

The Shell Seekers Study Guide

The Shell Seekers by Rosamunde Pilcher

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Plot Summary

The *Shell Seekers* is a novel that revolves around the final months of the central character, Penelope Keeling. Although the story focuses on Penelope, there are various glimpses into other characters that are important to her. As the mother of three children named Nancy, Noel and Olivia, each of the children's lives in the present are explored briefly in order to better explain their relationship with Penelope.

Penelope has just suffered a slight heart attack at the beginning of the novel and she is happy to return home (after voluntarily checking herself out of the hospital.) She then decides that it is time for her to return to Porthkerris, where she lived throughout World War II and met the love of her life, Richard. She asks each of her three children to come with her to make the trip, but all three decline, stating other obligations in their life. In the end, she decides to take Antonia, the daughter of Cosmo, the love of Olivia's life. Cosmo has recently passed away and Penelope takes her into her home in Podmore Thatch as a welcome visitor and an easy way to silence her daughter Nancy's constant admonishings that she needs a full-time caretaker. In addition, Penelope and Antonia take Danus, the gardener whom Penelope hires after suffering her small heart attack.

Central throughout the story are the paintings made by Penelope's father, Lawrence Stern. Lawrence was a famous painter, although over the years the popularity of his paintings diminished. Recently, however, there has been an increased admiration and appreciation for his works. Due to their rarity, the price for these pieces are astronomical. Since Penelope owns two incomplete panels in her home and one important work—*The Shell Seekers*—her children Nancy and Noel urge her to sell the works while their popularity has reached its peak. Penelope balks at the idea since *The Shell Seekers* is such a sentimentally important work for her; no amount of money can compensate for simply having it in her home.

After having another argument with Nancy and Noel about selling the pieces, Penelope finally goes to an art dealer unbeknownst to her children. She sells the panels for one hundred thousand pounds and uses the money to take herself, Antonia and Danus to Porthkerris, staying at one of the finest hotels in the region, *The Sands*. The only child that understands her actions is Olivia, but the other two are outraged. They become even more angry when they learn that Penelope donates *The Shell Seekers* to the art museum in Porthkerris that her father founded rather than sell it for an outrageous financial sum.

Shortly after Penelope returns from Porthkerris, she settles into her house again with Antonia. However, after a restless night of sleep, she goes out to her garden and suddenly suffers another heart attack. This time she does not recover, but in her final moments, she sees Richard coming for her, filling her with happiness. The children gather together for the funeral and hear her final thoughts in her will. Danus is granted a large sum of money from the sale of sketches by Lawrence Stern that Noel had wanted and Antonia is given a set of lovely pearl earrings that Nancy had wanted and yet again, these two adult children whine over what their mother did not do for them. In the end,

however, Olivia silences all of them and allows Antonia and Danus—by now a symbol of Penelope and Richard—to start their new lives together with the money that Penelope had bequeathed to them. It is a realistic story about families and the intense relationship between a mother and her children, as well as how adult children face their mother's imminent death.



Prologue and Chapter 1: Nancy

Prologue and Chapter 1: Nancy Summary

Penelope is sitting in the back of a taxi, on her way home from the hospital. She is happily settled back in her house and contemplates which child she should call to tell she is back home. She settles on calling Olivia. After hanging up, she feels grateful to be alive and living, as if given a bonus chance at happiness.

Nancy is starting her day in her only occupation—as a stay-at-home mother and woman who runs the household at the old Vicarage. She thinks about their house and lifestyle, both of which exceed the financial means that George, her husband, brings in. She clearly is a woman for whom appearances are of the utmost importance, no matter the cost. She has spoiled, disagreeable children and a housemaid that she dislikes, but is a weak individual and thus allows herself to be bullied around. Her relationship with her husband George is cold and distant, and he essentially ignores her.

Nancy spends her time fussing over Penelope, although she brings nothing constructive to the table. She demands that Penelope find constant help and avoid going into the garden, where she feels that Penelope will strain herself again. However, she has neither the money nor the inclination to help her mother herself. She thinks about the past and her "darling" Daddy and the only woman who really understood her, her grandmother Dolly Keeling.

Nancy decides to arrange a meeting with Olivia to go over Penelope's new state, although Olivia is well aware that the meeting will be fruitless. On the train, she sees an article that highlights the recent auction of a Lawrence Stern painting. She does not contemplate it long and continues on with her reading.

Prologue and Chapter 1: Nancy Analysis

Clearly, Penelope's feelings for her children are outlined when she tries to determine which child she should call to let know she is out of the hospital. Her choice of Olivia will become the obvious choice as the novel progresses, as it becomes clear to the reader that Olivia is the only child that truly understands Penelope.

The reader gets a clear glimpse of what type of woman Nancy Chamberlain is. For her, it is all about appearances and living as though she and her husband have a great deal of money — even when they do not. The obvious symbol of their foolishly extravagant life is the house that they live in, the old Vicarage. Although they cannot afford the place, owning it is extremely important to them to the point where they even answer the phone "The Old Vicarage" and have custom stationary with their address on it to reinforce its prestige. Unfortunately, Nancy and her family do not have the means to support this lifestyle and none of their friends truly care about their situation.



Chapter 2: Olivia and Chapter 3: Cosmo

Chapter 2: Olivia and Chapter 3: Cosmo Summary

Olivia is at the office, making important decisions about the latest publication of Venus. She is the editor-in-chief there and commands a great deal of power here. She is not looking forward to the lunch with her sister Nancy. She does not order any alcohol, but watches as Nancy consumes an entire bottle of wine. She also makes internal notes about how much weight Nancy has gained over the years and how her sister who once was much more attractive than she is now starting to look rather dowdy and awful. Olivia, on the other hand, was the studious one who now commands a great deal of attention and success at the office and with eligible bachelors.

They talk about Penelope and the changes that Nancy feels need to be made in their mother's life; namely, that she have full-time help and a gardener to help with her yard that she cherishes. Yet, Nancy does not want to be the one to fund these changes. Olivia disagrees that their mother needs any help whatsoever and knows she will figure it out. They get on the subject of Lawrence Stern paintings being sold at auction and Olivia informs Nancy that these paintings are now worth a great deal of money, to Nancy's shock. After the meeting, Olivia forgets all about her sister and goes home after work to take a nice, relaxing bath.

Olivia relaxes and suddenly recalls the summer of 1979 when she went to Ibiza with friends. She was stuck on a boat and escapes to the front of the sailboat to get away from some of the partygoers and a man finds her and begins talking with her. His name is Cosmo Hamilton and he has a thirteen-year-old daughter named Antonia. They chat and the next morning, as she is lying by the pool, he finds her again. He asks her to spend the afternoon with him and she agrees, spending the next two. Eventually, he takes her by his house and there, she finds a peace unlike anything she has experienced before. She agrees to stay with him then for a full year, giving herself a sabbatical from the career she has worked so hard to gain.

The shock of quitting her job and life initially jars Olivia. She goes to sleep for three days, eating very little. During this time, Cosmo is very sweet and takes care of her, but does not push her to join him outside. On the third morning, she realizes that her temporary grief has passed and she is ravenous for food and life with Cosmo. They spend months together, but just before Antonia is set to arrive in Ibiza to spend time with her father, Olivia suggests that Penelope come to visit as well in order to offset the "Three's a Crowd" problem. Penelope and Antonia fly over together and despite just meeting one another, get along brilliantly.

While there, Penelope fits into Olivia's Ibizan life as perfectly as she knew she would. They hold a house party in Penelope and Antonia's honor and this is the first time that Penelope sees the lovely pearl earrings that her Aunt Ethel had given her. The entire vacation goes flawlessly.



By February, Olivia believes she knows everything there is to know about Cosmo, but she is wrong. One day, a strange man comes to visit and Olivia soon finds out that he is the landlord of C'an D'alt. Olivia then realizes that Cosmo has lived in a house for 25 years and does not own it. Offending Olivia's independent sensibilities more is the concept that Cosmo cannot afford to buy anything at all. For Olivia, independence—financial independence in particular—is her source of happiness and she realizes then that she will leave Cosmo. Cosmo understands in that instant that he is about to lose her forever.

Chapter 2: Olivia and Chapter 3: Cosmo Analysis

The differences between Olivia and Nancy are quite apparent during their lunch meeting. While Nancy might have been the more physically attractive sister growing up, clearly Olivia is the one with the more successful life now and who has her pick of men to consider when she chooses. Also, Olivia is on the cusp of fashion, power and knowledge, while Nancy languishes on the outside thanks to her boring, simple life filled with shallow appearances.

This lunch meeting was called essentially so that Nancy could feel that she was doing something—without actually having to do something. It will be clear that Nancy is a woman of words alone who feels the world owes her everything and does nothing of value. Olivia, on the other hand, is a woman of action and knows her strength. She respects her mother and realizes that her mother is an independent and capable person.

Olivia's recollections of her time in Ibiza not only play a part in explaining and describing Olivia now, they will play a key role in the future plotlines of the novel as well. Her relationship with Antonia and the fact that Antonia gets along so well with her mother, Penelope, will be put to good use in the future. Another interesting aspect of Olivia's sabbatical with Cosmo is her emphasis on independence. When she realizes that he does not own the house that he has been living in for 25 years, it offends the core of Olivia's belief system so greatly that she realizes she cannot stay with him. Despite her devotion and love for Cosmo, she cannot share a life with someone who does not have the same sense of independence that she holds to be one of the key tenants in her life.



Chapter 4: Noel

Chapter 4: Noel Summary

Noel is waiting for his latest girlfriend Amabel to show up for their weekend vacation at a friend's house. Just like his sister Nancy, appearances mean a great deal to Noel, which is why he drives a fancy Jaguar that is not new, has a small and cramped apartment because of its prestigious address and has an expensive wardrobe. Amabel fits nicely in this arrangement as she comes from a well-connected family.

On the way out, he lends Amabel Lawrence Stern's old coat. She finds a letter inside and hands it to Noel once they have reached their weekend destination. In it, an appraiser writes Lawrence about some oil sketches he had done. The letter gets Noel thinking about other possible sketches that Lawrence might have had lying around and how expensive they might be now. He plans to visit his mother soon on the pretext to see how she is doing in order to scrounge around to look for the sketches. He calls his friend to get an appraisal estimate and is pleasantly surprised at how much money the sketches could garner him.

Chapter 4: Noel Analysis

Noel is very similar to his sister and unfortunately, both seem to value materialistic objects and appearances more than what actually matters in life. Ironically, neither of them can afford it, while their sister Olivia—who does not lust after appearances or material objects—has both and has a very successful life. Noel gets by on his charm and wit, spending his last bit of money on disposable items in an effort to look more important than he actually is.

Noel is turned on to the idea of selling Lawrence Stern's paintings and sketches at the same time that Nancy finds out the general financial value of the paintings themselves. Interestingly, both siblings will play off of each other in an attempt to get their mother to sell these valuables for their own personal greed.



Chapter 5: Hank

Chapter 5: Hank Summary

Hank Spotswood comes over to Olivia's house to have a dinner date with her. She had met him earlier and rather than go out to a traditional restaurant, Olivia invites him to her house instead. He is an American only in town for a short period of time. Over dinner, he asks if she will show him some of the English countryside that he has heard so much about. She agrees and they spend the night together.

However, while he is still there, Olivia receives a phone call from Antonia. She is coming to England because Cosmo has just passed away suddenly. She wants to stay with Olivia for a little while until she can figure out what to do. Olivia is shocked, but she also realizes that she needs to change her plans with Hank. She tells him that they will now go to visit Penelope at Podmore's Thatch. While Olivia is visiting Penelope, her mother asks if she would like to come with her to Porthkerris on a short visit. Olivia declines, stating life is too busy. After Olivia and Hank are finished enjoying Penelope's company, they leave. Moments later, Noel shows up unexpectedly with Amabel, on the pretext that he has come to check on her.

After only a few moments there, he brings up the topic of possibly selling her Lawrence Stern works, the Shell Seekers in particular. It does not seem to matter to him that the painting holds great sentimental value for her. When she finally cuts off the conversation, he tells his mother that he wants to find his old squash racket. In reality, he wants to paw through her things looking for the sketches. He leaves soon thereafter with Amabel.

Chapter 5: Hank Analysis

Noel's sudden appearance and false concern for his mother mirror how Nancy treats her mother as well. He is not at all concerned with her most recent medical scare, but instead worries how to get the Stern sketches that will give him the financial reward that he wants.

In contrast, Olivia receives bad news about Cosmo and immediately travels to be with her mother when she delivers the news. Olivia is not at all concerned with selling the Stern paintings, but instead about her mother, while simultaneously respecting her strength and independence. By bringing a man that she is not very close to by her mother's house, she shows that she keeps every aspect of her life open to her mother and appreciates her opinion. Both Penelope and Olivia realize that Hank is not a long-term relationship, but both appreciate what he has to offer at the time and are welcoming to him. Contrast this to Noel with his girlfriend, whom he only dates because she is wealthy and well-connected.



Chapter 6: Lawrence

Chapter 6: Lawrence Summary

Penelope remembers what life was like when she was nineteen. She is with her family at Carn Cottage in Porthkerris for the holiday and waiting to hear if their country is about to go to war. On the way to find her father at his studio, she hears that they have entered into war and goes to get him. Sophie, her mother, has told her to bring her father directly home and not let him go to the pub today.

As they walk home, Penelope explains her parents' relationship. Lawrence lost his first wife during World War I and Sophie lost her parents, who were close friends with Lawrence. After the war is over, Sophie finds Lawrence because she was always told that he would take care of her. In fact, he does and they fall in love, despite their age difference. Their marriage is the ideal union and shortly thereafter they have Penelope.

Sophie and Penelope soon learn they will have evacuees from London. Doris Potter and her sons Ronald and Clark, soon arrive. Despite a rough beginning with her crass mouth and constant yells, Doris finally settles into the calmer lifestyle at Porthkerris after a talk with Sophie. Back at the Sterns' home in London, the house in Oakley Street is occupied by their friends, the Cliffords. They have a family meeting and decide to stay in Porthkerris, but Sophie wants to return back to London briefly to check on her house. Lawrence agrees to the idea, asking her to take The Shell Seekers back with her to Porthkerris.

While Penelope and Sophie are in London, they meet the Friedmanns, who are staying in their house. Upon hearing Willi Friedmann's recollections of what is happening to the Jews in Germany, Penelope is so moved that she signs up the next day for the Women's Royal Naval Service as a volunteer.

Chapter 6: Lawrence Analysis

Penelope's life is about to change drastically, as often happens in war. She will grow up significantly in the next few years. The people that she meets will have a long-term, serious impact on her for the rest of her life. In addition, the marriage that she witnesses between her parents will have a profound influence on her life.



Chapter 7: Antonia

Chapter 7: Antonia Summary

Penelope wakes up and prepares for the new gardener who is coming to help with the yard. As soon as Penelope sees him, her heart begins to race and she is caught by his resemblance to someone else in her life. He does not drive and bikes to her house; immediately, he sets to work accomplishing the various tasks she has for him. His name is Danus Muirfield and he is from Edinburgh, Scotland. Penelope is instantly taken with him.

Meanwhile, Noel drives by to see his sister, Olivia. He does not call ahead to warn her that he is coming and she opens the door surprised. They laugh over the idea that Nancy already has Penelope deceased with her latest actions, but then Noel gets around to the topic of selling the Lawrence Stern pictures. Olivia tells him to leave Penelope alone, but agrees that he should help organize her attic and clean out some of the garbage up there.

Olivia tells Noel that Cosmo has died and asks Noel to take Antonia up to see Penelope when he goes there to clean the attic. He agrees, albeit reluctantly.

The auction of the Lawrence Stern picture happens and an American purchases the artwork for an incredible sum of money. Noel calls to tell Penelope, while Nancy learns of the news from her husband George. She is astounded that anyone would pay so much for a painting by her grandfather. Nancy immediately calls her mother with the news as well. Penelope also informs her that Antonia will be staying with her for awhile and Nancy is extremely put out that Penelope did not tell her.

Noel brings Antonia to Penelope's house and they immediately connect. While there, Penelope asks Noel if he would be interested in going to Porthkerris with her and he makes up a weak excuse to say no.

Chapter 7: Antonia Analysis

Upon the sale of the Lawrence Stern painting, a mere curiosity about what these paintings might sell for is escalated into empirical fact about what they are worth. Each child reacts to the sale slightly differently, but both Noel and Nancy immediately see the financial gain that they could personally have if they sold some artwork. For them, it is strictly about the money and nothing to do with value or sentimental worth. Olivia, on the other hand, believes they should leave Penelope alone and drop the subject altogether as she sees plainly through their motivations. Fortunately, Penelope does, too.

The arrangement of having Antonia stay with Penelope is an ideal one. Penelope can use the house guest as entertainment, but will not be subjected to the constant help that

Nancy would have provided her. Meanwhile, Antonia is in dire need of a family-like atmosphere where she can recover from the death of her father.



Chapter 8: Ambrose

Chapter 8: Ambrose Summary

Penelope goes to sleep that night and recalls how she met her husband, Ambrose. After volunteering for the war, she is assigned to the Wrens. As she has little skill and qualifications deemed important by war officials, she is given a low-grade title as Steward and told how to wear her hair and dress. For Penelope, with her bohemian lifestyle and free-minded parents, this is an entirely new way of seeing the world and living. She is instantly depressed and questions why she volunteered to begin with.

One night as she is walking to back to the Wrennery, a car pulls up behind her. The man offers to give her a ride, which she accepts. She is up front in telling him that she hates the job and he asks her out on a date for that evening. He waits outside the door and she runs inside to change from her uniform to civilian clothes. They get along wonderfully and agree to go to London together. He is surprised that she is not restricted by many social conventions and immediately sees her as the child of bohemian parents.

Once at her house in London, Ambrose Keeling is taken by the grandness of the place and in particular, with her father's Bentley. His mind works fast, calculating assets and financial gain in Penelope's situation. They make love that evening.

Penelope runs home thanks to a vacation break, anxious to be back with her family. While there, she tells Sophie that she is pregnant with Ambrose's child. Sophie is surprised, but tells Penelope to only marry Ambrose if she is wholly in love with him—and for no other reason. She has not yet told Ambrose.

Weeks later, Ambrose calls his mother, Dolly Keeling, to tell her that he is getting married to Penelope. She is crushed that her boy will have another woman in her life other than herself, but puts on a brave face. As soon as she arrives to their wedding, however, she learns that Penelope is pregnant and believes that she has forced her poor son into marrying her, despite the fact that it is not the truth. Penelope's parents, meanwhile, cannot come to the wedding because Lawrence is taken with the flu. Penelope realizes right away that she and Dolly will never get along. As they depart, Penelope and Ambrose are very awkward; she has been given a dishonorable discharge due to her pregnancy and he is going off to continue fighting in the war.

Chapter 8: Ambrose Analysis

The relationship between Ambrose and Penelope is a total disaster. Penelope has never had a boyfriend or slept with a man before. It is fitting that she would become pregnant, but unfortunately, she does not listen to her mother's advice to only marry Ambrose if she truly loves him. It is a mistake she will regret for the rest of her life.

Ambrose only sees Penelope's value as what she can provide for him financially. He believes that she comes from an affluent lifestyle and is impressed more by her father's Bentley than by anything else Penelope might have to offer. Penelope's relationship with her mother-in-law Dolly can be best summed up as utter miscommunication, as exemplified when Dolly asks her to call her Madre after the wedding and Penelope mishears her as Marjorie—and addresses her as such for quite a bit of time after they are married.



Chapter 9: Sophie

Chapter 9: Sophie Summary

Ambrose comes to visit Penelope in Carn Cottage in Porthkerris for the weekend, but the entire visit is a disaster. Now she knows that her relationship with Ambrose is a total mistake and failure. She gives birth to Nancy, who is named after a suggestion by Dolly Keeling, and feels no love for the child from the start. She allows Doris to fawn all over her and admits to her mother that marrying Ambrose was a huge mistake and that she should have listened to her one piece of advice. Doris, meanwhile, receives word that her husband is dead. She is confused as to where to go and what to do until Sophie tells her that she is a huge part of their family now and would prefer that they stay with them permanently at Carn Cottage.

Lawrence sees that the war is taking its toll on Sophie. She is bored by the environment and harsh, mundane life in Porthkerris. As a way to cheer her, he suggests she visits their house on Oakley Street and their friends, the Cliffords. She jumps at the chance and is overjoyed at the prospect. From London, she calls Lawrence filled with joy and happiness, but that evening, Penelope and her father are both awoken by a terrible start. Something is not right and the next morning, they find out that Sophie and the Cliffords have all been killed during the Blitz bombings in London that evening. Penelope is lost, but Lawrence will never be the same.

Chapter 9: Sophie Analysis

Penelope realizes that she has made a huge mistake with Ambrose, but she is unable to fix it. In this way, she grows up quickly and realizes that she is stuck in a marriage with a child that she does not care for. This will be the beginning of her relationship with Nancy and start of a miserable marriage with a man that she does not love.

Sophie's death has a profound impact on the entire family as she is the light and center of their core. Lawrence, having lost another wife to another war, will start to slowly die and disintegrate right in front of Penelope. He will never recover from his loss of Sophie.



Chapter 10: Roy Brookner

Chapter 10: Roy Brookner Summary

Noel gets up early to help his mother presumably clean out her attic. However, Noel is not a strong man of action and prefers to get out of work, rather than volunteer for it. This situation has great financial potential for him so he changes his usual lazy approach. Despite the fact that he is in there for hours, Noel finds nothing and gets into a foul mood.

Noel makes Antonia uncomfortable. She is also worried about her future prospects as she is eighteen with no money, no family, nowhere to live and no money left from her father. She has told Olivia all of this, but when she is with Penelope, she does not have all of these worries.

Nancy, meanwhile, shows up while Noel is there for the weekend ostensibly to talk about the Lawrence Stern paintings rather than to check on her mother's health. She disapproves of Antonia, but really disapproves of the idea that Antonia is becoming quite close with Danus since he is a mere gardener in Nancy's eyes. Penelope teases her for her snobbery and then asks Nancy if she would like to go to Porthkerris with her. Nancy declines, using the similarly weak excuses that Noel tried.

Despite the fact that Penelope, Antonia and Danus are having a pleasant weekend together, Noel and Nancy do their best to bring everyone down by confronting Penelope about the paintings. They ultimately upset her and she is frustrated by both of them. They both leave shortly thereafter.

When Monday arrives, Penelope calls Roy Brookner of Boothby's. She asks him to stop by to see some panels and sketches by Lawrence Stern. He is shocked and clears his calendar to arrange to see her. When he arrives, he spends a great deal of time listening to Penelope and is generally interested in her as the daughter of Lawrence Stern. He values the paintings and tells Penelope their value. She agrees to sell the "unfinished" panels and deposit the money into her account. She has been barely keeping her head above water her entire life and now she has enough money to spend on some extravagances. She could travel or purchase any number of things, but all she wants is to return to Porthkerris.

She daydreams of Porthkerris and remembers what it is like to be young.

Chapter 10: Roy Brookner Analysis

While watching Noel and Nancy bicker, Penelope wonders what happened to her loving children that she gave her entire life to. However, she reflects that since her family passed away, she never had anyone else to count on, least of all Ambrose or her children. Still, the fact that both Noel and Nancy stop by Podmore's Thatch not to check



on their mother's wellbeing, but instead to convince her to sell the Stern paintings to give them more money speak volumes about their motivations and what type of people they are.

Antonia, meanwhile, has fallen utterly in love with Danus. This relationship will have a profound impact on both Antonia and on Penelope. Also, it seems that Penelope trusts her children so little that she must contact the art dealer at Boothby's on her own to deal with the Lawrence Stern paintings because she realizes that her children will not appreciate the value of these paintings, but only see them for their financial gain (except for Olivia). She has now asked each of her three children to travel to Porthkerris with her and all three have declined the offer.



Chapter 9: Richard

Chapter 9: Richard Summary

In the summer of 1943, Penelope feels as though the war will continue forever. She daydreams that Ambrose will send her a post that says he has fallen in love with someone else and is leaving her, but that note never arrives. Nancy is no longer a baby and Doris's boys have grown up. A man named Ernie helps the family as much as possible, coming through in a pinch when they cannot find meat or something else necessary to get by. The women, meanwhile, use anything in their surroundings to sew new clothes.

One day, a local friend General Watson-Grant stops by to see Lawrence and shares a bit of news with them that a group of Americans will be coming to Porthkerris for training. The news is confidential, but soon, the new Americans make their presence known in the small coastal town.

Lawrence and Penelope travel to the local art museum one afternoon to look at the works there. While visiting, one of the soldiers comes in. His name is Richard Lomax and he immediately recognizes Lawrence, introducing himself. He had hoped to run into the artist and he speaks with Lawrence for quite awhile as Penelope zones out, concentrating on thoughts of her own. Lawrence ends the conversation finally, telling Richard to stop by their home any time he has free time. Later that week, Ernie tells Penelope about some canned peaches that have washed up on the coast of Porthkerris. She is elated and runs into town to get them. On her way back, Richard comes up in his Jeep. Although he cannot give her a ride, he places her goods in the car and has his soldier drive the goods to her house as he walks with her up to the house. She invites him to dinner that evening because they finally have something to eat; he accepts.

Richard fits into their family seamlessly and has a wonderful dinner with them. Penelope has forgotten what it feels like to be unexpectantly happy and Richard ends the evening playing backgammon with Lawrence. On one of these occasions, Richard asks Penelope to dinner at The Sands and Penelope goes to get a new dress in town. Penelope falls madly in love with Richard, despite the fact that she is married. Richard knows that she is unhappily married but falls in love with her and they make love in Lawrence's studio, dirty and cold from lack of use. They plan to go away together for a whole week when Richard has leave. They stay at a friend of Richard's house on the south coast as "Mr. and Mrs. Lomax" and have the most ideal time together.

Richard asks Penelope to marry him and she says that she wants to talk about it later, when the war has passed. On the last day, he tells her that he is leaving Porthkerris and that he will be going to another location to keep training. She receives a letter from him telling her of his love for her and how he plans to marry her as soon as the war is over. However, days later, she learns that he is killed during the D-Day invasion.



Chapter 9: Richard Analysis

Penelope deserves to be in a true, good relationship other than her marriage with Ambrose. She naturally falls in love with Richard and despite its short time span, their relationship teaches Penelope what true love is and what she could expect from marriage. Richard is the obvious contrast to Ambrose, whose connection to her family is miserable and awkward, while Richard seamlessly fits in. While Penelope hopes for a letter from Ambrose telling her that he is leaving her, she receives a letter from Richard saying he wants to marry her. Richard will be the one true love in Penelope's life.



Chapter 12: Doris

Chapter 12: Doris Summary

Penelope receives a phone call from Mr. Brookner, telling her that an American has purchased the Stern panels and the money has been deposited in her account. She feels faint, but elated at the same time. She hangs up and asks Antonia and Danus to go with her to Porthkerris. They happily agree. Penelope writes Olivia a letter to explain where they are going and why. They will be staying at The Sands, since it has such fond memories for Penelope. Surprisingly, The Sands has now become one of the most premier hotels in the country and they are treated to a fine, extravagant experience.

Nancy, meanwhile, still feels slighted by her mother's behavior over the Stern paintings and the fight with Noel. She considers calling Podmore's Thatch, but puts it off continually until finally she calls and does not receive an answer. She asks around and finds that Penelope has left town. Nancy immediately calls Olivia, who relays their mother's latest activities to her. Nancy is, of course, miffed that her mother did not consult her first and when she hears that they are staying at The Sands is horrified. Olivia tells her that Penelope sold the panels and Nancy is outraged that Penelope took Antonia and Danus instead of her. Olivia has to remind her that Penelope did ask her, but that each of them turned Penelope down.

Nancy immediately turns on Antonia and berates Olivia for sending "that girl" to their mother. She then hangs up and calls Noel, telling him the entire situation and he hangs up furious as well.

Penelope, Antonia and Danus are having a wonderful time. They travel throughout town and visit The Shell Seekers, which Penelope has recently donated to the art museum there, where she feels it rightfully belongs. It has never been shown publicly and looks right at home in the town where it was initially painted with Penelope as one of the children in the painting's subject. Penelope goes to see Doris and Ernie, who married after the war. They spend the afternoon together, catching up and drinking. When Danus and Antonia come to pick up Penelope, Doris immediately recognizes who Danus looks like—Richard. This semblance, of course, makes his loving relationship with Antonia the ideal parallel between Penelope and Richard all those years ago.

While in Porthkerris, Penelope calls each of her children to wish them a happy Easter. Olivia is delighted to hear from her mother. Noel does not answer the phone. Nancy, meanwhile, picks a huge fight with her mother over her latest actions of taking Antonia and the gardener to Porthkerris to stay at The Sands rather than her. She tells Penelope that her behavior is outrageous and that she never took care of Nancy or loved her, always picking on "poor Daddy" and generally brings up past bitter remembrances. Penelope responds by hanging up the phone, although she is indeed upset by her oldest daughter's accusations.



Moments later, Antonia finds Penelope to tell her that she is madly in love with Danus, but concerned because of the secrets that he keeps from her and from everyone. She wants to spend her life with him, but does not feel she can commit to someone who will not tell her why he does not drink and why he does not drive. Penelope advises her to tell him her feelings over dinner that evening, which Penelope will not be attending because she does not feel well. Penelope gives her a lovely (and expensive) pair of pearl earrings that her aunt once gave to her as a gift.

Chapter 12: Doris Analysis

The trip back to Porthkerris is wonderful for Penelope as she revisits her town and sees Doris. Doris finally puts the missing piece into the puzzle for the reader by pointing out that Danus looks just like Richard. Also, his relationship with Antonia and their falling in love in Porthkerris mimics the relationship that Richard once had with Penelope. This final puzzle piece will make the future actions of Penelope make far more sense to the reader.

Nancy typifies the ungrateful oldest daughter who is unable to see all that her mother has done for her. Nothing is ever good enough and she is forever asking what her mother can do next for her, while never reciprocating anything. When just the smallest show of love and concern is all that Penelope ever needs, Nancy just demands more and more from her mother instead. Also, obviously, Nancy never saw her father's horrible actions of cheating on Penelope or gambling their money away and blames Penelope for all of her troubles.



Chapter 13: Danus

Chapter 13: Danus Summary

Penelope wakes up and feels wholly refreshed. It is her last day in Porthkerris. She drives to see The Shell Seekers to admire it in its final home. While there, she hears a visitor come in and is immediately reminded of the first time she met Richard. When she looks up, she sees Danus instead and the memory merges into an illusion with his resemblance to her former love. He begins to talk with her about Antonia and how he is leaving early to return to Edinburgh. Penelope is shocked that he is leaving and abandoning Antonia until he tells her that the reason he has been so secretive is that he believes he has epilepsy. The reason he has never told his parents is because they lost a son at a young age and did not want to worry them. Now, however, he feels that he must tell his parents and be tested for epilepsy in order to move on and have a concrete future with Antonia. He is in love with her and wants to build a life with her, knowing whether he truly has the disease or not.

Penelope is happy to have all of the answers finally and says goodbye to Danus there in the art museum, wishing him luck. She will never see him again.

Chapter 13: Danus Analysis

The pieces of Penelope's life are starting to receive the closure they need. She finally understands Danus and his secretive behavior as he explains his past to her and his fear that he has epilepsy. Also, she leaves Danus in the art museum where she once met Richard and had their memories. She will never see Danus again, but it is fitting that her parting with the young man that reminds her of Richard in the very place where she first met the love of her life.



Chapter 14: Penelope

Chapter 14: Penelope Summary

Antonia and Penelope leave Porthkerris and The Sands hotel, thus ending their vacation. They discuss the situation with Danus and Penelope advises Antonia to consider the worst case scenario. She wants her to be brave and face whatever might come their way. Moments after they walk into their house, Noel is there, greeting his mother. His voice has an edge to it and he will not meet his mother's eyes. He is furious with her for donating The Shell Seekers and wants to know more about the panels. He says that she should have talked with him first, and that his friend could have given her a better deal. She ignores his complaints and tells him that she regrets nothing.

Penelope travels to London for the day for an appointment, but it is unclear exactly what she does. Antonia is there to help pick her up when she is finished. That evening, she has trouble sleeping. The words of her children ring in her head, their ingratitude keeping her awake. When the light of dawn at last arrives, she is calmed. The night is over and she is unrested, but climbs out of bed at seven. She goes directly to her garden and takes great pride in all of the green, the result of her hard labor. This is her sanctuary and where she will spend the day.

She reaches for a dandelion growing out of place but that action makes her light-headed. She instinctively goes back for her chair and settles down. Suddenly, a hot pain courses through her chest and she hears sounds, one of which is a man's footstep. The sun and pain in her body are gone, but she does not care anymore; she knows that Richard is coming. Then he is before her.

Mrs. Plackett calls Olivia at the office to tell her that her mother has passed away. She also lets her know that she was in London the day before and Olivia wonders why she did not come to see her. Olivia dutifully calls Nancy to inform her of the news, but reaches her husband instead. She drives to Podmore's Thatch and as soon as she arrives, a melodramatic Nancy pops out of her car, rushing to her sister. Nancy, as usual, brings absolutely nothing to the table and does nothing productive to help Olivia. Finally, she gets Nancy to leave and only then is she able to organize and schedule Penelope's funeral.

When she sees Antonia, Olivia is finally able to hear the latest news of how the two have fallen deeply in love and that Danus is in Edinburgh, waiting on test results for epilepsy. Antonia is suffering with a deep sense of loss, having lost her father, then Penelope and waiting to see if Danus will be diagnosed with epilepsy or not. Danus has gone fishing with his friend since he has to wait for the test results and for this reason, Antonia is unable to talk to him or even inform him that Penelope has passed away.

Charles Enderby is Penelope's executor and requests that the three children meet just after the funeral. Of course, it inconveniences Nancy (despite her empty life) but she



agrees to meet. Meanwhile, Danus returns from his fishing trip and hears from his mother that he does not have epilepsy and was misdiagnosed years ago. He is elated and receives a message that Antonia has called and Penelope is dead. He jumps in the car to race to Podmore's Thatch. He makes it just in time and accompanies Antonia to the funeral just in time.

Chapter 14: Penelope Analysis

It seems remarkable that even with their mother's death, Nancy and Noel can think of no one but themselves. While Olivia is truly upset that her mother is gone, neither Nancy nor Noel are upset at all about the loss of their mother. In fact, the most reaction that Noel gives is happiness and satisfaction when he hears how much money her estate will net him. It is crucial that Olivia understands the relationship between Antonia and Danus in order to defend them and understand Penelope's actions when they hear about what Penelope has done with her will. Danus's misdiagnosis is finally revealed, opening up his future to be with Antonia and build a nursery like he has always dreamed.



Chapter 15: Mr Enderby

Chapter 15: Mr Enderby Summary

After the funeral, the children hear about why Penelope went to London the day before—to add codicils to her will. Each of the three children will receive a nice sum of money—which pleases Noel wholly—but then Nancy and Noel hear that Danus will receive the Lawrence Stern sketches and Antonia will receive the expensive pearl earrings. Both immediately open their mouths and start to accuse the two young adults of manipulating Penelope and taking advantage of her. Olivia has had enough and uses a voice that neither have ever heard before; she tells them that nothing of the sort happened and that they will both accept the verdict gracefully.

Olivia goes up to her mother's room after the funeral and finds the letter that Richard sent her just before he died. She wishes Penelope had confided in her to tell her more about Richard, but puts the entire letter and its accompanying picture in the fire to keep her mother's secret.

Chapter 15: Mr Enderby Analysis

It is interesting to speculate what the other two children would have done if they had found the letter from Richard, but it is fitting that only Olivia knows about it and that she is wise enough to burn the information after reading it.

Also, Olivia's defense of Antonia and Danus is the only reason the two are able to move on and live the way that Penelope had hoped. Although Olivia is not exactly like her mother, she was her mother's strongest ally against her own kin.



Chapter 16: Miss Keeling

Chapter 16: Miss Keeling Summary

Olivia is sitting in her office when she receives a phone call. It is Antonia and she requests her to meet her and Danus for lunch that afternoon. Despite a busy day, Olivia agrees and meets the couple, who surprise her with the news that they have just gotten married. She hears about their nursery and the land they have recently purchased. It is then that Olivia realizes that while she will never have children, Antonia and Danus will be the closest she comes and she is elated. After lunch, she walks back into her kingdom at the office and feels fully satisfied. What Penelope had hoped for has happened.

Chapter 16: Miss Keeling Analysis

The novel closes with Penelope's hopes coming true. Her love for Antonia and Danus has allowed both of them to create the ideal environment to start on a new life of their own and given them the financial status to buy land and convert it to their needs. Also, Olivia is rewarded with an extended family that does not require a high commitment, but still allows her to be the independent career woman that she is so exceptionally good at being.



Characters

Penelope Keeling

The main character of the novel, Penelope Keeling has just recently suffered a heart attack. The novel opens as the independent, strong woman checks herself out of the hospital and returns back to her home at Podmore's Thatch. She is elated to be returning home, although she realizes that her children will most likely make a fuss about her early release. Penelope has three children—Nancy, Noel and Olivia—by her husband, Ambrose Keeling. She met and married Ambrose during the war. He was the first man that she had ever had a relationship with and became pregnant by him. Despite a warning from her mother to only marry Ambrose if she loved him, she made the mistake of getting married to him only to find out soon after that they were an utterly imperfect pairing.

Penelope is an open-minded, independent and strong woman who does not care much for material things or money. Her husband Ambrose, on the other hand, lived his life looking only for financial rewards and material things. Penelope is a product of her unique parents—Lawrence Stern, the famous painter and her mother Sophie, who was much younger than Lawrence. Both Lawrence and Sophie were open-minded, bohemian free thinkers and gave Penelope a wonderfully free and unique life. Unfortunately, Penelope is not able to replicate that type of marriage for her own life with Ambrose.

During the war, Penelope has an affair with a man named Richard Lomax, who is ultimately the love of Penelope's life. They are both madly in love with one another and plan to marry after Penelope divorces Ambrose (who never finds out about the affair as he rarely communicates with his new wife and is off fighting during the war). However, Richard is killed during the D-Day attack and for this reason, Penelope is forced to remain with Ambrose. She never mentions Richard nor speaks of him to her children. The only person that knows about her intense love for Richard is Doris, an evacuee who stays in Porthkerris (and ultimately stays) with the Sterns during the war.

In the final months before she dies of another heart attack, Penelope plans to return to Porthkerris. Despite protests from her children, she donates an important piece of work, *The Shell Seekers*, to the art museum her father loved in Porthkerris. Her children, especially Noel and Nancy, want her to sell the painting for a great deal of money while the popularity of Lawrence Stern pieces is at its peak. Instead, Penelope sells unfinished panels to finance her trip to Porthkerris. She takes Antonia and Danus, two recent young additions in her life, to travel with her after each of her children refuse the trip.

When she returns to Podmore's Thatch after a wonderful trip to Porthkerris, she changes her will in London and the next day, has another heart attack. Her children learn that she bequeaths an expensive pair of earrings to Antonia and a number of



sketches by Lawrence Stern to Danus to help them build their new life together. Her endless generosity and zest for life are the central themes in this novel. Also, her relationship with her children is an important piece of this novel, exploring how adult children handle their free-spirited mother whom they themselves are so utterly different from.

Antonia Hamilton

The daughter of Cosmo Hamilton, Antonia comes to live with Penelope after her father passes away suddenly. Cosmo Hamilton is the love of Olivia Keeling's life, but she leaves her happy year in Ibiza with Cosmo and Antonia to return to her high-profile lifestyle in London. Cosmo never loves another woman like Olivia and Antonia maintains her close relationship with Olivia over the years. When Cosmo dies, Antonia has nowhere else to go since her mother has remarried a man she despises and thus ends up living with Penelope, whom she met when she came to visit Olivia in Ibiza.

Antonia and Penelope develop a close relationship while living together at Podmore's Thatch. When Penelope wants to travel to Porthkerris again, she takes Antonia and Danus, the gardener, with her. Penelope also notices a strong relationship developing between Antonia and Danus. As Danus reminds her so much of her lost love, Richard, Antonia easily takes on the form, in Penelope's mind, of herself at that age. In this way, Antonia begins to represent the happiness and love that Penelope could have had if she had not met Richard during wartime.

For this reason, Penelope gives Antonia the expensive, lovely pearl earrings that she received from her aunt. With these earrings on, Danus sees her and immediately declares his love for her at dinner that evening. It is fitting that she is wearing a piece of Penelope's past as she takes on her new future, falling in love with Danus and agreeing to a new life with him.

In addition to her connection to Penelope, Antonia is also the only child that Olivia will ever have. Olivia is the person Antonia and Danus go to visit after they are married and Olivia can easily fast-forward her life to see that she will continue to have a close relationship with the loving pair in her future.

Danus Muirfield

After Penelope suffers a heart attack, her children—Nancy, in particular—harrass her to get more steady help in order to avoid having another medical incident. In order to quiet them, Penelope gives in and hires a local gardener. Although she is nervous about meeting him, Danus turns out to be the perfect choice for her. He instantly reminds her of her past love, Richard. Also, he is a well-bred, intelligent and unique individual with whom she immediately establishes a close relationship.

Danus helps Penelope in the garden, but also helps her in general. He assists Noel when he tries to find the Lawrence Stern sketches by making up the excuse that he



wants to clean out Penelope's attic. Danus also accompanies Penelope and Antonia to Porthkerris. When Penelope returns from Porthkerris, she visits her financial advisor in London the next day to place a codicil in her will that Danus will receive the Lawrence Stern sketches that she has kept from her own son, Noel. She knows that Danus wants to invest in his own nursery and start a new business with Antonia. She knows he will use the money and invest it wisely, fulfilling the life of promise and love with Antonia that she might have had with Richard.

Danus does not drink or drive, which is an intriguing and confusing thing to the Keelings. Both Nancy and Noel decide that he has gotten in a great deal of trouble in the past, drinking and driving. However, the truth comes out when Danus tells both Antonia and Penelope in Porthkerris (on separate occasions) that he believes he is epileptic. He will eventually return to Edinburgh, Scotland to see his parents and tell them that he has epilepsy (a fact he has kept from them in order to protect them) and get tested. When the results come back, it turns out that he does not have epilepsy and was misdiagnosed years ago in America.

Olivia Keeling

Penelope's favorite child, Olivia is the only one of the three children that really understands her and respects her. Olivia is the editor-in-chief of a high-powered fashion magazine in London. She is a strong, independent woman who has much of her mother in her. Although she was not the child of Richard, Penelope feels that Olivia has a piece of Richard inside her and treats her differently than her other two children. Olivia is the only child of Penelope that does not complain about what Penelope needs to give her, financially. She does not whine and tell her what she should have done for them. Instead, Olivia respects her mother and appreciates everything she has given them, especially in lieu of the father that they had. When the arrangements of Penelope's will are read to the three children, it is Olivia who smothers the idea that Nancy and Noel should legally fight the decision that Antonia receive the pearl earrings and Danus receive the Lawrence Stern sketches. In this moment, she becomes her mother and takes control of her siblings in a way that neither of them has seen before.

While on a trip to Ibiza, Olivia meets and falls in love with a man named Cosmo Hamilton. Despite having the ideal life and career in London, she leaves it all behind to stay a year on sabbatical with Cosmo in his house in Ibiza. He will be the love of her life, but ultimately, Olivia chooses her personal and financial independence over Cosmo and her happiness in Ibiza. She stays in touch with him until she receives a phone call from his daughter Antonia, telling her that Cosmo has died suddenly. Olivia arranges for Penelope and Antonia to live together in Podmore's Thatch and even arranges to find Antonia a job as a model with her fashion magazine. Despite the Antonia's rejection of the job, Olivia knows that she will have a close relationship with the woman who will be the closest thing to a child in Olivia's life.



Nancy Chamberlain

Penelope's oldest daughter, Nancy is ultimately the reason why Penelope marries Ambrose Keeling. She is named after a suggestion from Ambrose's mother, a woman that Nancy will have a close relationship with until her death. Conversely, Nancy does not have a close relationship with Penelope and has little in common with her. She loves her father and does not see all of his myriad of problems, including cheating on Penelope, treating her poorly and gambling away much of the family's income. She is highly materialistic and it is more important for Nancy to have the ideal life according to society, such as having the right friends, living in the right house and sending their children to the right school, rather than cherishing the important things in life like having well-behaved, loving children, or a close relationship with her husband. In this way, she is a direct reflection of her father, for whom it was far more important to keep up material appearances than be truly happy with what you have in life.

Just before Penelope dies, Nancy has an argument with her. She once again feels that Penelope has not done enough for her and whines about all the things that Penelope should have given them. She wants Penelope to sell the artwork so that she can fund her children's too-expensive education and support their too-lavish lifestyle to keep up appearances. It does not matter to her that the artwork has incredible sentimental value for Penelope. Despite her ingratitude, Nancy does not regret her conversation with Penelope and instead feels that it is her mother who ought to apologize to her rather than the other way around.

Noel Keeling

The perpetual playboy, Noel represents another facet of his father Ambrose and has little in common with his mother, Penelope. Noel is most blessed with the ability to fit in with high society despite not having any money of his own. He dates women who are socially and financially connected, rather than find women with whom he feels a personal connection. He values relationship with people only in the sense of what they can do for him, rather than who they are as a person.

When he hears about the value of the Lawrence Stern paintings, he starts to harrass his mother to sell the unfinished panels and The Shell Seekers. Also, on the pretense of helping her clean out her attic, he searches for sketches for paintings that are worth a great deal of money. It is never stated, but can be clearly assumed that if he had found them, Noel would have sold the sketches without ever consulting his mother and perhaps not passing along the financial windfall it would have brought him. After Penelope dies and he hears how much money they will receive from her estate, Noel reacts happily, telling his sisters they have received a good windfall in general. He never reacts emotionally to the loss of his mother, mostly because the only thing her death can bring him is money. Olivia predicts his future as taking the inheritance money, spending it on commodities trading, losing everything and finally finding an unattractive, but well-connected girl and marrying her for her money as she adores him and he



cheats on her relentlessly throughout their marriage. This accurately sums up Penelope's son, who unfortunately takes so much after his father Ambrose.

Richard Lomax

The love of Penelope's life, Richard is an American who is stationed in Porthkerris during World War II. He originally meets Penelope and her father Lawrence when they are in the museum one afternoon. He is an art fan and had hoped to meet Lawrence when he heard he was to be stationed in Porthkerris. Lawrence is happy to have new company and invites Richard back to their house. Over time, however, Richard becomes more interested in Penelope, falling madly in love with her. He becomes the husband that Penelope should have had and the son that Lawrence sees him to be.

When Richard is sent to the D-Day invasion, he is killed, although he was not required to storm the beach with his troop. He did not fear death and had sent Penelope a letter shortly before his death, telling her that he hoped Ambrose would divorce her and allow the two of them to be married when he returned from the war. His death prevents Penelope's future happiness.

Ambrose Keeling

The first man that Penelope has as a boyfriend, Ambrose Keeling will eventually become her husband. He is drawn to her father's Bentley and potential prestige as the son-in-law to a famous artist. Also, he thinks that Penelope is famously wealthy and that attracts him to her initially. After Penelope becomes pregnant with Nancy, she ignores her mother's advice and marries Ambrose, but quickly realizes that it is a huge mistake. She does not get along with Ambrose's mother and he does not fit in with the rest of her family when he comes to visit. He will cheat on Penelope throughout their marriage and eventually leave her for his well-connected and much-younger secretary in order to lead the life that he prefers, as a wealthy aristocrat filling his life with materialistic goals and things.

Doris

When World War II breaks out, Sophie, Lawrence and Penelope go to live in Porthkerris, their vacation home away from London. However, they are instructed to take in evacuees and they are assigned Doris and her two sons. Initially, Doris's loud behavior and sharp tongue irritate Lawrence and Sophie, but after a talk and over time, Doris learns to fit in well with the rest of the Porthkerris community and becomes an important family member in the household. When her husband dies in the war, she decides to stay in Porthkerris. She will eventually marry the handyman who helps the rest of the family throughout the war. When Penelope returns to Porthkerris after forty years, she immediately travels to see Doris. Doris sees Danus and recognizes the relationship between Danus and Antonia as a reflection of what could have been for Penelope and Richard years ago.



Lawrence Stern

Penelope's father, Lawrence is a famous painter. His work goes out of style after the war. However, during the time the novel is set, Lawrence Stern paintings regain popularity and the price for one of his works is astronomical, partly because of the fact that Lawrence was not a prolific painter. Penelope was very close with her father until his death. Lawrence married Sophie after losing his first wife in World War II and was consequently a much-older man throughout Penelope's childhood. He instilled open values and independence in Penelope and gave her a wonderful life and had a beautiful marriage with Sophie.

Sophie

Sophie, Penelope's mother, was the daughter of a friend of Lawrence's. After she lost her family in the war, she went to find Lawrence on the promise that he would always protect her. She falls in love with him and has Penelope by him. She rarely leaves his side until she visits London to break from the tedium during World War II and she is killed during the Blitz at this time. Before her death, she urges Penelope to only marry Ambrose if she truly loves him and it is the only time in her life that Penelope does not listen to her mother and respect her advice.



Objects/Places

Porthkerris

Where Lawrence, Sophie and Penelope retreat when World War II breaks out. Porthkerris is also where Penelope meets and falls in love with Richard. Just before she passes away, she will visit this coastal town to see her friend Doris and donate The Shell Seekers to its art museum.

Podmore's Thatch

When Penelope sells her house, her children (Nancy in particular) encourage her to avoid moving back to Porthkerris, but instead into a small house called Podmore's Thatch to be closer to them. It has a wonderful garden and she enjoys the house, but she misses her friends and the coastal lifestyle at Porthkerris.

The Shell Seekers

An important piece of artwork by Lawrence Stern, The Shell Seekers symbolizes to Penelope her childhood and her time in Porthkerris. When Noel and Nancy blithely suggest to their mother that she sell the piece, it symbolizes how little they care or understand what is important to her. She will eventually donate it to the art museum in Porthkerris, which is where it belongs.

Wrens

When Penelope joins the war, she is assigned to the Wrens since she has no other skill helpful during the war. It is with this group that she will meet Ambrose, her future husband.

6-liter Bentley

When Ambrose first meets Penelope, he admires pictures of her father's 6-liter Bentley. For him, it comes to symbolize the inevitable wealth, power and prestige that he assumes Penelope to have. For the reader, it symbolizes how materialistic and shallow Ambrose truly is.

The Sands

A very fashionable hotel in Porthkerris, Penelope, Antonia and Danus stay here when Penelope returns to Porthkerris. When Nancy and Noel hear that their mother is staying



there, they immediately regret the decision to not go with her to Porthkerris and wonder where she suddenly got the money to enjoy a stay there.

The Old Vicarge

Despite an inability to afford it, Nancy and her husband George purchase the too-large old Vicarge due to its prestigious address. It symbolizes how materialistic Nancy is and how appearances matter more to Nancy than anything else, even an ability to save money or live within her means.

Venus

The high-profile fashion magazine where Olivia is the editor-in-chief, commanding a very powerful position

The sketches by Lawrence Stern

Noel tries to look for these Stern sketches in order to sell them, but years before Penelope hides them behind a picture to keep them from her husband Ambrose. She will eventually bequeath them to Danus, who will appreciate them and wisely invest the money that they fetch on the art market. When Penelope does not give these sketches to her own son, she shows how much she sees him to be like her husband and utterly untrustworthy.

Oakley Street

The house in London where Penelope raises her children and lives with Ambrose until he leaves her for his secretary. It is given to Penelope by her father after he passes away.



Themes

The Mother-Child Relationship

Even at the best of times, the relationship between a mother and her children is tumultuous. There is no other group of people in the world with whom you can have such extreme feelings on a consistent basis.

The *Shell Seekers* essentially explores this relationship between a mother and her children from both perspectives. For Penelope, it is distressing to watch her loving children become the adults they have chosen to become. Her daughter Olivia is the only one who really understands her and it is for this reason that she communicates closely with her, updating her when she returns from the hospital, when she takes a trip to Porthkerris with Antonia and Danus and when she gives Antonia the pearl earrings. Nancy, on the other hand, feels that she has been given nothing of value from her mother throughout her life and a whole lifetime of bitter grievances spills from her mouth during her last conversation with Penelope. Despite this conversation, however, Nancy feels no regrets for what she said and feels entitled to have said what she said. Even when Penelope dies, she does not have any remorse for their final conversation.

Noel is the exact replica of Ambrose; he sees value in people only for what they can give him. This revelation surprises Penelope even though she recognizes it as part of his core being. He and Nancy team up together to sell the Lawrence Stern pictures not for their mother (although they certainly try different angles to convince her otherwise), but for their own financial gain. Of course Penelope knows her children and sees their true motivations well in advance, but it does nothing to diminish her disappointment in them. The children—even Olivia—never realize how much Penelope gives up to make sure they are well taken care of and loved. Instead, Nancy and Noel praise their father, who trashed Penelope throughout their marriage, and continue to persecute their mother for the rest of her life.

War

For Penelope, the event of war has a tremendous impact on her life. She officially grows up during World War II and the influence of the war will have significant long-term consequences on her life overall.

World War I had an indirect impact on Penelope's life as it brought Sophie and Lawrence together. Without the war, it is quite possible her parents would have never married and had her. Penelope will also find marriage and love during World War II, but they will not be with the same man. Penelope has a relationship with Ambrose and when she becomes pregnant with his child, marries him. The marriage is heartless and cold, leaving Penelope hoping that Ambrose will find someone else during the war and leave her. However, she is also given the ultimate gift of love during World War II when



Richard comes to Porthkerris, which would have never happened without the war. Richard is also killed during D-Day, however, taking away Penelope's true love for the rest of her life.

None of Penelope's children have any idea how much she sacrificed to have them or survive the war. Nancy, in particular, complains frequently of how much her mother forsook her throughout her life, when in reality, Penelope worked very hard to love and care for the child that she immediately did not bond with and had bad memories about in relation to Ambrose. For Penelope, the war gave her both heartache and true passion all in the same environment.

Sentimental versus Financial Value

The novel is named after *The Shell Seekers*, an important piece of artwork by Lawrence Stern. Central to the novel is the question of how a single piece of artwork can hold value for different characters and people.

For Lawrence, *The Shell Seekers* is an important piece of art that he requests Sophie bring to Porthkerris from London at the start of the war. He is personally attached to this piece of work. For Penelope, on the other hand, the artwork will hold a lifetime value of sentimentality. She will love the artwork since it reminds her of her father, of Richard, of Porthkerris and the fact that she is one of the children in the scenery. *The Shell Seekers* encapsulates her childhood, fond memories of her family and her highest treasure into her adulthood. However, two of her children—Nancy and Noel—miss this value entirely.

For Nancy and Noel, they can only see the value of *The Shell Seekers* as what it can do for them. When Lawrence Stern paintings gain in popularity again, they urge their mother to sell *The Shell Seekers* immediately for her well-being, when in reality, they want the money for themselves. They both plan how they will spend the money well before Penelope agrees to sell the paintings. It is because of their extreme greed that Penelope has to protect the painting and take control of its destiny. Against their wishes, Penelope donates *The Shell Seekers* to the art museum where she and her father would sit for hours and also the place where she first met Richard.



Style

Point of View

Despite its central character of Penelope, the point of view changes throughout the novel. In a seamless fashion, the perspectives of different characters are touched upon at different points in the plot line. Depending on the character, they will have multiple appearances or they might just have one short piece. In the case of Noel, for example, we get his perspective for only a few short pages, but learn enough about his character that we can easily understand his motivations and values when he appears in other portions of the novel. Penelope, on the other hand, captures most of the point of view in the novel as her present and past are explored from her unique perspective.

Through the changing viewpoints, each of the different characters are explored and explained in a way that would be impossible through a singular voice of any other character, including Penelope. By allowing the characters to present themselves in the novel, the author gives the reader a deeper understanding of who they are and what their motivations are.

Setting

The novel occurs in a variety of locations, but each is important to Penelope. The novel starts in Podmore's Thatch, but although this is Penelope's most recent house and current sanctuary, there are a number of other environments where important actions take place. Podmore's Thatch is the representation of Penelope's children interfering with their mother's wishes and allowing them to dictate how she is going to live. Carn Cottage in Porthkerris, on the other hand, is where Penelope's heart still resides and where she makes her final trek before passing away. It is here that many of her past recollections occur.

The location and setting of each of Penelope's children help to better describe what kind of person they are and what they value. For example, Noel is a parasite, living for the next big adventure and better financial situation. For this reason, the novel has him on a weekend vacation with his girlfriend who is well connected and only briefly mentions his current home (at a very prestigious address). Olivia with her powerful, independent situation lives comfortably in London, commanding a great career at a top fashion magazines. Nancy lives at the old Vicarage where she finds that the address gives her an aura of prestige and importance that she actually does not have.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written clearly and with few uses of poetic language. However, the reader learns most about the actions and plot line from dialogue between the characters rather than internal dialogue. While internal dialogue is certainly used, the reader is left to



wonder why Penelope makes some of the decisions that she does until her actions are revealed through conversations between the characters later.

There are few descriptive paragraphs in the novel, but when they occur, they immediately signal that this portion of the novel will hold a very important piece of plot for the story.

Structure

The overall structure of the novel is linear. However, the plot jumps around to different characters in order to move the story ahead. In some instances, the novel will move forward thanks to a letter that Penelope has written Olivia, updating her on her latest trip. Other times, Penelope will have trouble sleeping and will recall past memories that help to better explain current events. Olivia, too, will have memories that better describe her relationship with Cosmo and explain her current situation in the novel.

Quotes

"For Nancy, there was only one person who had never let her down. Daddy had been a darling, of course, while he lasted, but it was his mother, Dolly Keeling, who had consistently shored up Nancy's confidence and taken her side." (Chapter 1 p. 19)

"And so Penelope did what she had known all along that she would do. She reached for the telephone and dialed the number of Olivia's London office." (Prologue p. 4)

"One of the reasons that Olivia Keeling had made such a success of her career was that she had developed the ability to clear her mind, and so beam in her considerable intelligence on one set of problems at a time. She ran her life like a submarine, divided into watertight compartments, each impregnably sealed from the others." (Chapter 3, p. 40)

"It's just that ... this is the sort of place where I think I could stay. I wouldn't feel trapped or rooted here. I don't know why." She smiled at him. "I don't know why." (Chapter 3 p. 52)

"His years of weekendening in strange houses had sharpened his perceptions to such a degree that he was able, almost from the moment he walked through a new front door, to gauge the possibilities of the days that lay ahead and accord them his own private system of grading." (Chapter 4 p. 93)

"The sea was one of the reasons she wanted so much to go back. ... The past is another country, but the journey could be made. ... Before it was too late, she would take the road west to that rugged claw of England where, once, she had lived, and loved and been young." (Chapter 5, p. 138)

"The 4 1/2-litre Bentley filled him with envy as nothing else could do. He had always longed for just such a car, a status symbol that would turn heads proclaiming wealth and masculinity, with just a touch of eccentricity thrown in for added flavour." (Chapter 8 p. 214)

"Go to London. See your house. Stay with the Cliffords. Reassure yourself. ... Why don't you go to London and find that out for yourself?" (Chapter 9 p. 260)

"Mrs. Keeling was not a little old lady, and she was the daughter of Lawrence Stern, but even so, he opened the covers of the folder without much hope. ... What he found was of such heart-stopping importance that, for a moment, he could scarcely believe his eyes." (Chapter 10 p. 305)

"Laughing at herself, she undressed, turned off the lights, drew back the curtains and got into bed; to lie wide-eyed, watching the dark sky beyond the open window, hearing the murmur of the sea, feeling the beat of her own heart; to go over, in her mind, every single word that he had spoken during the course of the evening." (Chapter 11 p. 383)



"She had never swum with Richard, for theirs had been a wartime, winter love affair, but now, watching Danus and Antonia, she felt again, with a physical intensity that was beyond mere recall, that numbing shock of cold water." (Chapter 12 p. 465)

"And it occurred to her then, that these grandchildren would be Cosmo's grandchildren too. Which was strange. Like watching a tangle of loose threads unravel and plait themselves into a single braided cord, stretching ahead into the future." (Chapter 16, p. 581)



Topics for Discussion

Why is this novel named *The Shell Seekers*? What role does this phrase play in the plot?

Name three characters and describe what they would prefer to do with *The Shell Seekers* painting. How do their goals for the painting differ?

We never really meet Ambrose later in life, yet we can glean a lot about him. How does the reader infer what type of person Ambrose was and what qualities he passed on to his children?

How does Lawrence and Sophie's marriage and style of thinking impact Penelope and her way of life both as a child and as she grows up?

What do you think Noel will do with his inheritance? What about Nancy? Do you think Olivia's predictions about their future will come true?

Should Penelope have told her family about Richard, especially after Ambrose left her for his secretary? Why do you think she kept their relationship a secret, even after her children were fully grown?

Why does Penelope hide the Lawrence Stern sketches from Ambrose? Why does she continue to hide them from her own son and choose to reveal them to Danus, whom she has only known for a few short months? What do her actions indicate about each of these men?