

Some Luck Study Guide

Some Luck by Jane Smiley

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Plot Summary

“Some Luck” by Jane Smiley is the story of the Langford family of Iowa. As the story unfolds, Walter is twenty-four years old with a wife, Rosanna, and baby, Frank. Walter serves in Europe during World War I. When he returns, he becomes enamored by young Rosanna Vogel. She is a raving beauty of German descent with thick blonde hair, lovely features, and a quick smile. Rosanna was raised as a Catholic but she thinks independently and is rebellious. Rosanna is determined to marry Walter. There are elements of the Catholic religion that she cannot sanction such as she does not believe that God would punish an innocent baby who was not baptized by damning it to Hell. The couple marries in a Methodist church. Rosanna remains conflicted about religion throughout her life.

The young family is struggling. Walter has doubts about whether he'll be successful at crop growing, dairy farming, and to a lesser extent, raising livestock. Walter's father, Wilmer Langdon, is a successful farmer with a 320-acre farm that is bought and paid for. He criticizes Walter for buying a farm when the market price was at its highest. Wilmer invites the young family to live at his farm. It is tempting, but Walter is independent and proud. He doesn't want to be a charity case.

Walter is a hard worker and dedicated to making the farm profitable even through the years and challenges of the Great Depression and the Great Drought. Both of these events hit the farmers hard. But Walter perseveres so that he can support his growing family. Rosanna has a second son, Joe, who is not big and strong like his older brother, Frank. Rosanna struggles with her private thoughts about Joe – he's weak and has every bad feature from both sides of the family. She has guilt and shame for her feelings about Joe because Jesus loved all children the same. When she has Mary Elizabeth, Rosanna feels that she has a gift from heaven. When the little girl is only three, she dies from a freak accident. Rosanna is overwhelmed by her grief and has to fight the shame and guilt she feels about her daughter's death.

A distance grows between Walter and Rosanna after Mary Elizabeth's death. Their focus is not the same. Rosanna is depressed and looks to the Lord to free her of her misery. Walter doesn't think deeply about much more than his farm. Times get so rough at one point that Walter considers suicide. The family never can really relax because they barely survive. Rosanna has three more children. Rosanna was alone when she went into labor with the second youngest child, Henry, and delivered him herself.

The lives of the Langford children take different paths. Despite their time away or the distance between them, they remain strongly and forever connected to the Langdon farm and to Rosanna and Walter.



1920 - 1925

Summary

1920

Walter is twenty-five years old and has a dairy farm. World War I has ended and Europe is back in business, driving the price down. His father has chastised him about buying a farm when prices were high. Walter's wife, Rosanna, is a real beauty whom he won over after he returned from the war. Now they have a son, Frank, who is five months old and teething. Frank is also starting to crawling while trying to stand and walk. He likes to look out windows where he can see outside. The family takes the buggy to Rosanna's mother's house for Frank's first birthday. The house is filled with people and noise. The adults talk about livestock and crops. Everyone sings happy birthday to Frank.

1921

Rosanna's sister, Eloise, comes to live with the family so she can go to a good school and help with Frank who is walking now. Rosanna begins raising chickens. Rosanna is annoyed that Eloise asks her if she got Frankie baptized yet. Their mother is worried that Frank might contract cholera. Rosanna and Walter were at odds about getting Frank baptized. Their mother is caring for Aunt Rose who is old and sickly and on the verge of death. Eloise is there for Thanksgiving. Frank impresses everyone by counting to ten. Eloise has grown tired of caring for Frank. Eloise learns about how to run a business at home and at school. She and her friends have books that the adults do not know they have and they all keep diaries. Walter gets Frank a horse when he is almost two. Eloise mounts the horse and holds Frank in front of her as they take a ride together.

1922

The family is eating dinner when Frank calls for Rosanna who is not at the table. Walter tells him to eat his food. He tries to run for the stairs to find his mother but Walter stops him and knocks him down. Rosanna is upstairs with her mother getting ready to have a baby. Walter is worried that he has planted too many oats but he had followed a Langdon tradition. He likes the social aspect of planting oats when all the farmers visit each other in August. Rosanna always makes a big spread for the other farmers. Frank is a great advertisement for oats – he's bigger and taller than the Lewis boy who is a month older. The farmers talk about the hot weather, their livestock, and crops. Frank's little brother, Joe, is five months old. Joe is smaller than average. Rosanna is protective of him. It bothers her that Frank has grown away from her. Walter is worried about making enough to pay his bills and that he planted too many oats.

1923



Rosanna takes the buggy that's hooked up to Jake to town on Saturday. She waves at the people on the sidewalk. Maggie Birch, Eloise's best friend, runs up to the buggy. She asks if she can pick up Eloise and go to the Strand Theater and see a movie. Rosanna says she will think about it. Rosanna parks in front of Crest's where she gives Dan Crest a crock of her butter and three dozen eggs to sell for her. Dan offers her fifty cents a pound for the ten pounds of butter. There are so many things that Rosanna could have been but she is happy to just be a farmer's wife. Frank likes to hide under his parents' bed but Walter has forbidden him to do so. Rosanna is angry when she finds him under the bed. He gets his Sunday clothes dusty. Walter scolds Frank for being under the bed and beats him with his belt. Walter explains that he beats Frank because of Frank's disobedience and deception.

1924

Rosanna has a baby girl they name Mary Elizabeth. Rosanna wants Walter to buy a used Model T but Walter doesn't want to spend the money. He'd rather by a tractor. Frank is almost five and is expected to do some chores like feeding the chickens and horses. Frank also leads the courses out to pasture. Sometimes he rides Jake there. Frank also helped Rosanna with inside chores. He is also learning to read. Frank teases Joey a lot. He takes his dominoes away from him and hides them. Another Thanksgiving brings his grandparents and some young cousins to the house. Mary Elizabeth is starting to take a few steps. Rosanna gets after the boys for roughhousing.

1925

Irma, the wife of Walter's ranch hand Rangar, has taken Eloise's place helping out in the house. Eloise is at Iowa State where she's taking economics. Irma takes care of Joey but Rosanna does not let Irma take care of Mary Elizabeth because she is so clumsy. Walter recognizes that the farm life is hard but he could not imagine doing anything else. Every year, Walter threatens to plow up the Osage-orange hedge that separates the field behind the barn from the back acreage but he just winds up trimming it. The hedge is filled with sharp thorns that makes it impossible to go through so it does its job and keeps the animals in. Rosanna is always worried about one of the children getting hurt on the farm. She limits where they are allowed to play. One evening, Mary Elizabeth hits her head on the corner of a crate. Mary Elizabeth becomes very ill and they take her to the doctor. Rosanna tells the boys that Mary Elizabeth is sleeping.

Analysis

Walter Langdon is a young man with small farm and a young family. It is the 1920s and the country is on the precipice of the most devastating economic collapse the modern world has ever seen. Walter is a symbol of pride, a proud man who won't take his father's help. He and his wife, Rosanna and baby, Frank, could all come and stay at his father's home. But Walter wants privacy for him and his family. His father is an established farmer with a huge farm that is paid for. His father knows that he is struggling but chastises him for purchasing a farm when the prices are at their highest.



There is a competition between father and son that Walter won't cave to. The themes of familial duty and an obligation to continue the family tradition in farming are introduced in this section.

Another theme that emerges in this first section is survival. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of both Walter and Rosanna, they are able to survive on the farm and take care of the growing family. Rosanna has some underlying guilt because she favors Frank, her eldest son, and Mary Elizabeth, her baby. Joe is the middle child who is not as attractive as the other two children and is weak and fragile. Walter, as the father, is the disciplinarian as was traditional in those days. He is harsh with the strong-willed Frank and beats him when he disobeys. Frank does not feel close to his father. The beatings that he gets from his father do not dampen his high-spiritedness.

Religion is a strong theme relative to the character, Rosanna. She struggles with her religion. She was raised as a Catholic but worries that her family is not saved like Protestant religions advocate. She is conflicted about having her children baptized. She is able to survive the death of one of her children by clinging to the hope that her daughter who passed away at just three-years old was saved and that Mary Elizabeth is in heaven. Since Rosanna is a strong character in her own way, Rosanna's grief and guilt over her religious choices and the death of her child foreshadow the probability of future family conflicts.

Discussion Question 1

What underlying issue causes Rosanna to be conflicted about baptizing her children? Who instigates Eloise's question to Rosanna about baptizing children?

Discussion Question 2

How are Frank and Joe different? Why are Rosanna and Walter both silently disappointed in Joe? Why is Frank easily able to grow away from Rosanna, and why does it bother her?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the circumstances of Mary Elizabeth's death. How does her passing impact Rosanna, her religion, and her relationships with Walter and her sons?

Vocabulary

cupola, affinity, fledgling, succumbing, transfixed, bona-fide, undulating, quotidian, manifested, constriction, cholera, ostentatious, gumption, charade, comport, prosaic, incessant



1926 - 1930

Summary

1926

Rosanna wants to go to a Billy Sunday revival in Mason City. It is five months since Mary Elizabeth died. Rosanna keeps herself busy to distract herself from her guilt and grief. Rosanna and Walter are growing apart. Bill Sunday and a choir take the stage and sing a few songs. Frank is fidgeting and Joe is crying. Walter tends to the boys so that Rosanna can concentrate on the sermon. The family stays in a hotel in Mason City for the two nights. They attend the second day of the revival on Sunday. Billy talks about the devil and how he can appear to be like a nice fellow. He shouts the devil off the stage and calls people to come forward. Rosanna walks forward, kneels, and prays to Mary Elizabeth. She feels the child taking her arms from around her neck and flying away. Lillian is born six months later. To Rosanna, she is a gift from God. She believes that Mary Elizabeth herself blessed the new child.

1927

Frank who is seven now goes to school every day. He's taller than the boys his age. The older boys play mean tricks on him and bully him. Minnie Frederick who's a little older always stands up for him. To get back at the boys, Frank takes a mousetrap from home and smuggles it to school. Just before lunch, he sets the trap and places it inside his own desk. He has to think of a way to get it into Bobby's desk since Bobby is one of his tormentors. At school the next day, he is able to slip the mousetrap into Bobby's desk. The trap goes off and the teacher discovers tobacco and cigarette papers inside Bobby's desk. Bobby is suspended for a month. When a stray dog has puppies behind the barn, Joe keeps it a secret from everyone. When his mother discovers them, she wants Walter to get rid of them. Walter tells Joe that he shot the mother dog and the puppies.

1928

After harvest, Walter and Ragnar make an addition to the house so Lillian can have her own room. Walter forbids Frank to touch a bucket full of long nails. Walter catches Frank sifting through the nails and gives him a whipping. Frank is always up to something but the teacher tells Rosanna that he's the smartest child that she had ever seen. To Walter, Joe is the kid who needs an occasional beating to toughen him up. But Joey never does anything wrong. Rosanna paints Lillian's new room bright pink and made new curtains for her windows. It is the nicest room in the house.

Rosanna tells Walter that she is taking the kids to the Assemblies of God church in Usherton. Rosanna has been feeling down. Her own Bible reading isn't easing her



mind. She wants Walter and the children to be “saved.” They arrive at the church in time for the second service. Lillian seems like an angel.

1929

Ragnar and Irma both find jobs at Iowa State College and gave two weeks' notice. Frank digs in and helps with the planting and other chores. Walter and Frank seem to bond now that Frank is helping him. He is learning all about farming. Rosanna is happy to have Frank out of her hair. She wishes Joey was, too. But he's small and weak although he has stopped whining. Joey does small chores like collecting eggs. Rosanna silently thinks that God gave Joey all the worst features from both sides of the family. Rosanna knows she needs saving but hasn't done anything about it.

At Thanksgiving dinner, Frank tells his grandparents how the boys at school don't bully anyone any more. He is vague about who put them in their places but everyone kind of knows. Eloise lives in Chicago and loves it. She is a writer at a newspaper called the “American.” She tells Frank he can come on the train and visit her.

1930

The grandparents come for Joe's eighth birthday. Walter was in Crest's store earlier and was a witness to an armed robbery. The robbers were stopped and Dan got his money back; their guns weren't loaded. There's a conversation about how desperate people are. So many people have nothing. The day after Easter, Walter starts planting his corn. There aren't many frogs which to Walter is a bad omen, but Rosanna isn't worried.

When giving Lillian a bath, Rosanna discovers that the well had gone dry; the water is filled with muck. Rosanna prays, asking for water and that they will have the strength to withstand the Lord's test. She thanked him for their blessings. She's lost her customers and has to slaughter half her chickens and sell her butter for almost nothing. Walter has unsold crops from the year before. Rosanna tries the water pump again and this time it is free of muck. It is a miracle, she told Lillian. Frank notices that Walter worries about something called the “bank” and bad people robbing it. Frank is demonstrating a fine singing voice. He kisses other girls but likes Minnie the most. Rosanna tells Frank that any talent that a person is given is to be used in the service of the Lord.

Analysis

Grief and guilt still plague Rosanna. Suffering from the pain of losing Mary Elizabeth, she continues to seek peace through religion. She makes plans for the family to go to a revival. Her grief and her obsession with religion are creating a wedge between her and Walter. Rosanna convinces herself that she is free of her guilt and shame when she comes forward at the revival to seek salvation.

When Rosanna prays, she does not pray to the Lord; rather, she prays to her lost child. It is not God who frees her from her grief; it is Mary Elizabeth who releases her. But her respite doesn't endure. She decides to try yet another church to seek solace. When



they enter the church, Rosanna looks at Lillian with great admiration. When she tells Lillian that she looks like an angel, she is thinking of her dead child. Lillian resembles Mary Elizabeth and the reference to “angel” is a direct link to her lost child. There are strong indications that Rosanna will never find peace and that her pain will undermine her relationship with others, especially Walter.

Joey continues to be a disappointment to his parents. To Rosanna, he falls short in beauty and appearance. To Walter, he falls short in strength and masculinity. He is weak and fragile and has a tender heart. Walter has a distorted view of his sons and his relationship to them. He whips Frank for disobeying him, yet admires him for standing up to the beating like a little man. He looks at the fragile Joey as needing a beating but, unfortunately, he doesn't do anything to get one. Ironically, the child most interested in animals and farming is Joey who Walter doesn't see has a future farmer.

Rosanna carries her religious fervor over to Frank. He has an outstanding singing voice and she tells him that any gift that a person has should be used in the service of the Lord. Frank listens but he is independent and does not take what she says to heart. Frank's reaction foreshadows an emotional break with his mother. She is driving him away with her grief and her faith which she tries to force onto Frank.

Discussion Question 1

How does Rosanna deal with the guilt and grief she feels for her lost child? How does she convince herself, at least ostensibly, that Mary Elizabeth, and therefore God, has forgiven her?

Discussion Question 2

How does Walter view his two sons, Frank and Joey? Why does he say that Joey is the son who needs to be beaten and what underlying belief drives his opinion?

Discussion Question 3

What are signs in the farming community that people are becoming desperate during the economic downturn? Why is Walter worried about his bank being robbed?

Vocabulary

succumbed, garnered, tabernacle, exhort, susceptible, inertia, dynamic, visceral, brevity, promptitude, gripe, privy, contrariness, miniscule, thresher, genealogies, foundered, vagrant



1931 - 1936

Summary

1931

The crash and the drought hit the farming community hard. Walter has enough savings and seeds to last another year. Walter walks over to the farm that is abandoned by the Grahams who are forced to leave. The well by the house also is drying up. Frank gets a standing ovation at the Christmas pageant for his solos. Frank hears the word “communist” for the first time at Opa’s funeral. Frank also overhears Eloise’s boyfriend being referred to as a communist. He asks Eloise what communists are. She responds that they are people who see the world as unfair and want to make it fairer.

Walter takes Joey and Frank and drives to Centerville to listen to a congressman named Christian Ramseyer. Eloise marries her boyfriend without inviting anyone to the wedding. Walter refers to Eloise’s husband as that “Red Jew.” Ramseyer is pro-farmer and shouts like a preacher that he wants a stabilized dollar. Frank hears Walter tell Rosanna that he only yields thirty bushels per acre and he does not know what they are going to do.

1932

Walter switches from the Republican to the Democratic Party. Even though he supports Representative Ramseyer who is a Republican, he is fed up with Hoover. He supports Governor Reed from Missouri. Most people think that Roosevelt is going to win, which is fine with Walter. The pastor has told Rosanna that the Democratic party has more sinners and atheists. Things have improved slightly. There has been some rain, the oat crop is flourishing, they have some livestock, and Rosanna is selling her eggs and butter. They will probably get electricity soon. Rosanna is four months pregnant. Lillian is six years old and goes to her first day of school. Her teacher places her in a higher reading group on her second day. Rosanna goes into labor when she is home alone and ultimately delivers a boy, Henry, by herself.

1933

Rosanna suffers from postpartum depression after going through an emotional and physical ordeal from delivering the baby by herself. Praying doesn’t help. Lillian loves being with Henry. She plays with him and singing to him. Walter stays away from Rosanna and her depression. Walter and Rosanna debate on whether to send Frank to high school. The school is three miles away. Frank decides to get a bike, which he buys with money he made from selling rabbit skins. Crops are bad but Walter gets money from Roosevelt for not planting crops. Eloise, Julius and baby Rosa come to visit. They are both writers. Julius’ talk of worker solidarity is at odds with Rosanna’s belief that being right with the Lord is most important.



1934

It takes Frank fifteen minutes to get to school on his bike. Frank loves high school and the independence that it gives him. Rosanna finds Henry to be mysterious and remote. He reacts more enthusiastically to Lillian than he does to her. Rosanna considers it repayment since she had favorites among her children. Walter secretly thinks that using his tractor is like having a deal with the devil. He takes the drought as a sign. The family goes to the state fair. Joey takes his ewe to compete for a 4H ribbon. Joey becomes friendly with girl named Emily, which is also the the name of their family's ewe. Emily also has a ewe in the completion. Frank stays at the fair after his family left for the boardinghouse where they were staying. He'd been on all the rides and seen all the attractions and exhibits. Frank, who is fifteen, has his first sexual encounter in a car with an eighteen-year-old-girl named Libby. On the way home, Walter and Rosanna talk about Joey and Emily and whether she tried to kiss him. Frank remains silent.

1935

At a church sermon, the pastor preaches against evil thoughts and carnality. It makes Frank think about Libby and causes him to lose sleep. Walter nearly falls into a well. He catches himself at the last minute. The fall would have killed him. But he's only hanging on by his arms and has to figure out how to hoist himself up with no one else around. He starts to think about his life and how much a struggle it had been. He looks at the water below, which is probably ten feet deep. Would Rosanna miss him? He worries that the farm will not make it. He uses his elbows to inch is way out.

1936

During a harsh winter, Frank is sent off to Chicago to go to school. Eloise greets him at the train station. After he's in school for a while, the teacher tells Eloise that he's getting straight A's. Eloise and Julius argue about farming, more children, and about Stalin and solidarity compared to truth. Eloise grew up Catholic while Julius is the grandson of English rabbis. Frank plans to try out for a school musical at the end of the year. Frank earns the reputation of being good with the girls and the best liar. Word comes that Uncle Rolf, the brother of Rosanna and Eloise, killed himself and that they have to return for the funeral. Rolf has hung himself in the barn. Rosanna gets Frank aside and tells him that farming is bad. Rolf killed himself because the farm was failing.

Analysis

The theme of religious and ethnic bias rears its ugly head in this section. Walter's bias for Eloise's husband is revealed when he calls him as a "Red Jew," referring both to his Jewish heritage and his political leanings which Walter has characterized as communist. Rosanna's religious fervor surfaces when Walter changes political parties. Her pastor told her that the Democrats were sinners and atheists. Ironically, Walter's new-found liberal leanings put him on a par with Julius' own politics. However, Walter's view of the world is through the filter of farming. He is struggling through residual effects of the



devastating drought of the southwest plains and through the falling prices for his crops. Those are his politics. Unlike Julius, Walter is not concerned with fairness in the world only with the success or failure of his farm.

The theme of guilt has a strong presence in this section and is an overarching theme throughout the saga. Rosanna suffers from a serious bout of post-partum depression after the birth of Henry. The fact that she had to deliver the baby when she was alone has a lasting emotional and physical impact on Rosanna. Walter, who is one-dimensional and only concerned with the success of his farming efforts, does not know how to deal with Rosanna's depression. Instead of talking about it, Walter stays outside more and Rosanna withdraws within herself. Lillian loves Henry and gives him a lot of attention unlike Rosanna who is battling her demons and is distant and remote toward Henry. As she does in every aspect of her life, Rosanna seeks a religious explanation for her inability to bond with Henry. She views his lack of love for her as a repayment for her sins. Rosanna attributes Rolf's suicide to the failure of his farm. When she warns Frank to stay away from farming, it demonstrates that she has lost touch with him. He has no desire to be a farmer.

Rosanna has never recovered from her grief over the loss of Mary Elizabeth. She has tried to mask her pain and lives under an outward pretense that her religion has brought her peace. But Rosanna has repressed her feelings for all these years. Rosanna can't bond with Henry because he is a sad reminder, a symbol, of her lost baby. She wishes Mary Elizabeth was there instead of Henry. Rosanna has compounded the guilt she's been carrying around for years because of her lack of feeling for Henry.

Discussion Question 1

How does Walter's bias toward Julius surface? What is ironic about Walter's own political leanings and those of Julius? Compare and contrast their politics.

Discussion Question 2

How does Frank show his resourcefulness when there is a debate about his going onto high school? What coming-of-age experience does Frank have at the state fair? What does Pixie imply about Frank's sexuality and why?

Discussion Question 3

Explain Frank's temptation to commit suicide. What contributing factors led him to that pivotal point in his life? Make the case that Frank either placed himself in jeopardy intentionally or that it was accidental.



Vocabulary

abomination, castrating, atheist, entrancing, concoct, ominous, abyss, enterprising, skeptical, sauntered, reciprocal, carnality, smithereens



1937 - 1942

Summary

1937

Walter receives a letter from Frank's school recommending that he go on to college. Walter thinks about his problems with the farm and Rolf and his own temptation to commit suicide. Had he killed himself, he would have missed the worst year of his life. But, looking at Lillian and Henry, he's glad he didn't. Attending the University of Iowa, Frank stays in a tent by the Skunk River. He keeps his dorm money in case he wants to return to Chicago, which he prefers to Iowa. He likes his classes. He "borrows" bikes each night to ride to his tent. One night, he finds a stranger, Lawrence Field, sitting in it. Lawrence is also a student and comes from a wealthy family. They decide to drive to Chicago to see a Cubs game in Lawrence's REO Flying Cloud.

1938

Lawrence gets Frank a job in the horticulture lab so that he can get a room until the snow stops. One night they drive to Little Chicago. After a drink, the boys go upstairs to the whorehouse. All the girls know Lawrence. Frank winds up with Pixie. Later, Lawrence tells Frank that the depression had driven a lot of girls to become prostitutes. Frank writes several papers for Lawrence, which keeps him from flunking out. Joe plants two different types of corn and plans to cross-pollinate them to create a hybrid. There's talk of another war in Europe, which is making prices go up. Minnie helps Joey pull the tassels off the corn. She talks about her school days with Frank. Joey wonders how much Frank thinks of Minnie. He thinks probably never.

1939

At thirty-nine, Rosanna has her sixth child, a girl named Claire. Against hospital orders, Rosanna leaves that evening while the baby is picked up by her parents. The nurses protest but Rosanna is determined to leave. Minnie is teaching Lillian and Henry. She is the big sister that Lillian wishes she had. Walter pays a lot of attention to Claire; she is his baby. Rosanna cares for Claire, but does not feel the bond she felt with Lillian and Henry. Frank and Lawrence visit Eloise and Julius. They learn that the Germans are invading Poland. Joey's hybrid crop is more profitable than Walter's. Walter gets a little loud when they discuss the virtues of hybrid crops.

1940

Professor Culhane tells Frank and a few other students that their contribution to the war effort will be to make gun powder from cornstalks. Frank and another student have been working on the project for a year without success. Henry goes with Walter to visit another farmer who has two young sons. The boys take Henry to a ravine where a dead horse is lying. The boys beat the bloated horse with sticks until the gas inside explodes.



Liquids and smelly gunk pour out. Later, Joey questions Henry about the dead horse. He cries knowing that it was Jake. Lillian starts high school. She has been told all her life that she was a beauty, but she learns that she is just ordinary. She misses Minnie. Frank has a serious girlfriend, Hildy. While eating lunch, Lawrence suddenly is overcome with a painful toothache. Lawrence dies that afternoon from a massive infection from an impacted wisdom tooth. Frank doesn't talk about it to anyone.

1941

Henry has to remind Rosanna to make a cake for Claire's birthday. She stops adoring her children. She still idolizes Frank, but he doesn't care about her or anyone. Lillian has a horrible day. Jane is angry with her for putting down the boy she likes. The other girls turn on her and she is ostracized. She passes out in class. Julius and Eloise follow closely the German advances in Europe and Russia. Julius joins the Canadian army to join the fight. Hildy is madly in love with Frank; Frank is emotionally standoffish. Eunice comes on to him and he can't get her out of his mind. She is the only woman he ever truly desired. He enlists in the army much to Rosanna's dismay. He does not even drop Hildy a note.

1942

Julius is in France or England. Frank is at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, in training. Walter is torn over the war. He prays for the soldiers and the cities being bombed, yet his income has tripled. Rosanna is livid over Frank joining the army, but Walter thinks that he is a good fit. Frank gives the kids an old box of mementos: an Oriole feather from France, an Indian-head gold dollar, a sprig of lavender, a photo of Walter as a young soldier. Frank is sent to Camp Perry for sharpshooter training. Eloise has a premonition that Julius was killed in a fire.

Analysis

Frank had always been independent and as he matures he becomes even more so. When Walter reads the letter from school recommending that Frank go on to college, he thinks of himself and his problems on the farm. Walter is a self-absorbed person who believes that the farm life is the only life although he's struggled the entire time he's been farming. Walter envies Frank's intellect and fears that he might escape the farm and have a better life than he did. Walter is self-centered even when it comes to his kids. Ostensibly, he had no pride or admiration for his son who has proven to be capable and very bright.

Ironically, the son who Walter thought could not make it as a farmer, outdoes his father. Joey shows his resourcefulness in developing a hybrid variety of corn. Joey has never been given much credit by either parent. He's been quiet but is the kind of youngster who takes everything in and thinks about it. Although Walter ridiculed his plan to develop a hybrid crop, Joey out does Walter in yield.



Unrequited love is a theme that emerges in this section. Joey has feelings for Minnie but she seems to only talk about Frank. Joey is reticent and unsure of himself. He has always lived under the shadow of his older brother. He can't bring himself to tell Minnie how he feels. He's afraid of rejection because he assumes that she prefers Frank.

The theme of survival reemerges in this section. After surviving the Great Depression and the drought, the family is impacted by World War II. Without discussing it with anyone, Frank drops out of college and enlists. He has feelings for the girlfriend of his deceased friend and wants to get away from her, but Frank is secretive and no one else knows about his feelings for this girl.

Tragedy is foreshadowed when Eloise has a premonition that Julius, who joined the Canadian military, was killed in action.

Discussion Question 1

What potential problem does Joey's feelings for Minnie present? Why is he reluctant to tell her how he feels?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the resourcefulness of both Frank and Joey – Frank at college and Joey on the farm. What makes both boys so resourceful?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Frank unwilling to talk about Lawrence's death? Why does he enlist and leave abruptly without telling anyone or saying goodbye? Who is the person he wants to escape from the most and why?

Vocabulary

imperialist, goyishe, repudiated, panzer, meandering, bivouac



1943 – 1947

Summary

1943

Frank is sent to Africa and is assigned to an elite sniper unit in the Atlas Mountains. Below land mines are being laid for Rommel's army. The panzers begin to appear over the horizon and attack American tanks, blowing many of them up. Frank and his fellow snipers fire on the panzers with armor-penetrating ammunition. Rosanna and everyone in the family know that Julius is dead. They don't know where Frank is but finally get a letter that Frank is alive, has been made a corporal, and is in charge of a unit. Frank's unit is transferred to Sicily where they do not meet any resistance. They investigate an auto accident and find the driver dead at the wheel and the German officer that he was driving, lying injured on the ground. As they approach, the officer shoots himself. He survives the wound, but Frank puts him out of his misery.

1944

Frank's unit suffers many casualties in Camino, leaving him and one other soldier, Ruben. They are in a mountainous area, which protects them from direct hits of the many bombs that are falling. In Anzio, the Germans are in the ridges encircling the beach, shelling everything that moves. Frank and his replenished unit push onto the cliffs, making hundreds of kills. In Cisterna, they go house to house routing out the Jerries and completely wipe out the German unit. The next day, they march into Rome. After gathering in Corsica, Frank's unit will be sent to the south of France. Once in France, they see no Germans but lots of Americans. Frank's unit advances inland. Three months later, they arrive at the Rhine. They cross a bridge into Germany where they do not encounter any Jerries. The Rhine is theirs and the invasion is readied.

1945

Rosanna has received few letters from Frank and doesn't know where he is. She prays that he isn't involved in the Battle of the Bulge. Eloise takes a job with the WPA in San Francisco. Lillian wants to move to San Francisco after she graduates from high school but Rosanna is against it. She fears that Eloise will introduce Lillian to the wrong kind of men – Jews, Italians, and even Negroes. Rosanna is sure that Joey will marry Minnie even though she's three plus years older than he is. In Germany, Frank and his unit stops by Berghof which was Hitler's summer house. Arthur Manning comes into the soda shop where Lillian works. It takes only two days for him to propose and Lillian to accept. Lillian packs a few things and leaves a note for Rosanna and Walter.

1946

Lillian and Arthur live in an apartment in Washington, D.C. She is four months pregnant. Arthur has worked for the OSS breaking codes during the War. Walter isn't speaking to



Lillian although Rosanna is. Arthur pays Lillian a lot of attention and is funny and entertaining. Frank stops by on his way home from Europe. He fills them in on his experiences in Europe. Some stories are tragic while others are funny. Arthur shares some of the tasks that he performed with the OSS. Arthur thinks Frank is brilliant and would like to find him a job in D.C. Rosanna drags Frank all around town to show everyone that he is home. Frank is antsy and does not talk about what his plans are. Walter softens and is no longer angry at Lillian. They plan to take the train to D.C. to see her. Minnie still has feelings for Frank, which bothers Joey. After Minnie's mother dies, she talks about moving to Cedar Rapids to get her teaching degree. Arthur finds Frank a government job in Dayton, Ohio. His job is to wade through intelligence and figure out why the German army was so good. Lillian has a son, Timmy.

1947

Lillian is pregnant with her second child. Arthur loves Timmy and plays with him. Arthur seems carefree but Lillian catches him crying. Lillian knows that he was married before. His first wife died in childbirth along with the baby. Having Timmy reminds Arthur of his loss. Arthur thinks that he has been handling it, but he's been repressing a lot of feelings and grief. Claire has to get glasses for nearsightedness. Henry rearranges his precious book collection on the shelf in his room. He wonders how to disguise the books that he stole from the library. He usually kept the stolen books under his bed. He is sure the books he stole had been just dust collectors and he has rescued them. Frank stays with Lillian and Arthur in their new house for a few days. Debbie is their new baby. Arthur wants to fix Frank up with a girl who works in the Justice Department. There is suspicion that the girl is a spy and passes information to a Russian named Gubitchev. Arthur wants Frank to date her to see what he can find out. Frank follows the girl, Judy, and manages to drop his wallet so that she picks it up. She shows up at the house that evening with his wallet.

Analysis

Religion is again a strong theme in this section. It is a tense time for the Langdon family, especially Rosanna who is plagued with worry about Frank's well-being. She gets very few letters from him and she has no idea if he's dead or alive. She turns to her religion for comfort, praying that he's not involved in the brutal Battle of the Bulge. Later when he surfaces alive and well, Rosanna undoubtedly looks to her belief in the Lord and her prayers as the source of his safe return.

Racism and hypocrisy emerge as themes in this section. As devout as Rosanna is, she doesn't stop and truly think about "all God's children." Rosanna is symbolic of the bias of white people during the mid-twentieth century that was commonly accepted even by the most devout. She doesn't want Lillian to live with Eloise in San Francisco after she graduates because Eloise will introduce Lillian to the wrong type of men – "Jews, Italians and even Negroes." She also shows her lack of sophistication and narrow view when she considers Minnie, at 26, to be an older woman to Joey, who is 23.



Arthur who is a member of the OSS, the predecessor of the CIA, is impressed with Frank's obvious intelligence. At the time, the Red scare had the government scrambling to track down spies. A great fear permeated the nation that Russia was poised to drop the atomic bomb on the U.S. Arthur recruits Frank to do some intelligence work by becoming friendly with a woman who works in the Justice Department who is suspected of passing intelligence to the Russians. Frank agrees to do the work thanks to his risk-taking mentality. Frank's venture in espionage foreshadows new possibilities for his future including danger and intrigue.

Discussion Question 1

How does Rosanna show her biases against some of God's children despite her devoutness to Jesus? How an individual can overlook his own prejudices and still feel like a good and fair person?

Discussion Question 2

What about Frank leads Arthur to ask him to spy on an employee of the Justice Department? Why is such a task potentially dangerous, and what compels Frank to take the assignment on?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Henry remain a "mystery" to Rosanna? How does he justify stealing books from the library?

Vocabulary

happenstance, promontory, harrowing, brothels, parapet, athwart, pillage, ramshackle, sustenance, placenta, ionized



1948 – 1953

Summary

1948

Frank and Judy have been dating for two months. All she knows about him is that he grew up on a farm, served in World War II, works in Ohio, comes to D.C. some weekends, and used to stay with his sister but now he stays with her. He tells her that he is getting engaged to another girl. He has plans to meet Arthur and give him his final report. Judy never talks politics except that she hates J. Edgar Hoover. Frank thinks Judy may be providing information to Gubitchev to save someone that Hoover is unfairly going after. Frank runs into Hildy in Chicago. He uses her middle name now, Andrea or Andy. Their reunion stirs old feelings. They begin seeing each other and soon they are planning their wedding.

1949

Andy and Frank move to New York where Arthur helps Frank get a job. Lillian hosts a Christmas wedding for them. Arthur has another job for Frank and Andrea. It involves a wealthy man. Arthur will get them invited to parties that the man attends. It is suspected that he is a courier for the Reds. Arthur hints that Judy is about to be arrested. Frank and Andy attend a reception at the Metropolitan Museum of Art where his target, James Upjohn and his wife, Frances, are hosts. Frank tells Arthur that Upjohn seems to be attracted to Andy and that he seems to be grooming Frank for something. Arthur tells Frank that they're watching Eloise and that maybe the other side is too. Judy has been arrested. Frank ultimately tells Arthur that Jim Upjohn is a dead end.

1950

Andy receives \$2,500 in inheritance money, which Frank uses to join an investment group that is purchasing property in New Jersey. The realtor is Ruben from Frank's sniper unit. Andrea has Janet in October and Lillian has Dean in November. Frank is plagued by worry, but cannot pinpoint exactly the source of his worries. He figures it has something to do with the war. Frank is shocked when Ruben hands him \$7,000, his share of the profits from the sale of the New Jersey property. Ruben urges Frank to invest the money – he could triple it in a year. Frank roughs up Ruben and makes him vow that if he invests and loses the money, that Ruben loses his, too. Frank agrees to invest \$6,000. At Thanksgiving, Lillian mentions Judy to Andy who has never heard of her. Lillian tells her that Judy is the woman convicted of spying for the Russians.

1951

Frank receives \$19,000 for his investment in addition to the original \$6,000. Andy gets upset watching the news. She worries that the Russians will blow them all up to bits. Frank tries to assure her that the Russians won't bomb the U.S. because they don't



have a delivery system. Andy confronts Frank about Judy. She is afraid that there will be retribution. Judy, however, does not even know Frank's real name. Besides, Judy is free again. Andy pushes him to talk about his relationship with Judy. It makes him think of Eunice and his heart starts beating faster. Frank takes a late night walk by himself. Everyone is worried about the bomb, but Arthur has assured him that the specter of mutually assured destruction would keep Stalin at bay. He has never been more afraid in his life. Claire overhears Lois, Minnie's younger sister, propose to Joey. Lois does not care that he is in love with Minnie. Joe has a hard time letting go of deeply held feelings.

1952

Minnie lives in the big house with Joe and Lois. Lois is due to deliver in February, Lillian in January, and Andy in March. Eloise and Rosa pick up Henry at school and drive home for Christmas. Rosa has grown up and Henry cannot take his eyes off her. He has to remind himself that she is his first cousin and would only be there a week. On the drive home, Eloise fills Henry in on recent events. She took the Fifth before the California Un-American Activities Committee. Henry suggests that if she has to go to Washington, she could stay with Lillian. She cannot do that because she could hurt Arthur's career. Eloise thinks that she and Rosa are safe because Julius was a war hero. Henry is interested in going to Berkley after he graduates.

1953

Walter slips out of the house for a stroll around the farm before Rosanna wakes. The trip at Easter to see the new babies had been rougher than he imagined. Joe's baby is born on Valentine's Day. Later, Joe is in his barn when Rosanna stops by. She's upset and disheveled. They find Walter by the Osage-orange hedge. Joey prefers to think that his father is sleeping one last time. Claire comes downstairs to make biscuits for Walter. Claire knows what Rosanna is trying to tell her before she says the words. But until she hears the words, she can delay that feeling like an empty house that she is bound to feel.

Analysis

Repressed fear and emotions are main themes in this last section. Frank experiences panic attacks. He struggles with a fear that he cannot completely identify. Frank doesn't seem to be worried about the bomb like most people are including Andy. But maybe her fears rub off on him more than he knows or wants to admit. Frank has always been the tough guy, the unemotional guy who can take anything. Perhaps he's more tender than even he knows. He repressed his feelings about Lawrence's death and his feelings for Eunice.

Frank's a highly intelligent individual and he suspects that his experiences in the war may have had a lasting impact. Today, it's called Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. In the 1940s there wasn't a name for it. Being with Ruben again is a reminder of the war



which could explain why Frank had Ruben pushed up against the wall making him vow that if he lost money in the new investment that Ruben would feel the loss as well.

Although on a different level, Joey also must deal with repressed emotions. Joey's story ends with his marrying Lois, the younger sister of Minnie. Joey's been in love with Minnie for years. He always held back because Minnie had feelings for Frank. Joey never could summon up the nerve to approach Minnie but Lois turned out to be a bold and aggressive young woman which was witnessed by the fact that she proposed to him. The marriage probably would not have happened if Lois hadn't been so forward.

There are loose ends at the conclusion of the story. These cliffhanger endings point to a probable sequel. Henry is attracted to his first cousin and wants to attend Berkley to be close to her. He has always been the mysterious child and he himself vows that one day the real Henry Langdon will emerge. Eloise's fate is left up in the air with the feds still investigating her for un-American activities. Were there repercussions for Frank for spying for Arthur? Claire's story is yet to emerge.

Discussion Question 1

Explore the possible reasons for Frank's bouts with anxiety. Although he seems happy with Andy, why does his heart beat faster when he thinks of Eunice - someone he does not know well and has not seen for years?

Discussion Question 2

Why are many of the people of that era afraid of the bomb? Andy is concerned that Judy might be out for retribution because of her arrest. Although Frank explains that he used a false identity with her, what could be some of the consequences from the intelligence work that Frank performed for Arthur on Judy and Jim Upjohn?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Eloise have to appear before the California Un-American Activities Committee? Why doesn't she want to stay at Lillian's house if she has to appear for a federal committee?

Vocabulary

vendetta, tyrant, assuaging, patisserie, brouhaha, prolifically, anhydrous, inchoate, memorabilia, conundrum, contiguous, etymologies, reciprocated, suffragette



Characters

Rosanna Langdon

Rosanna Vogel is a young beauty when she first meets Walter Langdon, who is immediately smitten with her. Rosanna was raised in a strict German Catholic family but she is independent and strong-willed. She doesn't believe that a loving God would condemn an innocent baby who had not been baptized to Hell. She defies her family and marries Walter in the Methodist church.

Rosanna's upbringing in Catholicism instigates religious conflicts for the rest of her life. When she has Frank, her family pressures her to have him baptized. She, of course, knows the implications – if he dies without baptism, he would be doomed to eternal damnation. Although she remains steadfast in not having him baptized, she deals with internal doubts and fears about her choice.

Rosanna's life on the farm focuses first on her children and then on the daily chores that are endless. Rosanna adores Frank but does not feel the same about her second child, Joey. Joey is weak and fragile compared to the robust Frank. Joey is also not as bright as Frank and not as good-looking. Rosanna privately thinks that Joey has inherited every unattractive feature from both sides of the family. Frank is very independent and grows away from her while very young. She fills that void when Mary Elizabeth is born. The beautiful blonde girl closely resembles Frank. When the little girl dies at the age of three from a freak accident, Rosanna is naturally thrown into deep grief tinged with shame and guilt.

With Rosanna's focus on her children and religion and Walter's focus on farming, the two grow apart over time. The family stays together, but there are undercurrents of tension that are never addressed and fundamental disagreements that are never resolved. Rosanna never fully adjusts to life on a farm. She thinks that it is a difficult life that is wrought with too many risks and dangers.

Walter Langdon

At twenty-four, Walter Langdon buys a farm and is worried whether he will be able to be successful and support his young family. He is married to Rosanna and they have a baby named Frank. Walter previously served in Europe in World War I and when he returns home, he meets Rosanna. It is love at first sight for him. She is a beautiful, independent girl and soon they become betrothed. Although Rosanna was raised as a German Catholic, they get married in a Methodist church.

Walter works hard on the farm growing oats and corn. He raises a small number of livestock and has milking cows. He is dedicated to making a go of it and stands up to criticism from his father who derides him about buying a farm when the prices are high. His father knows that Walter is struggling and invites him and his young family to stay at



his farm. However, Walter is independent and proud, so he rejects the offer; he is determined to make a go of it himself, support his own family, and not be a charity case.

Walter is proud of his son, Frank, who even at a young age shows strength, resiliency, and intelligence. Walter is quietly disappointed in his second son, Joey, who is small, weak, and tender-hearted. When Rosanna experiences severe postpartum depression, Walter does not know how to handle it and so he stays outside more. Walter is not one to think much past his concerns for the farm. At one low point, he considers suicide but thinks of his young children and decides against it.

Eloise Vogel

Eloise Vogel is Rosanna's younger sister. She comes and stays with Rosanna and Walter for a few years to help with the children. She attends college and winds up in Chicago where she becomes a writer for the *Daily Worker*, a socialist publication. She marries a Jewish man from England named Julius Silber.

Frank Langdon

Frank Langdon is the eldest of the six Langdon children. He is blond and good looking like his mother's side of the family. He is a willful and independent child who is a handful for his parents. Rosanna always felt close to Frank and favored him. Walter says that Frank is a great advertisement for eating oats because he's tall and strong. When Frank is just five he is expected to do some chores around the farm like feeding the chickens and horses.

As Frank matures he begins helping Walter around the farm and they begin to bond. Frank has a fine singing voice which his mother tells him is a gift from God. He listens respectfully to his mother but it's obvious that he does not have the same strong faith as she does. Walter muses about whether Frank should go on to high school. He needs him around the farm and the school is three miles away. Frank shows his independence by using his own money for a bike so he can go to school. He loves school and wants to make something of himself. Frank does well academically and finishes school in Chicago where he stays with Eloise.

Frank attends the University of Iowa where he meets Hildy who falls madly in love with him. But Frank is not ready to settle down. When World War II breaks out, Frank enlists in the Army and is assigned to Africa and then to Europe. He performs in a heroic manner, makes Corporal and is put in charge of a unit. After his tour of duty he returns to Washington, D.C. and stays with Lillian and Arthur for a while. Arthur gets him involved in some undercover work involving U.S. citizens who are suspected of being Russian spies.

While in Chicago, Frank runs into Hildy, who now goes by the name Andrea, or Andy. They resume their relationship and they soon are planning their marriage. The couple eventually move to New York where Frank has a job and makes money through some



investments. The couple has three children. Frank is plagued by panic attacks that he doesn't understand. Today, his condition would probably be called Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Joey Langdon

Joey is the second child of the Langdon family. He is the polar opposite of Frank. Joey is weak and timid and Rosanna privately thinks that he got the worst features of both sides of the family. Joey has a tender heart and loves animals. After Rosanna has Mary Elizabeth, she has such strong feelings for Frank and Mary Elizabeth she feels guilty that she doesn't have the same feelings for Joey, her middle child at the time.

From a young child on, Joey has loved animals. When a stray dog has puppies behind the barn, he tends to them and keeps them a secret from the rest of the family. He is heartbroken when his father finds them and shoots the mother dog and all her puppies.

Walter is aware that Joey is not a tough kid like Frank. Walter thinks that Joey needs a beating once in a while to toughen him up, but Joey's such a good boy he doesn't do anything that deserves a beating. Joey continues to love animals as he matures. He has a pet ewe that he enters into a 4-H competition.

Joey doesn't have the educational aspirations that his brother, Frank, has. He is happy to hold to family tradition and become a farmer. Joey is smarter than anyone gives him credit for. He plants two types of corn and creates a robust hybrid that yields more crop than his father's corn which causes Walter to have some hurt pride.

Joey has always had a crush on Minnie Frederick even though she is three years older than he is. Joey doesn't have enough confidence to approach her - especially because she's obsessed with Frank. Eventually, Minnie's younger sister, Lois, figures Joey is a good catch even if he is in love with Minnie and proposes to him. Joey figuring he has no chance with Minnie, so he marries Lois.

Mary Elizabeth Langdon

Mary Elizabeth is the third child of Walter and Rosanna Langdon. She, like Frank, is blonde and beautiful. She quickly becomes Rosanna's favorite child. At three years of age, she dies from a freak accident. The family is devastated by her death, especially Rosanna.

Lillian Langdon

Lillian is the Langdon's fourth child. She is beautiful like Frank and is also a loving and charming child. On her second day of school, Lillian is placed in a higher reading group because she's so advanced.



Henry Langdon

Henry is the second youngest child of Rosanna and Walter Langdon. He is a pretty boy who is a mystery to his mother. He seems unaware of his physical attributes and only wants to read. He is closer to Lillian than he is to his mother.

Julius Silber

Julius Silber is a Jewish man from England who marries Eloise Vogel. They live in Chicago and both are writers for the Daily Worker, a social activist publication. Julius looks at the world as unfair and wants to make it more just. He joins the Canadian military during World War II and is killed in a firefight there.

Lawrence Field

Lawrence Field is a college friend of Frank's. He comes from a wealthy family and has a REO Flying Cloud that he and Frank take on trips to Chicago. Lawrence is suddenly struck one day with a painful toothache. He dies that afternoon from a massive infection from an impacted tooth.

Andy

Hildegary Bergstrom, Hildy, was Frank's girlfriend in college. Hildy was madly in love with Frank but Frank wasn't ready for a serious relationship yet. They ran into each other later in Chicago. By then, Hildy had changed her name to the more modern Andrea and was known as Andy. They pick up their romance where it left off and eventually marry and have a daughter and two sons.

Arthur Manning

Lillian elopes with Arthur who works for the OSS. They settle in Washington D.C. where he works and have four children. Arthur gets Frank involved in some intelligence operations.

Eunice

Eunice is Lawrence Field's girlfriend. Frank has an attraction for Eunice and has an affair with her after Lawrence dies. Frank can never get her out of his mind even after many years have passed.



Minnie Frederick

Minnie Frederick was a schoolmate of Frank's. She was pretty and a bit older than Frank and looked out for him, holding his hand and defending him against the bullies. Joey had feelings for Minnie but it seemed that she was obsessed with Frank. Even though Joey loved Minnie he married her younger sister, Lois.

Lois Frederick

Lois Frederick is the younger sister of Minnie. Lois is aware that Joey has feelings for Minnie but Lois is a bold aggressive girl and proposes to Joey. They eventually marry and live in the family house with Minnie.

Claire Langdon

Claire Langdon is the youngest child of Rosanna and Walter Langdon. Rosanna loves Claire but she never feels the bond she felt with Lillian and Henry. Claire is definitely Walter's baby. He always pays her a lot of attention, perhaps making up for the attention she doesn't get from Rosanna.

Judy

Arthur wants Frank to date a girl named Judy who works in the Justice Department. She is suspected of being a spy. Judy hates J. Edgar Hoover. Frank thinks she may be passing information off to the Russians. Judy is eventually arrested by the FBI for being a Russian spy. She is out of prison a few years later. Andy doesn't know much about Judy and Frank's relationship with her but she fears Judy will be out for retribution. Frank's not worried because Judy never knew his real identity.

James Upjohn

James Upjohn was a wealthy man who was suspected of being a Russian spy. Frank meets James and his wife, Frances, when they host a posh charity party. After Frank gets to know James, he tells Arthur that James is a "dead end" – he's not a spy. The only problem he has with James is that he seems to be attracted to Andy. Frank and James become good friends.



Symbols and Symbolism

Osage-Orange Hedge

A robust Osage-orange hedge grew behind the barn on the Langdon farm. It was as strong as a fence and kept the animals contained without having to build a fence with barbed wire. The hedge was always a part of the farm and something Walter wanted to chop down because of its thorns, but it did the job – kept the animals in.

Farmall Tractor

Walter noticed that a neighbor bought a small Farmall tractor. It had been loaned to another farmer, Roland, to try out for a week. Walter was amazed at how fast the neighbor was able to plow his fields compared to the horse and plow that he used. Walter was impressed with the tractor. He had a larger farm than Roland yet Roland planted much more corn. Walter probably felt a little “tractor” envy.

REO Flying Cloud

Frank’s wealthy college friend, Lawrence Field, had a REO Flying Cloud automobile. The two young men often drove to Chicago from Ames in the Flying Cloud. Frank had been literally homeless when he first met Lawrence. Driving around with the rich kid in his REO Flying Cloud was a thrill for Frank and made him feel young and carefree.

Hybrid Corn

Joey proved to be resourceful when, at age 16, he figured out how to plant two different types of corn in alternating rows so that they would cross-pollinate to create hybrid seeds. His venture was very successful and made more money than his father did growing corn from one variety of corn. Developing the hybrid was Joey’s moment to shine. He’d outdone his father who never really thought Joey would amount to much.

Corncob Gunpowder

As a senior at the University of Iowa, Frank had a part-time job in the Chemistry Department trying to develop gunpowder from corncobs. It was the school’s contribution to the war effort. Although Frank enjoyed the experiment, it wasn’t Frank’s idea of contributing to the war. Frank’s reputation as a big tough guy propelled him to join the military to play a real role in the war.



Jerries

The German soldiers during World War II were referred to as “Jerries.” The name stems from the shape of the German helmets. The Jerries represented the Germans and Nazism. To Frank they were the enemy and the reason he was away from home and risking his life. After he found out that Jerries were snipers, he decided to take his sergeant up on a chance to train as a sniper. As always, Frank stands out and is singled out by his sergeant for special duty.

Panzers

Frank’s first assignment as a member of an elite sharpshooter unit was in Africa where their mission was to attack the Rommel forces and the German tanks that were called “panzers.” Frank had been trained to destroy the panzers. fired at them with armor-penetrating bullets. He thought they were ugly and frightening and watched as they rolled over land-mines without sustaining damage. The image of these fearsome tanks may have played the Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome that he suffered after returning home.

Dead White Horse

Two farm boys took Henry to a ravine where a dead white horse laid. The boys beat the horse’s bloated stomach until the trapped gas exploded and spewed horrible smelling liquid and gunk. Later, Henry tells Joey about the incident. Henry describes the incident and the horse to Joey who is caught by surprise and begins to sob. It was his old horse, Jake. The two brothers cried together.

Kaufering

Frank and his sharpshooter unit encountered a slave camp in Germany called Kaufering where the men and boys appear barely alive. Frank is haunted by the images. He can’t decide if it was more horrifying seeing the corpses of prisoners or the ones who were half dead. The experience undoubtedly contributed to his trauma and panic attack after he returned from the war.

The Daily Worker

While they lived in Chicago, Eloise and Julius were writers for the Daily Worker which was a publication that supported a socialist agenda. When Frank is doing undercover work for the government, he learns that James Upjohn was contributing to The Daily Worker not because he agreed with their dogma; he just didn’t know how to stop. It was all innocent but his contributions had drawn attention from U.S. intelligence.

Billy Sunday Revival

Rosanna is naturally grief-stricken over the death of her beloved Mary Elizabeth. After months of mourning, Rosanna is desperate for some peace. She and the family travel to Mason City to attend the Billy Sunday Revival. On the second day of the revival, Rosanna seeks help from the Lord by answering Billy Sunday's request for people to come forward and pray. As she kneels and prays, Rosanna feels Mary Elizabeth releasing her and flying away like an angel.



Settings

The Langdon Farm

The Langdon Farm is the scene of the majority of the story. It is important because it's the family farm. It is located in rural Iowa and the closest town is a small community called Denby. When Walter is a young man with a wife and just one baby, he struggles to make it work. He could move to his father's farm but he is determined to make it work. Farming is vitally important to the Langdon family. Walter thinks that his oldest son, who is strong and robust, will follow in his footsteps. Frank has other ideas – he plans to get a good education and get away from the farm. Walter doesn't think that Joey, his second son who is weak and timid, will make a good farmer. Ironically, it is Joey who wants to continue the family tradition in farming.

Chicago

Eloise moves to Chicago where she meets Julius Silber who becomes her husband. Eloise and Julius are both writers at the Daily Worker and are involved in a socialist activist movement. Frank stays with Eloise in Chicago to finish high school.

When Frank is at Iowa State, he becomes friendly with Lawrence Field, a rich kid with a fancy new car. Frank and Lawrence make frequent trips to Chicago to attend Cubs games and do the town.

When Frank joins the army after World War II breaks out, he leaves abruptly not even saying goodbye to his college girlfriend, Hildy. Years later when Frank is back in Chicago, he runs into Hildy who now goes by the name of Andrea or Andy. Frank and Andy renew their relationship and are soon planning their wedding.

Ames, Iowa

Frank decides to attend the University of Iowa at Ames. To save on dormitory expenses, he stays in a tent near a river when the weather is mild. When winter comes, he is forced to stay in a boarding house. Frank meets two important people in Ames. He becomes fast friends with a wealthy student named Lawrence Field. Frank and Lawrence take many trips to Chicago in Lawrence's fancy new car. Frank meets Hildy at Ames who becomes his girlfriend while he's in Ames.

When World War II breaks out, Frank becomes involved in a project in the university's science department to help devise a way to make ammunition out of cornstalks for the war effort. Frank has always been the tough guy and experimenting with cornstalks doesn't do it for him. He abruptly leaves school and joins the Army to make what he considers a real contribution.

Africa

Frank is trained as a sharpshooter and is assigned to an elite sniper unit that is sent to the Atlas Mountain area of Africa where they are tasked with ambushing Rommel's army which includes a brigade of German tanks known as panzers. Frank is amazed at the power and size of the German tanks. His mission is to take them out despite their intimidating presence. He is able to kill off an entire German mortar team by himself. For his outstanding valor and performance in battle, Frank is promoted to Corporal.

San Francisco

After Julius is killed in a firefight in Europe during World War II, Eloise gets a job with the WPA in San Francisco. Lillian wants to move to San Francisco after she graduates from high school but Rosanna is against it. Rosanna doesn't like the idea of Lillian traveling all that way by herself. She also fears that Eloise won't see to it that she meets the right kind of boys. Rosanna is certain that Eloise is socializing with Jews, Italians and even Negroes. Lillian is persuaded not to visit her aunt and ops to travel to Washington, D.C. where she meets her future husband.



Themes and Motifs

Religion

Religion is a major theme in, "Some Luck" by Jane Smiley especially as it relates to one of the main characters, Rosanna Langdon. Rosanna was raised in a German Catholic family and attended a private Catholic school when she first meets Walter who was not Catholic. Rosanna is headstrong, however, and wants to marry Walter anyway and get away from her family and her Catholic upbringing. She has been taught that a child who has been baptized but hasn't had his First Communion will not be damned to Hell if he dies. Instead, the child will go to Limbo, but Rosanna believes that the child will go on to heaven. How could God allow a bad thing to happen to an innocent baby? She defies her family and marries Walter in a Methodist church.

As Rosanna matures, however, religion comes back in many forms to haunt and bewilder her. After having Frank, her family encourages her to get him baptized, but she is stubborn. The Methodists speak of a person being saved presumably when they reach the age of understanding. Her mother is concerned because people are dying from cholera and she does not want her grandson to be damned to Hell. Although Rosanna appears resolved on the outside, she has doubts that she is doing the right thing by her children by not having them baptized. She has been reared in the Catholic religion all her life and it's not the easy to just turn completely away from it.

Rosanna faces the tragedy of losing a child and later severe postpartum depression. She turns to prayer to see her through. When Henry, her youngest child, seems to turn away from her at a young age, she feels that his behavior is punishment from God for favoring one child over the other. Rosanna believes that Jesus loves all children the same and that she is not living up to his standards.

Survival

Walter takes on the never-ending responsibilities of a farm when he is just twenty-four years old. It is a challenge that at times he is not sure he is up for, yet he perseveres because he really has no choice. He has his dream and reputation to maintain and, more importantly, he has to provide for his young family. The 1920s and 1930s are probably the most difficult times to have a farm. The twenties lead up to the most devastating financial collapse in the history of mankind known as the Great Depression.

Farmers are some of the hardest hit by the Great Depression. Prices spiral down along with demand that hits an all time low. It is also the era of the Great Dust Bowl of the southwest plains. The dust storms and drought are so devastating that they impact farms as far away as the Dakotas and Iowa. Those horrid conditions are another barrier that stand in the way of his success.



At times Walter is barely able to hold on. In fact, there is an incident where he falls into a well and has to decide whether to hold on or to let go and end his life, misery, and worries. He clings to life on the strength of his elbows that catches each side of the well. He is alone and looks down far below to the ten feet of water that can solve all his problems. He thinks of all his money problems and hard work that often gets him nowhere. He is tempted to take the “easy” way out but he thinks of his young children and knows that he has to survive for them.

Independence

Rosanna Vogel Langdon and Walter Langdon are different in many ways but there is one important, overarching way in which they are the same. They are both very independent and that spirit of free-thinking and even rebellion carries over to their children. Rosanna was raised in a strict German Catholic family. However, as she matured, she began to question her religion and have doubts about some of the tenets. For example, she could not accept the contention that God would condemn a baby to Hell who had not been baptized. When she and Walter became involved, she defied the family tradition and married him in the Methodist church which was probably quite a blow to her parents. Eloise, Rosanna’s younger sister, joined the Communist Party which shocked everyone.

For his part, Walter’s independent streak was obvious when he bought a farm as a young husband and father and could barely keep his head above water. As bad as times were, Walter refused any help from his father who offered Frank the opportunity for his family to live at his farm. Walter was determined to make it on his own. Despite the hardships that faced Walter during the drought and Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s, he persevered without outside help.

Their first-born Frank was independent from the time he was a toddler. He defied the strict rules that his father set out for him time and time again. Even beatings with a strap could not convince him to obey his parents. That independence was demonstrated again and again throughout the story. He stayed in a tent by the river at college to save money. He quit college without saying a word to anyone to join the army. He was selected for an elite sharpshooter unit and after being dispatched to Africa and was made the leader of the unit. Joey, who seemed meek and mild, matured into a young man who thought outside the box and developed a hybrid corn that provided greater yield than his father’s corn crop. Henry wasn’t going to be pressured into farming; his love of reading and literature led him to be convinced that the “real” Henry Langdon would someday emerge. Lillian eloped with a man she’d only known a short time.

The independence like that demonstrated by the Langdon family members opens up an individual to exciting change and all kinds of possibilities.



Styles

Point of View

“Some Luck” by Jane Smiley is written from the third-person and limited, omniscient perspective. Using this device, the author writes from the point of view of the main characters and provides insight into the main characters and what drives them. The reader is able to know the thoughts, motivations, intentions, and private feelings of the main characters. The reader is privy to Walter’s fears and doubts about being able to make the farm successful and to care for his wife and children.

Readers are also shown Rosanna’s conflicts with religion and her guilt and shame about favoring one child over the other rise to the forefront. She struggles between what she was taught as a Catholic, the religion she was born and raised in, and the Protestant religion that preach that salvation is only possible when a person is saved. She is pressured by family members to get her children baptized, but she is not sure that doing so will save them.

Frank is the eldest child in the Langdon family. The reader learns that he is an independent thinker who is very willful and resourceful in getting his way. Even though Frank takes a lot of whippings from his father for not obeying him, Frank remains undaunted and his determination is not dampened.

The author, Jane Smiley, is a Pulitzer Prize winning author in both the fiction and non-fiction realms. She is well-known for her complex and rich characterizations.

Language and Meaning

“Some Luck” by Jane Smiley takes place in rural Iowa during a period spanning 1920 through 1953, therefore, there are many terms and references to farm life. Since the Langdon family has a farm, there are many references to the farming lifestyle. They grow oat and corn and raise milking cows, chickens and laying hens. There are references to Farmhall and John Deere tractors as well as to plow horses. Rosanna collects eggs from the laying hens and sells them and homemade butter to a store in the nearby town. Joey is enterprising and decides to cross-pollinate two varieties of corn by planting their seeds in alternating rows. He develops a profitable hybrid and has a high yield than his father’s traditional corn crop. The young children raise ewes that they take to 4H competitions.

Eloise marries Julius who is a Jewish man from England. He is not readily accepted into the conservative family and is referred to at various times as a “communist” and a “Red Jew” due to his liberal leanings. He is involved in a socialist movement that finds the world unfair and wants to make it fairer. Both Eloise and Julius write for the Daily Worker and are both turning into “Trotskyites.” Julius always felt that it was Trotsky’s



greatest mistake to leave Stalin in the Kremlin. These pejorative terms were commonly used during the Red Scare in the era that this book spans.

Julius joins the Canadian military to join the fight in Europe where he is killed in a firefight. Ironically, Walter, one of Julius' critics, switches from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party which is more progressive and more in line with Julius' political views.

There are some military references during Frank's tour of duty in World War II. Frank joins the army to fight the jerries and is trained as a sharpshooter for an elite sniper unit that is sent to Africa to fight Rommel and his army that is propelled by the light weight Panzer tanks. Land mines are buried in the desert in advance of Rommel's advance.

Structure

"Some Luck" by Jane Smiley is divided into chapters that are simply headed by years that span 1920 through 1953. The story begins in 1920 when Walter and Rosanna have just started out on their own. Walter has just purchased a farm that he really can't afford and Rosanna has one child, Frank, whom she adores.

The struggles of the young family are chronicled in the 1920s by drought and the Great Depression. These two events hit farmers the hardest. Walter has to cope with the downward spiral of the oat and corn market. Rosanna gives birth to Joey and then Mary Elizabeth. Rosanna adores her daughter and is devastated and never the same when the little three-year-old child dies from a freak accident.

The story follows the maturation of the Langdon children led by Frank who is an independent spirit and dreams of getting away from the farm. He has no intention of farming after seeing the hardships that his father has to endure. Joey becomes a farmer and is smarter than his father. Lillian becomes a wife and mother while Henry becomes a literary scholar. Young Claire is her father's baby.

There is a family tree that precedes the start of the book that shows the lineage of the Vogel, Rosanna's family, and the Langdons. "About the Author" at the end of the book provides biographical information about the author and a listing of other books written by her.



Quotes

Cousin Josie's boy got up one morning and was dead of cholera by the time he went to bed that night.

-- Eloise (Chapter 1921 paragraph 8)

Importance: Eloise is conveying her mother's fears that if Rosanna doesn't have her son baptized as required in the Catholic Church, that he may be condemned to hell if he dies.

He [Frank] felt that a great wind was blowing inside of him, and that it would blow him right out of the bed and back down the stairs if she took him up there and laid him down. He hid as best he could and he also made himself a little rigid – harder to pick up and easier to protest that way.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1924 paragraph 17)

Importance: Frank feels a compelling spirit within himself from the time he is a toddler. This quote captures the independent and rebellious spirit that he has possessed since childhood and carried on into adulthood.

What was it now, five and a half months since that day, the crashing, thundering day when Mary Elizabeth, such a good child had passed out of this world for no reason at all?

-- Narrator (Chapter 1926 paragraph 3)

Importance: The death of Mary Elizabeth haunts Rosanna. Her grief and guilt compel her to take the boys to a revival to seek peace and some forgiveness.

But he [Walter] knew anyway that that tractor was going to buzz around his head like a pesky fly, and it did, all night long, in and out of all sorts of dreams that otherwise had nothing in common with one another.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1928 paragraph 64)

Importance: Walter is intrigued by his neighbor's tractor. He plows his fields the old fashioned way with horse and plow. He knows how much easier and faster plowing would be with a tractor but it's expensive. He is not sold on it, but he is definitely interested.

If you'd ask Walter how many things about the now mercifully passed year of 1930 he'd found shocking, he would have said that nothing shocked him, but that was not true and he knew it.... For example, he had been shocked when his corn yield turned out to be thirty-five bushels an acre – the crop had looked so bad that he had expected it to be lower, more like thirty or less.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1931 paragraph 2)



Importance: This quote describes the tough year that Frank and all the other crop farmers have after suffering from the devastating droughts that plagued mid-America.

Right after the state fair – all the way to Thanksgiving, maybe – Frank had hardly thought about that girl, Libby Holman. The whole episode just seemed like a little hard bit of a thing that was in your show or something.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1935 paragraph 5)

Importance: This metaphor describes that the memory of the first girl Frank had a sexual encounter with was forgettable, but also annoying.

The matter was college – should Frankie go and where. Walter was suspicious of college, because it was not something any of the Langdons had ever done.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1937 paragraph 1)

Importance: Walter is conflicted when he receives the high school recommendation that Frank should attend college. Walter views life narrowly through the lens of a farmer. It is the only life he ever knew or would ever choose. “Going to college” is something completely alien to him.

At one point, Julius suggested that they keep their eye on the Canadians – whatever the Party decided to do up there, they would do that, too. After Trotsky was killed, Julius declared that that was it, he’d had enough, he would never, never raise a finger to help Stalin, the revolution had veered so far off the tracks that world communism was unsavable.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1941 paragraph 53)

Importance: Julius initially convinces Eloise to join the Communist Party, but later becomes disillusioned with Stalin and feels that the cause he believed in has been hijacked.

In Lyons, he wrote about some Roman ruins. His letters were masterpieces of saying nothing. That he was alive was her business, what he was doing was not her business. She didn’t even know if he was involved in what they called the Battle of the Bulge. She hoped he wasn’t because the Battle of the Bulge was very terrible and apparently, when the Germans found Americans or other Allies, they just shot them, didn’t even take them prisoner.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1945 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote captures the fears and worries of a mother whose son is fighting in World War II. Communication is limited at time, which leaves the beleaguered mother to imagine the worst.

I think if there’s someone Hoover is after, then she thinks that person is by definition innocent, so whatever she’s giving Gubitchev is somehow going to save that person. I think she thinks Hoover has crossed some line.

-- Frank (Chapter 1948 paragraph 37)



Importance: Arthur arranges Frank to spy on Judy a Justice Department employee who was suspected of handing intelligence over to the Russians. This quote describes the time period when people feared the Reds or the Communists and everyone pointed fingers at everyone else.

There was a ghost in him that would someday emerge from those books that he could not yet read, and that, he knew, would be the real Henry Langdon.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1951 paragraph 5)

Importance: Rosanna always refers to Henry as her mystery child. This passage confirms that even Henry knows that he is a mysterious fellow and that he believes that someday he will push through and cast that mystery aside.

From here, he could see the last thing his father had looked at – the long stretch of plowed land to the east, the gently curving, flat horizon, and just the tops of the Grahams' old windbreak...He had seen birds. Joe hoped – at the moment, there were a couple of red-tailed hawks floating on a draft.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1953 paragraph 8)

Importance: Joe stands by his father's dead body and tries to figure out the last thing that his father saw as a way of sharing that lost moment with him.