The Stone Diaries Study Guide

The Stone Diaries by Carol Shields

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The Stone Diaries is the fictitious autobiography of Daisy Goodwill, conveyed from Daisy's own point of view somewhere in her future. Daisy is the only child of Cuyler and Mercy Goodwill and was born in Manitoba, Canada in 1905. Mercy Goodwill, an obese woman who does not realize she is pregnant, gives birth to Daisy in her kitchen and dies immediately after. Daisy is taken to Winnipeg, Canada, to be raised by her parents' neighbor, Clarentine Flett, who has left her husband, Magnus, to live with her son, Barker, a professor of botany. When Mrs. Flett dies eleven years later, Daisy is reclaimed by her grieving father, Cuyler, who is on his way to Bloomington, Indiana to accept a job in the limestone industry.

In Bloomington, Daisy's father is quite a successful businessman, and Daisy enjoys an upper-middle class upbringing, a college education, and good girlhood friendships. At age twenty-two, Daisy marries a young man of similar social class named Harold Hoad, who drinks heavily because he is haunted by his father's suicide. Harold dies under ambiguous circumstances in Paris on their honeymoon before the marriage is even consummated.

Nine years later, Daisy takes a trip back to Canada to visit Barker Flett, the son of her childhood caregiver, Clarentine. After Clarentine's death, her deserted husband, Magnus, leaves for his childhood home in the Orkney Islands to live out the rest of his life. Daisy and Barker soon marry, despite the difference in their ages, and have three children, Alice Warren, and Joan. Daisy is a housewife and she and Barker lead a pleasant, if monotonous, life.

After twenty years of marriage, Barker dies of a brain tumor, and Daisy's father dies as well. Daisy begins writing a weekly newspaper column and becomes a local celebrity to her faithful readers. Barker's niece, Beverly, and Beverly's daughter, Victoria, born out of wedlock, live with Daisy during this time. Abruptly, the editor of the paper allows another columnist to take over Daisy's column against Daisy's will. Daisy falls into a deep depression after this incident.

In her later years, Daisy sells her home and moves to a retirement community in Florida, where she lives comfortably but is preoccupied with thoughts of her father and her father-in-law. Daisy's children are grown and married, and Daisy is frequently visited by her grand-niece Victoria. Victoria invites Daisy to accompany her on a research trip to the Orkney Islands, where Daisy plans to visit the grave of her father-in-law, Magnus Flett. Upon arrival in the Orkney Islands, Daisy discovers that Magnus is still alive and she pays him a visit.

After many more years living in Florida and making new friends, Daisy. at the age of eighty, suffers health problems, which put her in a hospital and then a convalescent home. Her mind begins to falter as well as her body, and Daisy spends the last years of her life in a semi-comatose state. During this time, Daisy comes to terms with her death and envisions what people will discover and say about her after her death.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1, titled Birth, 1905, introduces Daisy Goodwill's parents, their backgrounds, and the circumstances of Daisy's birth. Daisy's mother, Mercy Stone Goodwill, is an obese, childlike woman who takes pleasure in food, cooking, and little else. She was abandoned as an infant and grew up in an orphanage where all of the children were given the surname Stone. The Goodwills live in a small village called Tyndall in Manitoba, Canada and live a simple life. Mercy is a housewife, taking pleasure in maintaining her household, and her diminutive-by-comparison husband, Cuyler, works at a local quarry.

Mercy is confused by the adulation and sexual passion of her husband, but is a dutiful wife, taking part in all of her wifely duties without complaint. Cuyler is empowered by the love he feels for his immense wife, having never known love in his childhood.

One day, while preparing dinner, Mercy is taken with sudden pains that are far worse than the indigestion she has been feeling all spring. A local peddler, a neighbor named Mrs. Flett, and Daisy's father all arrive in time to witness Mrs. Goodwill giving birth to a daughter, then dying from excessive bleeding on the kitchen floor of her house.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Daisy is studying her life, even before its beginning, perhaps to answer some question in her mind. She witnesses her parents' courtship, marriage, and her own birth from her vantage point in the future. This is congruous with the fact that the characters introduced so far have questioned something about their lives and even felt that they had secrets from the rest of the world. Daisy's father has found his true happiness in Mercy. Daisy's mother questions but acquiesces to his amorous advances, and even Mrs. Flett, the neighbor, has secret longings for a different existence. From the description of Daisy's parents, there is a sense that this could be a remarkable beginning to an unremarkable life.

The witnessing and analysis of one's life is a strong theme in this chapter, and the reader feels Daisy's commitment to continue to examine her life. The symbolism of "stone" occurs repeatedly, most notably as Mercy Goodwill's maiden name and in Cuyler Goodwill's job at the quarry. There is also a strong image of a stone that Mercy places upon the lid of the pudding she is preparing moments before her death.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2, Childhood, 1916, begins when Daisy is eleven years old. She is living in Winnipeg, Canada with Mrs. Clarentine Flett, the former neighbor of her parents who was a witness to Daisy's birth. Mrs. Flett has left her husband and fled to live with her son, Barker, an unmarried scholar and professor of botany.

Eleven years have passed. Cuyler Goodwill was too devastated and confused by his wife's death to believe that he could care for his daughter. During this time, back in Tyndall, he built an enormous monument to his dead wife with stones removed from the quarry. It becomes a somewhat legendary monument, drawing visitors from near and far. Cuyler's perfect memory of his wife is damaged, however, since he believes that for some reason, she kept the fact from him that they were expecting a baby. Of course, Mercy did not know this herself, but it haunts Cuyler because he does not know the truth.

When she is eleven, Daisy becomes ill with the measles and a subsequent bout of pneumonia, which leaves her recovering in a dark sickroom for several weeks. It is during this time that she learns to use her imagination to imagine her own history. Soon after, Mrs. Flett dies from being struck by a bicycle, having never been forgiven by the husband she abandoned. Mrs. Flett's son, Barker, confused by his new sexual feelings towards Daisy, requests that her father take over her care. Cuyler agrees to reclaim his daughter, who he has not seen in eleven years, when he is on his way to Bloomington, Indiana, to begin a new job offered him as a result of his fame as the builder of Mercy's monument.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Daisy chooses to skip to this point in her life while recounting her childhood and gives little description of what kind of child she has been up to the point before her illness. The focus in this chapter is on Barker Flett, Mrs. Flett, and Cuyler Goodwill, and how they have been spending the past eleven years. Daisy seems to believe that people are shaped by major events rather than the long spans of life where nothing happens of note. As for the child Daisy is becoming as a result of her new imagination is still unclear. There is strong foreshadowing that she will use this imagination later in life, but to what effect, it is not yet known.

The images of stone continue in this chapter, with Cuyler's careful, loving construction of the monument to his wife. Stone is characterized as pure, earthy, and strong. Even the rainbow that inspires the monument seems, to Cuyler, to be made of stone. As he builds, he searches for meaning in his life, which he finds in God. It is similar to the joy

his late wife found in cooking and the elation Barker Flett finds in the study of flowers, an almost religious ritual.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Titled Marriage, 1927, Chapter three begins as Daisy is about to marry Harold Hoad in an upscale wedding ceremony. The past eleven years have been successful ones for Cuyler Goodwill, who has become a successful businessman in the Bloomington, Indiana limestone industry. Cuyler has developed a talent for public speaking, which he now does constantly.

Magnus Flett, the deserted husband of Daisy's childhood caregiver, has left Tyndall to return to his childhood home in the Orkney Islands, although he has no living connections there. After spending many bitter years searching for reasons as to why his wife left him, he feels it is time to leave the place where they had a life together. He gathers a few of his wife's belongings to carry with him, including a picture and copy of *Jane Eyre*. Magnus' son, Barker Flett, upon receiving the invitation to Daisy's wedding, sends her a bank note for ten thousand dollars from the proceeds of his mother's flower business. Barker is still troubled by the sexual feelings he had towards Daisy as a child.

The groom, Harold Hoad, is the son of a man who committed suicide and a manipulating mother, who rewrites the family history to suit her. Harold is tormented by the mystery of his father's death and drinks heavily to compensate. He and Daisy have a relationship based on her role as a caretaker. While on their honeymoon in Paris, the unhappy and intoxicated Harold is tossing coins in the street to some children, when Daisy, who is lying in the hotel room, hears a loud bang, followed by an ominous sound. The chapter ends with this sound.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Again, many years have passed without incident, until the next important, life-changing event. Characters have led their lives, often in frustration and confusion, until one event propels them to change. This span of years is simply a bridge from one of these points to another. This habit of glossing-over the past several years results in a feeling of something missing from Daisy's account of her life.

Cuyler's success as a businessman has killed his passion for his craft, and, although he is fond of Daisy, his constant sermons on how life is like limestone are tiresome and empty. For all of his talking, he says little to revere her directly, which sharply contrasts with the way he felt about Daisy's mother. He also seems to have left Canada behind forever, as if it never existed, and considers America his home.

The image of stone returns again in this chapter, as Cuyler feels that a stone was an item dislodged from his throat to enable him to begin speaking. However, as Cuyler now uses limestone as a metaphor for everything, this becomes a tedious metaphor in this chapter, certainly intentionally.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter is titled Love, 1936, and for the past nine years Daisy has been living back in Bloomington as a young widow. She has kept herself busy with golf, tennis, and her friends, since her husband's untimely death on their honeymoon. It is not clear at this time exactly what happened to Harold, but everyone in Bloomington knows the story about the incident at the hotel in Paris. Her marriage was never consummated, so Daisy is still a virgin at age thirty-one. Her father is remarried to a young, Italian woman named Maria, and Daisy feels it is time to leave home or, at the very least, take a trip.

Magnus Flett has returned home to the Orkney islands, walking much of the way and finding a sort of inner peace. His son, Barker, believes him to be dead, having not heard from him in many years. Daisy has been exchanging letters with Barker Flett, since she was a child and decides to make a trip back to Canada to do some sightseeing and to meet up with "Uncle Barker," as she refers to him in her letters.

Barker is still a bachelor, an intellectual creature of habit, but his feelings for Daisy have grown to fantasy proportions over the years. He has visited prostitutes, but has never had a relationship with a woman. Daisy travels by train to meet him, which is a much-anticipated meeting for both, and, without any explanation of courtship, they are married.

Chapter 4 Analysis

For the first time, Daisy as narrator admits that she is an unreliable witness to her life. Almost offhandedly, "Maybe now is the time to tell you that Daisy has a little trouble getting things straight . . . with the truth, that is." Details, and even huge chunks of characters' lives, have been left out, which has been obvious up to this point. Daisy did previously discuss the imagination she cultivated in her sickroom as a child. However, this is the first time there is a true acknowledgment that this imagination creates a blurred view of Daisy's life and perhaps not even the truth. Suddenly everything she says sounds different, seems suspicious.

Daisy's perception of herself as a woman emerges as a theme in this chapter. She claims to feel powerless as a woman, and that men are not ostracized by flawed histories, while women are often trapped by theirs. Perhaps that is Daisy's rationalization for altering the truth. The image of Harold Hoad's mother, rewriting her own history, seems almost a fitting image of Daisy, now that her own tendencies in that direction have been revealed. When Daisy accidentally leaves her journal on the train before meeting Barker, there is a hint that she is, in fact, leaving something more important behind.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5, titled Motherhood, 1947, tells of Daisy's current life as Mrs. Barker Flett. They live in Ottawa, with their three children, Alice, 9, Warren, 7, and Joan, 5. Daisy spends her time keeping house, taking care of the children, and reading magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*. They have settled into a comfortable and orderly life, though all of them - even the children - are restless. Daisy has no interest in sex with her husband, and she struggles with melancholy, but finds solace in her elaborate garden.

Barker is nearing retirement and is worried how he will occupy his time; he is also preoccupied with thoughts of a reunion with his father, Magnus, who he still has not spoken to since Magnus returned to the Orkney Islands. Barker's niece, Beverly, comes to visit the Fletts, and the children are fascinated by her. However, Daisy is cold to Beverly and sends her away, which upsets the children as well as Barker's family.

Cuyler Goodwill and his wife, Maria, do quite a bit of traveling now that he is retired. He is in the process of building a miniature pyramid in his backyard in Bloomington out of stones he has collected while traveling. He plans to turn it into a time capsule which, among other things, will include Mercy Goodwill's wedding ring. Also from Bloomington, Daisy's old friend, Fraidy Hoyt, comes to visit, and Daisy gets the impression that she is both envious and scornful of Daisy's comfortable new life.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Daisy refers to herself only as Mrs. Flett in this chapter, which first brings to mind Mrs. Clarentine Flett, and, simultaneously, signifies Daisy's loss of self in this process. When Daisy is overcome with inexplicable bouts of grief, she reminds herself of her ability to invent alternate worlds. However, during this time period, she invents no alternate world, except the one she seeks in ladies' magazines and reproduces in her garden. Daisy seems to have lost hold of this gift of hers, and she is paying the price by facing the bleakness of reality and an ordinary life.

What is most extraordinary, and very conspicuous, in this chapter, is that nothing tragic or otherwise interesting happens during this time. Daisy goes through the motions of sex without emotion or interest, as her mother did; she relates the current family members' comings and goings, but there is nothing life-altering happening at this period in her life. As for Daisy's children, Alice and Joan in particular promise to have interesting stories of their own. Alice, as the oldest, should prove a challenge for her parents, and Joan, the youngest, is developing a strong sense of imagination similar to her mother's. The fact that the most problematic characters are female reinforces the

idea that women, in particular, can become trapped in ordinary lives, and only the most resourceful are able to invent solutions.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Chapter six, Work, 1955-1964, is composed exclusively of letters received by Daisy over the past several years. Daisy's husband, Barker, has recently died of a brain tumor, soon after Daisy's father's death, and there are affairs to get in order. Barker himself has left her a letter, which expresses love and regret for the years when they left so many things unspoken. Cuyler's wife, Maria, disappears after his death and has yet to be heard from during the nine years that span this chapter.

Living with Daisy is Barker Flett's niece, Beverly, who came to Daisy unwed and pregnant, and Beverly's child Victoria. Daisy's girlhood friends, Beans and Fraidy, are both single again, and Daisy rekindles her friendship with each of them through letters and yearly trips. During this period, Alice, Daisy's oldest child, grows from a college brat to a mature, young married woman with three children.

Daisy has taken over her husband's regular newspaper column, a popular weekly piece about gardening that appears in a publication called *The Recorder*. Over the years, Daisy develops a relationship with the editor, Jay Dudley, though the seriousness of the relationship is not clear. There is another writer, Pinky Fulham, who takes over her column while Daisy is on vacation, and by the close of this chapter, Jay Dudley allows Pinky to take over Daisy's column full time, though Jay is full of apologies. The final letters of this chapter indicate that, after the loss of her column, Daisy is no longer writing letters to her friends and family.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The progression of each of Daisy's family and friends' lives is recorded through Daisy's letters from them - none of her outgoing letters are represented. Nevertheless, this is clearly a busy time for Daisy, and she has more of a social life than she has had in years. Through the examples of her writing that readers quote back to her, it is obvious that her column is thoughtful, smart, and gives her pleasure. There is no indication that she is pining away for her late husband, or for her father, which comes as no surprise. If the letters are to be taken at face value, it appears that Daisy is not inventing any false stories for the reader during this time period, perhaps because the truth is acceptable to her.

Daisy welcomes Beverly and her new daughter, Victoria, into her home, which shows a change of heart from Daisy's earlier opinion of Beverly. At first, the opinionated Alice finds this hard to understand, but something happens to Alice during this time period to mature her. Even so, Alice speaks to her mother condescendingly in her letters, clearly never seeing Daisy is a person. Although Alice chooses to get married young herself and have her own children, she still carries an air of superiority as if she is somehow

different from Daisy. There is a sense that the young still do not comprehend how life works, that Alice has not realized yet what is inevitable for herself as well.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Titled Sorrow, 1965, Chapter seven tells the story of Daisy falling into a depression. After she is fired from her newspaper job, she is angry and dejected and begins to neglect herself and her home. The chapter details the "theories" of each of her friends and family members as to the source, as well as the cure, for Daisy's depression.

Alice believes the loss of Daisy's column is the primary reason for her depression, that the column is the first time Daisy has been able to express herself as a person. Alice never believed her mother was capable of anything such as writing the column. Daisy's friend, Fraidy, believes that it is sexual repression that causes Daisy's suffering. Cousin Beverly, who is so grateful to Daisy for taking her in for these past nine years, thinks it is because Daisy is burdened with three ungrateful children.

Daisy's middle child, Warren, believes his mother must feel cheated, as she has not been able to use her education all of these years, and her youngest child, Joan, feels that her mother is full of anger towards Pinky Fulham. Jay Dudley, Daisy's former beau, believes she is upset because Jay did not want to marry her, and Daisy's friend, Beans, believes it is just the plight of women to be eventually broken. Daisy's childhood housekeeper, Labina, says she has known for years that without a mother, Daisy could never find her way in life.

Skoot Skutari is the grandson of the village peddler who witnessed Daisy's birth and her mother's death in the kitchen. The story of Daisy's birth is a familiar tale in the Skutari family. Though he became a millionaire, Abram Skutari was haunted for the rest of his life by the child he saw that day; he claimed he could feel the child's loneliness and sadness.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Perhaps there is a bit of truth in each person's observations of Daisy's problems, yet each individual only sees Daisy's plight in relation to himself or herself. There is a sense of arrogance in everyone's analysis of Daisy's depression, most notably in the way Alice perceives her mother and manages to make Daisy's issues all about Alice's own self-perceived growth. Thematically, there is an overwhelming sense that individuals are always self-absorbed and that one cannot offer a true outside view apart from the burden of their own life experiences.

Through the process of covering over a crack in her ceiling, Alice sets forth a plan to change the course of her life. This is a continuation of the theme of altering one's life at will that has been present throughout the novel. It is also consistent with the process of achieving this emotional change through physical labor, much as Cuyler Goodwill did while building the monument to his wife Mercy.

Daisy's own perception of her depression is brief but telling; Daisy will not sink to depths of depression from which she cannot return, because her capacity to alter her life story will prevail. The reader anxiously awaits the moment when Daisy will reclaim her life under her own terms, which magically seems to appear when her life is not acceptable. Life is all about perception to Daisy, and during this period in her existence she allows it to falter, for reasons only known to Daisy.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Chapter eight, Ease, 1977, begins when Daisy is seventy-two years old and living in a retirement community in Florida. She receives regular visits from her "niece," Victoria, the child of Barker Flett's cousin, Beverly, who came to live with Daisy in Ottawa. Cousin Beverly has recently died, but Victoria has remained close with her Aunt Daisy and worries about her. In recent years, Daisy has spent much of her time reflecting on the lives - and deaths - of both her own father, Cuyler Goodwill, and her husband Barker's father, Magnus Flett.

There is a flashback to the day of Cuyler Goodwill's death, as he is lying in a field dying from an apparent prolonged heart attack. He is still married to Maria and has continued to build the pyramid in his backyard. Lying there that day, he reflects on his life and makes a decision to stop building the pyramid, have it bulldozed, and to remove the box he has placed inside as a time capsule. Cuyler remembers vividly building the monument back in Tyndall to his wife Mercy, but spends much of the day of his death trying to remember her name.

Victoria invites Aunt Daisy to accompany her and her professor, Lewis Roy, on a trip to the Orkney islands while they conduct research on paleobotany there. The plan is for Daisy to visit Magnus Flett's grave and receive some closure, as well as to take her first trip to Europe since her fateful honeymoon. During the trip, Victoria becomes romantically involved with Lewis. The three discover that Magnus Flett is still alive at the age of a hundred and fourteen and is a patient at an old folks' home in the town the group is visiting. He was a local celebrity for many years both for his advanced age as well as his ability to recite the novel *Jane Eyre* word for word. Daisy spends much of the trip avoiding a visit to Magnus Flett, instead, spending most of her time with the hotel owner, Mr. Sinclair. Daisy finally goes to visit Magnus near the end of her stay, and sees an old man who cannot see and can barely hear or speak, but nonetheless, Daisy is content with the visit.

Chapter 8 Analysis

At the age of seventy-two, Daisy is accustomed to "her blend of distortion and omission," and has lived this way now for many years. She thinks back to her father's death many years before, and it is almost certainly Daisy's active imagination that creates the story that he would have liked to have his pyramid knocked down. Life is fairly comfortable for Daisy, yet she still searches for something, which is evident in her preoccupation with the two father figures.

The image of stone returns powerfully in this chapter, with both negative and positive connotations. Daisy would like to remember Magnus Flett as a man of stone, a man

with "no softness to him," although she never met him. There is something about this quality of the man that draws Daisy to think about him, to follow him to the place she believes his grave to be. Daisy is afraid to be disappointed by this false memory, yet when she visits him and finds an invalid, she is oddly satisfied and filled with a feeling of life.

This is because stone also finds, in this chapter, a theme as a strong connection to life, as illustrated by Victoria and Lewis' search for ancient plant life in the limestone of the Orkney Islands. Plant life has been evident as a hobby, a science, and a passion throughout the novel, particularly for Clarentine Flett, Barker Flett, Daisy, and now Victoria. In this chapter the connection is made between plants and stone, and even between life itself and stone. These recurring images in Daisy's life finally come together, which is more reason for this chapter to be titled Ease than the comfortable retirement community life that Daisy has been enjoying for the past several years.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Chapter 9, Illness and Decline, relates the weeks following Daisy's heart attack and susequent kidney failure, as well as what has been happening for the past few years. None of Daisy's children are able to visit her during the period directly after her heart attack, but after a month, Alice is at her mother's bedside, talking to her and taking care of financial matters, as Daisy is moved from the hospital into a convalescent home. Daisy's son, Warren, is living in New York with a new wife and their children. Joan is busy in Oregon with her husband and children, as is Victoria, who is married to Lewis Roy and has a set of twins.

Daisy is visited frequently by a young minister named Reverend Rick, although Daisy has never been truly religious in her life. Among Daisy's other visitors is the group of ladies she has played bridge with for the past several years. The jovial group of four, including Daisy, have been known to the other retirees as the Flowers, as all of the women have flower names.

Daisy suffers from severe pain during her illness, as well as hallucinations, clouded thoughts, and confused memories. She alternates between being completely lucid and utterly illogical. However, she puts great effort into remaining ladylike and courteous, even though she is mentally and physically distressed. This becomes more and more difficult for her with time, until finally she begins to respond to her family members and other visitors with anger and bursts of inappropriate comments. Daisy leaves the telling of this chapter with the notion that this time of reflecting could go on for quite some time.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Daisy struggles with pain, anger, and dementia, but more than anything she struggles with the need to be polite. One of the solid themes of this chapter is how a human being, especially one like Daisy, who has lived a life of relative prosperity, will submit to the demands of society even when she is in agony. Daisy responds appropriately to her visitors, even when she is thinking something entirely different, right up until the moment that her brain will no longer allow her to.

There is also a return to Daisy's childhood, both in the symbolic accidental "Daisy Goodwill," an omission of Daisy's married name on her hospital arm band, and in Daisy's own mind. Images flash through her mind, which seem to have no connection to each other, which makes obvious the emotional discomfort Daisy now lives in. Many of her thoughts are quite coherent, and even profound, but they leap back and forth, in the same way that Daisy's disclosure of her life has done throughout the novel.

During this time Daisy looks back and wonders what, in fact, is the true story of her life. Certainly that is the strongest theme of this novel, and one that comes to Daisy

powerfully as she nears the end of her life. As Daisy has pointed out numerous times, one's own opinion is sometimes all there is, the only way of recording one's existence, especially in the case where life itself is not particularly thrilling and borders on the ordinary. Daisy has chosen the most dramatic points of her life to share, while leaving all other points obscure or embellished.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter 10, Death, consists of a collection of observations about Daisy's life. There are multiple death notices and grave inscriptions offered as possibilities, as well as potential reactions to her death by Daisy's friends and family members. Also included are lists of clubs to which Daisy belonged, addresses at which she lived, her favorite recipes, and grocery lists. There is also a list of Daisy's bridal lingerie, her book collection, and her ailments, listed chronologically since childhood.

Daisy has, as she predicted in the previous chapter, lived for many years after the decline in her health. In her semi-comatose state, she develops the gift of looking forward, spending hour after hour foretelling the possibilities following her death. She foresees that her children, upon finding her personal documents and her remaining possessions, will make certain inferences based on what they find. For example, the remaining papers from her first marriage will divulge the fact of it to her children for the first time, and that her new husband had jumped from the window in Paris.

Daisy envisions her final resting state as stone rather than flesh, and even what her final, though unspoken, words will be: "I am not at peace."

Chapter 10 Analysis

Much of what Daisy has left for her family is a riddle meant for them to solve after her death. Daisy hopes that now, perhaps, she can be seen as a complicated, mysterious person based on the clues she has left behind. In her speculation, Daisy has high hopes of finally becoming that person with that interesting life she always wished for but could never achieve, even through her vivid imagination.

Daisy comes to terms with the fact that she is dying by imagining herself turning to stone, that familiar symbol of her life from its beginning. The stone that her mother placed on the lid of the pudding bowl that witnessed her birth and her father's preoccupation with stone his entire life comes full circle.

Still, so much of this chapter is filled with Daisy's regret of what she did not experience or accomplish. She realizes at this final phase of her life that her existence was, in fact, rather ordinary, and even the few dramatic episodes that punctuated it may not have been enough. Daisy used these experiences in the retelling of her life for all they were worth, but most of the years in between were spent waiting for the next big event.

Characters

Daisy Goodwill Flett

Daisy Goodwill was born in rural Tyndall, Manitoba to a mother who died in childbirth, never having known she was pregnant. Daisy's father grieved his wife's death and was unable to care for her, so Daisy was named and raised by a neighbor named Mrs. Flett, who died eleven years later. When Daisy was a child, she became ill with the measles, and in her sickroom she developed her vivid imagination, which served throughout her life as a vehicle for reshaping her life experiences. Daisy did, at eleven, become reunited with her father and move to Indiana, where her father became a successful businessman.

As a result, this portion of Daisy's life was spent in relative prosperity, including private schools and college. She married a young man of similar education, but he died tragically on their honeymoon. Many years later, Daisy traveled to Canada and remarried, this time to the son of her childhood caregiver, Mrs. Flett. After many years of raising her children with him, her husband Barker dies and Daisy takes over his newspaper column. When the column is offered to another writer, Daisy goes into a depression. Years later, Daisy retires to Florida and lives there until her death from natural causes. The book is about Daisy's life; the telling of which is from her own perspective. Daisy is regretful at the end of her life for not having the courage to rise above the constraints of society to achieve something greater, or to have a better life story than she did.

Mercy Stone Goodwill

Mercy Stone was abandoned as an infant at an orphanage, where all of the children were given the last name Stone. Mercy always excelled at domestic duties, including cooking and homemaking. She grew into an obese woman who lived to eat and to cook but had little interest in anything else. She married Cuyler Goodwill, who adored her, but Mercy had no notion of love, nor did she understand the act of sex that her husband seemed intent on performing. Mercy is characterized as childlike, and, in fact, is so napve that she doesn't know she is expecting a child and does not want to mention any of her strange feelings about sex to her husband. When she does give birth while cooking supper in her kitchen, Mercy dies from excessive bleeding soon after her baby is born.

Cuyler Goodwill

Cuyler grew up in a family where no one seemed to notice him, in fact, the members of his family barely seemed to notice each other. There was never any mention of love, and the notion was foreign to him. Cuyler worked at the quarry, like his father and grandfather before him because it was expected of him. When Cuyler met Mercy Stone,

he was struck with love so intense that he felt like he was alive for the first time. There seemed to be something about Mercy's sheer size that attracted him, as if for the first time he was presented with something substantial. After her death, Cuyler grieved her loss, but also struggled with the question of why his beloved had not told him that they were expecting a baby. His love for her changed during this time, but nevertheless he built a large stone monument to Mercy from stones at the quarry. This act became a religious ritual to him, and it was during this time that Cuyler found God. After his daughter's caregiver was killed, Cuyler took over the care of Mercy and took her with him to Indiana to begin a new job in the limestone business. During the trip to Indiana, Cuyler discovered his "silver tongue" - in fact, he spent the entire train trip trying to catch up Daisy with his entire life and never seemed to stop speaking after that. He was obsessed with limestone and used limestone as a metaphor for everything in life, to a fault. After he became a successful businessman, Cuyler lost his ability as an artist, then eventually as a speaker. None of the artistic projects he took on later in life matched the skill he showed early on.

Clarentine Flett

Clarentine was a neighbor to Cuyler and Mercy Goodwill in Tyndall, Manitoba. She was very fond of Mercy, although she thought of her as a childish figure that needed taking care of. Clarentine was married to Magnus Flett, but she felt no love in their marriage. After their three sons were grown and went out on their own, Clarentine felt a secret urge to run away and change her life, which she did after Daisy was born. After her husband refused to give her the money to go to the doctor to have her sore tooth looked at, Clarentine abruptly left him with only a note saying, "Goodbye," and took Daisy to go and live with her son, Barker, in Winnipeg. She opened a small flower business beside their home there and cared for Daisy. She loved Daisy and treated her like a daughter, especially when Daisy became ill with the measles at age eleven. Soon after this, Clarentine was walking on the sidewalk and was hit by a young bicyclist; she went into a coma and died soon after.

Barker Flett

Barker was the son of Magnus and Clarentine Flett, former neighbors of the Goodwills in Tyndall, Manitoba. Barker inherited his mother's love of plants but was more interested in their scientific nature and the act of classifying them than in their cultivation and beauty. Until he was well into his forties, Barker remained single, although many of his students were interested in him romantically. Sexually, Barker was confused at times; he was attracted to Daisy when she was eleven, which bothered him. Later he visited prostitutes, but only for a sense of release and a change from his daily schedule. Barker wrote letters to Daisy from the time she was eleven until she was thirty-one and convinced himself that he was in love with her. When Daisy finally came to visit him, they were married quickly, although there is no evidence that Barker actually loved Daisy once he came to know her. Later in life, Barker wished for a reunion with his

father, Magnus, but never acted on his wish. Barker died of a brain tumor after he and Daisy had been married for twenty years.

Magnus Flett

Magnus was born in the Orkney Islands, but moved to Manitoba as a young man to work at the quarry. He was married to Clarentine as they raised their three sons Barker, Simon, and Andrew. Magnus felt their marriage was fine and was completely caught off guard when Clarentine abandoned him. For years after that, he was too angry to speak to her, but later tried sending messages through their son Barker asking Clarentine to return home to him. When she refused, Magnus went into a kind of mourning for her, going through her possessions for hints of her life and of their lives together. After many years of this obsession for the absent Clarentine, Magnus, at the age of sixty-five, took off on a journey back to his native Orkneys, walking much of the way and reading Clarentine's copy of *Jane Eyre*. His whereabouts were unknown for years by his family, but Magnus had become a sort of celebrity in his old age, chiefly for his ability to recite *Jane Eyre* word for word. Magnus was still alive in the Orkney islands at the age of a hundred and fourteen.

Objects/Places

Mercy Goodwill's Kitchen

The kitchen is where Mercy felt most at ease during her short married life with Cuyler. She loved to cook and try new recipes here, and it brought her the only real joy she knew in life. It is also in this kitchen that Mercy went into labor with Daisy and later bled to death.

The Tyndall Stone

This was a stone that Cuyler had brought home from the quarry as a gift to his wife. On the day she died, Mercy placed it on top of a plate which covered a bowl of pudding she was preparing for that night's dessert. The stone is characterized as one of the witnesses to Daisy's birth.

Cuyler's Monument to Mercy

While he is mourning his wife's death, Cuyler constructs a huge monument, which began with the single stone that was her grave marker. Using balance instead of mortar, Cuyler places each stone carefully and carves designs in many of them. The monument becomes a sightseeing attraction, which carries with it a legend of a beautiful wife, a newborn baby, and a grieving husband.

Bloomington, Indiana

Bloomington is the home of the thriving limestone industry of the early twentieth century. This is where Cuyler made his money and changed from a simple quarryman to a successful businessman. Bloomington comes to represent a place of affluence in the novel, though neither love nor art is found by any of the main characters in this town.

The Hotel in Paris

While on their honeymoon, Harold Hoad dies at this hotel, and for much of the novel, it is unknown exactly what happened here, so it comes to symbolize a mysterious place. Daisy is lying on the bed staring at the ceiling when, as is later reported, Harold jumps out of the window committing suicide like his father.

Lady Slippers

Barker Flett's lady slipper collection is the thing he is most proud of in his life, and he wills it specifically to his wife so that she may sell it if she wishes. Both Daisy and their daughter, Alice, are unable to find interested buyers for the collection he devoted his life to.

Daisy's Home and Garden

The house at 583 The Driveway in Ottawa is a fine home with a beautiful garden. Daisy spends many hours in her garden here and is devoted to her children. It comes to symbolize a sort of lackluster existence for Daisy despite its beauty.

Cuyler's Pyramid

After his retirement, Cuyler sets to work collecting stones to construct a pyramid to scale from the ancient pyramids in Egypt. He plans to put a time capsule inside, which includes items from his past and from his family. At the end of his life, Cuyler finds he is mocked by the pyramid he feels he will never finish.

The Coin

Abram Skutari was the local peddler that all of the residents of Tyndall knew only as The Old Jew. Skutari was present, by chance, at Daisy's birth, and he felt so sorry for the child that he placed a coin from the old country on her forehead.

The Orkney Islands

Home of Magnus Flett, this is a place of stone covered by a thin layer of plant life. It promises to be a place where huge amounts of plant fossils will be found. Daisy discovers the Orkneys after she is retired and takes a trip with her grand-niece to pay her respects to Magnus. Daisy enjoys exploring the islands and truly feels alive during her visit.

Mercy's Wedding Ring

This simple, engraved band was removed from Mercy's hand at the time of her death. Cuyler keeps it with him and plans to either put it in his time capsule or give it to Daisy as a token of her mother's. He mentions it to Daisy one time, but neither of them ever speak of it again. It never materializes after Cuyler's death.

Bayside Towers

Daisy's home in retirement, this condominium complex in Sarasota, Florida is where Daisy spends her final "good" years in the company of her friends, The Flowers. The group enjoys elevated social status among the other retirees, and Daisy finds it an agreeable, if not exciting, place.

Social Sensitivity

From her remarkable birth in the kitchen in 1905 to how she imagines her obituary will read in the 1990s, this fictional autobiography of Daisy Goodwill Flett spans a lifetime and most of the twentieth century. Hers is a life formed by a string of small accidents, with few conscious decisions on her part to shape her own destiny; her plight is enigmatic of the women of her generation.

As legend would have it, Daisy's parents were an odd match. Her father, stonemason Cuyler Goodwill, surprised everyone by marrying Mercy Stone, an obese, orphaned housekeeper at the Stonewall Orphans' Home. In her vague way, Mercy seems to have missed large chunks of what it means to be married, including her own pregnancy. When she went into labor, she was bewildered, uncomprehending, and died moments after the birth, from what must have been equal parts shock and eclampsia.

Daisy's birth was witnessed by a small group of people brought together to assist her by little more than chance.

"History indeed!" Daisy comments, "As though this paltry slice of time deserves such a name. Accident, not history, has called us together," voicing the traditional thinking of her day that women's lives were not worthy of being recorded while at the same time subverting that view by telling her story anyway.

We follow Daisy as she is raised by a neighbor, "Aunt" Clarentine, who soon leaves her dour husband and moves with Daisy to Winnipeg, where her son, Barker, lives. At age eleven, Daisy's father comes back into her life, moving with her to Bloomington, Indiana, where she grows to adulthood and attends college.

Eventually, she marries her former guardian, Barker Flett, raises a family, and writes a gardening column for the local paper, then moves to Florida in her later years. But this recounting of the incidental facts of her life does not come close to conveying their significance. Shields presents Daisy's past in an entirely subjective way, and she is interested in giving many accounts of her life from different points of view, not a single, linear, socalled "objective" version. By experimeriting with the autobiographical form, Shields makes its limitations apparent.

After all, as this work of fiction reminds us, history is written from a particular point of view. Simply because that point of view often happens to be the dominant view in a given culture does not make it "objective."

By portraying the domestic scenes and circumstances of women's lives, Shields has gained the reputation of writing "women's novels," but this may have more to do with the statistic that most novel readers are women than anything else. It is a label that inevitably restricts her audience further, yet her male characters are just as fully and empathetically portrayed.

Perhaps there is something particularly compelling to women about hearing a female voice and reading about the dramas and dilemmas of women's lives.

While not overtly feminist, her characters sometimes hold some views generally attributed to feminism.

"The real troubles in this world," Daisy states, "tend to settle on the misalignment between men and women." One misalignment that is evident in The Stone Diaries is how men and women view intimacy. Shields manages to avoid the usual stereotypes, and the misalignments are not necessarily along gender lines— just couples that do not quite connect.

For Cuyler, sex is a glorious awakening, while for his wife it is a duty, and a puzzling one at that. Barker, too, is passionately drawn to Daisy, while she, on the other hand, is not passionately in love with either of her husbands, and somewhat vague about intimacies, yet she gives the reader a full account of her parents' relationship. Many of the women in this work are out of touch with themselves, their bodies in particular. Daisy's mother, for instance, has no idea that she has a child growing inside her. Fraidy, the consummate flapper, is sexually adventurous, yet Daisy and Beans are not. For Daisy sex is as ordinary as any other aspect of her life; in fact, very few of the women of the story are particularly male-identified. In other words, they do not obtain their sense of self from their attachments to men, but rather from work. Daisy seems most happy when she gets the opportunity to write a gardening column for the local paper. Likewise, Mercy finds satisfaction in cooking and cleaning, and Clarentine operates a successful flower business once she escapes her loveless marriage. Daisy's generation bridges the gap between women like her mother and Clarentine, and women like her daughters, who take the knowledge for granted that marriage alone does not necessarily mean happiness.

Daisy's friendships with other women are what sustain her when things get rough. The lifelong friendship Daisy holds with college chums Fraidy, Beans and later with the "Flowers," her bridge club, is vital to her. Yet her relationship with her daughters remains vague in places, either because it is taken for granted or because she may have been unsure even at the end of her life about whether or not she succeeded in being a "good mother." The items she leaves each of her children are only puzzling to them; they do not see the significance of her selections, and we can only guess. Like most children, they admire certain things about their mother while despising others. Perhaps a certain amount of detachment or uncertainty about her own role as a mother may be attributed to the fact that Daisy's own mother, an orphan herself, may not even have known that she had a child before she died. Of course, Clarentine stepped in to care for the child, and Daisy survives childhood relatively unscarred by its unusual inception.

Techniques

The use of overlapping and various narrative voices has become common since the metafiction of the 1970s broke the traditional linear mold for contemporary fiction. Rarely, though, are the parts so seamlessly joined together as in The Stone Diaries. By the time Shields wrote this novel, she was already an accomplished poet and playwright, and it shows in her careful attention to language and the convincing dialog. The Stone Diaries is a monument of words, with little in the way of a conventional plot, that gets right to the heart of human feeling and consciousness.

"When we say a thing or an event is real, never mind how suspect it sounds, we honor it," Shields writes. "But when a thing is made up—regardless of how true and just it seems—we turn up our noses.

That's the age we live in. The documentary age." Shields explores the question of whether any life, no matter how ordinary or thrilling, can be fully comprehended, even by the person living it. The autobiographical form is limited, but as is pointed out our society values documentation, so slyly Shields documents her fictional tale with photographs, letters, lists, various accounts, whatever she can collect. By the last chapter, Daisy is reduced to a series of lists, recipes, and obituaries.

Shields examines the split between Daisy's life and her narrative voice. Her story is told in the first-person present tense, with parts in the third person from various points of view. It includes many letters to Daisy, and other changes in narrative voice throughout as in the chapter entitled "Sorrow" wherein Daisy's friends and family offer what they each consider to be the cause of Daisy's depression. Inaccuracies and contradictions are included as well. For instance, Daisy is not always a reliable narrator: She states her mother was hugely obese when the photograph of "her" reveals her to be merely somewhat overweight. The use of photographs in the middle of the book lends mock authenticity to this fictional account. Shields states in an interview provided by her publisher, Penguin, that "When I read real biographies, I always turn to the photos in the middle. I'm always checking the image against the text. I found the photo of the Ladies Rhythm and Movement Club at a small country museum here in Manitoba. The photos of Daisy's grandchildren are actually of my own children. I asked them for permission, of course."

Themes

Themes

That ordinary life is a worthy subject for a novel is a theme that has had its place in all of Shields's fiction. Even when surprising events occur in the novel, they are presented as accidents, and accidents happen to everyone. Daisy's first husband, for example, falls from a window to his death, perhaps startled by Daisy's sneeze. It is odd, but still somehow convincing. Shields explores the experiences and inner lives of unremarkable, unnoticed people with careful detail.

The Stone Diaries is a collection of almost mundane details: memories, dreams, gardening advice, letters, recipes, and many lists—grocery lists, a list of Daisy's illnesses, to-do lists, and the like. These accounts all make Daisy's world more convincing. The characters cook, hang laundry on the line to dry, weed the garden, clean house, laugh together, reminisce, keep secrets, economize. These incidentals aren't glossed over to get to the next plot device; in fact, plot is less important in a novel such as this as eliciting an empathetic understanding of the internal workings of her characters' minds, including their flaws. Shields convinces us that Daisy and the rest of her family are no more purposeful or dedicated to a particular goal than her readers are today.

The Stone Diaries reveals the life of a fairly average woman, giving it shape and significance, just as we all bring meaning to our own, ordinary lives. However, the voice of Daisy is not the only one we hear; Shields writes from a variety of sometimes conflicting perspectives. She is interested in exploring how our stories often differ from the stories of others who recount the same events. Yet this is not so much a story to correct impressions or fill in the gaps others have missed, but rather to relish the variance.

Just as we continually edit our own memories and view them with a particular bias, Daisy is inevitably subjective and even omits large periods of her life in the telling. "When I read back over my manuscript," stated Shields in a 1995 interview, "I saw that Daisy had somehow leaped over her experiences with childbirth, sexual initiation, and education. But that's how life stories are. It's as though you end up your life with a boxful of snapshots. They may not be the best ones, but they're the ones you have."

So, we never really know Daisy completely. Perhaps no one can know another person completely; we are inevitably selective about what we remember and what we choose to reveal. Daisy is selective about her story too. In between we find plenty of speculation from various viewpoints—Daisy's, her friends', her children's— and even possibly deliberate vagueness about certain events such as the fate of "little Emma," her granddaughter born with Down's Syndrome.

Daisy is a witness to her own life and as such she has separated herself from the story even as she tells it, but, as one of her children speculates on her evasiveness, "... evasion can be a form of aggression." Readers may not know what to make of Daisy's obvious omissions and even occasional misrepresentations. Her son expresses feeling "cheated" by what Daisy has kept to herself. When he found a paper she wrote in college on the struggle for Italian independence, he speculates: Where did it go, my mother's intellectual ease and energy? . . . When I think about my mother's essay on Camillo Cavour, I can't help feeling cheated, as if there's some wily subversion going on, a glittering joke locked in a box and buried underground. And then I think: if I feel cheated, how much more cheated she must feel. She must be in mourning for the squandering of herself. Something, someone, cut off her head, yanked out her tongue.

In fact, she was a typical woman of her day. Her domesticity is never thrown off, but the story makes it clear what women of Daisy's generation missed. On the other hand, this could be what Daisy chose for herself whether wisely or not.

When a young man in the hospital asks her if he should tell his mother that he is gay, she responds by telling him to keep it to himself. "But I can't go on living a lie," he protests. "Why not? Most people do," she asserts. Daisy lies to herself, but in the end realizes that she "missed the point."

Perhaps though, it is less evasion and more that she did not know until it was too late that she could have expected more from life. One version of what Daisy imagines people must think of her is this: Now there's a woman who made a terrific meatloaf, who knew how to repot a drooping rubber plant, who bid a smart no-trump hand, who wore a hat well, who looked after her personal hygiene, who wrote her thank- you notes promptly,. . . who missed the point, the point of it all, but was, nevertheless, almost unfailingly courteous to others.

She certainly knows that there is more to life than she has had. Her final, unspoken words are, "I am not at peace." Her daughter, Alice, wants to ask her before her death if her life was worth the living, "Have you had moments of genuine ecstasy? Has it been worth it? ... Has it been enough, your life, I mean?" but she does not. Perhaps she already knows how Daisy would answer.

This is also a book about the transformative power of language. Cuyler Goodwill comes to appreciate language when making love to his first wife. Daisy discovers her fluency when she takes over a gardening column for the local paper.

Her husband, Barker Flett dies after writing her a surprisingly eloquent letter, and even her father-in-law, Magnus Flett, a singularly inarticulate and uncommunicative man, finds solace after he has alienated his entire family in memorizing the entire text of Jane Eyre. By putting her story into words, Daisy imposes order on chaos, and tries to gain some control after the fact over what she could not control as events transpired. Cuyler Goodwill, Daisy's father, is transformed by his discovery of the power of words from stonemason to public figure to sonorous blowhard in the end. This is one of the few

accounts provided depicting their life as father and daughter, and it is painfully awkward: Shields notes that "he has entered his baroque period.

Whatever fluency he has evolved has turned against him, just as his arteries would do later in life. His tongue's inventions have become a kind of trick . . .

Words in their thousands, their tens of thousands, pouring out like cream, too rich, too smooth. Doesn't he see the yawning faces before him, doesn't he hear the sighs of boredom, or observe her own scalding shame?"

Near the end of the book, this passage explains Daisy's motives in communicating her story: "All she is trying to do is keep things straight in her head. To keep the weight of her memories evenly distributed. To hold the chapters of her life in order. At the same time she knows that what lies ahead of her must be concluded by the efforts of her imagination and not by the straight-faced recital of a throttled and unlit history. Words are more and more required. And the question arises: what is the story of a life? A chronicle of fact or a skillfully wrought impression?" While Shields slyly incorporates indisputable "facts" into the work, the photographs for instance, what we find in The Stone Diaries is very much the latter.

The Ordinary Life

For the most part, Daisy's life was the average life of a woman living in her time in America. This is also true of nearly all of the characters in the book. Cuyler worked in the quarry, Mercy was a housewife, and Barker Flett spent his day-to-day life studying and teaching about plants. Nearly every one of these characters, though, wishes for something more grand. Daisy, for one, goes to great lengths to find ways to augment the story of her life. One way in which Daisy achieves this is through omission. When telling her story, Daisy makes great leaps in time to vault herself from one large event to the next. The story of her birth is certainly the most remarkable story of her life, and each significant event seems to get smaller over her lifetime. Still, she chooses to specifically tell about these more attention-grabbing times, even down to the tiniest detail, while skipping over the years of her life that were merely pleasant or ordinary. To Daisy, tragedy is preferable to comfort, but rather than change the way she lived her life, she changes the way she tells it. Another way Daisy compensates for the lack of excitement in her life is to alter the story altogether. She invents opinions for other people, thoughts they may have about her, and reasons for their actions. Somehow she believes this makes her story more interesting and also feels it will excuse her from taking responsibility for the dreary reality of her life.

The Alterable Fate of Women

Daisy, as do other characters in the story, says at one point that she believes that in many ways, it is simply the fate of women to take what they get in this world. Daisy's mother, Mercy, and Daisy's friend, Beans, feel this way, and the two of them accept it. Daisy feels that the stories of men, no matter how horrible they may be, are used in

their case to enlarge their lives; whereas, women are marked forever by a single incident. Daisy claims to feel trapped by the story of young Harold Hoad's death, yet she clings to this secret until the bitter end of her life as something to identify herself with. Daisy seems to contradict herself by defining herself by her biggest experiences, but that is what seems to be the feminist perspective of this novel.

Rather than continuing to accept the fate she is handed as a woman, she tells her story as if it was a man's story and asks the reader to judge her based on this. Daisy's daughter, Alice, too, decides to change her life in one day, when she covers over the crack in her ceiling and decides to become a better person. Clarentine Flett leaves her husband simply because she knows her marriage is over; she has no "better" reason. Daisy's way of presenting her life story is the opposite of the way she would have presented it if she had actually accepted that her fate as a woman could not be changed. If this was the case, the reader would have heard about all of the years that were lived in an ordinary manner, about Daisy growing up, going to school, and then raising her children. By choosing this alternate narrative method, Daisy chooses to say that even if the life was not unusual, the telling of it can be.

Leaving/Returning to One's Country

Daisy is born in and spends most of her childhood in Canada, as did her father. Yet when it comes time to take a job in the United States, Cuyler embraces the new country as his own and seemingly leaves Canada behind forever. When Daisy feels it is time to leave Indiana, she chooses to return to Canada to raise her own family. There is something nonspecific which draws her there - she doesn't have any particular memories of Canada itself that make Canada "better" in some way, but she wants to return to her country. In her old age, Daisy returns to the United States, to Florida, that predictable home for retired Americans, as if she is giving in to the tired old clichy. Magnus Flett, on the other hand, leaves Canada, where he has lived most of his life, and, in his old age, returns to the Orkney Islands of his birth. In his case, there is a sense of rebirth in this act, a return to his heritage and a letting go of the unpleasant man he has become in Canada. By earning a sense of fame in the Orkneys, he is able to be known forever by this fame and by the persona he takes on when returning to the Orkneys. A return to one's own country becomes a demonstration of how a character feels and of how they want to be portrayed.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this book is constantly changing, even when it comes to Daisy Goodwill's own observations. Most of the time it is told in the third person with Daisy as the omniscient narrator. The reader is at the mercy of Daisy and her flawed view to tell the story as she sees it. Daisy always lets the reader know that she is in charge in these cases. Daisy switches to first-person view at times to reinforce this. It is as if she is a character and the narrator at the same time, seeing her life from the future. Sometimes, in fact, she even switches to second-person narrative, an uncommon point of view for a novel, to answer a question she predicts the reader will have. The three together create exactly what Daisy wishes, an almost arrogant assertion that the reader will have the story her way or not at all.

Pieced in with the sections written in Daisy's point of view are first-person narrated sections by Daisy's relatives and friends, as well as letters which seem to be based more in fact than any of Daisy's points of view. These, contrasted with the portions that the reader gets from Daisy, put together a more complete picture of Daisy's life. At least these varied viewpoints affirm the realities of Daisy's life, even if she can alter the way the reader interprets them.

Setting

The setting of the novel changes a good deal, usually to illustrate either a sameness or a change in someone's life. When Mercy spends a lot of time in the kitchen, and Daisy spends all of her time in a hospital bed, for example, these settings are used to show the most significant place in their lives at that particular time. When Daisy and Magnus Flett make major moves to another country, they are making a major life change of their own making. The kitchen and the hospital bed are confining, while the large masses of limestone in Canada and the Orkneys are substantial places of comfort.

Language and Meaning

The author uses a unique blend of language to illustrate Daisy's personality. Since Daisy is college-educated, and most of the novel is written from her point of view, she usually states to the reader very clearly what she means. She is questioning the meaning of her life, and often offers poignant insight into what she believes life is about. However, when her family members and friends quote Daisy, they often remark that she uses trite, sing-songy, and even girlish language when speaking to them. This indicates that the Daisy that the reader hears is a different Daisy than the one she presents to others in her life, the reader encounters a persona that is more mature and now has more perspective.

Structure

The novel is divided into ten chapters, clearly separated into times in Daisy's life. In just a few words, the title of the chapter is meant to encapsulate what will happen during that chapter. There are usually spans of many years between the chapters, and they frequently jump right into the next era without much explanation of what has happened in between.

The book also includes Daisy's family tree and an assortment of photographs of characters at different times in their lives. The photographs, in particular, are a startling addition to a fictional autobiography, and make odd additions to Daisy's story.

Quotes

"Eating was as close to heaven as my mother ever came." Chapter 1, Page 1

"It is frightening, and also exhilarating, her ability to deceive those around her; this is something new, her lost hours, her vivid dreams and shreds of language, as though she'd been given two lives instead of one, the alternate life cloaked in secret." Chapter 1, Page 12

"Life is an endless recruiting of witnesses. It seems we need to be observed in our postures of extravagance or shame, we need attention paid to us. Our own memory is altogether too cherishing, which is the kindest thing I can say for it." Chapter 1, Pages 36-37

"His attention becomes concentrated as he moves from scratch to groove, as he joins line and curve, elaborating an image that is no more at first than an atom flickering in the brain, bringing to it all its possibilities while guarding its pure modality, its essence - this, always, is the hardest part - and preparing himself for the moment when the worked stone is complete." Chapter 2, Page 65

"Dreaming her way backward in time, resurrecting images, the young girl realized, with wonder, that the absent are always present, that you don't make them go away simply because you get on a train and head off in a particular direction." Chapter 3, Pages 89-90

"Why should men be allowed to strut under the privilege of their life adventures, wearing them like a breastful of medals, while women went all gray and silent beneath the weight of theirs?" Chapter 4, Page 121

"Curiously, she is not afraid, knowing as she does that love is mostly the avoidance of hurt, and, furthermore, she is accustomed to obstacles, and how they can be overcome by readjusting her glance or crowding her concerns into a shadowy corner." Chapter 4, Page 147

"Still, hers is the only account there is, written on air, written with imagination's invisible ink." Chapter 4, Page 149

"People the wide world over like to think of Canada as a land of ice and snow. That's the image they prefer to hang on to, even when they know better." Chapter 5, Page 157

"She may be crowded out of her own life - she knows this for a fact and has always known it - but she possesses, as a compensatory gift, the startling ability to draft alternative versions." Chapter 5, Page 190

"She may yearn to know the true state of the garden, but she wants even more to be a part of its mysteries. She understands, perhaps, a quarter of its green secrets, no more. In turn it perceives nothing of her, not her history, her name, her longings, nothing -

which is why she is able to love it as purely as she does, why she has opened her arms to it, taking it as it comes, every leaf, every stem, every root and sign." Chapter 5, Page 196

"In one day I had altered my life: my life, therefore, was alterable." Chapter 7, Page 233

"My mother is a middle-aged woman, a middle-class woman, a woman of moderate intelligence and medium-sized ego and average good luck, so that you would expect her to land somewhere near the middle of the world. Instead she's over there at the edge. The least vibration could knock her off." Chapter 7, Page 252

"But that child's sadness never left him. He swore he'd never seen a creature so alone in the world. He lived a long life and made a million dollars and loved his wife and was a decent father to his sons. But he grieved about that baby all his days, the curse that hung over it, its terrible anguish." Chapter 7, Page 261

"The odd thing about the pictures that fly into Daisy Goodwill's head is that she is always alone. There are voices that reach her from a distance; there are shadows and suggestions - but still she is alone. And we require, it seems, in our moments of courage and shame, at least one witness, but Mrs. Flett has not had this privilege." Chapter 9, Page 339

"And the question arises: what is the story of a life? A chronicle of fact or a skillfully wrought impression?" Chapter 9, Page 340

"Flett, Daisy (nee Goodwill), who, due to historical accident, due to carelessness, due to ignorance, due to lack of opportunity and courage, never once in her many years of life experienced the excitement and challenge of oil painting, skiing, sailing, nude bathing, emerald jewelry, cigarettes, oral sex, pierced ears, Swedish clogs, water beds, science fiction, pornographic movies, religious ecstasy, truffles, Kirsch, jalapeno peppers, Peking Duck, Vienna, Moscow, Madrid, group therapy, body massage, hunger, distinguished honors, outraged condemnation . . ." Chapter 10, Pages 344-345

"Now there's a woman who made a terrific meatloaf, who knew how to repot a drooping rubber plant, who bid a smart no-trump hand, who wore a hat well, who looked after her personal hygiene, who wrote her thank-you notes promptly, who kept up, who went down, went down and down and down, who missed the point, the point of it all, but was, nevertheless, almost unfailingly courteous to others." Chapter 10, Page 354

" 'I am not at peace.' - Daisy Goodwill's final (unspoken) words" Chapter 10, Page 361

Adaptations

There have been two audiocassette editions of The Stone Diaries. The Recorded Books unabridged (13 1/2 hours on 10 cassettes) edition is read by Alyssa Bresnahan, and the abridged (3 hour) Reed edition is read by Connie Booth.

Both received favorable reviews. Diane Turbide, in "A Prairie Pulitzer" (Maclean's, May 1, 1995) reports that Cynthia Scott, a National Film Board director in Montreal, had plans to make a motion picture of The Stone Diaries, but to date the project has not come to fruition.

Key Questions

The Stone Diaries is a complex novel with much to mull over even after the last page is read. As a collaboration between writer and reader, there remains a great deal of interpretation left up to the reader. Readers will no doubt be eager to discuss such things as whether or not Daisy can be counted upon as a reliable, accurate narrator and why Shields gives us this variety of other narrative voices throughout the work.

1. Why do you suppose Shields "left out" what would usually be key events in portraying the life of Daisy Goodwill Flett? How much of her story is remembered either by her or her "witnesses" and how much imagined?

2. A critic once accused Shields of "engraving beautiful script on the head of a pin" (Andrew Garrod, Speaking for Myself, 1986). Why the precise detail given to what could be called mundane subjects?

3. How do we take her unreliability as a narrator? Is Daisy trying to deceive her readers either by misleading or simply omitting details or does she just have trouble keeping the facts straight?

4. Only at the end of Daisy's life, long after her children are grown and have children on their own, do they discover that she was married previously. How is keeping secrets viewed in this work?

5. How important are women's relationships in The Stone Diaries: relationships between mothers and daughters, relationships between sisters, the friendships between women? Do the women of the story need men? How deeply does Daisy love either of her husbands?

6. How do women and men in the book experience intimacy differently?

What does this say about the traditional sexual roles of Daisy's generation? What, if not sex, gives the women of the story the most fulfillment?

7. Shields's characters, both male and female, are often unsure of themselves, of their path through life, of the choices and circumstances that present themselves throughout her works. How is this a departure from much of the literary canon? Can we make easy judgments about Daisy's life, about whether she was happy? Was she a "good" mother?

8. Interviews with Shields indicate that she is uncomfortable with being labeled a woman's writer. What is it about her novels that appeals to women readers?

9. Daisy's father is a stonecutter as is her husband's father, but what is stone in Daisy's life? Why is the book entitled The Stone Diaries?

Topics for Discussion

In what ways can *The Stone Diaries* be considered a feminist novel or not?

Having never really known Daisy, what is Magnus Flett's significance in the book about her life?

Discuss the social entrapments that kept Daisy from living the life she wished she had lived.

Is it unethical for Daisy to present the reader with an altered version of her life? Is this typical of most people in their everyday lives?

What is the importance of the image of stone (and limestone) in this book?

Discuss the portrayal of the sexuality of men and women in *The Stone Diaries*.

What are some of the rituals that characters in *The Stone Diarie*s follow in their daily lives, and what purpose do they serve?

In what ways does Daisy prove that life is alterable? In what ways does she disprove this theory?

Near the end of her life, Daisy imagines how her family and friends will react to her death. If the book were to continue from their point of view, how much of this do you think would actually happen?

Why do you think a family tree and select photographs are included in *The Stone Diaries*, considering it is a work of fiction? What effect do they have on the book?

Literary Precedents

Shields is now included among an internationally known and well-respected group of contemporary Canadian writers that includes Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood. Shields has a talent for writing about women's lives, portraying women that have an intellectual life that is very much a part of who they are as individuals, and this is something she shares with Atwood and Munro.

In several interviews, Shields has expressed an admiration for Mavis Gallant and cites, as one of her early influences, John Updike. There are clear similarities to Updike in much of her work, specifically the use of almost mundane, ordinary characters and their ordinary lives as subject matter, but even Shields's style of writing shows some Updike influence.

The Stone Diaries in particular, though, shows signs of another possible influence; that of the "magical realism" of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and other South and Central American writers. Their use of extravagant, extraordinary events that are thoroughly grounded in everyday life may have influenced some of the more striking incidents in The Stone Diaries. It seems fantastic, for instance, that Daisy's mother, however obese, could go for nine months without any inkling that she was pregnant; or that Daisy's first husband could, on their honeymoon, fall to his death out a window (perhaps because of her sneeze), and she never spoke of it, or him, again; or that Magnus Flett memorized every word of Jane Eyre and lived to the age of 115. These occurrences, while remarkable, are thoroughly believable in the context of the novel.

Related Titles

Unlike some of Shields' earlier fiction, The Stone Diaries does not have a companion piece to fill out the lives of some of the peripheral characters, but readers might also enjoy her first two novels, The Box Garden (1977) and Small Ceremonies (1976). These paired books portray the lives of two very different sisters, Judith Gill and Charleen Forrest. Like The Stone Diaries, relationships between women are paramount and enrich the story of their childhood and their shared memories. It is interesting that even in these early works, Shields is clearly fascinated by how our perspective changes events as we remember them. Happenstance (1980) is another novel by Shields that provides more than one perspective on a story; in this case we read the husband's and the wife's view of their relationship in separate sections of the novel.

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