowing seen at the end of Chapter 1 that gives insight into Selina and Julie, and into their characters. In this scene, Julie and Selina meet by chance years after Selina has gone to High Prairie. Selina is peddling vegetables in a wealthy neighborhood when she encounters Julie. They are surprised to see each other. Selina is dirty and tired because her life is so difficult. Julie is living in one of the wealthy homes of the neighborhood, is married and financially secure. Selina should be the one crying over her situation but Julie cries for her friend. The reader can learn several things from this scene. This is an indication that Selina is going to have a difficult life ahead of her. It also indicates that Julie is tenderhearted and feels sorry for Selina. Finally, this shows that the two women will come back into each other's lives after more than a decade apart.

Selina's father has died and she has only a few hundred dollars and two diamonds to her name. She sells one of the diamonds and keeps the other for a future emergency. She takes the job as a teacher in High Prairie and leaves her friend Julie behind. She is literally on her own at 19 and headed to a strange place where she doesn't know what to expect. Some people would have fallen apart at the situation and sought an easier way out, including depending on the charity of a wealthy friend. Selina doesn't do that. She looks at this new stage of her life as an adventure, which is a lesson she learned



from her father. As an interesting aspect of this idea, Selina tries to instill this same sense of adventure in her son, Dirk, in later years. Dirk doesn't understand it and takes a completely different path.

On the way to the Pool farm, Selina is overwhelmed by the scenery. She points out a cabbage field, saying it's beautiful. She compares the cabbages to “chrysoprase and porphyry.” Chrysoprase is a green mineral and porphyry is a rock that contains crystals. The reference stands out because it indicates Selina's tendency to see the beauty in things while Klaas sees only cabbages – plants that are grown as a cash crop by a farmer and as food for the people of Chicago. This difference makes Selina stand out from the beginning and Klaas doesn't understand her at all. Selina also doesn't understand Klaas's attitude. She doesn't realize the level of hard work required of the truck farmer. However, even later, when she's working like a man in the fields, she holds onto her sense of adventure and her attitude that there is beauty all around her.

While Selina is indomitable, she is also immature at this point and has unrealistic expectations. It's easy to admire her sense of adventure and the way she is determined to make the best of the situation. It's also going to be apparent later in the book that she has to learn that life is hard for the families of High Prairie.

Discussion Question 1

What kind of childhood does Selina have and how does it affect the rest of her life?

Discussion Question 2

Is Selina's attitude that life is an adventure a good attitude? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Selina's first look at cabbage fields, her comment about it, and Klaas Pool's reaction to her thoughts. What does this say about Selina and about Klaas?

Vocabulary

Infantile, disharmony, skirmish, dint, portentously, harried, utilitarian, contusions, solicitous, diffident, cloistered, disparity



Chapters 3 and 4

Summary

In Chapter 3, Selina arrives at the Pool farm. She's struck by how the windows all shine, which she later learns is a “mark of social standing” in the community. There are clothes on the line. Selina expects Klaas to help her get down from the wagon but he begins unloading the empty boxes from the back instead. She is surprised that Maartje looks much older than she'd expected.

Maartje takes Selina to the small bedroom that she'll use during her stay. There is a beautiful chest in the room and Selina learns it's been handed down through generations of Maartje's family. Maartje shows Selina the bridal gown, cap, and shoes inside. Selina discovers that there's a small stove in her room but it never provides any real heat and her room stays cold all winter. She meets Jakob Hoogendunk who helps on the farm. When she's left alone, she unpacks her belongings, including photographs of her parents. When all her clothing is unpacked, she feels that the room is already a little more hers.

Selina goes to the kitchen and meets Roelf for the first time. He seems sullen when she enters but there's an immediate connection between them. When Klaas enters, he mentions cabbages and everyone except Roelf laughs, making Selina certain that he'd told them she thought the cabbage fields were beautiful. There is plenty of food but it's very plain and there are hardly any vegetables on the table. Klaas and Jakob begin talking about farming and Selina pays attention. She knows nothing about farming and asks questions, surprising everyone at the table with her interest.

She heads up to her room and Roelf takes hot water up for her. Before she leaves the kitchen, she asks about the book Roelf was reading and discovers he was reading the dictionary. She becomes determined to share the books she has with him. She goes to her room and meets Roelf. He says he agrees, that cabbage fields are beautiful, then rushes away. She feels certain she won't be able to sleep but wakes to a cold morning. She realizes that this adventure her father spoke of would take an enormous amount of courage.

In Chapter 4, Selina woke to freezing temperatures each morning at 6. Maartje told her it would be warmer to dress by the kitchen stove but Selina refused, saying that would reduce her to the state of a “peasant in one of those dreadful Russian novels.” She goes to the High Prairie School before time for the students to arrive and builds a fire in the stove. She and the students begin removing layers of clothing as the room warms. Those who sit nearest the stove are overly warm. Those farther away are often cold. Selina struggles to keep her mind on the work at hand and imagines what her life might be like if she was rich.



Selina offers to lend Roelf a book. He says he doesn't have much time to read but it's obvious that he's pleased to have something different. Roelf slips away from his chores to work on something that interests him as often as possible. Instead of mending cold frames for the spring plants, he works on beautiful wood projects. He begins to confide in Selina, saying that the Dutch Reformed Church was ugly. Selina realizes that Roelf has a unique outlook that should be sheltered. His father calls him "dumb" and his mother doesn't understand him, though she loves him and urges Klaas to ease up. Selina realizes that both Klaas and Maartje have no idea how to communicate with Roelf. One day, Roelf gives Selina a drawing he made of market day at Haymarket, where the family goes to sell produce.

One day, Selina makes the trip to town by train. She goes to the Hempel house and finds that Julie is away. Mrs. Hempel, still upset that Selina's father was a gambler, doesn't invite Selina to stay. She has a lavish lunch and buys gifts for the Pools. She makes the return trip to the Pool farm that night, walking the miles from the train station to the Pool farm in the snow.

Analysis

Selina's first look at Maartje happens when Selina first arrives at the farm. Maartje is worn down by the difficult life. She works very hard and doesn't have any time to worry about her own appearance. She is wearing a faded dress and her hands are rough. It takes Selina a few minutes to realize that Maartje is no more than 28 years old. Selina judges her at that moment and feels a level of panic. She can't imagine a life where she doesn't make herself presentable, especially since she was expecting to meet Selina for the first time that evening. Selina has to learn about the lives of the women here before she comes to realize that Maartje has done the best she can to be presentable for Selina's arrival. Selina herself will later go to town wearing faded, dirty clothes and a man's crumpled hat. The people of High Prairie have to spend most of their energy on survival, meaning they don't have time for many of the nicer things in life.

Selina has never been on a farm and knows nothing about agriculture. She is, however, intelligent and knows that a lot can be learned from books, which helps her get a grip on her own farm when she finds herself living that life. But even on her first night at the Pool farm, she's interested. When Jakob and Klaas are talking about the farm, Selina interrupts and asks questions. This surprises everyone. They undoubtedly don't know why she's interested. The more important reason is that women of this time and place never interrupted a male-dominated conversation, even if they had good ideas or questions.

Selina's attitude at this point is rather immature about many things but she is also simply unaware of how some things work. For example, she doesn't really know how plants grow other than a basic idea that she would have learned from books. On her first night at the Pool farm, she discovers that their meals consist mainly of meat with few vegetables, which seems strange because they live on a farm that produces wagon loads of vegetables each week. It's not until later that Selina understands that they sell



almost everything they raise as cash crops to buy the necessities for the farm and family, meaning they eat mainly meat that they raise and butcher themselves. Selina later admits that eating one of the cabbages she's raised herself feels almost like cannibalism.

In her imagination, Selina had pictured herself as a dignified teacher, standing before a room filled with children eager to learn and paying close attention to her every word. The reality was much different. The weather outside is bitterly cold and everyone has to wear warm clothes to get to school. There, the stove doesn't evenly heat the room, meaning those nearest the stove are often too hot and those farther away are too cold. The wool clothing becomes itchy when it warms after being damp, meaning the children are literally unable to sit still. All this applies to Selina as well, and she finds it's impossible to remain dignified. This is one of many examples of Selina's learning experiences after her arrival at High Prairie. What she expects and what she gets are often two different things.

Discussion Question 1

What is Selina's first impression of Maartje?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Selina is interested in farming and asks questions? What is Klaas's reaction to her questions?

Discussion Question 3

Describe what Selina expects from her experience as a school teacher. How does that differ from what really happens?

Vocabulary

grotesquely, bacchanal, frieze, swathed, incongruously, bulwark, ebon, matutinal, emphatically, audacious, loathsome, taint



Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

In Chapter 5, the men of High Prairie aren't romantically interested in Selina because she's too small and pale compared to most of the women they are accustomed to seeing. Despite that lack of romantic interest, everyone talks about her. People know that she thinks cabbage fields are beautiful and that she sometimes read to Roelf in the evenings while he worked. Selina accompanies the Pools to church where she first meets Widow Paarlberg, who Maartje says is very rich. She also sees Pervus DeJong for the first time. Selina notes that he's handsome and Maartje says the Widow Paarlberg is interested in Pervus. Selina is happy to see that Pervus doesn't seem to return the Widow Paarlberg's interest and finds herself wondering what he looks like when he smiles.

Pervus has been a widower for 2 years. He owns 25 acres of poor land with a 16-acre tract that's often flooded. When he chooses a crop that depends on good rainfall, the year turns out to be dry. When he chooses a crop that's tolerant to dry weather, there's a lot of rain. While some people might pity him for his bad luck, he has a "lovableness and splendour" about him. An elderly relative tends his house. The Widow Paarlberg has gone to him for advice, asking him to help her make decisions since her husband died. She has a large, profitable farm. Everyone seems to think that Pervus should marry her, which makes him determined not to.

There is an event at the church to raise money to buy an organ. The women all make box lunches and the men bid on them. The man who wins the auction gets to share a meal with the woman who prepared the box. It's understood that bidding won't become competitive for the lunches made by married women, ensuring that their husbands will win. Selina decides to make her lunch pretty. She makes dainty sandwiches and the finished box is very small compared to others. The Widow Paarlberg's box is auctioned before Selina's. A young boy wins the bid for 85 cents. Pervus is standing next to Selina and doesn't even express any interest, which angers several people.

When Selina's box is offered, the auctioneer makes fun of the fact that it's so small. Someone bids a nickle but Pervus bids a dollar. Roelf joins the bidding which becomes serious and Pervus wins, paying 10 dollars. Everyone knows it's a great deal of money. As they eat the meal together, Selina asks Pervus why he bid so much. He says it was because they were making fun of her. As they talk, Pervus says he wishes he was more comfortable with arithmetic so that he could be sure he's charging correctly at the market. Selina offers to help him. They agree that Pervus will go to the school each morning to start the fire for Selina, and she will teach him 3 evenings a week at the Pool house.

In Chapter 6, Pervus begins arriving at the Pool house each Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday evening. By now, Selina has spent a lot of time with Roelf and tries to share



her education at every opportunity. She invites him to join her lesson time with Pervus but Roelf refuses. Selina and Pervus begin to talk about things other than lessons. His wife died as did their infant daughter. He talks about the farm and the flooding problem. Selina asks if the land can somehow be drained. Pervus says that takes money that he doesn't have, but Selina points out that it's costing him money to leave the land as it is. Pervus feels something akin to worship for Selina. She feels passion but is inexperienced and fearful. He misses several lessons because he's ill. When he comes back, Klaas and Maartje have gone to a meeting leaving Selina alone with the two little girls. They make taffy and she puts them to bed. She and Pervus study for awhile, then he kisses her and she responds eagerly.

Analysis

By this time, Selina and Roelf have become close friends. He is only 12 but he's enamored with Selina, probably because she's the first person who has shown that she understands him at all. They both see the beauty in the world around them and are both interested in new thoughts and ideas. They like to read and Selina often reads to Roelf while he's working on various wood projects in the evenings. It's an important connection for both of them.

There's no doubt Selina is interested in the farming from her first days on the farm, but she also feels that people who can do better for themselves should do so. She sees that Roelf has a love of beauty and that he's intelligent, and she instinctively wants something better for him. During one of their conversations, he says he has gone to market several times already with his father and Jakob. He then says that he'll soon be old enough to take loads of produce to the market by himself, indicating that he intends to become a farmer like his father. Selina is upset that he's settling for this life. This is one of several contradictions in Selina's life and thoughts. She settles into the life of a farmer and doesn't seem to expect that she should do anything else, but she doesn't want this for either Roelf or, later, for her son, Dirk.

High Prairie is a relatively small community and everyone knows everything. There seem to be few secrets and people have strong opinions. The fact that the Widow Paarlenberg is interested in Pervus is not a secret at all and most people think it's a good match. They don't keep this opinion to themselves as is seen during the lunch basket auction. The auctioneer calls Pervus by name while he's auctioning off the Widow Paarlenberg's basket but Pervus seems to be refusing to consider her as a possible wife mainly because people are pushing him in that direction.

Selina thinks Pervus is handsome and she's attracted to him from their first meeting. He notices her as well and seems equally attracted. While her attraction seems to be based mainly on his physical appearance, he is also interested that she is so intelligent. She realizes that he isn't nearly as intelligent as she. She is also unimpressed with his farming. She talks about the need to drain some of the land that's prone to flooding but he says he can't afford to. She says that his refusal to plan for the future is short-



sighted. This is an important look at the relationship between Selina and Pervus, and into their characters.

There probably aren't many outsiders who settle in High Prairie and there certainly aren't many who aren't of Dutch descent. Selina notes that Roelf has dark hair and that she wonder where that came from because most of the people are blond. With this in mind, it seems that many of the young men would be attracted to Selina as something new and exotic. That's not the case, mostly because this is a hard life. Selina is small and she seems fragile. The life is difficult and it takes a lot of physical strength to survive. With that in mind, Selina doesn't seem to be a candidate for a good wife but it turns out that she is strong enough to thrive in this harsh situation.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Pervus as a farmer. What is Selina's impression of him?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the relationship between Selina and Roelf. What do they have in common that makes them close?

Discussion Question 3

What is Selina's attitude about farming? What affects those attitudes around her?

Vocabulary

swain, alluring, inexplicable, aghast, ample, insolent, capaciously, proportioned, copious, blustered, ruminatively



Chapters 7 and 8

Summary

In Chapter 7, Selina and Pervus marry that May. She knows that she's now going to live the rest of her life in High Prairie as a farmer's wife, but vows that she won't ever let herself become the bedraggled housewife that Maartje is. At one point, she confides her fears to Maartje who says that she ran away before her marriage to Klaas. She says she returned before anyone knew she was gone because she realized that it's impossible to run away from life.

Pervus's house is especially ugly, even in a region where none of the houses are especially pretty. Selina imagines herself making it pretty. Maartje lends her the traditional bridal gown. Roelf makes her a beautiful bride's chest. Selina urges him to visit often, saying she needs his friendship. They go directly to Pervus's house where Selina realizes she'll have a lot of cleaning to do. The next morning, Pervus wakes her just after 4, saying that she's now a farmer's wife and that it's time to make breakfast.

In Chapter 8, Dirk is born the following year. A year later, Selina gives birth to a daughter who dies. She looks back at her time at the Pool's as a time of ease now that she has all the responsibilities of a wife and mother. She's invested in Dirk from the beginning but the work is difficult. The farm continues to be moderately successful but Selina becomes attached to the land in a way that makes it certain she'll never leave it. Selina makes suggestions for improving their land and Pervus listens but takes no initiative to follow through. Selina begins to read about agriculture but Pervus continues to follow the habits of his father's generation. She receives a magazine and looks at it with Roelf, planning for ways to make her house more attractive. They imagine themselves in the beautiful settings. Others in High Prairie wouldn't have understood this friendship or their conversations.

Selina rises at 4 each morning and is soon mechanically getting dressed without thought to how she looks. She gives up on the idea of having flowers in the house. She works hard and is often tired, but she still has moments of hope and high spirits. One day, Selina puts a radish in her hair, pretending it's a beautiful flower. Pervus is furious. He knows that their hired man, Jan, will tell everyone about Selina's action and that others will laugh at her because of it. That's a turning point for Selina and she grows up a little more that day.

When Selina has been married about 3 years, she gets a letter from Julie Hempel, who is now Julie Arnold. She says she found letters from Selina that Mrs. Hempel had hidden. Julie found them after her mother's death.

By now, Selina has begun working in the fields. Pervus objected, saying that no DeJong women have ever worked in the fields but Selina points out that vegetables are ruining and that it's obvious that Pervus needs help. She points out that the housework she



does is as physically demanding as working in the fields. She gains a sense of accomplishment and sometimes feels more hopeful because of it. Dirk is at her side and Pervus is proud, saying that Dirk is already learning how to become a farmer. Selina objects, saying that Dirk won't be a farmer. Maartje Pool dies in childbirth during Selina's fourth year of marriage. Nine months later, Klaas marries the Widow Paardenberg. Soon after that marriage, Roelf runs away from home. He stops by Selina's house to return some books but she urges him to keep them. He doesn't know where he's going.

Analysis

Selina has a sense of unreality for awhile around the time of her marriage. She seems to waver briefly but doesn't show any real reluctance. An interesting aspect of her nerves is seen in her thought that her father had assured her that life is a grand adventure. Selina is now tied to a farmer and the year she was to spend as a teacher at High Prairie is now going to be where she spends the rest of her life. Selina seems to step into this marriage without a great deal of thought. She longs for adventure but she isn't going to follow through with her plans to have them. This may be part of the reason she's so heartbroken later when Dirk gives up on his dreams of being an architect to go into banking.

As soon as Selina is married, she considers her new name: Mrs. Pervus DeJong. She thinks it's a pretty name and can imagine having calling cards with that name embossed along with a message that she's "at home Fridays." This is another example of Selina's immaturity. She somehow thinks that she's going to have an easy life that matches her childhood dreams. She remembers this idea of the calling cards later and realizes how foolish it was. She is literally at home everyday but each day is filled with an impossible load of work to accomplish.

There's an important look at Selina and at Pervus in the scene involving the radishes. Selina is working in the field alongside her husband and his hired hand. That's already a step outside the norm of the time and place. Men were expected to provide for their families and the fact that Pervus can't make the farm successful is probably a serious blow to his ego. Selina, however, feels a sense of accomplishment and pride when she's working with the land. This remains with her all her life and explains most of the reason she's successful at farming. With this sense of accomplishment, she feels happier than she is most days. It's a moment of sheer happiness that makes her put a radish in her hair, pretending it's a beautiful flower. It's important for the reader to remember that Selina had seen the cabbage fields as beautiful and she continues to see beauty in the world around her. This radish is just one more example of that. It's also important to remember that in this time and place, extravagant attitudes would not be accepted. Everyone had laughed at Selina for her thoughts on the cabbage fields. Pervus knows that Jan, the hired hand, will tell everyone about Selina's actions, and that they'll laugh at her again for thinking the radish is beautiful. He doesn't want others to talk about them, which prompts his harsh reaction to Selina's antics.



Discussion Question 1

List three things that Selina imagined would be wonderful in her life but that turned out to be much different in reality.

Discussion Question 2

Describe Selina's life as Pervus's wife.

Discussion Question 3

Describe the incident with the radish. Why is Selina feeling happy and why is Pervus so angry at her action?

Vocabulary

teeming, inexorably, voluble, pangs, sordidness, funereal, scrupulously, disproportionate, vainglorious, fractious, gregarious



Chapters 9 through 11

Summary

In Chapter 9, Dirk is 8 years old and is big enough to help in the fields. Selina insists that he continue to attend school. Pervus was in charge of a farm by the time he was 15 but Selina insists that Dirk won't become a farmer. Selina is 30 by this time. She has become a true farmer's wife, just as Maartje Pool had been. She wears ragged clothes. Her skin and hair look older than she is. Despite the harsh life, she continues to show signs of the fun-loving, high-spirited courage of her youth. She has expended a great deal of energy to make a few changes on the farm. She suggests they plant asparagus. It takes three years for asparagus roots to produce a crop but Selina thinks it's worth the investment. Pervus discounts it as foolish. Pervus sometimes gives in because it is too much trouble to oppose her.

He believes she spoils Dirk by not making him work so hard. One day, Pervus insists that Dirk pick a specific tomato patch instead of going to pick huckleberries with the Pool girls. Dirk pushes himself to finish the tomatoes then joins the girls, and becomes ill from overheating.

Pervus suffers serious rheumatism, made worse by working outside so much. He goes to Haymarket during an attack and sleeps in the wagon rather than paying for a night's lodging in the boarding house. Pervus catches pneumonia and dies.

In Chapter 10, Selina doesn't have time to mourn because she has work to do on the farm. A few days after Pervus's death, the hired man, Jan, takes a wagon load of produce to market. He returns with most of the produce and no money. Selina realizes that she's going to have to go to market herself. Jan objects that women don't go to market but Selina knows she doesn't have a choice. As she's preparing for market, she carefully washes the vegetables, making them look nicer than those offered by other farmers. She sorts vegetables by size and bundles them together. Before she can leave, the preacher arrives and tells her it's not right for her to go to market. She says that she and Dirk will starve if she doesn't take control of her farm.

As Selina heads to market with Dirk beside her on the wagon, she feels guilty that she's excited about something so soon after Pervus's death, but she can't stop feeling that she's happy to be making the journey. She encounters several people on the way who obviously disapprove of Selina going to market. They arrive and Selina chooses her place. She and Dirk sleep in the wagon that night and Dirk sees it as an adventure.

In Chapter 11, Selina wakes before daylight as the other farmers begin to rouse themselves to prepare for the day's selling. She goes to the restaurant of a man she has met on previous trips to market named Chris Spanknoebel. He knows about Pervus's death and Selina explains that there's simply no one else to take the produce to market. Chris says he would have allowed her to sleep in the restaurant with Dirk at no charge



and she says she couldn't ask him to do that. She and Dirk have a meal and prepare to sell their vegetables. Most of the peddlers are not comfortable doing business with a woman and Selina sells very little.

By the time it's hot, Selina knows she's going to have to find another outlet for her vegetables. She goes to see William Talcott who runs a store catering to upscale buyers. He buys the best half of her remaining vegetables and admires the way she's cleaned and bundled them. He says she should come see him first with her next load. She then prepares to head home but wonders if she might be able to sell some of her vegetables directly to homes along her route. She chooses a wealthy neighborhood and begins knocking on doors. When she reaches the last house on the street, she's sold several items and made a few dollars. A police officer stops and asks for her peddlers' license. Selina says she doesn't have one and the officer pushes her, insisting that she stop selling. Just then a woman arrives and Selina is surprised to find that it's Julie. They have a tearful reunion and Selina introduces Dirk.

Analysis

By the time Dirk is 8, Selina has begun taking a more active role in the farm, even though it's not acceptable for a woman to do so. She works in the fields and she has ideas of how to make the farm more profitable. One of those ideas is to have a second horse to pull the wagon to market, meaning Pervus can make it there faster without so much wasted time on the trip. She buys an old mare for 5 dollars and Pervus is angry at her for it. Selina puts the horse out to pasture for a month, giving it time to rest from its previous life of work, and the horse then becomes a sturdy animal that pulls its share of the loaded wagon. With time, it's obvious that it was a wise investment but Pervus never says that she did well. Selina doesn't seem to be angry at him and doesn't believe it's because he's mean. This is merely a facet of Pervus's character. This is an important look at Pervus as a character in the story and of his relationship with Selina.

There's another important look at the relationship between Pervus and Selina in his response during one of their discussions about changes on the farm. Pervus is unimaginative, which is a stark contrast to Selina. She wishes he would show some passion for something but he never does. There is a change in perspective from Selina to Pervus during one conversation and Pervus admits that he is still very much in love with Selina and that he views her as "an exquisite toy" that he had chosen "in a moment of madness." He is tolerant of her outlandish ideas even though he isn't willing to follow them. During this particular conversation, it's noted that he might have believed that he spoiled and pampered her. This is probably because Selina's attitude is different from most of the other women in the area. At one point, the perspective switches to Klaas Pool. He remembers Selina talking about how beautiful the cabbage fields were and says Selina has probably changed her mind about that by now, but she hasn't. She continues to be passionate about life and to want more for herself and her family, even though she's quickly becoming worn out from the harsh life.



The people of High Plains don't approve of Selina going to market with her vegetables. That's traditionally the role of the man of the family. They go so far as to send the preacher to discuss the plan with Selina. He talks to her of Biblical ideas, such as the fact that God cares about every living thing, right down to the sparrow. Selina says it doesn't do any good for her to stay at home in her traditional place as a housewife if she and Dirk are going to starve. This is one of several examples of one of the book's themes, the Role of Women.

Selina believes that Pervus is "penny wise but pound foolish," meaning he pinched pennies but wasted larger amounts. She urges him to get a room at the boarding house at the market rather than sleeping outside with the wagon. But the room costs 25 cents for the night and Pervus can't bring himself to spend that money. He catches pneumonia and dies because he tried to save 25 cents. It's important for the reader to realize that 25 cents represents a great deal of money to Selina and her family at this point. Selina realizes that when she goes into town with Dirk. She considers renting a room for the night but thinks about the fact that they'd have to pay 50 cents for the two of them, and she can't bring herself to spend the money either. It's not quite the same thing because Pervus was ill and needed the room, but he probably didn't think he'd die from a night outside. This is yet another look at the harsh life Selina, Pervus, and the other farmers are living.

Discussion Question 1

What happens to Pervus and why?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Selina's first trip to market by herself. What do people think about it and what is Selina's reaction?

Discussion Question 3

What do you know about Selina as a character at this point? Do you like her? Is she believable?

Vocabulary

impecunious, apathy, physique, opalescent, omnipresent, poignant, anachronistic, contrivances, dexterously, belligerence, rubicund, fastidious



Chapters 12 and 13

Summary

In Chapter 12, Julie takes over Selina's life. She wants to take Dirk into her home and provide for him, sending him to the school where her son and daughter, Eugene and Pauline, attend. Selina thinks about what's best for Dirk but insists that they will return to the farm. Selina tells Julie she doesn't need help and explains about Pervus's recent death. Julie insists on driving Selina and Dirk home with the promise that a servant will drive the wagon out later. She then says her father, Aug Hempel, will be visiting Selina the following day.

Aug arrives and asks Selina if she wants to sell the farm. She says she doesn't. He approves, saying it will be worth more in the future. She says she wants to provide for Dirk to have a good life and Aug says he understands that, but urges her to remember that she can't live his life for him. He then writes her a check and Selina says she'll take it only as a loan, complete with an I.O.U. Aug agrees. He says she's right to want to plant different crops, such as asparagus and that she needs a farm hand who knows his way around. Ten years later, Selina would have that I.O.U. with the words "paid in full" written by Aug Hempel. Aug would become a controlling power in a major bank and Selina would have the I.O.U. among her prized possessions, including Roelf's sketch of the market.

In Chapter 13, Dirk matures into a handsome and intelligent young man. He has a manner that makes people like him and everyone felt that he paid them attention to the exclusion of everything else. From the time Dirk is 9 until he turns 15, Selina manages to turn the farm around. Merchants speak for her produce a year in advance. She is often dressed in muddy clothes but people sense a richness about her. She feels rich because she's achieved so much. When she tells Aug that she couldn't have done it without his loan, he disagrees. He says she would have found a way because she's that kind of person. He says Julie isn't nearly as strong. Selina has two men working beside her in the field and a woman who tends to the house. She buys 20 acres, expanding the farm.

Selina shares her thoughts about beauty and adventure with Dirk. He shows a mild interest but doesn't become very involved with any aspect of it. One day, Selina shows Dirk a picture in a magazine. The picture is of a sculpture by Roelf Pool. Dirk is polite but doesn't remember Roelf and isn't that interested. Selina turns the conversation to Dirk's upcoming move to college. It's a given that he's going to attend but he doesn't know what he wants to do. He suggests that he might go to Midwest University in Chicago to take some general courses. Selina is happy. She's read about the English families who send their sons to college so they can learn and come to decisions about their futures. She agrees that Dirk should enroll in Midwest.



At one point, they discuss an agriculture course but Dirk says he isn't interested. He says he feels bad that Selina is working while he goes away to college. She says she loves the work and that she's doing it because she loves him. He begins school in 1909 and seldom cuts a class because he feels he owes it to Selina to attend every lecture.

Analysis

Aug asks Selina what she wants for her future. Selina says she only wants what's best for Dirk and that she doesn't really want anything for herself. She also says that she made mistakes in her life and that she wants to keep Dirk from making those same mistakes. Aug says that's a noble idea, but that it's not possible to live someone else's life for them. He says everyone has to make their own mistakes and that they only get mad if you try to keep them from making them. Selina is trying to arrange Dirk's future, though she still has only a rough idea of what that future looks like. She knows she wants him to have an education and to have options, but she can't think past that. Selina is feeling what most parents feel. It's natural to want the most for a child but Selina is so determined that she can't imagine that Dirk won't follow her advice. This makes it even more difficult for Selina when Dirk follows his own path and doesn't do what Selina has in mind for him as an adult.

Even after years of the harsh life she's living, Selina has an eye for beautiful things and she admires the nicer things of life. She loves to touch delicate fabrics and to look at "exquisite workmanship," but she doesn't want to wear those delicate fabrics. Part of it is habit and part of it is undoubtedly her lifestyle. This is an important part of Selina's character because she had judged Maartje when she thought Maartje just wasn't paying enough attention to her own appearance. It's also an example of Selina's maturity. She has come to see that some things in life are important while others, such as a new dress in the latest fashion, simply isn't.

There is a distinction between the traditional students attending Midwestern University and the "unclassified" students, mainly older students who had to put off their education to deal with other responsibilities. At one point, Dirk befriends one of these "unclassified" students and even takes her home for a weekend. He isn't romantically interested in her but they are friends. Then one of the other young men among the traditional students points out that people are talking about this young woman, and he says that Dirk shouldn't have anything more to do with her. Dirk dismisses her as a friend, which hurts Selina horribly. She has raised him to look at other people as an opportunity to learn new things. She would never have dismissed someone because of their social standing and she doesn't understand why Dirk would do so. He does feel some remorse about his attitude toward the young woman, but he doesn't change it. This is one of the first times that Dirk's true nature shows through.

Discussion Question 1

How does Aug Hempel change Selina's life?



Discussion Question 2

Describe what Selina wants for Dirk's future. Are her dreams realistic?

Discussion Question 3

Describe what you consider to be the most important theme at this point in the story.

Vocabulary

conveyance, acquiesced, idiomatic, tumult, proprietorially, utterance, meditation, pulchritude, nebulous, ingenuous, guile, impecunious, utilitarian, sonorously



Chapters 14 and 15

Summary

In Chapter 14, Dirk continues to attend school but he isn't always happy. Some of the teachers wear on his nerves. Meanwhile, Selina spends a lot of time alone. People talk about her but they couldn't understand that she spends her evenings "entertaining ... old friends and new." She imagines Dirk as a child and as he will be in a decade. She remembers Pervus and his strong hands. She thinks about Maartje Pool and how Maartje was happy that Selina and Roelf found things in common to laugh about. And she thinks about how people misunderstood Roelf.

Whenever Dirk comes home for a weekend or a visit, Selina asks him all about the people he's met and the places he's been. She asks for details, including the food, and she's always interested in what he's experienced. He talks a lot about Julie's daughter, Pauline, who has now insisted that everyone call her Paula. Selina notices that she is a constant part of his conversation.

Dirk says he might like to attend architecture school. Selina approves. Dirk worries about the cost but Selina says she can manage it. They talk about their opinions of what constitutes beautiful buildings and about Selina's ideal Chicago house. The next day, Dirk brings up the cost again. Selina says she's been thinking of adding pigs to the farm as a cash crop and that they'll pay his tuition. Dirk is obviously not happy but Selina assure him that she's content with her life and that she loves the farm, including the idea of raising hogs. That fall, Dirk begins school at Cornell. Selina leaves the farm at the busiest time of the year in the spring of 1913 to see Dirk graduate.

Dirk returns to Chicago and begins work at the architectural firm of Hollis and Sprague. He is disappointed to find that he is "little more than a draughtsman" and his pay is relatively small. He is happy because he has ideas and he talks to his mother about his opinions on the newer buildings in Chicago. Dirk doesn't spend as much time with Paula and Eugene. Selina thinks it's because he has come to realize that his lack of money matters. Selina feels he needs to come to this conclusion now. Paula is outspoken and both she and Eugene gripe about aspects of their lives.

One day, Paula tells Dirk that she would never marry a man who wasn't rich. It takes some time before Dirk realizes how completely serious she is. A few months later, she marries a 50-year-old man named Theodore Storm. They soon have a son and a daughter and Paula is relieved to have that duty behind her. She already knows her marriage was a mistake. Meanwhile, the Hempel companies make millions when the overseas demand for meat skyrockets due to World War I.

In Chapter 15, Dirk tells Selina he's spending the weekend at Paula's country estate. She urges him to go and have fun. Selina likes plays but doesn't care for motion pictures. She sometimes visits Chicago but the things she likes don't interest Dirk.



Paula picks Dirk up in her car. On the drive, he admits that he likes architecture but feels he is little more than an errand boy when he'd hoped to become an important architect. He doesn't see any future in the business. She suggests he quit in favor of something that will earn him more money in a shorter period of time. Paula tells Dirk that Theodore likes him, and that he can help Dirk get started in something that will earn more money. Paula says her interest in Dirk is "maternal" and that she wants him to be successful. She suggests that he go into advertising or sell bonds. Dirk begins to see things Paula's way but says he knows his mother won't be on board. Paula says Selina is a "wonderful person" but doesn't know anything about modern-day success. Later, Dirk wonders about Paula's interest and cautions himself to be careful. The next morning, Paula asks what Dirk was thinking when he went to bed the previous evening. Dirk candidly says that he thought that Paula is bored in her marriage and that he should be careful. He also says that he noticed his suit didn't fit well and wished he could have one tailored by the famous name brand, Peel. Paula assures him that he can have that.

Analysis

One evening, Dirk and Selina are talking about Dirk's recent adventures and Selina notices how often Paula is part of his conversation. Dirk says that he likes Paula but that he doesn't like her hands. He says that her hands are "grabby." Dirk may be expressing what he's already subconsciously noticing about Paula's determination to always get what she wants and to get her way. He doesn't put this thought into word for years so it may be that he's not yet really aware of it.

There's no doubt that Selina has made the farm into a successful endeavor by the time of Dirk's graduation. At one point, she tells him that she feels good about the asparagus that she planted years earlier, and she remembers that Pervus had been set against the idea. When Dirk graduates, Selina wonders if it would have happened if Pervus had lived. She feels disloyal because of that thought, but it's a valid question. If Pervus had lived, Selina would never have been peddling her vegetables the day she met Julie, and Aug would not have come into her life.

Dirk envies Paula to a great degree but he also notes her shortcomings. One of these is seen when he arrives at the country estate, called Stormwood. Dirk's room is nice but it's obviously not one of the nicest in the house. He compares that to Selina's attitude that the guest should get the best of everything. He is obviously aware of how he's expected to act and of the attitudes his mother has tried to instill, but is beginning to realize he simply can't see himself living the kind of life she wants for him.

By this point, it's obvious that Paula is not happy in her marriage but the reader should remember the time. Divorces happen but they are not the norm and Paula would likely face criticism if she chose to seek a divorce. It's also obvious that she doesn't really care about her children. She talks about them as if they were merely a duty to be done. She makes it clear that she isn't attached to them and leaves them in the care of staff members all the time. That's a huge contrast to how Selina raised Dirk.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think Selina's life would have been like if Pervus had lived? Support your answer.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Paula refuse to consider Dirk as a suitor? Who does she marry and what is her life like?

Discussion Question 3

Compare Paula to Selina.

Vocabulary

pendants, desiccated, iconoclastic, caustic, congenital, brocaded, vicarious, taciturn, ardent, pigmentation, indolent



Chapters 16 and 17

Summary

In Chapter 16, Dirk goes into the military. He spends most of his time at Fort Sheridan where he becomes an officer and then trains other officers. He wants to go to France, mainly because he is tired of the endless dinners and even of Paula and his mother. He is transferred to Paris just two months before the end of the war. Selina provides food for many families while their men are gone to war. When Dirk returns, Paula convinces him to go on a drive to sell Liberty Bonds. He does and discovers that he's very good at it. Within two months, he's made as much money as he made in a year as an architect. Selina believes that Dirk will return to architecture and it takes some time before she realizes she's wrong.

Dirk begins to meet influential people, some through Paula's connections. She asks Theodore to take Dirk to the Noon Club, a place where influential men gather, mostly for social purposes. Dirk is disappointed to discover that the club looks like "a Pullman smoker" with traditional fake mahogany and dark leather. Over the next years, Dirk's life changes dramatically. He has a lot of money, lives in an apartment in a good building, travels abroad, and learns to speak the language of the elite.

One day, Selina visits Julie and Julie says that people are talking about the amount of time Paula and Dirk spend together. Julie says Paula says she isn't planning to divorce Theodore because all the money they have as a couple belongs to Theodore. Though Dirk is now earning "thousands" of dollars, Paula is accustomed to millions. The next time Dirk visits, Selina talks to him about his life, but focuses on the fact that he's become a "gilded youth." Dirk insists that he works hard for everything he earns. Selina asks when he reads and he doesn't have an answer. She asks if he plans to marry and he says there isn't anyone he wants to marry who is free to do so.

Selina asks Dirk "how big" he is, thinking back to his childhood. As a child, Dirk said, "So big," spreading his arms wide. Now he says, "So big" but holds his thumb and finger just inches apart, a little angry that Selina seems to be making his success seem insignificant.

Dirk knows that Paula has played a role in his success. Paula knows that she can't make Dirk feel indebted or he'll resent her. She knows they have to avoid gossip but she finds she can't go a day without seeing him. Dirk begins to be irritated by her attitude and begins to feel that she's overly possessive. Dirk knows many young, available women, and they resent that Paula acts like she owns Dirk.

In Chapter 17, there are women who work in Dirk's office who notice him, though he takes no real notice of any of them. Dirk has a good apartment and a servant. He receives many invitations to events. His relationship with Selina changes. She stops asking him to describe other houses he's seen or the food he's eaten. The farm does



well and there's a high demand for DeJong asparagus. When someone notices that he shares a name with the famous asparagus on the menu at upscale restaurants, Dirk sometimes denies that there's a relation. Selina urges him to make time for new people but Dirk says he doesn't have time. Selina says he "can't afford not to" make the time. Selina sometimes visits Chicago and takes walks into new neighborhoods where she meets new people. There are common laborers and she believes that most are "more vital" than Dirk.

Analysis

Selina and Dirk disagree on his role in the war. Selina believes that, if she was a man who had a choice about being involved, she would choose to either join wholeheartedly and fight, or she would be a conscientious objector and refuse to be involved at all. She sees Dirk's involvement as half-hearted and Selina has never done anything without giving it everything she has. Paula learns of Selina's attitude and asks if she wants Dirk to die fighting like so many other young men have. Selina says that her life would stop if Dirk died, but she still believes that he should take a stand. This is typical of Selina. She still has a passion for life after all the hardships she's endured, but Dirk really doesn't have that same fire, and that disappoints her.

There's an important moment between Selina and Dirk in this section, when Dirk says that he is "So big" but holds his thumb and finger just inches apart. This seems to indicate that Dirk hasn't had the life that he would have wanted to live, even though he's made choices for himself that weren't in keeping with his mother's wishes for him. It may be that he feels ashamed that the only woman he loves is married and refuses to consider him because she's only interested in how much money he can make. He may be realizing that he isn't seeing the beauty in the world, as Selina had always done, but that seems unlikely. He may also just be generally unhappy with his current life. He believes that he's just being a little mean because he feels Selina is making fun of him, but it seems possible that there's something deeper than that. It's left to the reader to decide what he means and the significance of the moment.

Selina is bitterly disappointed in some of Dirk's choices. She wanted him to live a life of adventure because she missed her chance to do that. She was happy when he was involved in architecture, probably because it meant that he was creating something and that he could be moving toward the chance to create something important or at least beautiful. She hates the idea of Dirk being a banker. During their conversation about this, Selina says she might have made a mistake by sending Dirk away from the farm. She recants, saying that there really isn't time for dreaming on the farm either. Dirk's success is a matter of opinion. In Dirk's opinion, he's making money and that means he can buy things he wouldn't have had as an architect. In Selina's opinion, he is lacking in experiences, which makes him poor. It's left to the reader to decide who is correct and what their opinions mean.

When Selina goes to Chicago for a visit, she spends time meeting new people. People love her and open up to her with little prompting. Dirk has that same ability to connect



with people but he only uses it for business. He tells Selina that it isn't safe for her to wander around the city but she is focused still on learning as much as she can from everyone she meets. She has discovered that Dirk has a small circle of friends and that he doesn't deviate from that circle. She is very disappointed that he doesn't care about meeting new people and finding the adventure in life. In some ways, Selina is still trying to make Dirk live the life she wanted for herself.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Selina's dream for Dirk. Compare that to the reality of his life at this point.

Discussion Question 2

What is happening with the relationship between Paula and Dirk by now?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think of Paula as a character? Is she likeable? Believable?

Vocabulary

contemptuously, exorbitant, trepidation, zestful, colloquial, fastidious, poignantly, feebly



Chapters 18 and 19

Summary

In Chapter 18, Dirk has an upscale office and it's almost impossible to get a meeting with him. Paula comes up with the idea that he should launch a campaign to attract more women investors. Dirk decides that he needs an illustration for the campaign and contacts an artist named Dallas O'Mara. Dirk is surprised to learn that Dallas is a woman. He contacts her and manages to get an appointment. She arrives and Dirk discovers that she's quiet to the point, so that he feels the need to fill in with conversation, which is unusual because most women talk so much that he doesn't need to say much. She tells him she'll have to think about the project for a couple of days and that she'll charge \$1,500. Dirk says it's a lot of money and Dallas agrees, but doesn't offer to lower the price.

On the appointed day, Dirk and Paula arrive at Dallas's studio where she's working on a painting of a woman. She teases Dirk, saying she's making a drawing of a woman buying bonds, then tells him that wasn't her idea at all. Dirk is amazed that Dallas has paint on her clothes and doesn't seem to care about her appearance. The studio is shabby and comfortable, and there are people all over the place. Dallas says she always likes to surround herself with interesting people.

When they are outside, Paula makes a rude comment about Dallas's appearance. Suddenly, Dirk sees how petty and "artificial" she is. Dirk thinks about Dallas a lot. He tells Selina about her and Selina says she would like to meet Dallas.

Dirk continues to visit Dallas's studio and there are always people around. One day, he asks if they can have some time alone and invites her to dinner. She accepts and he knows that he's going to skip an important meeting to have dinner with her. He suggests a club but she says she prefers hotel restaurants because there are always interesting people eating there. They go to the Blackstone. Most women Dirk knows won't eat rolls or butter, saying it will make them fat. Dallas eats without any concern and Dirk is pleased.

Dirk says he was an architect and that he gave it up when there were few new buildings going up. Dirk says his mother sacrificed to get him an education and that he felt he had to make more money to justify it. Dallas asks if Selina felt the same and Dirk finds that he can't bring himself to lie about Selina's attitude. Dallas says she'd like to meet Selina and agrees to a trip to the farm.

Dirk says he wants Dallas to like him and asks why she doesn't. She says she demands that people in her life "possess at least a splash of splendour in their makeup." She says that some people are just ordinary. Dirk's pride is hurt. Dirk asks what happens when young men fall in love with her. Dallas says they talk about it and then become friends. Dirk says he can give Dallas things but Dallas interrupts, saying she's going to Paris in



April to study oil painting. She says she's been studying locally and allows Dirk to go with her to a class. When they arrive, Dirk is amazed to find the model is nude but he tries to act as if he isn't in a panic over the situation. They stop for sandwiches after the class and Dirk is momentarily thrilled at her look, which he takes as something special for him. Then he sees her smile the same way at the young man working behind the coffee counter.

In Chapter 19, Dirk realizes that the things he thought were important, really weren't. He doesn't realize that Dallas's outlook is very much like Selina's. Dirk talks to Selina about a fox hunt Paula hosted but Selina thinks it's ridiculous. Dallas also thinks so, and says that the people of that crowd are "trying to be something they're not." Paula announces that General Emile Goguet, a visiting dignitary, is going to be visiting Chicago and that Paula is hosting an event for him. Roelf Pool is going to be accompanying Goguet. Selina already knows about the visit and wonders if she'll have a chance to see Roelf.

Dirk becomes even more upset with Paula. Many of her habits annoy him. It's almost as if they've been married all these years and are now moving toward a breakup. Meanwhile, Dirk becomes more enamored with Dallas. She says, however, that she isn't really interested in Dirk. She says that she will probably marry someone some day who is rough around the edges and has worked toward something. She says she likes people who are "bumpy" and that Dirk is much too smooth. She says that he might have developed some of that rough edge if he'd thought architecture was worth fighting for. Dirk says that he'll return to architecture but she cuts him off before he can finish the thought.

Analysis

Dirk is interested in Dallas from their first meeting, at least partly because she doesn't seem particularly interested in Dirk. He's accustomed to women who immediately throw themselves at him and obviously want to attract his attention. Dallas is different from the beginning. It may be that Dirk sees a challenge and can't resist that. Another important aspect of Dallas's character is her attitude about money. She says that she'll charge \$1,500 to do the art for his campaign. Dirk is amazed that she's going to charge that much, but he agrees to pay it. He makes a comment that it's "a lot of money," and she agrees that it is. She then says she remembers doing commercial drawings for a fraction of that amount. Dirk says that Dallas has "arrived," indicating that she's become a success. Dallas says she's only begun her life. There are a couple of important points in this exchange. First, it's obvious that Dirk is focused only on the money while the money is secondary for Dallas. That's an easy attitude for her to take because she is making enough money to live comfortably and she might feel differently if she was doing the same work for a small payment. The other important point is that Dirk is measuring success only by dollars but Dallas has other ideas. Over the coming chapters, it will become clear that she's very much like Selina.

Paula holds a fox hunt at her country home, complete with all the traditional English food that would be served at an event in England. Dirk thinks Selina will like hearing



about it, but she's confused. She says that it's alright to copy the English for the things they do well, but that holding a fox hunt is just ridiculous.

The relationship between Selina and Dirk takes another turn during this phase of Dirk's life. Selina has spent most of her adult life focused only on what Dirk wants and needs. She has worked tirelessly to ensure that he had a good education and all the opportunities she could provide. Now Dirk is financially independent and seems set in his ways. He doesn't really seem to need Selina anymore and she has begun to find interests other than Dirk. Years earlier, she would ask him about homes he visited and the food served at various parties. She wanted details and he sometimes chafed under her questions. Now, he misses that. Selina has hidden her hurt as Dirk was growing away from her and he's just now feeling the hurt of Selina growing away from him.

Dallas tries to tell Dirk what it is that she's looking for in a potential mate by describing someone who is "rough" around the edges and "bumpy." She's trying to say that her future husband will be someone who has fought for something he felt deeply about and says that Dirk might understand if he'd felt that a career in architecture was worth fighting for. Dirk immediately says he'll return to that field if it will make any difference in Dallas's opinion of him. Dirk doesn't understand at all. This is what Selina tried to teach him as well. It may be partly because things have come easy for Dirk. He didn't have to work in the fields as much as most children of his area and he found that he could sell bonds without putting out much effort at all. All this may have contributed to Dirk's attitudes about life.

Discussion Question 1

What does Dallas mean when she says the people in her life must "possess at least a splash of splendour in their makeup"? What does she mean when she says she likes people who are "bumpy"?

Discussion Question 2

Describe how the relationship between Selina and Dirk has changed by this point in the story.

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Dirk is so attracted to Dallas and what is her attitude about Dirk?

Vocabulary

vindicated, patronage, shrewdly, pathos, condescending, fortnight, gamin, sallow, denounced, ostensibly



Chapters 20 and 21

Summary

In Chapter 20, General Goguet and Roelf Pool arrive in Chicago. Dirk expects to meet them at Paula's dinner that evening. Dirk drops by Paula's studio just after lunch, an usual time for his visits, and finds Dallas entertaining Goguet and Roelf. Roelf immediately begins talking excitedly to Dirk about his plan to visit Selina that afternoon. He says Selina was the first person to teach him about beauty. Dallas laughingly says that Goguet and Roelf have skipped out on the "elaborate programme" planned for them in favor of visiting Selina. Dallas announces that they'll all go to visit Selina. On the way, Roelf talks with Dallas about their previous adventures in France and her plans to go there to study. Roelf promises it will be "great."

they arrive at the farm to find Selina in the fields. When she sees Roelf, she runs toward him and he toward her. She's spattered with mud and wearing a battered man's hat as Roelf takes her into his arms.

In Chapter 21, the group talks and Selina is polite to everyone but turns often to Roelf. Dallas and Dirk are talking quietly to each other at one point and Dallas says that she would like to paint Selina. She says a portrait of Selina would make Dallas instantly famous.

Roelf leans in toward Selina and says, "Cabbages are beautiful." They laugh at the joke only they understand. He then says that Selina has had a rich and successful life. Selina says she has remained in High Prairie while Roelf traveled the world. Roelf counters, saying that there are two kinds of people in the world, with one being wheat and others being emeralds. Roelf says that Selina is wheat and she says that Roelf is an emerald. They continue to talk like this, including Roelf's evaluation of Paula's flawed appearance. Dirk feels that he has nothing to offer among the artistic expressions.

The banter continues as they drive back to town. They drop Dirk at his apartment and he goes inside. His Japanese servant, Saki, says that Paula called but didn't leave a message. His evening clothes are laid out for him. Suddenly, Dirk drops face first onto the bed and stays there for half an hour. He hears the phone ring and then hears Saki's light rap on his door.

Analysis

Selina is thrilled to visit with Roelf. As they talk, it's apparent that she has more in common with Roelf than she has with Dirk. Dirk sees this and it has an effect on him. He begins to chant in his head that he is a "rubber stamp." He sees himself as unimaginative, which is a stark contrast to how he sees Dallas, Roelf, and Selina. He has known about Selina's outlook for his entire life and always dismissed it as old-



fashioned and inconsequential. Now, with others who see things as she does, Dirk realizes that he is the one who is inconsequential.

The book's ending leaves a great many things open to interpretation. It may be that Dirk has finally decided that he is finally finished with Paula. He seems to be discouraged to find that she's called and it's obvious that it's her on the phone for him again as the story comes to a close. He may also have come to accept that he doesn't see the world as Dallas, Roelf, and Selina see it, and that he's poorer because of it.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the meeting between Roelf and Selina. What effect does it have on Dirk?

Discussion Question 2

What is meant by the reference Roelf and Selina make to wheat and emeralds?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Dirk is thinking about as he lies on the bed at the end of the book?

Vocabulary

tremulous, shirtwaist, exquisite, radiant, enormous, outrageously, absorbed, electrifying



Characters

Selina Peake DeJong

Selina is the daughter of a gambler named Simeon Peake, and he greatly influences her life. She is alone a great deal of the time which makes her depend on books for companionship. This love of books is a life-long passion for Selina. Some of her plans and ideas are based on books she's read over the course of her life. Her view of the world is also influenced by books.

Selina is left alone when she's only 19 and she decides to take a position as a teacher in a rural Dutch community near Chicago. She is nervous but loves the fact that she's setting out on an adventure. She marries just a year later and is a widow just a few years after that. Selina is left to manage a farm and she takes control of that situation, working as hard as any man and making a mediocre farm into a successful enterprise. Selina isn't afraid of hard work and she is a loving, giving woman.

An important part of Selina's character is her appreciation of the people and the world around her. While some people look at a field of cabbage and see nothing more than labor and food, Selina sees a beautiful array of colors and can appreciate the aesthetics of that field. She loves meeting new people and embraces new ideas. She looks at life as an adventure, even when the situation is difficult.

When she becomes a mother, Selina wants her son to have this same outlook on life. She wants him to appreciate beauty and to embrace new adventures. She's bitterly disappointed when Dirk gives up his life as an architect in favor of finance. She is also disappointed when he expresses a narrow view of the world. In Selina's mind, Dirk's life indicates that she's failed, as his mother, to make him embrace beauty and adventure.

Dirk DeJong

Dirk is Selina's only surviving child. His nickname is Sobig and he grows up on the farm owned by his parents, Selina and Pervus, in a rural Dutch farming community outside Chicago. Dirk lives a life somewhat different from most of the other local boys. While he works some on the farm, he is given far less responsibility throughout his childhood because Selina wants to make sure he gets a good education. He finishes high school and attends college, all because Selina works very hard to make it possible. Dirk initially doesn't know what he wants to do and embarks on a "general" course of study, eventually moving to another university to study architecture.

As Dirk settles into his study of architecture, he spends hours talking, drawing, and imagining buildings. He is excited about the idea of being part of the building boom but becomes discouraged when building comes to an abrupt end because of World War I. Dirk drops out of the architecture business and begins selling bonds. This transfer into the financial area discourages Selina, who had hoped that Dirk would find something



creative to do with his life. Dirk doesn't particularly like the banking business, but he likes the money that comes with his job in that field. He lives the typical life of moderately wealthy young men of the time and seems outwardly happy. It's not until he meets the young artist, Dallas O'Mara that Dirk begins to question his values and the course of his life. As the book comes to a close, Dirk is realizing that there's more to life than making money.

Dirk is a likeable and believable character, but he seems to be somewhat ineffective. He allows Paula to manipulate him for some time and seems to question it only after he becomes interested in Dallas. He doesn't take his mother's advice and doesn't see that Dallas and Selina look at the world very similarly.

Pervus DeJong

Pervus is a young Dutch farmer who lives in High Prairie when Selina begins work there as a school teacher. Pervus buys a box lunch Selina made because he didn't want her to be embarrassed. He paid a great deal of money for the lunch and they began to see each other when Pervus asks Selina to help him hone some of his skills, such as arithmetic. Pervus is nothing like Selina. He is literal and unimaginative. When Selina makes suggestions about maximizing the land, Pervus pays little attention. He continues to struggle with the difficulties that could be partially addressed by Selina's ideas. Pervus dies at a very young age, mainly because of the difficult life he leads.

Simeon Peake

Simeon Peake is Selina's father. He is a gambler and leads a disreputable life but is devoted to Selina. He continues to pay for her education even when money is tight for them. He significantly influences Selina from a young age, teaching her to look at life as an adventure and to see the beauty in the world around her, even when things are difficult. He dies in a shooting but was not the intended target.

Julie Hempel Arnold

Julie is Selina's best friend when the girls are teenagers attending a finishing school for young ladies. She is the daughter of a wealthy merchant who becomes a millionaire. Julie marries and lives a lavish lifestyle, especially compared to Selina's adult life. When Julie and Selina meet by chance one afternoon, Julie is horrified at Selina's situation and immediately sets out to make sure that Selina gets a helping hand.

Klaas Pool

Klaas is the husband of Maartje and father of Roelf. He owns the farm where Selina lives during the year she serves as school teacher at High Prairie. Klaas has a successful farm and he works very hard. He has little imagination and doesn't



understand Roelf's need to express himself through art and creativity. Klaas marries the Widow Paardenberg after Maartje dies in childbirth.

Roelf Pool

Roelf is the only son of Klaas and Martje Pool. He and Selina meet when Selina moves to High Prairie to be a school teacher. Roelf's father doesn't see any need for Roelf to continue his education past the early grades because he can't imagine a life where Roelf doesn't become a farmer. Roelf loves books and reads everything Selina has to offer. He has a crush on Selina though he's several years younger than she. Roelf leaves home after his mother dies and becomes a famous artist. He and Selina reconnect years later.

Dallas O'Mara

Dallas is a young artist living in Chicago. Dirk hires her to create the image for a campaign aimed at encouraging women to buy bonds. She is very much like Selina in her outlook on life. She sees life as an adventure and surrounds herself with people she finds to be interesting. Dirk believes Selina is unrealistic in her outlook but he latches onto Dallas's ideas and begins to change his outlook because of her.

Maartje Pool

Maartje Pool is the wife of Klaas and mother of three children, including Roelf. The Pool family are hosts to Selina when she arrives at High Prairie to teach school. When Selina sees Maartje for the first time, she imagines that the woman is very old but soon realizes that she is relatively young. Maartje dies in childbirth a few years after Selina moves out.

August Hempel

August Hempel is known to everyone as Aug, even when he becomes a millionaire and owner of a series of very successful businesses, all related to the meat industry. He is Julie's father. It's through Julie that Aug meets up with Selina when Selina is struggling to make her farm profitable. Aug questions her about her plans and gives her money to help take steps that will make the farm profitable but Selina insists that it is a loan and she repays it once the improvements are in place. Aug admires Selina and says she would have found a way to make the farm better, even if he hadn't been able to help her. He also sees his daughter Julie for what she is, saying she would be too weak to make something of herself in Selina's situation.

Paula Arnold Strong

Paula is the daughter of Julie Arnold. Her name is Pauline but she shortens it to Paula. For the sake of clarity, she's referred to as Paula in this study guide. As a child, she is spoiled and accustomed to having all the nice things that money can buy. When she becomes an adult, she is attracted to Dirk and he is attracted to her. However, Paula makes it clear that she won't marry him because he doesn't have enough money. She marries an older man who is very rich and has two children. She doesn't love her husband and cares little for the children. She loves Dirk and often manipulates him into doing what she wants. There's no doubt that she helps his career in the financial arena but she also controls much of his social time, even though people talk about the amount of time she and Dirk spend together.



Symbols and Symbolism

Sobig

Sobig is Dirk's nickname. When he is very young, his mother would ask him to tell her how big he is. Dirk stretches out his arms and says, "So big." The nickname sticks and Selina often uses it until Dirk objects that he has outgrown it. Even when he is an adult, she sometimes slips up and uses the nickname.

Cabbage

Fields of cabbages are the first crop Selina sees on her way to High Prairie and she is enthralled by their beauty. She tells Klaas Pool that the cabbages are pretty but he doesn't see anything more than hard work and a potential cash crop. Though Selina works hard all her life, she always sees the beauty in things, especially in fields of cabbages.

Roelf's Drawing

Selina prizes some things throughout her life and a drawing of the Haymarket was one of those items. When Dirk saw her looking through these treasures and said the entire batch was not worth anything, Selina disagreed and pointed out this drawing. By that time, Roelf had become famous, known as Rodel, and one of his pieces had recently sold for a great deal of money.

Miss Fister's Select School for Young Ladies

Julie and Selina attend this school as teenagers. It's where they cement their friendship and this is where Selina gains the education to become a school teacher in High Prairie.

The Noon Club

This is a gentleman's club where Dirk begins to meet influential men on his climb up the ladder in the banking business. The club is something of a disappointment to Dirk. There's polished woodwork that's obviously imitation mahogany. The chairs are all upholstered in plush red or black leather. The club represents Dirk's new successful lifestyle but he is disappointed in it.



Dallas's Studio

Dallas has a large, space that's shabby and comfortable where she works and there are people there constantly. She paints there and says she likes having all the interesting people around her. Dirk is not happy that they can never be alone there.

DeJong Asparagus

This is a crop Selina tries to get Pervus interested in during the early years of their marriage. He fought her, saying they couldn't give up the land to start a crop that wouldn't give any returns on their investment for 3 years. Selina eventually does plant asparagus and her crops become known and advertised in some of the best restaurants in Chicago. Dirk sometimes denies that he's related to the DeJong of the famous asparagus crop, indicating that he is at least somewhat ashamed of his background.

Pigs

When Dirk plans to go away to architecture school, Selina says she feels she can pay the tuition by raising pigs. Dirk is unhappy with the situation and says he doesn't know if he wants to go to school if hogs are paying his way. Selina is happy with the plan and apparently does follow through. The pigs represent the most unsavory side of Selina's life which pays for Dirk's opportunities.

Oil Painting

Dallas wants to go to Paris to further study oil painting. She is already quite good at the craft but wants to learn more. Dirk knows that she'll be good at painting portraits but wishes she wasn't interested in it so that she wouldn't be leaving Chicago.

The Foxhunt

Paula hosts a foxhunt in the tradition of the English hunts. Selina sees it as ridiculous, saying the English have the hunts because they need to rid the countryside of foxes. She says this is one time that mimicking the English isn't a good thing.



Settings

High Prairie

High Prairie is the name of the area southwest of Chicago where Selina goes to become a school teacher. The area is predominantly Dutch and most of the people are farmers. Selina is immediately captivated by the beauty of the fields and farms. The people who have always lived there don't notice the abundance of colors that change with the seasonal crops, but Selina continues to enjoy the wonder of it even after she's dealt with the harsh realities of life there. There is a school and a church, and the community is very reserved in their attitudes. Selina faces a great deal of criticism when she steps out of her appointed role as housewife and works on the farm.

Chicago

Chicago is where Selina spends several years during her late teens and where Dirk lives as an adult. The city is busy and has a lot to offer when Selina's father is doing well financially, but can also be a difficult place for those with limited money. The story is set in the late 1800s through the early 1900s, and the city reflects the amenities and limitations of that time period. The markets and stores seem believable and appropriate for the time.

Haymarket

Haymarket is where farmers gather in Chicago to sell produce to various grocers and peddlers. The competition is fierce and the market is very busy during the growing season. After Pervus dies, Selina goes to the market with Dirk, though a woman alone at the market is so rare that people talk about her decision. The market is filled with men who spend the night, waiting for the early morning shoppers. Blocks of a street are set aside for the market with wagons lined along both sides of the street and down the middle. There are also some businesses along the street that provide services to the farmers, such as a restaurant and a boarding house where farmers can sleep. A watchman spends the night patrolling the street to ensure order.

The DeJong Farm

Pervus DeJong owns 25 acres of land that isn't very profitable. There is a large section of land that is prone to flooding and Pervus is working so hard at making a crop each year that he can't find the time or money to make plans for making the farm more profitable in coming years. Selina changes that when she takes over, draining a section and buying more land. Under Selina's management, the farm becomes well-known for top-of-the-line vegetables, including hothouse tomatoes during the winter months with people speaking for her crops an entire year in advance.

The Pool Farm

The Pool's farm and farmhouse is typical of the time and place. The house is poorly insulated, meaning the rooms away from the stoves are terribly cold in the winter. The house is very plain because Maartje has no time for anything other than the work that's required of her. This is Selina's first look at a farmhouse and a farm. She wants to have a farm that's as profitable as the Pool's and she wants to make her home better than theirs. Like most families of the time and place, there is more emphasis on the land than on making the house more comfortable.



Themes and Motifs

How Books Affect Selina's Attitude

From a young age, books have influenced Selina's attitudes. She reads a lot while her father is away and these books provide her with an escape from her loneliness and with ideas that she wouldn't otherwise have encountered. Her father impresses on her the idea that life is to be lived as an adventure, which cements in Selina's young mind the idea that she can live the way she sees the world through the books. An early example of this is seen after Selina reads "Pride and Prejudice." She decides that she's going to be an author like Jane Austen and she begins to act mysteriously, as if she has a deep secret. She finally confides in her best friend, Julie, that she wants to be a writer. Julie isn't that interested in books but tries to be supportive.

Later, Selina goes to live with the Pools as the new school teacher. The weather is very cold and the daughters of the house rush to get dressed behind the stove in the kitchen, which is the only place in the house that's warm at that time of day. Selina says won't dress behind the stove "like a peasant in one of those dreadful Russian novels."

As a teenager, Selina and Julie pour over magazines to get tips on the latest fashions and other information vital to young ladies of the period. As a young wife, Selina buys books and magazines about agriculture and home. She wants to make her home into something wonderful and she looks over the magazines with Roelf, picking out ideas and making plans. She learns a great deal but the reality sets in and she soon gives up on the ideas that are only ornamental, such as keeping fresh flowers in a bowl. However, she does use this knowledge to make her farm into a profitable venture after her husband's death.

Another example of this theme is seen when Dirk is preparing to go to college. It's a given that he's going to college but the question is which university he should attend. Selina doesn't want to push him into any field and her efforts to figure out what Dirk wants never come to anything. When the time gets near, Dirk says he wants to learn "general" things. Surprisingly, Selina isn't upset because she imagines that he'll be spending time with other people who want to learn for learning's sake, and that he will be exposed to ideas that will eventually lead him to a firm goal for his future. She's read about this in English novels.

Later, Dirk tells her about a fox hunt hosted by Paula. The event is obviously based on hunts from English novels but Selina says there's a time when those ideas aren't a positive model. She says the English have some good ideas but that they hosted fox hunts because there was an abundance of the animals wreaking havoc on the countryside. She asks if the Chicago area has been overrun by foxes, which both she and Dirk know is not the case. This is a sign that Selina is willing to look to books for inspiration but is also willing to accept that not all ideas from books are good ones.



Dirk's Success

From the time he is born, Selina wants only to ensure Dirk's success in life. She works hard to make sure he has opportunities to succeed in whatever he chooses to do. She refuses to consider that he is going to grow up to be a truck farmer with no other options, especially when he's young and the farm is barely meeting the bills. At that point, Selina sees only that the farmers work too hard with too little reward, and that there is no time for creativity and adventure in their lives. She refuses to have Dirk remain home from school and works like a man to make sure he is able to attend any university he chooses. She is happy when he decides on a "general" course of study at first, imagining that he's going to spend time with others who are focused on learning for the sake of learning. She's thrilled when he goes into architecture, imagining that he's going to be able to use a creative side of his personality that she believes will bring him ultimate happiness.

For Selina, life is to be taken as an adventure. She enjoys talking to new people and doing new things, learning all she can about life and different viewpoints along the way. She also believes in creativity. She admires Roelf Pool for his artistic side. She is thrilled when Dirk chooses to get a degree in architecture. She is heartbroken when he gives up architecture and begins work in the financial district selling bonds. She is even more hurt when he tells her he's never going back to architecture, mainly because there's no money to be made there. It's obvious he is more focused on becoming wealthy than on finding pleasure and adventure in life.

Dirk realizes that his mother has sacrificed for him and he says that he feels guilty about it. He doesn't, however, make changes in his life that he knows would make Selina happy, such as remaining in the architecture field. He continues to struggle to make more money, ignoring Selina's insistence that he take time to see the beauty around him or to learn from other people. He doesn't have time to read books, which Selina finds to be a terrible thing.

There's no doubt that Dirk becomes successful. He begins making a great deal of money and has all the things a successful young man should have, including a servant and an apartment in a good location in Chicago. He is invited to all the upper class homes. However, Dirk soon discovers that he's sort of disappointed in some aspects of this life. He expects something wonderful from the Noon Club but finds that it's just an ordinary club with typical furnishings. After Dirk meets Dallas, he discovers that he's disappointed in even more aspects of his life. He sees Paula for what she really is – a greedy young woman who has spent a lot of time manipulating Dirk to do what she wants. He also begins to realize that there's more to life than making money. This is a lesson Selina spent her life trying to teach him but Dirk doesn't learn it until he sees Dallas's lifestyle.



The Roles of Women

The early part of this story is set in the late 1800s. Most women were still filling the very traditional roles of the day by tending the house and taking care of the family's needs. Selina begins to buck that traditional role from her arrival at the Pool farm. She's there to be a teacher but has a natural curiosity about everything around her. This extends to farming and she's soon very interested in how the farming works. On her first night at the Pool farm, Selina interrupts a conversation between Klaas and his hired hand, Jakob. She asks about a comment they've made regarding fertilizer. They are amazed at her audacity because women of this time and place were never expected to interrupt a male-dominated conversation like this. Selina is not particularly worried with conventions but she does realize that she's out of her depth, at least to some degree, and she soon leaves the room to get some privacy in her own room.

Selina marries Pervus just months after arriving in High Prairie, and she takes over the traditional role of a farming wife. She works in the house, doing laundry, cooking, and cleaning. She mends their clothing and does a myriad of other tasks aimed at making a home during this time. Pervus has a simple-minded man who also works on the farm but he isn't capable of handling many chores, especially if it requires anything more than the usual level of thought. After they've been married awhile, Selina begins working in the fields. Pervus is horrified. He says that no woman in his family has ever worked in the field. He says that the work is too hard for a woman but Selina challenges him to do a day's work in the house. She knows that their farm is never going to be truly successful unless she helps, even though she's stepping outside the traditional role.

After Pervus dies, Selina knows that her role in the farm is going to have to change again. She sends their hired man to the market with the first load of produce after Pervus's death, but he returns with most of the produce and only a few dollars. Selina knows at that moment that she can't possibly send him to another market day. She goes instead, which is unheard of. A woman might accompany her husband to market but would never spend the night in the produce wagon and would never go alone. Selina knows she has to find a way to support her family and she does what she feels she has to do. Everyone in the neighborhood talks about her but she doesn't let that stop her. However, she discovers that she doesn't do well at the market because most of the peddlers are frightened to do business with her. They only deal with other men and don't know how to act with a woman who has produce for sale.

The roles have changed a great deal by the time Dirk is an adult and women are beginning to ignore traditions. Paula and Dallas are prime examples of this, though in different ways. Paula drives and doesn't embrace motherhood. Dallas lives life to the fullest, surrounding herself with people she finds interesting, and doesn't care what other people think of her.



Making the Most of Life

Selina grows up with her father's influence making her believe that it's important to make the most of life. She looks at life as an adventure which is why she feels a sense of excitement as she is driving toward High Prairie and her first job as a school teacher. She is nervous, but she's already determined to make the most of the opportunity. She soon finds that the position is difficult and that she had unrealistic dreams of being a dignified teacher in front of a class filled with children eager to learn. Even then, she continues to do her best and to find the beauty in the world around her. She holds onto this attitude when she becomes a farmer's wife. She gives up on some things as being too hard – such as keeping fresh flowers in the house and keeping herself dressed nicely – but she never gives up on making the most of her situation. An example of this is seen one day when she puts a radish in her hair, pretending it's a beautiful flower. Pervus berates her but Selina keep this attitude, even years later when she's a widow and feels she's failed to help Dirk grow into a happy adult who makes the most of his life.

Roelf and Dallas are also examples of this theme. No one understands Roelf when he's young, including his parents. His father thinks his tendency to make beautiful things instead of working on practical needs for the farm is “dumb.” His mother loves him but doesn't have either the time nor the ability to understand him. Despite this lack of understanding, Roelf continues to look at the beautiful things in life. When his life at home becomes too difficult, he leaves High Prairie and eventually winds up in France where his talent is appreciated. His desire to live life to the fullest puts him on the path to fame and fortune.

Similarly, Dallas is well-known for her artistic ability but she continues to look for ways to improve herself and her art. She surrounds herself with interesting people because she knows she can learn from them. She has a good reputation and is making a living in Chicago but she plans to travel to Paris to learn more about oil portraits. She believes Selina is beautiful and shares many of Selina's ideas. Dallas believes Dirk has had life too easy and that he hasn't every felt passionate enough to fight for anything.

Dirk fusses at Selina for wandering around Chicago, talking to everyone she meets, because he feels it isn't safe. He doesn't realize that this is a vital part of Selina's nature. He also doesn't understand why Dallas always has people gathered in her studio. She says she wants to surround herself with interesting people because it's an important part of life. Dirk begins to understand this idea of living life to the fullest only after spending time with Dallas.

Maartje Pool is another example of this theme, though she has a different outlook than Selina, Roelf, and Dallas. Maartje confides in Selina that she ran away shortly before her marriage, but that she realized she might as well return. She says that it's impossible to run away from life. Selina accepts Maartje's words, seeing the wisdom behind them.



Selina's Love of the Land and Farming

Selina has a love of beauty, adventure, and learning before her father dies and she goes to High Prairie to teach school. On the way to the Klaas Pool farm, where she'll stay while she's teaching school, she discovers that the fields of cabbages are beautiful. She makes the mistake of saying so to Klaas Pool who laughs about this for years to come. But during that first meal on the farm, Selina listens while Klaas and his hired hand, Jakob, talk about farming practices and plans. Selina interrupts, which is unheard of because women simply don't insert themselves into the male-dominated conversations about farming. Selina asks questions and refuses to be put off with generic information. She discovers there's a book in the Pool household that answers some of the basic questions.

When Selina begins teaching Pervus in the evenings, they initially confine themselves to talking about the lessons at hand. Their conversations gradually become more personal and begin to include details about Pervus's life and his farm. Selina learns that there's a tract of his land that's prone to flooding. She suggests that he should drain it, a suggestion she makes for years to come, but Pervus simply can't accept that it's worth the investment. Once Selina and Pervus are married, she begins to take an even bigger interest in farming. She reads in order to learn more about farming in general and comes up with some ideas to improve the farm. Within a few years, she spends a lot of time working in the field alongside Pervus and his hired hand. She believes that planting asparagus would be a good investment but Pervus objects, saying it takes too long to realize a cash return on that crop. Most of the time, Pervus thinks her ideas are ridiculous but he sometimes gives in just because Selina is so persistent.

By the time Pervus dies, Selina is able to step in and take over all aspects of the farming. She continues to see the beauty and the potential, and she begins to clean and bundle the vegetables so that they attract the most attention from buyers. She works as hard as any man but she feels a deep sense of accomplishment that makes all the work worthwhile. The fact that she's also taking care of Dirk and providing for his future gives her an even deeper sense of accomplishment.

At one point, Aug Hempel asks if Selina wants to sell the farm. She assures him that she doesn't and he approves of her plan to make improvements. Selina understands that she has to make investments in the land in order to make the land become more profitable. Within a few years, she has made significant improvements, including the purchase of additional acres. When Dirk is preparing to go to college, he says that he hates for Selina to pay for his tuition through such hard work. Selina assures him that she's doing something she loves.



Styles

Point of View

The story is written in third person from limited perspectives. The majority of the early part of the book is written from Selina's limited view of events but there are a few notable exceptions. Soon after Selina's marriage to Pervus DeJong, the reader gets a brief look at one of Pervus's private thoughts. He still looks at Selina as an elegant little thing, too small for the heavy country life and not really suited to it. He refers to her privately as an "exquisite toy, which, in a moment of madness, he had taken for himself."

Roughly the second half of the book is written mainly from Dirk's perspective. Like Selina's perspective, the majority of this part of the book is limited in perspective but there are a few exceptions. A few passages are written more like an omniscient perspective. For example, Dirk knows that Paula is manipulating him and he begins to resent it. That thought is not presented as Dirk's thought but more as an outside observations.

Some readers may think Selina isn't a very reliable perspective. When Selina arrives at the Pool house, she's unprepared for the hardships. The upstairs is cold and she watches as Maartje works from before sunrise until well after dark, day after day. Selina has to walk a mile to school and start a fire in the heater. Her room is too cold for her to enjoy spending time there and she has no real opportunities to be alone anywhere else. However, as soon as she arrives at her own house, she notices that the fire makes the house too hot and she wishes for the coolness of her bedroom at the Pool's house. She soon begins to struggle under all the work required of her. Before long, Selina is looking at her time at the Pool's as a carefree time of freedom. While that may seem to be the words of an unreliable perspective, it seems more likely that Selina is being honest with the limited experiences she has had in her life.

Language and Meaning

The book was written in the 1920s and set in the decades leading up to that time, and the language is appropriate to that time. Books of that era were often filled with flowery prose and this book is no different. There are lengthy passages describing places, people, and events. While the basic story line is straightforward, the language may be difficult for some readers to follow. Sentence structure is sometimes altered from what modern English speaking readers would use.

In addition, a great deal of the story is set in a traditional Dutch community and many of those characters speak limited English that is affected by their native language. For example, Maartje and Selina are in church watching an exchange between Widow Paardenberg and Pervus DeJong. Maartje notes that Pervus "makes with his head no."



She is saying that he is shaking his head no but she doesn't have a good grip of the English language. There are also many dated words and terms that would have been common during this time. Words such as ebon, bacchanal, draught, and roseate in the book. These were probably a normal part of the author's vocabulary when the book was written but modern-day readers may not immediately know the meanings.

Selina loves to read books and there are many literary and historical references. Some of these are dated so that modern-day readers may not be familiar with them. At one point, Selina and Julie look through the pages of "Godey's Ladies' Book," which was a magazine popular with women of that time. There are references to famous people of the time, well-known architecture, and historical events. The reader who isn't familiar with these references may miss subtleties in the story but will still understand the overall storyline.

Structure

The book is divided into 21 chapters of varying lengths. For example, Chapter 1 has 13 pages. Chapter 2 has 8 pages. This is typical for the book with most chapters somewhere in that range of pages. The chapters are titled by number only, giving no hint about what's to come in the chapters.

The majority of the book is in chronological order with the exception of Chapter 1. The opening and closing paragraphs are looks into the future. In the opening paragraph of that chapter, the reader is introduced briefly to Dirk "Sobig" DeJong and his mother, Selina Peake DeJong. In this paragraph, the reader learns about Dirk's nickname, which is also the name of the book. In the final paragraph of this chapter, the reader gets a look at a scene in which Julie and Selina meet again after being apart for more than a decade. It's a chance encounter and Julie is horrified at Selina's situation. This encounter prompts a major change for Selina because Julie's father gives her advice and a loan that affects the rest of Selina's life.

The author uses several literary devices throughout the book. Personification is seen on several occasions. For example, Selina is helping Pervus learn more about reading and arithmetic and he notes that the numbers "marched so tractably" when Selina is manipulating them. Another of these devices is foreshadowing. At one point, it's noted that nothing could prevent Selina from "meeting the fate that was to be hers." That gives the reader insight to coming events.



Quotes

He wasn't as big as that. In fact, he never became as big as the wide-stretched arms of her love and imagination would have had him."

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 6)

Importance: Dirk's nickname is Sobig because of this exchange he has with his mother, Selina. He stretches his arms as wide as he can, saying this is how big he is. This is very early in the story but it's an indication that Selina's dreams for Dirk won't come true.

There sprang to life between the boy of twelve and the woman of nineteen an electric current of feeling."

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 32)

Importance: This is the first time Selina and Roelf meet and they sense kindred spirits in the other from that first introduction. This is borne of their love of beauty and their need to find adventure in their lives.

I won't come down to dressing behind the kitchen stove like a – like a peasant in one of those dreadful Russian novels."

-- Selina (chapter 4 paragraph 7)

Importance: Selina has come to realize that her room is horribly cold in the early morning hours as she's getting ready for school. Maartje invites her to dress in the kitchen where it's warm but Selina sees this is inappropriate. This is an important look at how books have affected Selina's life, which is one of the story's themes.

The very first time Pervus DeJong met Selina he had a chance to protect her. With such a start, the end was inevitable."

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 29)

Importance: This is an example of foreshadowing, which the author uses a couple of times to hint at what's to come. In this case, the author is teasing the reader about the upcoming scene in which Pervus buys Selina's lunch box because others are laughing at her.

You can't run away far enough. Except you stop living you can't run away from life."

-- Maartje Pool (chapter 7 paragraph 13)

Importance: Maartje and Selina are talking just before Selina's marriage. Selina asked if Maartje was nervous before her own marriage and Maartje admitted that she briefly ran away, but then returned. This bit of wisdom is one that Selina recalls in the coming years when her own life is harsh.

She says, I remember like yesterday, cabbages was beautiful. I bet she learned different by this time."



-- Klaas Pool (chapter 10 paragraph 27)

Importance: Klaas is talking about Selina's talent for seeing the beauty in the world around her, which she had tried to share with Klaas on their first meeting. He didn't understand then and he certainly wouldn't understand that Selina, even after years of hardship, still saw the beauty in a field of cabbages.

About mistakes it's funny. You got to make your own; and not only that, if you try to keep people from making theirs, they get mad."

-- August Hempel (chapter 12 paragraph 32)

Importance: Selina has just told Aug that she wants to make a good life for Dirk because she wants to help him avoid the mistakes she made. Aug gives her a good piece of advice but Selina doesn't really understand what he's saying.

Oh, Selina DeJong never was lonely on these winter evenings before her fire."

-- Narrator (chapter 14 paragraph 11)

Importance: There are people who believe that Selina must be lonely because she lives by herself. However, she spends her evenings with her memories and those memories are so vivid that she doesn't feel lonely. She imagines Dirk as he was as a child and as he will be in the future. She remembers Pervus, her father, and Roelf, among others.

Paula's little air of possession had grown until now it enveloped him. She wasn't playing now; was deeply and terribly in love with him."

-- Narrator (chapter 16 paragraph 9)

Importance: Paula is now so much a part of Dirk's life that she spends a lot of time together and soon people begin to gossip about their relationship. Even though Paula seems to be in love with Dirk, she isn't willing to give up her wealthy lifestyle with her rich husband to marry Dirk.

Selina always talked to everyone. She enjoyed listening to street car conductors, washwomen, janitors, landladies, clerks, doormen, chauffeurs, policemen."

-- Narrator (chapter 17 paragraph 9)

Importance: Selina believes that she can learn a lot and that her life becomes richer from talking with all kinds of people. This is a stark contrast to Dirk's attitude and the small circle of people he associates with. Selina realizes that everyone of these people is more important than "her successful son."

He was seeing things through Dallas O'Mara's wise, beauty-loving eyes. Strangely enough, he did not realize that this girl saw life from much the same angle as that which his mother regarded it.

-- Narrator (chapter 19 paragraph 1)



Importance: Selina has tried to impart a love of beauty to Dirk and to make him realize the things that are truly important in life, but Dirk has dismissed her ideas as old-fashioned and wrong. He begins to see things as Dallas sees them because he's falling in love with her and is more open to her ideas, but he still doesn't see that Dallas and Selina have very similar outlooks on life.

What a fine life you've had, Selina. A full life, and a rich and successful one.”

-- Roelf Pool (chapter 21 paragraph 9)

Importance: Roelf recognizes that Selina had taken everything she can from her life and that makes her rich in experiences regardless of the money she's making from the farm Selina argues that she has remained at home all these years while Roelf has traveled the world, but Roelf says that Selina has “been everywhere” because of her experiences.