

# **Stern Men Study Guide**

## **Stern Men by Elizabeth Gilbert**

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# Plot Summary

*Stern Men* by Elizabeth Gilbert follows the life of Ruth Thomas, an intelligent and sarcastic young woman who refuses to leave the dreary and difficult life of a lobster fishing island and against all odds, becomes the savior of a doomed industry and culture.

Born in May of 1958, Ruth Thomas is beautiful but cantankerous. Her mother, an outsider, leaves Fort Niles when Ruth is four. Ruth is raised by her neighbor, the beautiful widow Rhonda Pommeroy, mother to seven rambunctious boys. Ruth's father is a greedy lobsterman who speaks little and is easily annoyed. Ruth's mother sends her to Delaware to an elite girl's school, which Ruth hates and whose influence she does her best to overcome after graduation. There is no work for her when she comes home, not even as sternman for her father. With nothing to do, she and old Senator Simon Addams, a family friend, watch hapless Webster Pommeroy search for legendary elephant tusks in the mudflats. Simon wants to found a natural history museum but cannot obtain housing for it.

When against all odds, they find a tusk and show it to tycoon Lanford Ellis, who has always steered and financed Ruth's life and thus earned her wrath, he pays her to visit her mother in Concord, NH. It is the worst week of her life and is followed much more nothing to do that stretches for months until Ruth accompanies Rhonda to Courne Haven to style hair for a gala wedding. Meeting Lanford there, she asks to use his abandoned general store for the Museum and is given the key. She also snoops through Pastor Toby Wishnell's Victorian mansion looking for his nephew Owney in whom she is interested, is caught, and sternly lectured. Ruth makes up for it by having sex with Owney. For the next few months, she lies low while Lanford expects her to come to dinner as promised.

Ruth and Owney marry and she conceives the need for a lobstermen's cooperative. She builds one in stages, making it financially beneficial to the lobstermen but also psychologically acceptable to join. She then approaches Lanford to ask for land on which to build a home. As they talk and as she seethes about how his family has used hers for generations, Ruth demands that he cede to her grand Ellis House itself and vacate the premises. Lanford agrees and surprises Ruth by detailing how and why he has watched over her, hoping and believing that her stubborn character would lead to the salvation of the islands.



# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands, located 20 miles off the coast of Maine, are alike in geology, resources, buildings, weather, and people. Inter-marriage among the Scots-Irish produces a distinctive population, with Courne Haven with some Swedish traits being introduced by immigrants working in Dr. Jules Ellis' granite quarries on Courne Haven, but no contribution from the Italians working on Fort Niles. When the granite industry folds, those who do not flee turn to lobster fishing. The men of the islands are fierce competitors, going to war in 1902-13. Only Ebbett Thomas stays above the fray, hiding his boat and gear to be ready to fish when peace returns. Ebbett has two sons, Stanley and Len. If he had lived, Ebbett would have liked granddaughter Ruth.

## Prologue Analysis

The rather dry Prologue profiles Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands, on which the novel is primarily set. Elizabeth Gilbert characterizes the twin clumps of granite facing one another twenty miles off the coast of Maine as "two old bastards in a staring contest" (pg. 1), separated by shallow, mile-wide, and fast-moving Worthy Channel. She briefly summarizes how alike they are in every way and sketches their history from the time of the Penobscot Indians, who use them only for temporary fishing. She tells the tragic saga of two Dutch brothers who settle in 1702 but within a year meet tragedy. Only with the coming of the Scots-Irish in the late 1750s does permanent settlement begin. Inter-marriage produces a population that is distinctively short, muscular, and sturdy, with pale skin, dark eyebrows, and small chins. This allows the author to skip detailed physical descriptions of her characters. The settlers are Presbyterians and Congregationalists, political conservatives, and all farm or fish until late in 19th century, Dr. Jules Ellis establishes the Ellis Granite Company, utilizing immigrant labor. Workers on Fort Niles are primarily Italian and inter-marriage with the locals is forbidden. Courne Haven attracts Swedes and some blond babies are born.

All of these factors are significant later in the novel. The Dutchmen give the islands biblical names, Bethel and Canaan, and one brother soon slays the other, like Cain and Abel in Genesis. Gilbert states that the islands are so similar that "their creator must have been either a great simpleton or a great comic" (pg. 1.) Religion does not fare well in the novel. When protagonist Ruth is later reminded that she is named for a great heroine of the Bible, she is unaware and uninterested, struggling not to pronounce herself an atheist. The social discrimination against Italians plays a role commensurate with the bitterness with which the summary of the laboring populations is introduced.

When concrete replaces granite in the building trades the populations shrink back to their original sizes and lobster fishing comes to predominate. Gilbert stresses that lobsters meander wherever they wish and lobster fishing is highly competitive. She



details the first lobster war, which destroys the economy of both islands in 1902-14, and creates lingering hatred. Later lobster wars are depicted in the body of the novel, for which the Prologue sets the scene. Gilbert notes the irony of the fact that in 1902 lobsters are far from being considered a delicacy. They are junk fish, but Valentine R. Addams of Fort Niles twice tries to get the International Fisheries Conference in Boston to act against unfair and illegal practices on Courne Haven as the industry tries to get on its feet. He is murdered for his efforts and the pattern of retaliation and counter retaliation is predictable.

Sordid details of the conflicts and hardships are left for the body of the novel. The key theme is that every family on both islands is left impoverished and filled with hatred. In 1904 Addams' widow bears twins, foul-mannered Angus and listless Simon and does her best to keep animosity high. The twins as ancient men become colorful, major characters. The only fisherman on either island who prospers is intuitive, hard-working Ebbett Thomas, who wins the admiration of Dr. Jules Ellis, whose family assumes the role of patron of the Thomas clan. Ebbett marries and has two sons, Stanley and Len, who, grown up become significant characters in the island. Gilbert skips a generation, however, to opine that Stanley's daughter, Ruth, born in 1958, would have caught Ebbett's curiosity.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Ruth is born during a week of storms. The neighbor women doubt that her mother Mary will live. Senator Simon Adams delivers healing chicken stock. He is terrified of the sea while his twin, Angus, is a most aggressive lobsterman. Pretty Ruth's first word is No. She likes eavesdropping on adults, which is easy in the chaos created by the seven sons of Ira and Rhonda Pommeroy, who live next door. When her parents go away for a short time in her ninth summer, Ruth stays with this family and she and Rhonda become like mother and daughter. Ruth is sorry when her father returns alone and claims her while Ira drowns. Angus finds the body and deposits it on the dock where the Pommeroy boys are playing. They race home, hysterical, and overwhelm their mother. Simon builds a coffin but his phobia keeps him from the funeral, which is delayed until the New Hope brings the hated Pastor Toby Wishnell to officiate. During the service, Ruth observes a lone figure, looking out to sea, who later rows Toby back to the New Hope.

Simon calls on the Pommeroys, bringing the boys a book and Rhonda rum. She has quit drinking. Simon tries to interest the boys in Capt. James Cook's voyages around the world, assuming that they will be sailors, and warns Rhonda that the local men will offer to buy her husband's boat and gear. Although she will need the cash, he advises against selling the boys' future. To help Rhonda, Simon asks for a haircut and the other islanders follow suit and offer suggestions. Watching Angus and Stan play cards, Ruth breaks into tears at a tasteless joke about a man who drowns while drunk.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Dense Chapter 1 establishes that Ruth Thomas is born in May of 1958 in a delivery that the neighbor women who sit with her doubt that Mary Thomas will survive. Not being from Fort Niles Island, Mary is, without evidence, considered weak and pampered. By the time Ruth is nine, Mary and husband Stan go to the mainland for a short time, leaving Ruth with next door neighbors, the Pommeroys. Ruth, described as a beautiful baby who grows into a very pretty girl, bonds more with Rhonda Pommeroy, mother of seven boys, than with Mary. She is sorry to leave the home when Stan returns and claims her. Ruth is described as willful and clever in hiding so she can overhear adult conversations. She roughhouses with the Pommeroy boys, whose names are given once and then turned into a litany that trails off after the first few. This becomes a motif when talking about the wild and mentally slow bunch.

Chapter 1 also introduces the elderly Addams twins, offspring of them man whose martyrdom brings about the first lobster war. Eccentric Senator Simon Addams is a kindly man, who proves himself a friend of the Thomas and Pommeroy families. He brings soup to give Mary the strength to deliver her baby. He is considered an authority



on many things in the community, but is pathologically unable to go near the sea. As a young adult, Ruth will attach herself to Simon. By contrast, Angus Addams is Fort Niles' most aggressive lobsterman and a curmudgeon. He is Stan Thomas' best friend and together they are known as Greedy Number One and Greedy Number Two by the rest of the lobstermen. All of the characters except Ruth are heavy drinkers.

Beautiful, colorful Rhonda is lovingly depicted, a woman who loves her husband and wishes one of her continual string of pregnancies will produce a daughter. Ruth becomes a surrogate, particularly after Ira Pommeroy drowns while fishing, drunk. Gilbert observes that few lobstermen can swim and, given the heavy gear they wear, this probably results in a swifter, more merciful death than would come by struggling. Rhonda has long, black hair, which she sweeps into beautiful, intricate mounds. Ruth, who has short hair, uses a towel to imitate Rhonda while daily pretending to give birth to rocks that represent her and Robin Pommeroy's offspring. Their charming, perceptive play contrasts sharply with the image of drowning, which is brought home when Ira's bloated, eyeless corpse is dumped ashore three days after his death. The boys are traumatized.

The drowning serves to introduce two characters who become crucial later in the novel: the young Pastor Toby Wishnell and his nephew, Owney, Ruth's future husband. Toby is the first of his famed family not to fish and the men of Fort Niles are offended that, having the genes and intuition to be a great lobsterman, he throws it away to be a clergyman. Legends grow up on Fort Niles about the fishing prowess of the Wishnells of rival Courne Haven. They are said to have a supernatural ability to find lobsters, which might mean a special arrangement with God and with the very species that they catch. Young Wishnells are said to be born resembling lobsters, but the traces are lost in the first molting. The Fort Niles residents also resent Toby's Swedish complexion and hair color for, recall, Fort Niles islanders do not mix with the Italians who perform manual labor in their quarries. They hate Toby irrationally and make as little use as possible of his spiritual services. The peculiarities of sailing an island circuit as a minister are described in some detail. Later, Toby's predecessors are described as succeeding through less abrasive personalities. At any rate, Toby performs an admirable funeral, described in minute detail. His homily, told in fragments, has a literate, nautical ring that goes over the mourners' heads. He admonishes them not to question God's decrees and to help raise the orphaned boys as Christians, lest a millstone be hung around their necks (Mt. 18). Tears are few. Ruth, who initially sheds a few, is preoccupied by watching a young man, blond like Toby, who stands aloof from the mourners, looking out to sea, and rows the pastor back to his boat. The boy is Owney who will later be shown yearning for the sea, which his uncle denies him. His posture in this fleeting scene already suggests this.

The scene next shifts to the Pommeroy home after the funeral, where Simon brings the Pommeroy boys a magnificent book about Capt. James Cook's three voyages around the world. Simon is much taken by the word circumnavigator. He assumes that the orphans will follow their father to sea, but the likelihood is low. Simon warns that the men of the island will offer to buy Ira's boat and equipment and share his fishing territory, while promising to return these to the boys when they grow up. They will, of



course, offer fire sale prices, but Rhonda is destitute. His suggestion that they might otherwise join the army comes true for two of them later and another becomes a farmer, for which he already shows an inclination. The Cook book (which none of the boys can read) and Simon's odd dog, who daily chases boats out to sea as though they were cars, offer interesting details but do not advance the plot. The novel, in general, is peppered with such charming material. Ruth is upset, learning that her father and Angus are known as Greedy Number One and Greedy Number Two by their rivals and stand the best chance of profiting from the tragedy. Rhonda is shown giving haircuts to the island men, suggesting how she will survive as a widow. She knows no one on the mainland to whom to turn.

The chapter concludes with Ruth sitting with the two Greedies as they play cribbage. She is offended by their tasteless jokes. Gilbert often relates people telling jokes, rarely quoting them verbatim but suggesting their outlines and letting the reader imagine the details. The two friends will regularly throughout the novel call one another terrible for their humor and behavior, usually while drinking heavily. Note that Rhonda, whose drunken antics are described early in the chapter, swears off alcohol after Ira's death.





## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

Ruth is sent, unwillingly, to a girls' boarding school in Delaware rather than to Rockland, where most island children attend high school. Mary, who lives in Concord, NH, wants Ruth to broaden her horizons, but Ruth does no more than necessary and returns home every summer, to where she feels, despite its discomforts and boredom, that she belongs. She works as a sternman for her father, each getting on each other's nerves. Islanders shun her because of her education. She graduates in 1976 with no plans for college and finds that all of the lobstermen have hired sternmen. Ruth grimly looks forward to hanging around with Rhonda and Simon, but writes Mary about the relief of being able to breath again, being home.

At age 73, Simon sets out to search the mud flats at Potter Beach for the legendary tusks of a circus elephant that perishes in 1838 with the sinking of the *Clarice Monroe*. It will serve as the cornerstone of his long-planned Fort Niles Museum of Natural History. He hires Webster, now 23, to explore the mudflats. Since seeing his father's corpse, Webster has suffered arrested development and has proved too shy and inept to help Simon with the Museum until they discover that he is good sifting through mud up to pull out treasures. Ruth joins Simon, watching Webster work fearlessly, both fearing that he will disappear.

As they watch, they rehash topic that they have discussed since Ruth's childhood. Simon is adamant against Ruth working on a lobster boat. It is a dangerous, dead-end occupation, for soon lobsters will be fished out. Simon tells stories about shipwrecks around the world, emphasizing the tiny likelihood of rescue and reveling in gory details. Thus preoccupied, they miss Simon finding a tusk until he stands before them, holding one silently. Webster breaks into tears and Simon worries what he will do with him now.

### Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter 2 the action jumps nine years forward to see Ruth sent unwillingly at her mother's insistence, to broaden her horizons beyond lobstering, alcoholism, and nasty weather, at an elite girls' school in Delaware. Four years are reduced to a few paragraphs, as Ruth does the minimum allowed, ignores her classmates, whose interests are limited to makeup and horses, and, against her mother's wishes, returns home every summer to work as a sternman for her father. She annoys her mother by emphasizing in letters that on Fort Niles she feels that she belongs. This is indeed her feeling while in Delaware, but back home she recognizes the discomforts and boredom and she and her father get on each other's nerves. The grinding, dangerous work of a sternman is described in some detail and typical arguments between father and daughter are described. The scenes show Ruth's sharpened sarcasm and reveling in



having developed a foul mouth. They also suggest that later talk of becoming a professional lobsterman is largely posturing.

Ruth graduates in 1976 with no plans for college and nothing to do but sit with old Simon on Potter Beach and watch hapless Webster Pommeroy search for a legendary elephant tusk in the dangerous mudflats. Background is provided on how Simon has been for years collecting artifacts for the Fort Niles Museum of Natural History. He has no financial backers or helpers except Webster, whose physical and emotional development are revealed to have been stunted by his father's tragic death. A long excursus is given on the myth of the sinking of a paddle boat, the Clarice Monroe, in 1883 in the waters off Fort Niles. The narrative is rich in colorful details of the tragedy, in which a small circus is lost.

After describing in equally rich detail the variety of treasures that have been found in the flats over the years and revealing the myth of a human-sized lobster caught in the earliest day of settlement on the island, Simon takes up his favorite topic that he has repeated to Ruth since she is a toddler. He talks about shipwrecks around the world, emphasizing the tiny likelihood of rescue. He revels in gory details of how men suffer and die, concluding that boats are never safe. A litany of specific wrecks is recited, with Ruth, as she frequently does, reminding him of a specific counter-example: when the Margaret B. Rouss sinks in the placid Mediterranean and all hands are saved. Simon is trying to convince Ruth not to go to sea as she declares she wishes, largely to goad the kindly old man. Simon does not listen to her arguments about the relative safety of lobstering in coastal waters.

Simon and Ruth are too preoccupied to notice Webster find a tusk until he appears before them, silently, holding his small, mud-caked find and weeping at the thought of his task being complete. Simon confesses that he had never expected this and proposes that they take the tusk to Lanford Ellis, who is certain to grin. Simon's pathetic insistence strongly suggests that they will not get an enthusiastic reception, but the grin does materialize.

# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

The odd trio walks out derelict Ellis Road, carrying the tusk to show to reclusive 94-year-old Lanford Ellis at Ellis House, the grandest building on either island. Ruth is sure that he will not see them, even though he has arrived earlier for the summer than usual. As he often does, Simon asks whether Ruth's mother will visit. They then walk on in silence, Ruth marveling at how completely the forest has reclaimed all that had existed on the once-prosperous island. Only the Ellis Granite Company Store in the harbor and Ellis House remain standing. The former is long-abandoned crumbling. The quarries, over 1,000 feet deep are filled with spring water. Remaining locals resent how the Ellises have gutted their islands.

Simon insists that Webster present the tusk to Lanford and receive proper credit. Simon regards Lanford as a decent man and recalls that he always grins at Ruth and is good to her family. She does not respond. No one answers the door, but they find caretaker Cal Cooley in the stable. Ruth is disappointed to have to see the phony old man again, but Simon is instantly taken by the large lighthouse mirror that Cal is proudly polishing. By comparison, the tusk seems insignificant. For the fifth time Simon describes his Museum project and grovels for the right to deliver his appeal to Lanford to obtain use of the old Company Store to house the collection.

Furious at Cal's attitude, Ruth walks to the cliff to study the boats working disputed Worthy Channel. Buoys float like confetti, representing the tension between the two islands, as each side presses into the other's territory and pushes against the incursions. When she considers going to sea on her own, Ruth is discouraged by the inferior crop of sternmen available, her ignorance of navigation, and the lack of funds to buy a boat. There have been successful lobsterwomen elsewhere. When Cal interrupts her thoughts, Ruth does not let his banter to rile her. He has kept the tusk and sent Simon and Webster home, and has instructions to bring Ruth alone to the house. Acknowledging that Ruth hates him, Cal reveals that Lanford will give her \$300 in fun money to visit her mother in Concord and advises that she not antagonize him. Ruth, who has not responded, enters Lanford's bedroom alone. He sits in a wing-back chair, covered in a lap rug, looking old and thin. He grins and holds out his arms to Ruth, his blue eyes swimming in tears.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Much of Chapter 3 is given over to describing how Fort Niles had appeared in its heyday, when a constant flow of sailing ships had carried granite around the world and received in return coal to power the stripping of more resources. Locals still hold that the Ellises would have left the islands thin shells had the market lasted. As it is, the three quarries form artificial lakes a thousand feet deep. As they walk along Ellis Road, which



parallels Ellis Rail, they see rotting and rusting remnants with an abandoned and massive lathe. Details are added about the life of the Italian workmen and the discrimination that they had endured.

Details are added about the only early structure still in repair on the island, Ellis House. It is described as a reduced-scale bank, built, of course, from local granite, with a hint of the Roman bath. The property is unkempt and the stables no longer smell of horses. Dr. Jules Ellis, mentioned in the Prologue, is developed as a character, more a tycoon than a physician. He builds the grand house to provide a healthful summer home for the family, which like clockwork arrives and departs each year in grand processions. Clearly the locals benefit nothing from the visits. The only other old structure is the Ellis Granite Company Store, a three-story wooden structure in the harbor area, abandoned for forty years. Simon has long wanted to lease it to house his Museum but the current owner, Lanford Ellis, has long avoided talking to him about it. The tusk seems unlikely to move him, but Simon hopes that Lanford's decency and regard for the Thomas family will help.

Chapter 3 introduces a new character, Lanford's lone jack-of-all-trades, Cal Cooley. Ruth clearly has a bad history with Cal and, in fact, wishes him dead. He realizes that she hates him but pays smarmy attention to her. Cal has spent 90 hours polishing a large lighthouse mirror that Lanford has recently purchased. Simon is mesmerized and the two talk at some length and in considerable detail about lighthouses, going back to the Pharos in ancient Alexandria, Egypt. Such asides are by now expected and, generally, informative and entertaining.

Angered that Cal forces Simon again to grovel for an opportunity to present his Museum project to Lanford, Ruth walks over to the cliff to meditate on the boats working disputed Worthy Channel. She imagines how an outsider would view the picturesque sight of boats floating like toys amidst buoys marking lobster traps. These float like confetti. She contemplates the constant tension that exists between the lobstermen of the two islands, suggesting that the lobster wars described in the Prologue are not a thing of the past. Violence will, in fact, erupt later in the novel, as each side presses into the other's territory and pushes against the incursions. Meditating on becoming a lobsterwoman herself, she reveals the disheartening obstacles and does not seem convinced that this is the life for her. She insists, however, that she is smarter than anyone on the islands and could succeed, if that were all it took.

Ruth is forced to deal with Cal after he sends Simon and Webster home. As she often does with her father, Ruth refuses to be bated into arguments. Cal reveals that Lanford wants to see her alone and wants her to visit her estranged mother. This suggests that enigmatic Mary will be fleshed out as a character. When Ruth arrives in his bedroom, the frail recluse indeed grins at her.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Leaving Ellis House, Ruth searches for her father and finds him drinking with Angus. Stan does not care with whom she spends her time. Angus is a bully and a bigot but not a hypocrite and Ruth likes him. Declining to hire Ruth as a sternman, Angus explains how he needs to keep his costs down to care for his brother and Cookie, whom he hates. While Angus is a slob, Simon keeps the house immaculate and cares for Angus better than any wife would. Ruth tells Stan about meeting Lanford and brings up the sore subject of her mother. Seeing the money, Angus demands that Ruth return it and rants against the Ellis family for butting into people's business. Stan angers Angus by ordering him to shut up and declining to comment on Ruth's visit.

As the daughter of an orphan and an immigrant, Mary had always been treated with suspicion by islanders. She has no genealogy among a people who trace centuries of ancestors. Mary's mother is abandoned as a newborn in 1884 at the Bath Naval Orphans' Hospital, named Jane Smith, and adopted in 1894 by Dr. Jules Ellis to be his spoiled daughter Vera's companion. Jane is big and accommodating and becomes Vera's lady-in-waiting. She accompanies Vera everywhere, even on her honeymoon and after herself giving birth in 1925 to an illegitimate daughter, Mary, by an Italian quarryman. Jane cares for Vera by day and for Mary by night. She is freed from this slavery when a huge wave sweeps her from a rock where she is knitting. Her body is never recovered. Feeling abandoned, Vera raises Mary to inherit Jane's terrible position.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 begins by showing Ruth tell her father and Angus about his meeting with Lanford and revealing the money that he has given her with which to visit her mother. Angus and Stan are developed as characters, both tough lobstermen but differing in character. Stan is taciturn. His answer to anything Ruth says is that he does not care what she does or with whom. Angus is a loud busybody, but somehow still likable. He is contrasted with his twin brother Simon, who cares for him in return for financial support.

The lion's share of the chapter is devoted to telling the stories of Ruth's grandmother Jane's life and death and the conditions of her giving birth to daughter Mary. As the daughter of an orphan and an Italian immigrant, Mary had always been treated with suspicion by Fort Niles islanders. It is emphasized that Mary has no genealogy among people who can trace their ancestry back for centuries. Jane is adopted by Dr. Jules Ellis to be his spoiled daughter Vera's companion, but in fact becomes her indentured servant for life. Rich details of life in refined society at the turn of the 20th century are provided. In 1925 Jane shocks the family by becoming pregnant. Her duties seem too demanding for her ever to have met a suitor. Jane says only that the father is an Italian. There are calls for a vendetta against the Italian community, but Jules cannot afford to



alienate his work force. Jane continues her unremitting labors until she accidentally drowns while enjoying a short break, thanks to Vera's being confined to bed by an illness. Recall the comments earlier about how a quick drowning is merciful. Her body is not found, although late in the novel her skull is found decades later in the mudflats. Vera raises Mary to inherit Jane's terrible position. This narrative sets the stage for grown Ruth meeting her mother and discovering her own dark secret.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Cal makes arrangements for Ruth's trip to Concord, but does not find her at 6 AM, for she has fled in a panic to Rhonda's, where Rhonda has for hours been painting her kitchen, assisted by her drunken sisters, unmarried Gloria and Kitty, who is married to Ruth's Uncle Len, but is being threatened with eviction because of her drunkenness. Rhonda is happy to take her in. Kitty laughs hysterically at everything. They are using garish lime green marine paint left over from Ira's buoy painting. Robin's wife Opal brings in their enormous baby, Eddie. They live upstairs. Kitty accuses Ruth of being away so much that she is a tourist, but Rhonda defends her, saying that she had been banished to school by Lanford. Ruth talks about the boredom of school.

Cal interrupts the playful fight, complaining that they are late. Cal and Kitty are former lovers. Rhonda urges Ruth to bring her mother back where she belongs. Cal complains dramatically about the trouble Ruth causes him and warns that heavy eating will make her fat. The New Hope rather than Lanford's yacht, Stonecutter, is waiting for them. Big, blond Owney Wishnell says nothing as he rows them out and is set to work getting the New Hope swiftly out of the harbor afterwards. Ruth is happy when Toby chews out Cal over the delay. As they ride heavy seas, they chat about the folklore of the sea and how all of the islanders have the same face. Ruth hushes Cal when he mentions her Italian blood. This interests Toby, who remembers burying Ira, whom he takes to be Ruth's father. When Cal remarks that Ruth is an Ellis, she considers murdering him before clarifying that her mother is Vera Ellis' handmaid. Cal insists that she is a beloved niece, whom Ruth is going to visit. Asking about lovely Rhonda and her sons, Toby learns that she survives by giving haircuts and on money sent her by the sons who have moved on to the army and a farm. When Ruth says that she is the daughter of a lobsterman, Toby condemns the occupation as savage and greedy. Ruth watches silent Owney. Toby talks about mediating lobster wars and recalls the attempt in 1965 to form a collective on Courne Haven. Although it offers many economic benefits, blockheads defeat it. Ruth knows that her father and Angus oppose collectives and recalls the details that she has heard with the story Toby tells. Owney, Toby insists, has seen such battles up and down the coast and knows better than enter this savage profession. Owney says nothing but listens closely. When Toby asks if Ruth will go to college, she replies that she will take up the noble calling of lobstering. She is both mortified and proud at having mouthed off Toby. A tense hour later, Toby declares that Owney will be the second Wishnell after him not to fish and watches her silently for the last hour of the trip. Ruth hides her discomfort. Once ashore, Ruth pretends to sleep during the drive to Ellis House while Cal whistles "Dixie." Ruth's mother gasps, seeing her daughter, and hugs her. Ruth repeats simply, "Here I am."



## Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 postpones the mother and daughter reunion a bit. Ruth packs for the trip to Concord, but panics and leaves her suitcase on the porch while visiting Rhonda. There follows a tragic and comic scene in which Rhonda, since her husband's death a teetotaler, and her drunken sisters are painting her kitchen, dressed in garbage bags to protect their clothing. They had found leftover marine paint in a garish color and decided not to waste it. Details of the Pommeroy family's life are brought out. In particular, Kitty is married to Ruth's hated Uncle Len. Hapless Robin has married and lives upstairs with wife Opal and an enormous baby, Eddie.

When Cal arrives it is revealed that he has long served as Ruth's chauffeur. This explains her antipathy towards his mannerisms. Toby's *New Hope*, piloted by silent Owney Wishnell, rather than *Lanford* yacht takes them to the mainland. This detail shows the Ellises' ability to command their minions and lets a grown Ruth see a grown Owney, albeit mostly from the rear. He is silent but his posture reveals what he is thinking. Toby, Ruth, and Cal hold fast-paced conversations as uncomfortable as the heavy ground seas that they ride. Among the more interesting topics is the folklore of the sea, which the pastor rattles off as a litany. They note that the trip is doomed by having three bad-luck factors aboard: a woman, a cleric, and pronouncing the word pig. Ruth bristles when Cal mentions her shameful Italian blood, but this opens the topic of Ruth's family, Toby being sure that he has buried Ruth's father. She informs him that they have passed Stan on the way out of the harbor. He buried Ira Pommeroy, whose beauty still fascinates Toby. Cal sets them up for another clash by calling Ruth an Ellis, Vera's great niece. Ruth insists that she is a Thomas and her mother is Vera's servant. Ruth shuts down the conversation by declaring she wants to become a lobsterman, an occupation that Toby reviles.

Toby talks about an attempt in 1965 to collectivize lobstering on Courne Haven and alludes to a tragic act of violence. Ruth recalls hearing the story told differently, from the point of view of her father and Angus, who are dedicated independents. She resents Toby calling their ilk blockheads. Toby insists that Owney, having seen the violence, knows better than to desire such a life and informs Ruth that he has forbidden it. He apparently sees all of the attention Ruth has been paying to Owney's back as he steers the boat. Toby has come off in this chapter as a testy, self-absorbed, and dogmatic figure and not at all the pastor that he brags of being. It seems clear that he and Ruth will some day tangle over Owney's destiny. Owney remains in this second encounter as enigmatic as in the first and Ruth is attracted to him.





# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

From the time Mary is a little girl, Vera emphasizes how she cannot do without her as a helpmate and how like her late mother she is. She never wants Mary to marry and keeps her too busy with chores to meet a man. Mary meets Stan Thomas while organizing a community picnic on Fort Niles to be given by Vera to show off to relatives from abroad. Stan is taken by Mary's pretty face and figure, insists on getting retail prices for his lobsters, but offers his service gratis in organizing and helping to run. Weather turns the party into a fiasco and, after cleaning up, Mary takes Stan to Ellis House, where they sit in the kitchen with Edith, the cook. Mary, of course, is summoned by Vera, but Edith fills Stan in on her tragic life's history and oppressed situation. Edith cannot believe such a good-looking young man, with a job and not a drunk, is unmarried. Edith predicts that if he pursues Mary he will be in big trouble and warns him not to harm her.

Stan and Mary marry the next August. Vera disapproves, claiming that marriage is restrictive and winter life on the island is harsh, but throws none of her characteristic tantrums. Lanford gives Mary \$10,000 in cash, a token after 30 years of service. When Vera does not offer the use of Ellis House for the ceremony, they are married in Stan's living room, without formalities by Toby's predecessor, Pastor Mort Beekman. They bank the Ellis money.

Mary shows Ruth to her room in the Concord mansion, which she has visited as rarely as possible. They discuss an old photograph of them that Ruth has never seen. Both are uncomfortable until they go to see Ricky. Ruth's brother is nine but looks three, curled up in a crib, continually grinding his head back and forth into his pillow, rolling his eyes, and screeching. Feeling sick, Ruth helps Mary manipulate his withered limbs. Ricky feels like a defenseless, molted lobster. On first glance at newborn Ricky, Stan had blamed Mary's unknown genetics. Exhausted from giving birth, Mary had thrown back that the Thomases are all inbred. Nurses had never heard such a fight. Lanford had come to offer condolences and to offer the family's financial support for Ricky's round-the-clock, life-long care, provided the Thomases move to Concord and Mary takes up her old role. The Ellis will pay for Ruth's education and find Stan a job. There is no room for negotiation. The parents split up, Stan taking a few months off to cool down before returning home. His noncommittal story leaves young Ruth figuring that her mother, like Ira, had drowned. Gradually, however, she pieces the story together. Mary asks Ruth about life with her father and about Angus, recalling when he loses a finger in a winch accident but continues working. Ruth is amazed at how readily she makes her mother uncomfortable. She feels like a charging rhinoceros in a china shop. When they finish with poor Ricky, Mary talks with pride about Ruth finishing high school so well rather than learning about knots and tides on Fort Niles as her father had. Ruth insists that she would have preferred that. Mary recalls terrible island winters that spawn nightmares.



Cal takes mother, daughter, and Vera clothes shopping, since Ruth has no luggage. Vera looks like a frightened bird in the front seat, ordering Cal to drive cautiously - to the point of angering other motorists. In her old age, Vera has turned into a giggler and, in a trace of an English accent, makes every sentence seem wistful. Ruth recalls that islanders have made a proverb of her refusing to let workers drink water in her kitchen. They drink out of the hose. Learning of the retirement of the elderly Mr. Blaire from whom she has always bought dresses, Vera orders Cal to drive home. She tells Ruth that her mother and she enjoy their life together, free of husbands, and recalls the scene when Mary bravely announces that she is marrying Stan. It had made Vera cry, but Lanford had comforted her. Now Mary is back where she belongs. Ruth is angry enough to get out and walk home, but endures a week, wearing the same clothes and ignoring how her mother is exploited. Vera is surprised at how much hatred Ruth shows towards Cal, while Ruth wonders why fate has linked them to the Ellises.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 adds detail to the interlocked stories of spoiled Vera and pliant Mary and tells of how Mary and Stan Thomas meet. Gilbert uses the character of Edith the family cook to tell the tale, throwing in warnings of how dangerous it will be to try to take Mary away from the Ellis family. Edith voices the staff's anger at how Mary, a born Ellis, is mistreated. As it turns out, Vera checks her mercurial temper when she learns of the marriage plans, but does not offer the traditional large wedding afforded to real Ellises. Twice in the story, her brother Lanford who arranges for Ruth's visit to Concord, serves as intermediary to provide what the family doubtless feels is a generous gift. Considering that Mary has been paid nothing for thirty years of service, it is a pittance.

Mary and Stan would never have met had Vera not decided to throw a lavish community lobster bake to impress visiting relatives. Recall the family's surprise that Mary's mother had found time in her busy schedule to visit the Italian quarter and get herself pregnant. Mary has been kept too busy to make friends and Vera has always emphasized how restricting marriage is. Looking for Angus, who is reputedly the island's greatest lobsterman, Mary recruits Stan to provision the picnic and help set up and run the party. Ironically, weather ruins the event, but throws the 25-year-old bachelor and 30-year-old servant together. Before the Ellis household is transported back to Concord, Stan and Mary agree to marry next summer. It is a fast, simple affair, officiated over by Toby's predecessor, Pastor Mort Beekman. Few words are devoted to this devil-may-care and non-dogmatic cleric, but they make him seem quite attractive by comparison with Toby, who has recently been shown in a very bad light.

Mary and Ruth talk uncomfortably and then visit Ricky, Ruth's nine-year-old brother who since birth has suffered a mental impairment that leaves him helpless and pitiful in a crib. Ruth has over time learned, from whatever sources is not said, what had happened at Ricky's birth on the mainland. Stan had blamed Mary's unknown genes for the tragedy, while Mary had thrown inbreeding in Stan's face. Both of these situations have been discussed previously and are now brought together in a tense flashback. While Stan goes back to Fort Niles and Ruth, Mary moves back to Concord with Vera,



resuming her life of servitude in return for the promise of life-long professional care for Ricky. Stan had refused a job on the mainland, but is forced to allow the Ellises to pay for Ruth's education. Both parents reject the idea of institutionalizing Ricky.

Mary recalls life on Fort Niles, concentrating on a few colorful incidents in Angus' life, perhaps suggesting a certain attraction. Ruth confirms that Angus is, indeed, missing a finger, but believes it is typical myth-building that has him kicking the severed digit overboard after his accident, cauterizing the stump with a lit cigar, and continuing his work. Ruth cannot resist the temptation to make crude jokes that shock her mother. At the end of the chapter she meditates on how treating Cal cruelly makes her feel alive in this artificial environment. The visit to Concord fills in many gaps in Ruth's life and solidifies the image of her sarcasm. One imagines that Gilbert writes for readers who find sarcasm attractive. Others might be put off by Ruth, who does manage to feel a bit guilty about how she treats others.

Cal again interrupts and there follows an amusing car ride into town to shop for Ruth, who has brought no luggage. Cal several times on the way over had warned Ruth that this would happen and would not be a pleasant experience. Vera is clearly not an easy person to endure, although some of her quirks are picturesque. She is humorous badgering Cal about his driving, insisting that he sit at a four-way-stop until all traffic has cleared - including angry motorists coming up behind them. She refuses to deal with the younger Mr. Blaire, who has inherited the only dress shop that she will patronize, so Ruth spends the week in the clothes that she is wearing. Ruth's goal is not to show her anger, a trait that has already been seen many times. Vera makes this difficult, going on about how Mary is back where she belongs. Melodramatically, Vera equates her sorrow when Mary moves away to Mrs. Lindbergh's when her baby is kidnapped and murdered. This subtly shows that Vera is living four decades in the past. It leaves Ruth angry enough to walk home to her island and wondering why fate has linked the Thomases to the Ellises, a link that continues to the end of the novel, centering on ancient Lanford.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Cal talks endlessly as he drives Ruth back to Rockland and argues with her over whether he or her mother is the bigger sycophant. They bond briefly over the horrible smell of a cheese that Mary gives them for the road before Cal oversteps his bounds and is told to leave her alone. New Hope is waiting at the dock, but Toby needs supplies. They leave Ruth and Owney alone with orders to stay on the dock in the rain. Instead, after absorbing Ruth's rambling about her week, Owney asks if she would like to see something. Amazed to hear him speak, Ruth joins him in the rowboat, which he pulls mightily out into open water. Near a tiny granite island, Owney pulls up a hidden trap brimming with lobsters. They placidly let Owney handle them before releasing them. He tells Ruth that his uncle does not allow him to keep and sell them, but he maintains such hidden traps everywhere they go, just to prove that he knows lobsters. He does not want to be a minister. Ruth, who agrees that that would be a waste, is the only one who knows Owney's secret.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Exceedingly brief Chapter 7 shows Ruth and Cal trading insults on the drive to Rockland, highlighted by a scatological discussion about cutting a cheese that Mary had given them for the road. When Cal and Toby go shopping for supplies, Owney finally breaks his silence and takes Ruth out to clear the lobster traps that he hides to prove that he understands where lobsters live. Recall the nearly mystical awe in which lobstermen hold the Wishnells, claiming that they fight one another for the honor of entering their traps rather than competitors. Near tears, Owney reveals that he wants to be a lobsterman rather than a minister, and Ruth agrees. As a lobsterman, he could get rich. Watching him row, Ruth is falling for Owney physically.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Unlike other fishermen, lobstermen do not perish by the fleet. Thus Rhonda is the only such widow on Fort Niles, but is so sunny and lovely that people forget to pity her. She has survived in her paid-off house, has her sisters and Ruth for companionship and sons who are no worse deadbeats than others. Fagan works on a potato farm and is happy to send money home. Conway lives on disability after being discharged from the Navy. John and Chester serve in the Army. John disappears afterwards in Germany while Chester goes to California and joins the Gypsy Bandoleer Bandits. Webster, Rhonda's favorite, is still with her and is her greatest concern. Robin, the family idiot, marries young and fathers huge Eddie. Overcoming his speech impediment, Robin works as sternmen for Stan Thomas. He is clumsy and tiresome but works cheaply. Timothy, who also lives at home, is Len Thomas' sternman. He keeps only whiskey money, giving the rest to Rhonda, who earns money by cutting, curling, and setting hair. She is a natural, specializing in making ugly men look good, flattering, and flirting. The wives like the results and seem relieved not to have to be touching their heads.

Ruth goes straight to Rhonda's house from the dock, where she finds her cutting the hair of the entire, miserable Russ Cobb family. The trip, Ruth summarizes, brings the worst week of her life. The Cobbs hotly debate with Rhonda when raccoons are introduced from Courne Haven, the 1940s or 1958. Later, alone, Rhonda and Ruth talk about Ricky. Rhonda has tried to convince Mary to return. Someone would arrange to care for Ricky. Rhonda corrects Ruth's view that no one had liked her mother. Everyone had been nice and Angus had loved her. Discussion of Owney is cut off by the entrance of Opal and her toddler, who attacks her breast like a bilge pump. Ruth is happy to be back among people that she can tease. Eddie throws up on Ruth before being taken upstairs. Rhonda declares that he needs to be on a feeding schedule.

Ruth and Rhonda then segue into how girls learn about what breasts are before returning to the subject of Mary. Rhonda holds that Mary's only fault had been sensitivity and failing to understand why, for instance, fishermen drink so much. Mary and Vera want to get Ruth to Concord and then to college before she gets pregnant and is stuck on the island. Rhonda urges Ruth to be with her mother, but Ruth is determined not to do anything the Ellises want. Rhonda asks about Owney and wants more detail than that he is an unusual person and they have just met. Ruth tells everything about him and his being frustrated to tears by his uncle. Rhonda used to want to marry a big, prosperous Swedish Wishnell, but had never even talked to one. Rhonda changes the subject to how she had loved Ira. Ruth confesses that she has scarcely talked to any boys, while Rhonda confesses that she had always hoped that Ruth would marry one of her sons, childlike Webster in particular. She candidly runs through their various bad points and concludes that all of her sons lose everything when they lose their father. Rhonda wishes that she had a normal son for Ruth.



Although she likes have Ruth around, Rhonda does not want to imprison her. Ruth vows to stay with Rhonda and go wherever she goes. She is finished with talk of Concord and college. Again she vows to do the opposite of what Lanford wants. After discussing whether her throat is like a pelican's, Rhonda asks how Ruth had felt alone with Owey. Eventually Ruth lets slip that she wants to show him her nipples. Rhonda thinks that she should and then plays feet on Ruth. The sexual frankness leaves Ruth feeling awkward and guilty about rejecting her mother and the Pommeroy boys.

Later, Ruth wanders over to the Addams house to avoid going home, hoping to cheer up. Angus angrily tells her that Simon and Webster are hunting for the other tusk. She finds Simon about being unable to get Webster to quit searching, despite his getting a bad cut. Simon cannot demand the first tusk back, lest he offend Lanford, but suggests that Ruth might undertake this. Ruth asks him to write her mother, who seems lonely. Simon agrees that Ruth should take Lanford up on paying college. Because he is so distracted by Webster, Ruth leaves him to find her father. She has no one else.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 opens with a long aside on the transformation over millions of years of George's Bank, in which Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands are located, from lush forests to abundant fishing grounds that have nearly been fished out in mere centuries since the coming of Europeans. The aside reaches its dramatic conclusion by describing the effects in terms of widows and orphans of the loss of a single fishing fleet. By comparison, lobstermen, being loners, do not perish in such numbers and Rhonda is the only lobster widow on Fort Niles in 1976. This is a chapter about Rhonda and her hapless children, each of them being sketched. The conclusion is that while they bring her little financial help in her widowhood, they are also little expense and are an odd bunch. Rhonda earns money cutting hair and is a morale booster both for the ugly men whom she charms as she works but also to their wives who are happy not to have to perform this chore.

Ruth and Rhonda have a heart-to-heart talk after the last customers, Russ Cobb and his family, leave. It deals with Mary and Ricky, with Rhonda assuring Ruth that islanders liked Mary and treated her well and would welcome her and the boy back, and with Ruth's long-time wish that Ruth would marry one of her sons, preferably poor Webster, who is her greatest concern. She wishes that she could give birth to a normal son for Ruth, but realizes that the age difference would be too great. Ruth dislikes the topic. Nevertheless, Rhonda is interested in Ruth's mention of Orney. After several interruptions, she asks about him and refuses to settle for platitudes. Ruth tells about their meeting and the lobster traps and the unfairness of Orney's fate and then is baited into talking about her sexual feelings, a revelation that makes her feel awkward. Rhonda is left wistful and plays the "feet on" game by which she had annoyed her late husband.

The sexual discussion is reached by a meandering course. Opal is nursing enormous Eddie. This is played for humorous sound effects and similes. Ruth is amazed at the size of her breasts. Rhonda talks about not being told what is happening when her older



sisters develop breasts. Rhonda and Ruth debate pre-adolescent naïveté. Finally, Ruth blurts out that she wants to show Opal her breasts, although she feels that her nipples are too big - obviously that is her own opinion, because no one else has seen them. Rhonda says that the time is right and she should. Mary's and Vera's fears that she might get pregnant and is stuck on the island are not entirely off-base.

Rhonda favors Ruth going to live with her mother and attend college, but Ruth will have none of it. Several times she emphasizes that she will do nothing that the Ellises want of or for her. Accepting this with a grain of salt, as one does adolescent proclamations, Rhonda says that while she appreciates Ruth's company she does not want to imprison her, using infamous Alcatraz to seal her metaphor. Ruth then vows to stay with Rhonda and go wherever she goes. Although Ruth will later declare herself an atheist and when she is told the background of her name will show no signs of recognition, this is a clear allusion to the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible, where Ruth swears to accompany her mother-in-law Naomi wherever she goes. As a reward for this loyalty, Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David. At the end of the novel, Ruth will manipulate the Ellises and marry her Owey, who is a shy David character.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

The second lobster war (1928-30) is inconsequential while the third in 1946 is short and ugly, depriving the islanders of profiting from the greatest single year in lobstering history, and the fourth (mid-1950s) consists of routine pushing. By tradition, families fish specific territories but everyone tries to bump others to enlarge his own empire. When the victim becomes annoyed, he issues a ritual warning, which the challenger either accepts and backs off or further challenges. Both spend hours and weeks calculating their opposing strengths and dedication to the cause. Lobstermen cannot be afford to get a reputation for passivity, for their livelihood depends on the catch. Younger men tend to be pushers and older ones cutters. On Fort Niles, Angus is the most aggressive and boastful cutter, issuing no warnings. He even cuts Stan's buoys and confronts him with the evidence, setting off a heated verbal fight that turns into an eight-month estrangement.

As Korean War veterans reestablish themselves in lobstering, hostility runs high. Angus escalates the war against by filling Courne Haven traps with garbage and rubble, but finds it less amusing when he pulls up a doll stabbed by scissors. Fellow islanders are shocked and organize a blockade of Courne Haven harbor. Ned Wishnell impudently leads the running the blockade. Angus is embarrassed and feels deserted. Hostilities might have died down had Angus and Don Pommeroy not met some Courne Haven men, including Fred Burden, in the Wayside Hotel bar in Rockland. They have everything in common to talk about and they engage in lighthearted taunting, tall tales, and jokes until Don and Fred get into a ridiculous argument about whether Don could beat a five-foot monkey in a fight. Unable to bear the inanity any longer, Fred punches Carl and a brief *mêlée* ensues. It ends with Don hospitalized in a coma. Learning about the incident, Don's brother Ira ignores his wife Rhonda's pleas and gathers a posse to teach Courne Haven a lesson.

War rather than commerce reigns for seven months, ruining everyone except Stan Thomas, who sits it out, preparing his boat and gear for the time when lobstering can safely resume. His new wife, Mary, enjoys the time they spend, working together. Mary tries to talk Stan into abandoning fishing to work in the Ellis House stables, but Stan would eat his own feces first. The war ends in November of 1957, not because the lobstermen are worn out, but because Jim Burden, the 19-year-old son of the hospitalized Fred, finds Ira's ugly green buoys floating in his territory and races in a fury to confront him. Inexperienced, Jim gets lost in the Atlantic, in a storm, and runs out of gas. Scared and embarrassed, he radios for help. Ned Wishnell responds and orders him to drop anchor and wait. Everyone on both islands goes out to search. Several hours later Ned finds Jimmy and tries to board the *Might J* but in heavy seas is dumped overboard and crushed between the hulls.





This tragedy ends the war. Ned, Maine's foremost lobsterer, had always been above petty conflicts. Feeling responsible for the drowning, Ira takes to serious drinking. The beautiful widow Allison flees the repulsive island, abandoning her year-old son, Owney, to the care of his uncle, Pastor Toby. Confident that the war is over, Stan puts to sea with a vengeance and earns the nickname Greedy Number Two. He is no longer interested in Mary as he spends hours ashore working on his ledgers and planning his fortune. He is too busy to be excited by Mary's pregnancy and puts to sea in a terrible storm to avoid hearing her screaming. He leaves naming the newborn to Mary. She chooses Ruth. Her drunken neighbor, Rhonda, also pregnant, predicts that Mary will marry one of her sons.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 describes the fourth Court Haven-Fort Niles lobster war that occurs that culminates just before the birth of Ruth Thomas. As such, it develops the theme of constant, low-grade conflict that characterizes island life and clarifies how the various characters in her parents' generation come to be as they are. It opens by explaining the territorial nature of the business and the traditions that govern business. Competition, often cutthroat, is not limited to inter-island men, but occurs within families and between close friends. Everyone is either a pusher or a cutter. Some are both. The titles are pejorative but accurately describe what must be done to earn as good a living as possible from the sea. Note that the post-World War II years are prosperous. The return of Korean War veterans to fishing heightens the aggressive competition.

Elizabeth Gilbert describes a typical scenario hypothetically, in terms of a Mr. Cobb and a Mr. Thomas pushing one another and calculating whether it is prudent to advance the conflict or back down. She covers all of the psychological and practical considerations, making it sound much like a schoolyard disagreement. Charmingly, the first objection one is supposed to make consists of tying a half-hitch knot in a challenger's line. Moving from hypotheticals to cases in point, the author shows Angus cutting without warning and cursing as he works. He cuts friend and former protégé Stan Thomas' traps and throws the evidence at his feet. This leads to an eight-month estrangement. Recall how, after this flashback, they eat and play cards together nightly. It had been so before as well.

The war consists of juvenile pranks that are entertaining to read about and picture, until someone crosses the line and stabs a children's doll with scissors and leaves it in a lobster pot. Angus leads the charge to retaliate with a blockade, but it falls through. This failure should have marked the end of the war, but members of the two factions get into a crazy bar fight. Gilbert shows the evening beginning peacefully because the lobstermen all know one another and share everything in common. There is much to talk about and many things to joke about. A juvenile bet turns into a vicious fight that lands Fred Burden in the hospital. His son Jim, an inexperienced 19-year-old, sets out to get vengeance, gets himself lost on a heavy sea, and runs out of gas. His SOS is picked up by the most experienced lobsterman in Maine, Ned Wishnell, who in attempting a rescue drowns. Ned is so frustrated with Jim that he makes a beginner's



mistake, which costs him his life. Jim finds Ned falling overboard so humorous that he hesitates the split second in which he might have saved him. The telling of the drowning is tense and poignant.

The outcome is that the war is dropped. Had anyone but Ned drowned, it might not have been enough to change hearts, but Ned had always stayed above the fray. Ira Pommeroy, who had been needling the Burdens during the war, feels responsible for the tragedy and begins drinking more heavily than ever. Recall that he is drunk at sea when a wave sweeps him overboard to his death earlier in the novel.

Chapter 9 describes Stan and Mary's happy early marriage during the lobster war and the change that comes over when fishing resumes. Never a likable character, he is even less so now as he flees to sea to avoid listening to Mary in labor and cannot be bothered to name his newborn daughter. It is easy to see why Ruth prefers spending time at the Pommeroys. The chapter also describes how Owney comes to be the ward of Pastor Toby and says that from infancy he is happy only when he is in water. Brother Ned's death makes clear why Toby is determined to keep Owney away from what he considers an unholy profession, but makes one wonder why he allows him to work on the New Hope. Recall Senator Simon Addams' maxim: there is no such thing as a safe boat.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

In July of 1976, as Fort Niles downplays the U.S. bicentennial, Toby overlooks the fact that Rhonda has no formal training in hair styling to ask her do the honors for the wedding of Dorothy "Dotty" Wishnell and Charlie Burden. Ruth at the time is on Potter Beach with Simon and Webster, who looks suicidal. Ruth and Simon look through a book about finding hidden treasures that Simon finds disappointing, although he has glanced at only the first chapter. Ruth finds him pathetic.

Ruth too is invited to help at the wedding, along with Kitty. Owney rows them out on the morning of the wedding to the New Hope, where Cal waits, and then drives them to Toby's three-story Victorian house. Rhonda sets up a temporary salon in the back garden while Cal sends Owney to fetch Lanford, forbidding Ruth to go along. Ruth ignores Cal's small talk about the Ellises' wanting her off Fort Niles and a lewd remark about going to a motel with her. He predicts that she will soon have filthy sex with someone. Kitty's timely come-on to ex-lover Cal inspires him to walk away.

Dotty, a recent widow in her mid-thirties, and her fresh-mouthed, six-year-old daughter, Candy, are Rhonda's first customers. Rhonda tries to keep the conversation happy, but Dotty turns it to widowhood and a lack of playmates for Candy. Dotty wants to look happy, but Kitty, seriously, says that "only God can make a happy bride" (pg. 225). Ruth wanders off to explore Toby's house. Knowing that she is trespassing, she lets herself in. Everything seems feminine and delicate. Curious to see where Owney sleeps, she heads upstairs. On the third floor Ruth walks in on Toby, ironing his shirt. He invites her into the stark room. When she cannot say whether she is named after Ruth in the Bible, Toby recommends reading the Bible's wonderful stories. Ruth withholds that she considers herself an atheist. After remarking that Ruth is surely meant for more than Fort Niles, Toby muses about his own work of providing people a connection to the Lord and help with worldly matters. Fort Niles is the most isolated and least religious of his islands. Ruth swallows a remark about the people disliking him.

Toby continues about what a pity it is that Fort Niles is too old-fashioned to accept a ferry to the mainland or generally embrace progress, such as using fiberglass boats or adopting voluntary trap limits. Soon wardens will swarm force this. Ruth is appalled by Toby's condescending manner and is would have defended her island, but Toby resumes: the world changes. Species are fished to extinction, granite becomes outdated. When the last lobster is caught, what will the foolish locals do? They must form a cooperative. When Ruth insists that this will never happen, Toby counters that Ruth does not belong among such people. She has choices, one of which is emphatically not Owney. Fort Niles will be abandoned in two decades. It has no leaders. After citing the 19th-century demise of the Isle of Shoals, Toby tells a tale about a lobsterman who illegally keeps and sells short lobsters. A warden trying to catch him discovers only a skunk. Ruth insists that this is a true event and the actor is Angus, but



Toby assures her that it is a wide-spread apocryphal fable which he has used to warn Ruth about snooping in his house. Ruth leaves as decorously as possible, wishing that she had left earlier - and that she had proclaimed herself an atheist.

Rhonda is still working on guests' hair, engaging in inane conversations with pretty blond teenagers about sea urchins and sharks, and opposing cruelty to animals. Kitty is fall-down drunk as she combs out hair. Ruth thinks about how wrong Toby is: lobsters are prehistoric survivors who will thrive when nothing else is left. The broader conversation has turned to torturing frogs, snakes, and mice, as Rhonda makes everyone pretty and happy.

Ignoring the ceremony, Ruth admires the gardens and catering. Fort Niles weddings are pot luck affairs. The groom looks depressed, Candy cries, and Toby preaches about responsibilities and rewards. With help from Kitty and bartender Chucky Strachan, Ruth dances even with Cal, until she realizes that he is rubbing his penis against her. Revolted, she flees into the woods, where she gets lost and requires directions from a confused old widow.

Ruth is led by Cal to grinning, emaciated, wheelchair-bound Lanford. His wondering what Mary will do when Vera dies gives Ruth the same uncomfortable feeling she always has when told by Lanford what she should do without telling her what is going on. She has always obeyed him because of his power over her mother. Lanford usually summons Ruth twice a year and treats her like a granddaughter. Simon and other adults would love such access to Lanford but must deal with him through Cal. When she is 13, Ruth is told that Cal will drive her to school in Delaware, bring her to Concord for Christmas, and she would not see Fort Niles until June. When she was 16, Lanford tells her to wear her hair off her face. She never acts stubborn with him as she does with others. Today she wonders if he will order her to stop drinking or dancing or to go to college or move in with Mary. Not feeling up to asserting her independence, Ruth boldly brings up the elephant tusk and the question of Simon's museum needing a house. Lanford hands her a key to the Ellis Granite Company Store building, tells her to come to dinner on Thursday, and then ignores her. She walks away.

Wishing that she had stayed home, Ruth hides behind the band just before Babe Wishnell directs a long, loud, and pun-filled roast at the bride and groom. It includes an off-color reference to his own honeymoon in 1945 before turning mawkish. Babe then invites Lanford to say a few words, which he oddly devotes to Viking descendants, quarrymen, turning lobstermen. Looking lost, he goes silent and Cal does nothing to help. Rhonda sits by Ruth and suggests that she find Owney at the house and take her time.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 shows Ruth and Kitty joining Rhonda on a trip to Courne Haven to beautify participants in a wedding. Stan claims not to care if Ruth goes; relations between father and daughter are declining. Simon and Webster are both depressing Ruth. Capt. John



Cook, mentioned early in the novel reappears, as Ruth tries to interest Simon in a book that she has given him. He does not rise to the occasion and Ruth finds him pathetic. The early scenes clearly set up that Ruth has little holding her on Fort Niles. Later in the chapter, the hated Pastor Toby will say this bluntly and Lanford, both directly and through hated Cal, will intimate it. Recall that Ruth has vowed to do nothing that the Ellises want of her, for the chapter draws out how they have steered her in the past.

Ruth is more than ever attracted to Owney, but is kept away from him by Cal, who becomes an even more disgusting character, slinking about, sneering, and making risqué comments. He rightly predicts, however, that she will soon have sex with someone. There is a touch of humor when drunken Kitty acts suggestively towards her former lover and he flees the scene. At the end of the chapter, Rhonda tells Ruth where to find Owney and suggests that she take her time with him. By that time Ruth is thoroughly drunk and has had run-ins with her chief nemeses, Toby and Lanford.

Much space is given to preparing the wedding party to look nice. Pages of dialog show what people on the two islands chat about. Meanwhile, Ruth trespasses in Toby's house and endures a long, self-serving lecture about his sacrificial ministrations, Fort Niles' hopelessness, spiritually and materially, and Ruth's need to get off the island. He paints the twin islands as backward by the standard of the other Maine islands to which he ministers and warns that their demise is near. Ruth is hard-pressed not to tell Toby off. She learns from him that biblical Ruth, surely her namesake, is a "model of female loyalty" (pg. 227) and that the Hebrew scriptures are full of wonderful stories. She refrains from remarking on the fictional nature of the stories and the fact that she has recently concluded that she is an atheist. It seems not yet a deep conviction, however. Ruth finds "atheist" a fun word. In the course of his verbal spanking, Toby mentions an attempt at forming a cooperative. Ruth insists that her father and the other lobstermen will never accept this. Ironically, in the Epilogue Ruth will be seen successfully spearheading just such an organization. She will not test out her hypothesis that the lobster will outlive all other forms of life.

Toby uses two devices to sell his arguments. First, he cites how in the 19th century the Isle of Shoals falls into immorality (discovered and dealt with as well as possible by a venerable fellow clergyman) and within a generation is uninhabited. The story reeks of sanctimony. In the second, Toby ascribes the name Jim to a lobsterman who illegally keeps and sells to tourists short (undersized, illegal) lobsters. A warden trying to catch him sees him dump a weighted sack off his boat, but when he confronts Jim, they pull up a skunk. Toby knows that Ruth will object to this fable told in various forms all along the coastline. Ruth does not disappoint, insisting that Angus is the tricky lobsterman involved. Toby assures her triumphally that it is apocryphal. The entire exchange is typical of how urban myths propagate. He uses it as a parable, to warn Ruth against trespassing and snooping.

Soon afterwards, Ruth, now thoroughly drunk, must face Lanford, who has declined markedly since their last encounter. Ruth avoids him as much as possible, but receives twice-annual summonses that she dare not decline. These are always uncomfortable for her. Ruth realizes that she always obeys Lanford's unquestioningly because of his



control over her mother's fate. That Lanford does not appear to be a cruel man does not factor in. She will not take chances. She knows that he regards her lovingly, like a granddaughter, making decisions about her future, ranging from declaring where she will be educated, where she will celebrate Christmas, and her education and even her hairstyle. Perhaps because she is drunk, Ruth asks for the Ellis Granite Company Store building for Simon's museum and, shockingly, is given the key. She has earlier thought him omniscient, and carrying to a wedding the key to an abandoned building cannot readily be explained in any other way. Lanford then orders her to come to dinner on Thursday and ends the audience. Stubborn Ruth will not keep the date and will string Lanford along until she almost feels guilty about it. When she finally visits Ellis House, he will dryly remark that Thursday is a long time arriving.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Ruth finds Owney on the porch and they walk through the moonlit forest, around the edge of a deep quarry, and back into woods until they reach a sheer wall of granite. There she pulls Owney close, kisses him, and is surprised when he uses his tongue. She has kissed a few boys but it is never like this. Ruth needs to have her nipples kissed and Owney does not disappoint. They race feverishly to a small beach, clear space in an old shed, undress, and come together. She has never been able to picture sex and had hoped that her first partner would guide her through it. She has figured that it will be difficult, grim, and probably painful, but it is wonderful. They try every position, like raunchy professionals before falling asleep. When they wake up and hike back, Toby is waiting. They stop holding hands and Ruth verifies that she has not lost the precious key.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 brings Ruth and Owney together in the woods in surprisingly explicit detail. Having in earlier chapters yearned to show Owney her nipples, Ruth now burns to have them kissed. She is surprised that two novices find sex so natural. Ruth cannot control the wanderings of her mind. At each stage she declares that she will be satisfied with such-and-such, but then asks herself whom is she kidding: she wants more! Marginally related things run through her mind: could Owney's slow speech be related to the fact that his tongue is soft and big and so perfect for kissing? How will the people in her life react to her and Owney being naked together? She had worried about the first time being awkward and painful, but is pleased that they both perform like professionals. Ruth may have kissed boys rarely, but she has obviously heard about a wide variety of sexual practices and enjoys them all. She is quite happy being, as she says, raunchy. Sated, Ruth and Owney fall asleep and in the morning are caught returning by Toby.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Ruth lays low for most of the fall of 1976. Toby catching her and Owney is unpleasant, but the reason that her father makes her feel unwelcome at home comes four days later, when Ruth forces Stan to eat dinner with her and then calls him a liar and a coward for never expressing an opinion about anything. He claims that nothing that she or her mother does affects him and that everything is determined by you-know-who. Ruth weeps after the fight at Rhonda's and stays with her through July, August, and early September, going home only when she knows that her father is out. She has nothing to do. Kitty too lives at Rhonda's, thrown out by Len, who takes up with desperate Florida Cobb. Kitty is badly upset, drinking all day and crying all night. She is violent when they try to put her to bed. Opal is no help with her and Robin defends her. Rhonda thinks that they are all just teasing each other.

To prevent Ruth and Owney from seeing one another, Toby sails the coast, preaching Ruth yearns for sex with Owney and Rhonda seems to approve. Ruth hides from Angus, who calls her a slut and, most of all, from Lanford and, Cal, who will fetch her to him. Simon cannot believe the luck that brings him the building. Ruth is helping him build display cases when Cal appears, as she has dreaded. After making a nuisance of himself, Cal offers to take Ruth Lanford, but she finds excuses for every date that he proposes. Ruth and Simon are both surprised to hear that Lanford will remain on Fort Niles until he sees Ruth. Webster interrupts, carrying a mud-caked human skull, which is determined to be that of Jane Smith-Ellis. Simon cannot figure why Ruth has been so unhappy lately. That fall, word spreads that Lanford is staying because of Ruth and people want answers. Cal does not search Ruth out. It suffices that she has been summoned.

Mid-November, Stan visits the Pommeroys. Ruth has ducked under the table to fetch a lost spoon. and, hearing Stan's voice, Ruth gets very quiet and Rhonda keeps the secret. Stan asks about Ruth's plans, because he has received a letter from her mother. Vera and Mary want to know her college plans. Rhonda says that Ruth has something to tell him that he may not like, but refuses to get involved. Kitty blurts out that Ruth is pregnant and too afraid to tell him. As Rhonda tries to comfort Stan, Kitty says it is a breeze to have babies. Kitty laughs when she realizes that Ruth is under the table.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

One expects Chapter 12 to show Ruth ostracized and Owney kept apart from her, and this is the case, but Gilbert says the reason for her having to lie low come less from having been caught having sex, but from an argument with her father about him not caring about anything that she does, including the sex. This has been building recently, but has been seen from the beginning of the novel. He lumps Ruth with her mother as





people whom he cannot control and, therefore, simply leaves to their own devices. Ruth becomes depressed and living in the tumultuous Pommeroy house with its own turmoils does not help. A few minor characters' conflicts are wrapped up. They generally have no compassion for Ruth's sorrow, although Rhonda understands the sharp new yearning. Owey has been sentenced to sea duty and has no way of phoning Ruth. Amusingly, Ruth has no interest in conversing with Owey, she wants his body.

Ruth avoids many people that autumn but most fears being found by Cal on a mission from Lanford. She helps Simon set up his Museum. The project is described in great detail, concentrating on his map collection. There is no long formal aside as in the past, but descriptions of Simon showing Ruth his reproduction of a Mercator-Hondius map (1633) and talking about the heroism of the first mapmakers, contrasting the accuracy of what they see with what lies, unseen and only imagined, inland. Simon savors stories about what they get wrong with Pedro Cabral finding Brazil instead of India, John Cabot Newfoundland instead of Japan, and Verrazano New York instead of the Spice Islands. Simon is in ecstasy, planning his exhibits. He has abandoned Webster to his mudflats. Ruth remembers since childhood going through Simon's files on shipwrecks and hearing gory stories about what can happen to anyone in a boat. Once again she sees his nightmare photographs - and then Cal appears.

Lanford wants to see Ruth but she finds excuses to bring her up to the for every date up to the second Saturday in September when Ellises traditionally pack up and return to Concord. This has been so well established in the novel that one can feel Ruth, Simon, and all the islanders' shock when Lanford refuses to leave until they have met. Seeing his boat in the harbor after the normal date, then seeing it pulled ashore for maintenance and storage, and having the leaves drop from the trees to reveal lights on upstairs in Ellis House, all unnerve people, who have been shown to thrive on gossip. Ruth is prepared to let Lanford winter on Fort Niles. She does not want to see him. Recall her vow to oppose any Ellis' will. Ruth and Lanford hunker down for a war of nerves that goes on for years.

At the point that Cal dramatically announces Lanford's decision, poor Webster appears, carrying a mud-caked human skull. Forensics determines that it is probably that of Ruth's grandmother, Jane Smith-Ellis, drowned by a rogue wave in 1927. Aside from the drama, the scene is used to show a wedge grow up between Simon and Ruth when he begs her not to tell her mother about the find, lest it devastate her. One imagines that the find may have made the newspapers. Ruth reaction is to cry, uncharacteristically, and ask why Simon would not expect this to devastate her as well. Simon is crushed at having upset Ruth, who refuses to be consoled.

The characters are left thus hanging until mid-November when Stan visits the Pommeroys. Recalling the early scene in which Ruth hides under a table to listen in on Simon's conversation with the newly-widowed Rhonda about her family's future, Ruth finds herself under the table when Stan arrives and remains hidden. Thus she hears drunken Kitty blurt out the news that Ruth is several months pregnant. Stan is appropriately stunned.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

By the summer of 1982, the Skillet County Fishing Cooperative is benefiting the dozen lobstermen who join. It operates out of Simon's Museum under the direction of Ruth Thomas-Wishnell. She gets the idea in 1977, her son David's christening, seeing Stan and Babe Wishnell in one room, each grimly scribbling calculations about making money. When Lanford offers Ruth the lighthouse lens, she sells it for \$22,000 and starts a bait dealership, after getting Stan, Simon, Angus, and Babe to support it. It quickly saves lobstermen time and money and, within six months, Ruth expands to a full cooperative with Babe as president, Webster running the scales, and Rhonda having a calming effect as secretary. There are some threats and petty violence, but these trail off. Angus holds out for two years.

After working two years as Stan's sternman, Owey buys a fiberglass boat, they incorporate together, and grow rich. Owey is a natural fisherman and comes home feeling amorous, which Ruth likes. She is proud of herself, considers further expansion, and wonders what her Delaware classmates are doing. She is most proud of not letting the Ellises drive her away. Pregnant again in 1982, Ruth finally visits Lanford, who grins slyly, reminding her that she is six years late for dinner. Ruth intends to buy land on which to build a house, but ends up asking for Ellis House itself and demanding that Lanford vacate. She calls it restitution for what his family has done to hers. Agreeing, Lanford claims always to have hoped that Ruth would organize the islands and expected her to rebel. He is happy about her marriage and hopes for a dynasty. His father would be proud. They part without anger or sadness. Seeing his grin, Ruth gives Lanford a kiss on the forehead.

## Epilogue Analysis

The Epilogue moves the story forward to the summer of 1982 and briskly summarizes how over the last five years Ruth has married Owey, given birth to David, founded the Skillet County Fishing Cooperative, and earned a great deal of money. Recall the vigor with which Ruth had rejected the idea of a cooperative when Toby had sung the praises of such an intelligent enterprise. The co-op operates out of Simon's Intra-Island Memorial Museum of Natural History. The name suggests that the old animosities have been dropped as lobstermen on both islands see the practical value of working together. The price is Simon not getting the coveted Goat's Rock lighthouse lens for his collection, for Lanford gives that to Ruth personally and without restrictions. She sells it to raise seed money for the co-op, whose idea springs from watching her father and Babe Wishnell calculate profits during her son's baptism. Since all of the lobstermen perform the same tasks, she offers services that save them time and money. She enlists the high-liners, knowing that others will follow their lead. She starts small, proves value,



and then expands. She is rightly proud of her success, and particularly proud at not letting the Ellises drive her away from Fort Niles.

Ruth learns that this had never been Lanford's intention when they finally meet. Pregnant again, Ruth wants to build a fine house atop Ellis Hill. He claims always to have hoped that she would organize the islands and counted on her always rebelling. Recall Toby's contention that Fort Niles will fail for lack of leadership. She has provided it. Lanford hopes that she founds a dynasty. Ruth is not ready to accept these novel idea, having been too long filled with anger at the family's humiliation. She finds restitution the perfect word for her proposal: Lanford will vacate Ellis House and give it to her. He agrees and they part neither angry nor sad. Seeing the broken centenarian grinning broadly, Ruth plants an appreciative kiss on his grandfatherly forehead.



# Characters

## Ruth Thomas-Wishnell

The novel's protagonist, known by her maiden surname, Thomas, until the Epilogue when she marries, Ruth is described as having a difficult birth in the last week of May 1958, during terrible storms. She is the daughter of Stan and Mary Thomas. Her father is a native Fort Niles Island lobsterman and her mother is a former servant from Concord, NH. The pretty baby grows into a very pretty girl, with remarkable posture and striking presence. Her first word is a firm "no." At age four, Ruth is abandoned by her mother under mysterious circumstances and attaches herself to the neighbors, the Pommeroys and becomes the lone girl in a pack of boys. As she loves fun-loving Rhonda more than her mother, this is not traumatic.

At her mother's insistence, Mary is sent to an elite girls' boarding school in Delaware to broaden her horizons, but she does the minimum, refuses to socialize, and returns at age of 18 with no plans for college. Although Fort Niles is cold and boring, Ruth tells her mother that this is where she belongs, lobstering with her father. When she serves as Stan's sternman, however, they irritate one another. In this period she is described as having black hair so thick that one could sew a button on a coat with a strand of it, a roundish face, an inoffensive nose, and a large rear end but caring nothing about such girly things. Her reading and acquired accent set her apart from fellow islanders. Ruth is a master of sarcasm.

Ruth's only friend besides Rhonda is eccentric, elderly Senator Simon Addams, twin brother of her father's best friend, Angus. With nothing else to do, when her father hires someone else as his sternman, Ruth spends most days talking with Simon and watching hapless Webster Pommeroy search for artifacts in chest-deep mud on Potter Beach. Simon works hard to convince Ruth to abandon any ideas of going to sea as a lobsterman or perhaps in the Coast Guard. When Webster against all odds finds an elephant tusk, Ruth accompanies him and Simon to Ellis House, to renew Simon's plea for the use of the abandoned Ellis Granite Company Store to serve as a Natural History Museum. They are turned away by tycoon Lanford Ellis' pretentious caretaker, Cal Cooley, who has served as Ruth's chauffeur during her school days. She finds Cal pretentious and loathsome. Twice a year Ruth is summoned to an audience by Lanford and told what she is to be doing without explanation. Ruth vows to do nothing more that he or his family wants.

Ruth develops a crush on big, silent Owney Wishnell, nephew of the despised Pastor Toby Wishnell and captain of his mission boat, the New Hope. Toby is determined to keep the young people apart and lectures Ruth on the need to escape the stifling island and realize her potential. She regrets not telling Toby that she is an atheist. Ruth, who drinks heavily at a gala wedding reception, runs off into the woods with Owney for fabulous sex, which results in her getting pregnant. A fight over her father's unconcern about anything she does estranges them for months.



When Ruth and Owney marry and David Thomas Wishnell is born, Ruth conceives an idea to form a cooperative, an idea that she had previously rejected when Toby presented it. Selling a lighthouse lens that is given to her by Lanford, Ruth raises \$22,000 as start-up money for a modest bait dealership that saves lobstermen time and money. Within six months, Ruth expands this into the Skillet County Fishing Cooperative. It proves highly successful and bonds together the lobstermen of the two island.

When she becomes pregnant again in 1982, Ruth finally visits Lanford the long-promised visit. She intends to ask him for land on which to build a house, but ends up asking for Ellis House itself and demanding that Lanford vacate. She calls it restitution for what his family has done to hers. Agreeing, Lanford claims always to have hoped that Ruth would organize the islands and expected her to rebel. He is happy about her marriage and hopes for a dynasty. They part without anger or sadness. Seeing his grin, Ruth gives Lanford a kiss on the forehead.

## Rhonda Pommeroy

The mother of the large Pommeroy family that lives next door to protagonist Ruth Thomas, Rhonda bears seven sons in six years: Webster, Conway, John, Fagan, Timothy, Chester, and Robin. Her husband calls her Wanda, mimicking their son Robin's speech impediment, and the nickname spreads across the island. Most of the time, she is simply called Mrs. Pommeroy. Rhonda is not yet sixteen when she marries her cousin Ira, whom she adores above everything in life and whom she annoys with little gestures like tweaking his nipples and playing "Feet on you" when drunk. Rhonda drinks daily, even when pregnant, which some claim accounts her boys' inability to read. Rhonda is a true beauty who always looks like she is amazed and delighted. She piles her hair in a great, glossy pile. She speaks with the Down East accent of New England, close to the brogue of the original island settlers. Especially when drinking, Rhonda nudges a bit too energetically to show affection. Her sisters are Kitty and Gloria.

When Ira drowns while fishing for lobsters, blind-drunk, and Ruth's mother, Mary, leaves the island mysteriously, Rhonda becomes the mother figure in Ruth's life, treating her lovingly as the daughter she has been denied. Rhonda longs for Ruth to marry one of her sons, but this is not to be. As a widow, Rhonda survives by cutting the hair of virtually everyone on the island. Though untrained, she has a knack, the lobstermen enjoy the flirtatious attention, and the wives are pleased not to have to do the unpleasant job. Her sons, when they grow, supplement her income when they can and at least cost her little. The house is long ago paid off and needs few repairs. Frugal, Rhonda and her sisters one night paint her kitchen using her late husband's disgusting lime-green marine paint left over from painting his lobster-pot buoys.

Pastor Toby Wishnell hires Rhonda to do the hair of participants in a gala Wishnell family wedding on neighboring Courne Haven Island. She takes Ruth and Kitty along. Business is brisk and everyone is pleased with her skill. During the reception, Rhonda tells Ruth where to find Owney Wishnell, on whom Ruth has a crush, and they go off



into the woods to have sex. Shunned by her father after a fight, Ruth moves in with Rhonda, who soon realizes that Ruth is pregnant. Before marrying Ira, Rhonda had fantasized about marrying one of the handsome Wishnells but had not been in their social circle. When Ruth founds the hugely-successful Skillet County Fishing Cooperative, she hires Rhonda for secretarial work. Rhonda is skilled at calming their anger and often throws a hair cut into the bargain.

## Senator Simon Addams

Born in 1904 after the murder of his fiery father, Valentine R. Addams, Simon is the twin brother of the ruthless lobsterman, Angus Adams. As a boy Simon is fat and listless and he grows into an intellectual, unnaturally large, with a misshapen head, and large doughy hands - and a deathly fear of the sea. This is a detriment, as Simon seeks to establish the Fort Niles Island Natural History Museum to house and display the books and artifacts that he spends a lifetime collecting. His nickname Senator oddly derives from his knowledge of a wide variety of subjects, rather than for holding political office. It is used half-mockingly. People consider Simon eccentric but authoritative.

Simon admires Mary Thomas and brings his peppery chicken soup to strengthen her in the delivery of her first baby, protagonist Ruth Thomas. Simon earns money repairing furniture, lobster traps, and beached boats. He builds a coffin for Ira Pommeroy but cannot attend the funeral, because of his phobia about drowning. Simon is accompanied everywhere by his year-old mutt, Cookie, who daily chases the lobster boats out to sea and daily nearly drowns. With his phobia, Simon can only stand on the dock, begging her to return. Although the Pommeroy boys cannot read, Simon brings them after the funeral an expensive book detailing the three voyages around the world of Capt. James Smith, hoping to inspire them with sailing. He warns the widow, whom he admires, that the men of Fort Niles are likely to come, offering to purchase at fire sale prices her husband's boat and gear. He advises against selling, should the boys, when they come of age, want to fish.

Simon is 73 the year that Ruth graduates from high school. Thwarted in her attempts to fish, she spends time with Simon, one of her only friends. Simon has set himself the task of recovering a tusk from an elephant lost during the wreck of the Clarice Monroe in 1838. He hires hapless 23-year-old Webster Pommeroy to do the actual searching in the treacherous mudflats. Five times Simon has groveled before Lanford Ellis' pretentious caretaker, Cal Cooley, seeking an audience to plead for use of the long-vacant Ellis Granite Company Store to house his Museum. As Simon collects common objects indiscriminately, he has run out of room in his house. The artifacts are unsorted and uncataloged. Simon believes that one cannot know what posterity will find valuable.

When Ruth receives from Lanford the key to the Company Store, she and Simon set about organizing and building. Simon has keen interests in early mapmakers, explorers who bumble into discoveries, and shipwrecks and lighthouses throughout history. He constantly warns that no one is safe on a boat of any size under any conditions. Simon's



dream comes true when the Intra-Island Memorial Museum of Natural History opens for business.

## Angus Addams

Born in 1904 after the murder of his fiery father, Valentine R. Addams, Angus is foul-mannered. The twin brother of friendly and scholarly Simon Addams, Angus hates everyone on the island and states his reasons loudly and crudely. An aggressive, unscrupulous, and intuitive fisherman, Angus earns the nickname Greedy Number One. His closest friend and former protégé, Stan Thomas, whom he also abuses, holds the nickname Greedy Number Two. Angus has a reputation for being a bully and a bigot, but Stan's daughter, protagonist Ruth Thomas, likes him because he is at least not a hypocrite.

The skipper of the Sally Chestnut, Angus is a legend for losing a finger in a winch accident, kicking it overboard, cauterizing the stub with his cigar, and continuing work. Angus finds the body of Ira Pommeroy three days after he drowns, brings it ashore after completing his day's work, and deposits in on the dock, where the Pommeroy boys see it and are traumatized. During the fourth lobster war in the mid-1960s, Angus is the most aggressive cutter, without warning cutting the lines on any traps that impinge on his territories. He even cuts Stan's and casts the buoys down at his feet. When peace returns, they resume eating, drinking, and playing cribbage together. When Ruth becomes pregnant, he calls her a whore. When she becomes a successful businesswoman, founding the Skillet County Fishing Cooperative, Angus is the last holdout, joining only after two years.

## Jim Burden

The 19-year-old son of Fred Burden of Courne Haven Island, ME, who is hospitalized in a bar fight with Don Pommeroy of Fort Niles Island, Jim, who has experience only as a sternman, finds Ira Pommeroy's buoys floating in his family's fishing territory and sets out to confront him. He ends up in the Mighty J far out in the Atlantic, lost, and out of gas in a terrible storm. Jim radios for help and is told by Ned Wishnell, a premier lobsterman, to drop anchor and wait. Everyone on both islands commences to search. Several hours later Ned finds Jimmy and tries to board the Might J but in heavy seas is dumped overboard and is crushed between the boats and vanishes. This tragedy ends the lobster war of the mid-1950s.

## Cal Cooley

The sole servant of tycoon Lanford Ellis of Concord, NH, Cal is a jack-of-all-trades, keeping the grounds of Ellis House on Fort Niles Island and performing other duties summers when Lanford is in residence. Cal comes from Missouri and speaks with what protagonist Ruth Thomas believes is an exaggerated Southern accent. For years Cal ferries Ruth to and from school and on visits to her mother in Concord. Ruth finds him a



phony, particularly when he refers to himself in the third person as Old Cal Cooley. He is tall and thick-built, with black hair combed back, large blue-black eyes, a thick nose, huge chin, and a lined forehead. He could be anywhere from 40 to 60 and has served the family for some 20 years. Cal clearly has sexual desires towards young Ruth. He is not pleased being reminded that he and drunken Kitty Pommeroy, Ruth's aunt, are former lovers.

Cal is first seen polishing a magnificent lighthouse lens recently bought by Lanford. He has put in 90 hours on the project and shows great pride in the artifact, which Senator Simon Addams covets for his proposed Natural History Museum. Simon regularly appeals to Lanford about his project but, like everyone else on the islands has to deal with Cal as an intermediary. When Webster Pommeroy finds an elephant's tusk, Cal turns him, Lanford, and Ruth away and takes the artifact for safekeeping. When Lanford gives Ruth the lighthouse lens to do with as she wishes, Cal is crestfallen but must turn it over.

Cal also does the bidding of Pastor Toby Wishnell and keeps the latter's nephew Owney jumping, ferrying passengers back and forth to Toby's boat. Seeing an attraction between Owney and Ruth, Cal does his best to keep them separate. At a gala Wishnell wedding, Cal gets his one change to be close to Ruth, who is drunk and dancing with everyone. His lewd moves revolt her. Later that evening, she meets Owney and they run off into the woods to have sex. They marry and Ruth becomes a successful businesswoman. When she demands that Lanford turn over Ellis House to her as reparation for the way his family has mistreated hers, Lanford is required to move the old man's possessions back to Concord. Ruth take pleasure in this reversal of roles.

## Jane Smith-Ellis

Protagonist Ruth Thomas' maternal grandmother, Jane is abandoned as a newborn in 1884 at the Bath Naval Orphans' Hospital and adopted in 1894 by young Dr. Jules Ellis to serve as his only daughter's companion. Jane in fact becomes Vera's lady-in-waiting. Jane is big, shy, and accommodating, accompanying Vera everywhere but, as a legal relative, is paid no salary for her efforts. In 1925 Jane becomes pregnant at age 41. She reveals only that the father is Italian. Assuming that he is a quarry worker, the Ellises are amazed and horror-struck. Jane continues her duties and arrives on Fort Niles Island the day before giving birth to a daughter, Mary. She cares for Vera by day and for Mary by night, helped days by kind family servants. Jane is freed from virtual slavery in 1927 when a huge wave sweeps her off a rock on which she is knitting. Her body is never recovered. Mary inherits the terrible position until her marriage to Stan Thomas. Decades later, Jane's skull is recovered from the mudflats on Potter Beach, Fort Niles Island.





## Dr. Jules Ellis

The original patriarch of the Ellis family of Concord, NH, Jules founds the Ellis Granite Company to exploit the wealth of Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands and builds for his family a great house at the summit of Fort Niles as a summer escape from the unhealthy city. It also serves to oversee his investments. Jules is more a captain of industry than a physician. In 1894 he adopts a ten-year-old orphan named Mary Smith to be his only daughter Vera's twin and companion. In fact, Jane becomes Vera's slave. Annually Jules brings his wife, five children, an entourage, and friends to Fort Niles on the third Saturday in June and leaves on the second Saturday in September. By 1976, only Jules' 94-year-old son Lanford keeps up the tradition. Frail Vera prefers to remain in Concord year-round. In the Epilogue, Lanford tells protagonist Ruth Thomas that Jules would have been proud of her marriage and success in business.

## Lanford Ellis

One of the sons of tycoon Dr. Julius Ellis of Concord, NH, Lanford succeeds him as head of family. He helps run his sister Vera's affairs, serving as intermediary in freeing Mary Smith-Ellis from servitude when she marries Stan Thomas. He takes an active interest in their daughter, protagonist Ruth Thomas. At age 94, Lanford is the only Ellis who keeps up the tradition of spending the summer on Fort Niles Island. As the sole heir of Lanford House, he forbids his many relatives from visiting. He is attended by a single servant, Cal Cooley, who lives year-round on the island. Twice a year Lanford summons Ruth, whom he affectionately addresses as granddaughter, to issue orders that he does not explain. She comes to avoid him whenever possible and vows to do nothing to please the Ellises. When she refuses a summons to dinner, Lanford refuses to go to Concord for the winter, upsetting the islanders. She accepts his unconditional gift of a rare lighthouse lens and sells it to raise seed money for a lobstermen's cooperative, but refuses to visit. She finally gives in when he is 100 and quite frail, and demands that he cede to her the house as reparations for his family's maltreatment of hers. Agreeing, Lanford reveals that he had always looked to her in her rebelliousness to become a leader of the islands and to restore them to prosperity. He approves of her marriage and hopes that she founds a dynasty. Touched by his grin, Ruth gives him a tender kiss goodbye. Lanford's fate is not revealed.

## Vera Ellis / Mrs. Joseph Hanson

The daughter of tycoon Dr. Jules Ellis of Concord, NH, Vera becomes the virtual slave-owner of protagonist Ruth Thomas' grandmother and mother. As a young girl who endures too much time with brothers, Vera demands a sister and on her tenth birthday is presented orphan Jane Smith as a twin sister. Vera keeps Jane busy attending to her extensive wardrobe. Photographs show homely Vera wearing a look of exquisite boredom. Placid Jane accompanies Vera everywhere as a handmaid but, as a legal relative, is paid no salary for her efforts. In 1905, Vera marries a Bostonian, Joseph Hanson, who joins the household. They have no children but maintain a heavy social



schedule, which keeps Jane busy serving. When Jane bears an illegitimate daughter, Mary, by an Italian quarryman, her labors are not eased and, when Jane drowns, Vera feels abandoned and prepares year-old baby Mary as a substitute servant.

The same pattern of non-stop and backbreaking labor is repeated until Mary, preparing for a gala picnic on Fort Niles, meets Stan Thomas. They are married the next summer, against Vera's warnings about the rigors of winter on the island and how marriage restricts a person. Vera does not throw one of her famous tantrums, but denies Mary the use of Ellis House for the wedding. When Mary's second child is born with severe disabilities, Mary returns to serving Vera in exchange for life-long medical care for the boy. Vera pays for Mary's oldest daughter Ruth's private education and tries to convince her to move to Concord and attend college. Ruth stays away whenever possible.

In Concord in 1976, however, Ruth visits Concord. She finds Vera looking like a frightened bird. Vera has Cal Cooley drive them to shop for clothes for Ruth. Vera has turned into a giggler in old age, speaks with a trace of an English accent, and makes every sentence seem wistful. She is still infamous on Fort Niles Island for forcing workmen to drink from the hose rather than letting them enter the kitchen for water. She no longer summers on the island, claiming that she is too infirm. Vera's fate is not revealed.

## **Conway, John, and Chester Pommeroy**

The three sons of Ira and Rhonda Pommeroy who join the military to escape Fort Niles Island, Conway joins the Navy, does two tours in the Vietnam War, and in 1972 he is wounded. After rehabilitating, he marries the widow of a buddy and settles in Connecticut on disability. John and Chester join the Army, too late for Vietnam. John serves in Germany, where he is discharged and disappears. Chester moves to California, where he where he turns into a drug freak and joins the Gypsy Bandoleer Bandits, fortune tellers. They twice visit Fort Niles. Chester does not respond to protagonist Ruth Thomas' requests for marijuana. She hears later that he has many children without marrying.

## **Don Pommeroy and Fred Burden**

The two lobstermen who precipitate the destructive lobster war of the mid-1950s by getting into a silly bar fight in Rockland, ME, Don is a bachelor lobsterman, known fool, and the milder brother of hot-headed Ira Pommeroy of Fort Niles Island. Fred a fiddler and lobsterman from Courne Haven. The fight, over whether Fred, hypothetically, could beat a five-foot monkey in a fight, lands Don in the hospital in a coma and Don being detained but not charged, since he too is badly beaten. Without learning details, Ira organizes a posse to attack Courne Haven and the two sides lock in a seven-month war that ruins the participants economically.



## Fagan Pommeroy

The middle son of Ira and Rhonda Pommeroy, Fagan is the only brother to show ambition when he grows up. Hating the sea, which drowns his father, Fagan moves to a small potato farm inland, where he hopes to be a foreman some day. His letters home bore Rhonda, but she welcomes the little money that he sends.

## Ira Pommeroy

The beloved husband and cousin of Rhonda Pommeroy, who helps raise protagonist Ruth Thomas after Ruth's mother leaves home, Ira is a small and muscular lobsterman with huge hands, which he carries fisted on his hips. He has an odd face, frowning, squinting, and always looking like he is offering a kiss. He dislikes Rhonda's playfulness when drunk, but loves her greatly. Ira drowns early in the novel while fishing alone and drinking, as he regularly does. Like most lobstermen, he cannot swim. His body is found three days later and is buried by the traveling Pastor Toby Wishnell. Ira's drinking had intensified when a prank during the fourth lobster war backfires and a leading fisherman drowns trying to rescue the young man whom Ira had enraged.

## Kitty and Gloria Pommeroy

Rhonda Pommeroy's elder sisters, Kitty and Gloria both drink, but Kitty regularly becomes fall-down drunk. When she hears something funny, she sinks to her knees and, when helped up, makes lady-like motions to cover her mouth and fix her hair. Gloria, the eldest, has a heavy, unhappy face. She never marries. In her youth Kitty works off-island and has numerous lovers. Abortions leave her unable to have a baby. She returns to the island after an explosion disfigures one side of her faces and marries Len Thomas, a fellow alcoholic, after having been lovers with Cal Cooley. Throughout the novel, Len, protagonist Ruth Thomas' hated uncle, threatens to throw her out for drunkenness. Kitty brags that when Len beats her, she beats him worse. She claims that it is, nevertheless, a good marriage. When eventually throws her out she moves in with Rhonda and wonders at why this is her fate.

## Robin, Opal, and Eddie Pommeroy

The youngest of the seven sons of Ira and Rhonda Pommeroy, Robin is the closest in age to protagonist Ruth Thomas and is her most regular playmate in childhood. Their daily game is gathering rocks to which Ruth pretends to give birth, in imitation of the Pommeroy parents. They capture all of their expressions and gestures. Robin is a fat little boy and an easy target for strong Ruth when they fight. He cannot pronounce his R's and his father's imitation of this impediment spreads among his fellow lobstermen. Still fat and dopey at 17, Robin marries a pretty, hefty teenager, Opal, from Rockland and they and their enormous baby Eddie move in with Rhonda. Overcoming his speech impediment, Robin becomes a motor-mouth, annoying Stan Thomas on whose boat he



serves as sternmen. Robin also regularly drops equipment overboard by accident, but he works so cheaply - since no one else wants him - that Stan tolerates him.

## Timothy Pommeroy

The fourth and quietest of the seven sons of Ira and Rhonda Pommeroy, Timothy grows up to be a decent person, working as sternman on Len Thomas' boat. Timothy closely resembles his late father and tolerates his hotheaded boss, working quietly with his back turned. Timothy keeps only whiskey money for himself, giving the rest to Rhonda, with whom he lives. He drinks all night, alone.

## Webster Pommeroy

The oldest and smartest of the seven sons of Ira and Rhonda Pommeroy, Webster is mentally destroyed at age 14 by the sight of his drowned father's body on the dock of Fort Miles. He stops growing and speaking. He cannot read a book. He is the childhood playmate of protagonist Ruth Thomas, who remains a loyal life-long friend. The only child old enough to work, Webster cannot become a sternman because of acute seasickness. He wants to be a farmer and keeps a few chickens. A family friend, Senator Simon Addams, wants to find for Webster a vocation, but Webster is too shy to request donations for Simon's Fort Niles Museum of Natural History or solicit artifacts from owners, or to help with construction. He is good sifting through mud, however, and pulling out treasures. At age 23 Webster spends every summer day searching the mud flats at Potter Beach for the legendary tusks of a circus elephant that perishes in 1838 with the sinking of the Clarice Monroe. The work is dangerous and seemingly hopeless, but Webster succeeds in finding one and continues looking for the second. Simon increasingly worries about Webster's obsession and physical safety. Webster also unearths the skull of Jane Smith-Ellis, who drowns in 1927. When Ruth forms the Skillet County Fishing Cooperative, she hires Webster to run the scales.

## Mary Smith-Ellis Thomas

Protagonist Ruth Thomas' mother, Mary inherits the onerous job of serving as lady-in-waiting to the spoiled and demanding Vera Ellis of Concord, NH, when her mother drowns while knitting beside the sea. Mary is allowed just enough education not to be a dull companion and then takes over her mother's odious chores. This keeps Mary too busy to have friends or lovers, but in 1955, Vera wants to throw a community picnic on Fort Niles Island and the work falls to Mary. She is assisted by Stan Thomas, who is soon smitten with her.

Against Vera's wishes, Mary and Stan wed the next summer and Mary leaves Vera's service. Uncle Lanford gives her \$10,000 in cash for a wedding dress, but the couple banks the money. It is a token amount, given all of her and her mother's unpaid services to the family. Married life is at first good, thanks to a lobster war that keeps Stan at home and attentive. Still, islanders had been concerned about her as the daughter of an



orphan and an Italian immigrant. During this period Mary gives birth to Ruth during a terrible storm. Island women expect her to die in childbirth, but she does not. Stan has turned into a workaholic and ignores her and the baby. A second pregnancy four years later goes badly and Mary returns to Concord to resume her chores in exchange for the special medical care required by disabled son Ricky. Ruth prefers neighbor Rhonda Pommeroy, who helps raise her, to her own mother, who does not have a delightful accent, swear colorfully, or drink daily. Ruth visits her mother as rarely as possible and deeply resents the way that the Ellises treat her. Eventually, Ruth demands restitution from the Ellises and gets it. Mary's and Risky's fates are not revealed.

## Len Thomas

The reckless, perennially broke uncle of protagonist Ruth Thomas, Len will take any job for money, including digging a grave for Ira Pommeroy when he drowns and storing his stinking corpse in the root cellar for the week it takes a minister to arrive for the funeral. Len is married to Gloria Pommeroy. They have no children. Ruth detests alcoholic Uncle Len and suggests that Gloria murder him in his sleep. Len eventually throws Gloria out and takes up with desperate Florida Cobb.

## Stan Thomas

The taciturn father of protagonist Ruth Thomas, Stan is a successful lobsterman on Fort Niles Island, earning the nickname Greedy Number Two while Greedy Number One is his best friend and former mentor, Angus Addams. Stan's wife, Mary, abandons the family mysteriously when Ruth is four years old, to give birth to a severely mentally challenged child, whom she raises in Concord, NH. Tall, handsome, broad-shouldered, thin-hipped Stan has discreet liaisons but never remarries. He is fastidious about his appearance, has dark hair, green eyes, and a mustache. He has a reputation as a cheapskate and a hustler, but Ruth chalks that up to jealousy among his rivals. Stan's boat is the Miss Ruthie and his buoys are painted red and blue.

Stan reluctantly hires his daughter to serve as sternman during the summers that she spends at home from private school, but this leads to arguments. The summer that she graduates (1976), he hires someone else, leaving her with nothing to do. Ruth hates that Stan never states an opinion on anything, even on the revelation that she and Owey Wishnell have sex. Father and daughter are estranged for months. He learns that she is pregnant from a drunken neighbor. When she conceives the idea of a lobstermen's cooperative, she enlists Stan as one of the major players to ensure that others will join. Owey, his new son-in-law works several years as Stan's sternman before buying his own boat and forming with him a corporation. They make a fortune together.



## Babe Wishnell

A prosperous lobsterman on Courne Haven Island, ME, Babe throws a gala wedding for his daughter, Dorothy (Dotty) Wishnell, and Charlie Burden. At the reception, Babe roasts the newlyweds with dubious humor and anecdotes that he does not realize embarrass himself. Protagonist Ruth Thomas slips off into the woods to meet Babe's cousin, Owney Wishnell. They conceive a baby at whose baptism Babe, like Ruth's father, Stan, both sit grimly calculating how to maximize profits. Seeing this, Ruth conceives of a way to help all of the lobstermen perform routine chores. This grows into the vastly profitable Skillet County Fishing Cooperative, as whose president Babe serves.

## Ned Wishnell

Reputedly the best fisherman in Maine, Ned hears young Jim Burden's call for help when he runs out of gas out in the Atlantic. Everyone responds to the distress call, but it is Ned who finds the boy and, while trying hastily to board his boat, slips into the water and is crushed between the hulls. His body sinks. The tragedy of someone who had not taken part in the petty squabbles dying during a rescue makes everyone on both islands come to their senses and end their conflicts. Ned's beautiful, 20-year-old widow Allison flees home to Kennebunkport, ME, damning repulsive Courne Haven Island and leaving her year-old son, Owney, to be raised by her brother-in-law, Pastor Toby Wishnell.

## Owney Wishnell

The son of the famed lobsterer, Ned Wishnell, whose drowning death while rescuing a hotheaded young fool leads to the end of the lobster war of the mid-1950s, Owney then abandoned by his mother, Allison Cavanaugh, and is raised by his uncle, Pastor Toby Wishnell. From childhood, Owney longs to be a lobsterman, but Toby forbids this and pushes him to the ministry. Owney grows into a large, painfully quiet young man with strong Swedish features. He maintains and pilots his uncle's boat, the New Hope, on far-ranging missionary voyages along the coast. Protagonist Ruth Thomas as a young girl first sees Owney standing on the dock during a funeral at which the uncle officiates. She runs into Owney several times years later and frustrates herself trying to draw him into conversation. He is big and square with a squarish head, massive forearms, and beautiful, unscarred hands. He dresses like a lobsterman but in immaculate gear. He wears his light hair in a homemade crew cut, and has light-blue eyes.

Free of his uncle's supervision for a short time, Owney shows Ruth that he has been successfully setting lobster pots, whose catches he frees, because his uncle forbids him to become a fisherman. After a wedding, Owney and Ruth sneak off to make love in the forest, conceiving a son, and end up marrying and having a son, David Thomas Wishnell. Toby is forced to marry them. Owney becomes father-in-law Stan's sternman for several years before buying his own boat (the island's first fiberglass one) and they



go into business together. Owney's natural talents are evident and they make a great deal of money.

## Pastor Toby Wishnell

The much-hated roving pastor whose parish, based on Courne Haven Island, ME, extends from Casco on the Songo River along the whole coastline of Maine and into Nova Scotia, Toby prides himself on being the first Wishnell not to fish for lobsters. Instead, he becomes a pastor, operating off a floating mission church, the New Hope, assisted by his nephew, Owney Wishnell, whom he wants to make in his own image. Toby's zeal contrasts with his predecessor, Pastor Mort Beekman, whose air of unconcern impresses the fishermen. Residents of Fort Niles Island, long rivals of Courne Haven, are particularly hostile to Toby for his haughtiness and for rejecting the family's supernatural ability to locate and catch lobsters. His good looks and cultivated manner are resented. Toby is seen performing an elegant, flawless funeral for Ira Pommeroy. He preaches about the community's duty to raise the orphaned Pommeroy boys in the Christian faith. He is also shown, however, lecturing protagonist Ruth Thomas about all of the good he does, spiritually and temporally for those he visits and tries to convince her to abandon the island and make something of herself. She hates him and wishes that she had the courage to tell him that she is an atheist. Toby does his best to keep Owney from seeing Ruth, but eventually has to marry them. He brings up Owney after his brother, the boy's father, drowns and Owney's mother abandons him.



## Objects/Places

### Clarice Monroe

A 400-ton side-wheel steamboat lost in October of 1838 just outside the Worthy Channel that separates Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands, the Clarice Monroe is carrying 97 passengers when she catches fire and sinks. Corpses float up on Fort Niles' Potter Beach. She is also carrying from New Brunswick to Boston, MA, a small circus. Three horses swim to shore, but the rest of the menagerie is lost, including an elephant. Senator Simon Addams hears the story in his youth and, 138 years later as a 73-year-old, decides to find the tusks to serve as the centerpiece of the Fort Niles Museum of Natural History, which he has been working on establishing for years. Remarkably, one is recovered from the mudflats.

### Concord, NH

The town in which the wealthy Ellis Family winters, Concord is home to Mary Smith-Ellis Thomas and her son Ricky from shortly after his birth in Rockland, ME. Mary had previously served, like her mother before her as Vera Ellis' virtual slave. Mary has returned to the grind in return for medical care for her disabled child. She is thus estranged from her husband Stan and daughter, the novel's protagonist, Ruth Thomas. When Ruth visits Concord in 1976, elderly Vera takes her to Blaire's Lady's Dress Shop, but refuses to deal with the current Mr. Blaire, who has inherited the business from the father whom Vera remembers. Vera and Mary - and allies on Fort Ellis Island - regularly pressure Ruth to move to Concord, but she resolutely refuses.

### Courne Haven, ME

One of two fictional islands located some twenty miles off the coast of Maine, Courne Haven is separated from Fort Niles by the Worthy Channel. Named for the English doctor who saves a pregnant Dutch resident's life fifty years before permanent settlement takes place (1758), Courne Haven is dominated by the Cobb, Pommeroy, Strachen and Wishnell families. Courne Haven reaches a maximum population of 618 in 1889, thanks largely to Swedish immigrants hired by the Ellis Granite Company as laborers. Courne Haven yields primarily cobblestone-grade granite. There is some intermarriage between the Swedes and locals, producing a streak of blonds in the population. The finest home on the island is Pastor Toby Wishnell's three-story Victorian home. There are other nearly as splendid summer homes in the vicinity, as the Ellis family does not ban summer visitors as it does on Fort Niles. Its garden is used for a gala wedding attended by the protagonist Ruth Thomas. She and Toby's nephew Owney slip off into the forest to make love.





## Delaware

Delaware is the state in which protagonist Ruth Thomas attends an unnamed, elite, private girls' school at the request of her estranged mother, Mary, who wants her to be exposed to something other than lobster fishing, alcoholism, ignorance, and cold weather on Fort Niles Island off the coast of Maine. Wishing to join other young people from the island at Rockland High School, Ruth does the minimum required, ignores the other girls, whose interests are horses and skin care, and returns to the island every summer, where she claims, despite its discomforts and boredom, to belong. When she makes her fortune, Ruth wonders (without really caring) what the other girls from Delaware are doing with their lives.

## Ellis Granite Company

For decades the backbone of the economy on Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands, the Ellis Granite Company systematically denudes the islands of granite until the market for the product fails. On both islands vast quarries have filled with spring water and the cheap housing and stores provided immigrant workers are abandoned and rot. The three-story Company Store, while abandoned, is in relatively good shape. Protagonist Ruth Thomas talks Lanford Ellis into donating it to house the Intra-Island Memorial Museum of Natural History.

## Ellis House

The resplendent residence of the wealthy Ellis family of Concord, NH, stands at the summit of Fort Niles Island, overlooking it and neighboring Courne Have Island. It is the finest structure on the island, resembling a small bank with elements of the Roman bath house. Built of black, tombstone-grade granite locally quarried, it dates from 1883. It has always been used by the Ellis family only during the summer. The winter home in Concord is referred to as the Ellis Mansion. The sole residence at the time of the novel is elderly Lanford Ellis, who is attended by his jack-of-all-trades Cal Cooley, a year-round resident. In 1976 Lanford breaks tradition by arriving on 18 April and does not leave for years. In the end, he turns it over to protagonist Ruth Thomas-Wishnell as reparation for the way his family has exploited hers for generations.

## Fort Niles Island, ME

The lion's share of the novel is set on Fort Niles Island, one of a pair of fictional islands located some twenty miles off the coast of Maine, Fort Niles is separated from its twin, Courne Haven Island, by the Worthy Channel. The populations, which share everything in common, are fierce economic rivals. Named for a Dutch child born fifty years before permanent settlement takes place (1761), Fort Niles counts among its notable citizens the Dalgleishes, Thomases, Addamses, Lyfords, Cardoways, O'Donnells, and Cobbses. It reaches a maximum population of 627 in 1889, thanks to the influx of Italian



immigrants hired by the Ellis Granite Company to serve as skilled artisans. They are housed in wretched "peanut houses" (pg. 69), which, along with a tiny Catholic church, fall into ruin as the need for mausoleum-grade granite falls off. They leave the island. There is virtually no intermarriage or indeed social contact between the Italians and the natives, in contrast with Courne Haven, where Swedish laborers occasionally take wives. By 1976 nearly all vestiges of the once-prospering business have rusted away. An exception is the grand Ellis House, located on the summit and the abandoned old company store in the harbor area. Among the locales on the island mentioned in the novel are Gavin and Potter beaches.

## Fort Niles Museum of Natural History

The institution long envisaged by Senator Simon Addams to preserve the mass of books and memorabilia that he has collected over decades, the Museum has no financial backers. Simon's goal is to get wealthy, reclusive Lanford Ellis to rent to him or otherwise let him use the Ellis Granite Company Store, an abandoned three-story wooden building located by the harbor, to house everything. Simon's hapless assistant, Webster Pommeroy finds in the mud flats at Potter Beach a tusk from an elephant that perishes in 1838 with the sinking of a steamboat, the Clarice Monroe. Simon hopes that this find will tip the scales, but Lanford does not reply. Simon also hopes that a 5,000-lb. Fresnel lens from the Goat's Rock lighthouse may make its way into the Museum. Again, he is frustrated. When protagonist Ruth Thomas convinces Lanford to turn over the key, the work of organization and construction begins. The museum is renamed the Intra-Island Memorial Museum of Natural History when the cooperative creates harmony between the islands.

## Goat's Rock Lighthouse Lens

A great glass-and-brass Fresnel lens crafted in France in 1929, the lens is acquired by Lanford Ellis from the U.S. Coast Guard when it modernizes the Goat's Rock facility. It weights 5,000 lbs. but is so exquisitely balanced on its turntable that it can be spun by two fingers. Senator Simon Addams instantly wants it for his proposed Fort Niles Museum of Natural History and Lanford's assistant, Cal Cooley spends over 90 hours polishing the various components. He is upset when Lanford offers the lens to protagonist Ruth Thomas to do with as she wishes. She sells it for \$22,000 to raise seed money for a bait dealership that expands into the Skillet County Fishing Cooperative.

## New Hope

The boat that carries clergymen to the islands of Maine and Nova Scotia, where populations are too small to support full-time ministers, New Hope is built in 1915 and serves a series of pastors prior to Toby Wishnell. Toby has restored the 40-foot, glass-and-brass boat to the point that she is the most admired vessel in the islands. She is



large enough to have to anchor off-shore. Skipper Owney Wishnell, Toby's nephew who against all odds becomes the husband of protagonist Ruth Thomas, rows people too and from shore.

## Potter Beach

A ten-acre stretch of mudflats on Fort Niles Island, ME, Potter Beach is a treasure trove of lost treasures. Senator Simon Addams spends every day in the summers of 1975 and 1976 sitting on the rocks, watching young Webster Pommeroy wade out at low tide chest deep in the rancid-smelling muck, feeling about. Protagonist Ruth Thomas sits with Simon in 1976 after graduating from high school. He finds many things, much of it junk, but some museum-quality. Among the important items is an elephant tusk, the goal of the two-year search, and the skull of Jane Smith-Ellis, who drowns in 1927.

## Rockland, ME

A seacoast town in Maine, Rockland is seen serving as the port for Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands, where lobstermen sell their catches and provision themselves, and where the few bright youngsters who continue their education beyond age thirteen attend high school. Many islanders have extended family in Rockland. Suggestions that a ferry service be established is rejected by the independent-minded lobstermen.

Rockland is also the town that Mary and Stan Thomas visit, ostensibly for a short time, when protagonist Ruth Thomas is nine years old. There Mary gives birth to a second baby who suffers severe disabilities. Mother and son move from Rockland to Concord, NH, rather than returning with Stan to Fort Niles. Protagonist Ruth Thomas resents being sent to an expensive girls' boarding school in Delaware rather than to public high school in Rockland.

Finally, Rockland provides in the Wayside Hotel bar the flash-point for the fourth lobster war between the islanders. Don Pommeroy and Fred Burden get into a hypothetical argument about whether Don could beat a five-foot monkey in a fight. Unable to bear the inanity any longer, Fred punches Carl and a brief *mêlée* ensues. It ends with Don hospitalized in a coma. The two sides quickly escalate the conflict, bringing fishing to a halt for months and economically destroying the participants.

## Sternmen

Sternmen perform the heavy, monotonous work aboard lobster boats. Standing in the stern or rear of the boat, they haul up traps, pick out lobsters, bait the traps, and throw them back into the water. They rise early and work steadily. On a tossing, slick deck it requires diligence not to fall overboard. Protagonist Ruth Thomas performs the job during summers when she comes home from school in Delaware and finds that she and her father get on one another's nerves. The year that she graduates, Stan Thomas has already hired a sternman, as have all the other old men, and she can only hope to step

in if someone gets sick or fired. Ruth views them all as drunken idiots that are lazy, surly, and incompetent.



# Themes

## Religion

Protagonist Ruth Thomas in her late teens decides that she is an atheist, because she likes sound of the word. She cannot, however bring herself to tell anyone, not even Pastor Toby Wishnell when he lectures her about the wonderful stories in the Bible and offers a parable intended to warn her against excessive curiosity.

Religion is otherwise relegated to a surprisingly secondary place in Elizabeth Gilbert's *Stern Men*. In a sense this is surprising, since the novel deals with the difficult lives and tragic deaths of lobster fishers in the raw weather and high seas off the coast of Maine. It is once remarked that lobstermen drown rarely and individually, rather than by the fleet as happens with deep-sea fishermen. The islanders believe the superstition that only one tragedy per year is allowed by some nebulous act of fate, so that once the quota is filled, everyone else is safe. Consider by comparison how the church fills in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* before ships put to sea.

It is mentioned in passing that while they labor in the granite quarries in the 19th century, Italian immigrants are vouchsafed a Catholic church and permitted processions on feast days by a heavily-prejudiced Scots-Irish population. When the Italians leave, the church falls to ruins and this is not lamented. By contrast, Toby remarks that the crumbling of the local Protestant church is lamentable and points to spiritual laxity among the people. Sarcastic Ruth silently objects that instead it reflects on how the locals despise him.

Toby with his nephew and ward Owney Wishnell cruises the coastal waters of Maine and Nova Scotia performing baptisms, weddings, and funerals on island communities too small to support clergy. A predecessor in this ministry, Pastor Mort Beekman, is more successful, showing less zeal and impressing hard-drinking, hard-living lobstermen with an air of unconcern about dogma. Toby has many cards stacked against him on Fort Niles Island. He hails from nearby Courne Haven Island, a bitter economic rival, and is the first in his illustrious family to abandon lobster fishing. Lobstermen cannot understand how he could forsake this birthright. Wishnells are said to have a supernatural ability to locate lobsters and it is suggested that God and the animals themselves have a pact with Wishnells to crawl into their traps.

Toby is introduced conducting a funeral for the drowned lobsterman Ira Pommeroy. The corpse is stored until it is convenient for the New Hope to visit. Toby shows pastoral sensitivity helping the grieving widow through the ordeal. His sermon misses the mark, however, including an exhortation to islanders, who are scarcely listening, to attend to the Christian upbringing of Ira's seven orphaned sons lest at the Last Judgment they find a millstone tied around their necks and be cast into the sea. The allusion to Mark 9 and Luke 17 likely goes over the mourners' heads and nautical image is perhaps too raw, given the circumstances. He does not consider his audience.



When he confronts Ruth one-on-one, Toby haughtily brags about his constant sacrificing of time and comfort for his far-flung parishioners, pointing out how he brings them not only a spiritual connection with God but also mediates peace when they find themselves at war over lobster territories, and brings charity donations and sometimes the mail. Toby suffers from a cult of personality that takes away from whatever good he does. He also insists that Owney follow him into the ministry against the boy's clear wishes. Forcing spirituality on another is rarely successful.

## Sex

Sex is largely an underground current in Elizabeth Gilbert's novel *Stern Men*, but it explodes into the foreground in Chapter 11, when Ruth Thomas, who has long had her eye on big and silent Owney Wishnell, goes off into the woods with him in a drunken state, and has sex in passages that are ripe with sensuality, graphic imagery, and lewd talk.

Ruth admits to having thought a lot about sex in recent years but to have had little opportunity even to try kissing anyone. She has not been able to picture what it would be like to be with anyone, because she needs the concrete features of a lover to focus. When she first sees Owney, her passions rise. Describing their short, innocent time together alone in a rowboat to her substitute mother, Rhonda Pommeroy, she amazes herself by declaring that she wants to show him her breasts, which no one has ever seen. Rhonda figures that it is about time. As a child, Ruth recalls sleeping beside Rhonda's bed and listening to her and her late husband Ira making love.

As the moment comes, Ruth takes the lead, kissing Owney with her tongue and being amazed at how avidly he responds. She puts his hands on her hips and when he moves them to her breasts, she opens her sun dress and is driven to ecstasy. They race to a remote beach, undress, too slowly for Ruth's tastes, and find that although they are both novices, they make raunchy love (her word) like professionals. Gilbert details the many positions and practices that they try out. It is amazingly frank, given the generally laid-back tone of the rest of the book.

Other characters' love lives are mentioned in passing. Rhonda's sister Kitty has lived off the island for a while, had numerous affairs and abortions that have left her barren. One of her ex-lovers is Cal Cooley, who has served for years as Ruth's chauffeur to and from school and whom she loathes. He several times makes lewd comments to her and just before she goes into the woods with Owney predicts that she will have sex with someone. When Ruth dances with him along with everyone else at a wedding - because she is drunk - Cal grinds against her. When she realizes this, she flees in revulsion. Kitty is married to Ruth's uncle, a violent man, and brags that she beats him as badly as she does her. When he throws her out from drunkenness and takes a lover, Kitty wonders why. She does everything he could want her to sexually. Ruth knows that after her mother abandons him, her father has quiet liaisons but has no interest in learning with whom. There is little to do on Fort Niles Island but to drink, play cards, have sex, and fight.



## Retaliation

The lobster fishermen of neighboring Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands are fierce competitors, going to war four times in their history, dating back to 1902-13 when lobsters had not even become a luxury product. A second lobster war (1928-30) is inconsequential, but the third (1946) prevents the islanders profiting from the greatest single year in lobstering history. Competition grows fiercer as veterans of the Korean War return to their boats and reestablish territories. This is studied closely in a fourth lobster war (mid-1950s), which is thoroughly detailed in the novel.

By tradition, families fish specific territories but everyone tries to bump others to enlarge their own empires and maximize profits. When the victim becomes annoyed, he issues a ritual warning, which the challenger either accepts and backs off or further challenges. Both spend hours and weeks calculating their opposing strengths and dedication to the cause. Lobstermen cannot be afforded to get a reputation for passivity, for their livelihood depends on the size of the catch. Younger men tend to be pushers and older ones cutters, severing opponents' buoy lines to prevent harvesting lobsters.

On Fort Niles, Angus Addams is the most aggressive and boastful cutter, foregoing warnings and even cutting his best friend Stan Thomas' buoys and confronts him with the evidence, setting off a heated verbal fight that turns into an eight-month estrangement. He childishly exalts in filling Courne Haven traps with garbage and rubble, but when someone retaliates by putting in one of his traps a doll stabbed by scissors, Angus rallies his fellow islanders to organize a blockade of Courne Haven harbor. It is run without incident and hostilities appear ready to die down. A senseless bet and bar fight in Rockland, ME, reignites passions. For seven months, no one fishes and bring themselves to financial ruin.

The war ends in November of 1957, when inexperienced young Jim Burden reacts to finding another's buoys floating in his territory and races to confront him. Instead, Jim gets lost in the Atlantic, runs out of gas, and has to issue an SOS. Everyone on both islands goes out to search for him. Ned Wishnell, the most revered lobsterman in Maine, who has kept above the fray, drowns trying to board Jimmy's boat and bring him in. Everyone feels chastised and stops the foolishness, concentrating instead on recouping their losses. Peace comes only in 1977-82, as Ruth founds the Skillet County Fishing Cooperative, convincing the stubborn lobstermen that it is in their common interest to buy bait and sell their catches through her. She does it gradually and skillfully, winning over the premier lobstermen first and waiting for the others to follow suit. There are some threats and petty violence, but these trail off. Angus Addams is the last man in, having held out for two years. Ruth earlier had thought the spirit of vengeance and retaliation could not be defeated. She is glad to be wrong and proud of her achievement.



# Style

## Point of View

In *Stern Men*, author Elizabeth Gilbert consistently uses an anonymous and omniscient third-person narrator speaking in the past tense. The narrator obviously cares for protagonist Ruth Thomas, whom s/he follows closely and seems to relish Ruth's quirkiness.

Much of the story is driven by dialogue, which helps define the characters in their own words. Most of the characters are hard-drinking, hard-working, and opinionated folk, who use profanity. Ruth's first word as an infant is No and as she grows into adulthood she says No to others who want to mold her fate. She has run-ins with several who wish to do so and a major fight with her father who infuriatingly refuses to give an opinion on anything she does. Their conflict grows throughout the novel. Ruth discusses explorers, shipwrecks, lighthouses, and other nautical subjects with elderly Senator Simon Addams. Time spent at the neighboring Pommeroy house is generally quirky. The love scene with Owney shows Ruth out of control with unexpected but hoped-for passion.

Flashbacks occur at various points in the novel, filling in details on how the major characters come to be what they are. These are often quite detailed and reinforce what has gradually been doled out previously. Asides on historical and political matters are frequent and are woven into the narrative.

## Setting

*Stern Men* by Elizabeth Gilbert is set primarily on two tiny islands (fictional) located twenty miles off the coast of Maine. The Prologue summarizes the history of Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands from prehistoric times. The first European population is Scots-Irish. Early in the late 19th century the Ellis family of Concord, NH, begins quarrying granite on the islands, bringing in immigrant workers. On Fort Niles these are Italians, who are shunned by the Scots-Irish, while on Courne Haven they are Swedes, who bring blond genes into the population. When granite loses favor in construction, the immigrants leave and lobster fishing becomes the sole industry on the islands. The lobstermen are fiercely independent and territorial, with rivalries beginning at the family level and extending to inter-island. Long, destructive lobster wars are frequent. The novel focuses on Ruth Thomas from birth to young adulthood, struggling to find a place for herself in this rugged, male-dominated culture.

A number of scenes are set on the mainland. Rockland, ME, serves as the port for Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands, where lobstermen sell their catches and provision themselves, and where the few bright youngsters who continue their education beyond age thirteen attend high school. Many islanders have extended family in Rockland. Its Wayside Hotel bar is the setting for a fight that sets off the fourth lobster war between





the islanders. Concord, NH, where the wealthy Ellises winter and Ruth's estranged mother lives as a family retainer with her mentally challenged son is seen briefly, when Ruth pays a reluctant visit.

Finally, Ruth and Owey are shown having sex on a Courne Haven beach after a wedding that she attends as assistant hair stylist to Rhonda Pommeroy. First she trespasses on Pastor Toby Wishnell's fine Victorian home, the finest on the island. Courne Haven, the twin of Fort Niles, otherwise receives little focus.

## Language and Meaning

In her first novel, *Stern Men*, Elizabeth Gilbert concentrates on a bright girl brought up in the tough environment of a lobster fishing village. Her birth comes just after the close of an intense, protracted lobster war with men of another island just a mile away. For seven months they act like juveniles challenging and sabotaging one another and in the process going broke. It takes high tragedy for the dispute to be dropped. There are no employment opportunities on Fort Niles or Courne Haven Islands except lobster fishing. Some see the islands emptying within a few decades. Gilbert captures the frustration that leads to widespread drinking and expresses itself in common profanity. The mood is fatalism.

Protagonist Ruth Thomas' first word is No and as she grows up, knowing that she is far more intelligent than those around her, she develops a sharp, filthy, sarcastic mouth. A precious passage when as youngsters she and a neighbor play house imitating the boy's parents' speech and mannerisms, show whence the attitude comes. Ruth's father and others do not care for Ruth's attitude, but it charms the reader as intended. Ruth's mother abandons the family when she is young, giving her a hard edge, which is somewhat smoothed by spending most of her time with the rowdy neighbors, the Pommeroys, who consist of a wonderful, loving widowed mother and seven boys. Ruth's only other friend is the elderly scholar, Senator Simon Addams, who shares history and the lore of the sea with her. He is the source of much high-brow and entertaining ephemera.

The very elderly tycoon Lanford Ellis on behalf of his sister Vera, whom Ruth's mother serves in Concord, NH, arranges for Ruth to be educated in an elite girls's school in Delaware. Islanders claim that the experience changes her language and makes her bookish and standoffish. Ruth does not care about their opinions, but had not wanted the education, refuses to consider college, and wants to work as a common sternman. She gets no opportunity and wonders why she is fated to do nothing with her life. Ruth also tangles with Pastor Toby Wishnell, who pours out self-serving piety at her. She wishes that she could bring herself to tell him that she is an atheist but cannot. This makes her all the angrier. Ruth ends up having sex with Toby's nephew and ward, who for most of the novel speaks at most in monosyllables. Simon's ward is also a silent, morose character and Ruth's father never reveals how he feels about anything. These silent types deepen the tension.



By contrast, the Epilogue soars. Ruth, married and a mother, finds herself and becomes a successful businesswoman. She does the impossible, uniting the fiercely independent lobstermen of both islands in a cooperative. She confronts her nemesis, Lanford, demanding restitution for the evils that his family has done to hers over generations and learns the unexpected truth about how he has throughout her life been watching over her, steering her, and hoping that her rebellious nature will lead to a renaissance on the islands. He is proud that it has happened and she is proud of herself in a way that the reader can only respond: well done.

## Structure

*Stern Men* by Elizabeth Gilbert consists of a Prologue, twelve numbered but untitled chapters, and an Epilogue. There are no divisions above the chapter level. Scene changes within chapters are indicated by extra leading.

The Prologue gives an overview of the history of a pair of fictitious islands located twenty miles off the coast of Maine. In a rather straight-forward, journalistic style, Gilbert establishes that the base population of Fort Niles and Courne Haven islands is Scots-Irish. During the 19th century, immigrants are brought in to quarry granite. On one they are Swedes, who are allowed to intermarry, adding genes for blue eyes and blond hair to the population; on the other they are Italians, who are strictly segregated. Because of interbreeding most islanders look alike. After the demise of the granite industry no work is left except lobster fishing, which is a cutthroat business. The advent and course of the first lobster war is given. All of the facts given in the Prologue are essential to understanding and appreciating the novel.

The story opens with protagonist Ruth Thomas' birth in May of 1958, during terrible storms. She is beautiful but cantankerous. Her mother is an outsider but leaves Fort Niles when Ruth is four and mysteriously never returns. Ruth is happily raised by her neighbor, the beautiful widow Rhonda Pommeroy, mother to seven rambunctious boys. Ruth's father is a lobsterman who speaks little but whom her sarcasm annoys. Ruth's mother sends her to Delaware to an elite girl's school, which Ruth hates and does her best to overcome after graduation.

Having sampled anecdotes that stretch over eighteen years, the novel hits its stride when Ruth comes home from school, determined not to be driven away again. Ruth wants to work as a sternman for her father, but all of the positions are taken. With nothing to do, she sits on the rocks watching hapless Webster Pommeroy search for legendary elephant tusks in the mudflats. He works for old Senator Simon Addams, who wants to found a natural history museum but cannot obtain housing for it. When they against all odds find a tusk and show it to tycoon Lanford Ellis, who has always steered and financed Ruth's life and thus earned her wrath, he pays her to visit her mother in Concord, NH. It is the worst week of her life and is followed much more nothing to do that stretches for months until Ruth accompanies Rhonda to Courne Haven to style hair for a gala wedding. During it she asks Lanford to use his abandoned general store for the Museum and is given the key. She also snoops through Pastor Toby Wishnell's



Victorian mansion, is caught, and lectured. She makes up for it by having sex with his nephew and ward on the beach. For the next few months she lies low while Lanford expects her to come to dinner as promised.

Major flashbacks are used to describe how Ruth's grandmother and mother come to be virtually enslaved to the Ellis family. Why Mary Thomas leaves Fort Niles is clarified and how the Ellises have controlled the fate of both islands for decades are explained. Discrimination against Italian immigrants is spelled out in great detail. It is important because Ruth's anonymous grandfather is Italian. A second major flashback focuses on the seven-week-long lobster war that immediately proceeds Ruth's birth. It illuminates the major characters' personalities, which one has initially to take at face value. It also explains how Ruth's lover and later husband, Owey Wishnell, comes to be the pastor's ward. The war, described in far greater detail than the first one, alluded to in the Prologue, ends with a tragic death that has the power to unite the lobstermen of both islands.

The formal unification is described in the Epilogue and is entirely the work of Ruth, now married and a mother. She sees a need for a cooperative and gradually builds one, making it financially beneficial to the lobstermen but also psychologically acceptable. She then approaches Lanford to ask for land on which to build a home. As they talk and as she seethes about how his family has used hers for generations, Ruth demands that he cede to her Ellis House itself. He agrees and then surprises her by detailing how and why he has always watched over her, hoping and believing that her stubborn character would lead to the salvation of the islands.



## Quotes

"Every lobster one man catches is a lobster another man has lost. It is a mean business, and it makes for mean men. As humans, after all, we become that which we seek. Dairy farming makes men steady and reliable and temperate; deer hunting makes men quiet and fast and sensitive; lobster fishing makes men suspicious and wily and ruthless" (Prologue, pg. 5.)

"Senator Simon Addams looked into the bassinet, and there she was: little Ruth Thomas. A girl baby. An unusually pretty baby, with a wet, black mat of hair and a studious expression. Senator Simon Addams noticed right away that she didn't have the red squally look of most newborns. She didn't look like a peeled, boiled rabbit" (Chapter 1, pg. 13-14.)

"It was Ruth Thomas's firm position that she belonged nowhere but on Fort Niles Island. This was the position she took with her mother: she was truly happy only on Fort Niles; Fort Niles was in her blood and soul; and the only people who understood her were the residents of Fort Niles Island. None of this, it must be said, was entirely true.

"It was important to Ruth in principle that she feel happy on Fort Niles, although, for the most part, she was pretty bored there" (Chapter 2, pg. 43.)

"Because there was Webster, standing before them. He was coated in mud up to his skinny waist. He had tight curls sweated into his hair and dashes of mud across his face. And he was holding an elephant's tusk flat across his filthy, outstretched hands" (Chapter 2, pg. 61.)

" 'And what will become of you, Ruth?' Pastor Toby Wishnell asked. 'You have good sense, don't you? What will you do with your life?'

"Ruth Thomas looked at the back of Owey Wishnell, who, she could tell, was listening closely.

" 'College?' Pastor Toby Wishnell suggested.

"What urgency there was in Owey Wishnell's posture!

"So Ruth decided to engage. She said, 'More than anything else, sir, I would like to become a lobster fisherman.'

"Pastor Toby Wishnell gazed at her coolly. She returned the gaze.

" 'Because it's such a noble calling, sir,' she said" (Chapter 5, pg. 119.)

" 'You should be with your mother if that's what she wants. There's nothing keeping you here. People out here, Ruth, they're not really your people.'

" 'I'll tell you what. I'm not going to do a single thing with my life that the Ellises want me to do. That's my plan'" (Chapter 8, pg. 173.)

"Mary, still exhausted in her hospital bed, came back with her own demented defense. She was not normally a fighter, but she fought this time. She fought back dirty. Oh, yes, she said, all Stan's relatives could be accounted for, precisely because they were all related to one another. They were all siblings and first cousins, and it doesn't take a



genius to realize that, after enough generations of inbreeding and incest, this is what you get. This child, this Ricky-boy with the flippy head and the clawed hands." Chapter 6, pg. 139.)

"But Jim stood there for that quick moment of amusement and pride - and a swell came and knocked the two boats together. Smashed them together, with a force that almost threw Jim off his feet. Between the two boats was Ned Wishnell, of course, and when the boats separated after the collision, he was gone. He had sunk" (Chapter 9, pg. 206.)

" 'Ruth was a great woman of the Old Testament. She was the model of female loyalty.'

" 'Oh, yeah?'

" 'You might enjoy reading the Bible, Ruth. It contains many wonderful stories.'

"Ruth thought, Exactly. Stories. Action-adventure. Ruth was an atheist. She had decided that the year before, when she learned the word. She was still having fun with the idea. She hadn't told anyone, but the knowledge gave her a thrill" (Chapter 10, pg. 227.)

"It is extraordinary what people can do even if they've never done it before.

"Ruth had thought a lot in the last few years about what it would be like to have sex. Of all the things she'd thought about sex, though, she'd never considered that it might be so easy and so immediately hot. She'd thought of it as something to be puzzled out with difficulty and a lot of talking" (Chapter 11, pg. 256.)

" 'It's really something Ruth should talk to you about, Stan. Kitty spoke too freely.'

" 'About what?'

"Kitty said, 'Well, guess what, Stan. What the hell. We think Ruth's going to have a baby.'

" 'Kitty!' Mrs. Pommeroy exclaimed.

" 'What? Don't holler at me. Christ's sake, Rhonda, Ruth doesn't have the guts to tell him. Get it the hell over with. Look at the poor guy, wondering what the hell's going on.'

"Stan Thomas said nothing. Ruth listened. Nothing" (Chapter 12, pg. 273.)

" 'Yes? she said. 'Do you understand?'

"He did not answer. She gave him time to think about what she'd said, and then explained it, with careful patience. 'Your family owes a great debt to my family. It is important and proper that your family make some restitution to my family for the lives of my mother and my grandmother. And for my life, too. Surely you understand?'

"Ruth was pleased with that word - restitution. It was exactly the right word" (Epilogue, pg. 284.)



## Topics for Discussion

How do drownings shape the course of this novel? Enumerate them and describe how they fit together and drive character and plot?

How does Toby Wishnell shape up as a minister of the Christian gospel? What are his good and bad points?

What is the basis for Ruth Thomas' antipathy towards Cal Cooley? Is she fair to him? Does he have any redeeming qualities?

Does Ruth Thomas have any real desire to become a lobsterwoman or does she say it simply to be contrary? Cite at least three factors to support your answer.

How is the historical figure, Capt. James Cook, used in the novel? For what does he stand?

In what ways does Senator Simon Addam's desire to found a historical museum hold the novel together?

How is ethnic discrimination portrayed in the novel?