

The Signature of All Things Study Guide

The Signature of All Things by Elizabeth Gilbert

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Plot Summary

The Signature of All Things is a sweeping generational novel by writer Elizabeth Gilbert. In this novel, Alma Whittaker is the unattractive daughter of an adventurous botanist who had set out to be better than his father before him. Alma has inherited her father's love of botany, but lacks his sense of adventure. Alma spends most of her life in seclusion on the family estate, unmarried and alone. However, after a brief, unsatisfying marriage to a gifted artist, Alma sets out into the world in an attempt to understand her husband. In time, Alma has an epiphany about the fight for survival seen in all things, from mosses to human beings; but, she misses her chance for fame when another scientist publishes the same theories before her. The Signature of All Things is a novel of self-discovery that takes the main character and the reader on a journey that will leave their lives forever altered.

Alma Whittaker is the only biological child of Henry and Beatrix Whittaker. Alma's father, an uneducated botanist who built his wealth with pharmaceutical plants, is an adventurous man who teaches Alma that there are no limits to life with the right amount of ambition. As Alma grows, she becomes highly educated, developing a love in botany that will shape her entire life.

Alma has a quiet childhood that is altered when her parents adopt the young girl of a gardener and his promiscuous wife. Alma resents her new sister, Prudence, because she is beautiful. Alma finds Prudence to be less intelligent and does not spend much time in sisterly behaviors. However, when a new neighbor named Retta moves in next door and makes herself a friend of the two girls, Alma finds that Prudence is more forthcoming around Retta and easier to get along with.

When the girls are in their late teens, a local botany publisher, George Hawkes, begins coming to the house often. George even begins publishing some of Alma's articles on plants. Alma begins to imagine she is in love with George and that he might return her feelings. For years Alma harbors these feelings, sharing them only with Prudence in rare moments of sisterly confidence. One day Retta tells Alma that she is getting married, and Alma is shocked to learn Retta's fiancé is George. When Alma tells Prudence this news, Prudence shows uncharacteristic anger toward Alma.

Both Retta and Prudence marry within a short time of one another. Alma is shattered by this because she is afraid she is destined to never be married. Instead, Alma focuses on her beloved plants and decides to make a study of mosses. For the next twenty years, Alma studies mosses and publishes two books on them. At the same time, Prudence raises a family with her teacher husband. George and Retta suffer in a loveless marriage. When Retta becomes a danger to herself, Alma helps George place her in a mental hospital.

When Alma is in her early fifties, George shows her exquisite lithographs done by a new artist named Ambrose Pike. Alma is so impressed with the lithographs, she invites Ambrose to visit her home, White Acre. Ambrose comes, and they hit it off immediately.



One night, after Ambrose has told Alma his belief that he is meant to live on a higher plane, Ambrose catches her reading obscure books in an attempt to understand him. Ambrose invites Alma into a private place where he tries to communicate with her without words. Alma feels as though they did communicate and that Ambrose had fallen in love with her. Therefore, when Ambrose asks to marry her a short time later, Alma is more than thrilled to accept.

Alma and Ambrose are married in a short time. However, Alma is shocked when Ambrose refuses to be intimate with her. Alma tries to push the issue only to learn that Ambrose does not want a physical relationship with her. Alma has Ambrose moved into another bedroom and eventually sends him to Tahiti to oversee a vanilla plantation her family owns there. Little more than a three years later, Alma gets word that Ambrose has died.

After Ambrose's death, Alma is given his valise and finds within it multiple drawings Ambrose did of a young black man. Alma realizes that her husband was a homosexual, which explains why he did not want a physical relationship with her. However, she now wonders what this other man had that made Ambrose love him. Therefore, after Alma's father dies, she decides to go to Tahiti and find this man.

Alma has never traveled before and finds Tahiti to be strange and scary. However, she eventually succeeds in finding Ambrose's lover. They speak about Ambrose, and Alma feels as though she has finally found some of the answers she has always wanted. At the same time, she comes to an understanding of the fighting nature of the world, of the need for all living organisms to fight the weaker in order to survive. Alma writes a paper about this survival instinct as she travels to Holland.

In Holland, Alma goes to her uncle who is the director of the Hortus Botanicus in Amsterdam. Alma leaves with him her thesis and a request for a job. Alma's uncle loves her paper and immediately welcomes her into his life and his home, giving her a job as Curator of Mosses. Alma and her uncle fight repeatedly about her refusal to publish her paper. Alma feels the paper is not complete because she cannot explain why some organisms sacrifice themselves for stronger ones, such as a stranger who drowns to save a drowning child.

Shortly after her uncle's death, Charles Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species*. Alma is shocked to find that it is her theory, only better written. Alma also learns that there was another scientist, Alfred Russel Wallace, who also wrote on the same theory. Alma feels close to these two other scientists and follows their careers closely. After Darwin dies, Alma is growing quite old and feeble. She invites Wallace to speak at the Hortus Botanicus. Alma shows Wallace her paper and feels a strong kinship to him that makes her feel less alone. Alma is then content with her life and ready to die.



Prologue and Part 1, The Tree of Fevers: Chapters 1-4

Summary

Prologue

Alma is born in January of 1800 to a Dutch mother and English father. Alma is the only biological child of Henry and Beatrix Whittaker to survive to birth. Alma's birth is not especially celebrated in the Whittaker home.

Chapter 1

Henry Whittaker was born in 1760 in Richmond, outside of London. Henry's father is the orchard man at Kew, the botanical gardens. Henry is not impressed with his father or his lack of ambition and vows to be better. Therefore, when Henry is given a job at the Kew, he begins stealing plants from the greenhouses to sell to Sir Joseph Banks, the director of the Kew, competitors. Henry makes a good amount of money by doing this, but is eventually caught by his own father. Henry's father turns him in in order to protect his own job. Henry manages to speak to Banks and convince him not to have Henry hanged for his crimes.

Chapter 2

Banks decides to have Henry sail with Captain Cook on his third voyage around the world. Henry is to work with Mr. David Nelson, the botanist Cook choose to replace Banks with on his second and third voyages. Banks wants Henry to watch and observe so that he can report back everything that happens on the voyage. Henry takes Banks' advice to heart because he believes it will help him become rich one day. The voyage is a long and dangerous one. Henry witnesses many things and suffers often at the hands of the sailors. However, he does all he has promised to do in hopes of gaining Banks' favor. Upon his return, Henry reports immediately to Banks. Banks sends Henry to Peru.

Chapter 3

Henry sails to Peru with Ross Niven, the leader of an expedition intending to collect botanical samples. However, Niven is a sickly man and he dies soon after their arrival. Henry is left alone in Peru where he learns about Jesuit's bark, the bark of a Peruvian tree, the cinchona, that can treat fevers and malaria. It is an important drug that is very expensive to import to England, but the demand is very high. Henry spends several years studying this tree and the bark, learning which barks have the best curative elements. Henry is taken to a place where the best trees grow and he spends a great deal of time cultivating them. It occurs to Henry that the cinchona tree could be coaxed to live in certain parts of England. If so, he and Banks could corner the market on Jesuit's bark and make a great deal of money. However, when Henry approaches Banks



with this idea, Banks laughs. Henry is so angry that he takes his samples and goes to Holland where he makes a deal with the Dutch East India Company.

Chapter 4

Henry builds a cinchona plantation on a thriving Dutch colonial outpost of Java in the lower Himalayas. Very quickly Henry, and his new partners, are able to make a lot of money by importing the Jesuit's bark quicker and with a better quality than the Peruvians. A rich man, Henry decides it is time to get married and find a place to settle down. Henry chooses Beatrix van Devender, the Dutch daughter of the director of the Hortus botanical gardens in Amsterdam. With Beatrix and her servant, Hanneke de Groot, Henry travels to America where he settles in Philadelphia. Henry builds the largest, most impressive house in Philadelphia and creates a massive botanical wonderland on his property, importing many plants from all over the world. Henry then begins a pharmaceutical plant business, only increasing his significant wealth.

Analysis

The first part of the book introduces Henry Whittaker, Alma Whittaker's father. Henry is a very ambitious young man who is not impressed with his father's tacit acceptance of his poverty. For this reason, Henry uses the only skill he has, the ability to grow trees, and uses it to build his fortune. Henry goes to work for one of the most renowned botanists of his day and learns all he can. Henry then takes the importation of an important drug to new heights in order to build his wealth.

Henry is an adventurous man who knows what he wants and he works to get it. Henry is admirable in the fact that he has little education, but he manages to build a massive empire with the one bit of knowledge he has, botany. It is clear that Henry is a force and any child of his will also be something of a force. These early chapters not only explain from where the Whittaker fortune had come, but the unique man who created that fortune and how his influence might shape his only child.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author introduce Alma in the first chapter, but focus the first part of the novel on her father? What is important about Alma's father?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Captain Cook? Why does the author imply that Henry's voyage with Cook was monumental beyond its impact on young Henry?



Discussion Question 3

What is Jesuit's bark? How might Henry's future have been different if Banks had not laughed when he proposed his business plan?

Vocabulary

Sultan, minted, manufacturing, opportunism, destitution, trajectory, soared, invariably, dispatching, collectors, worthy, cultivating, suspected, sickening, battering, corpses, diversions, demonstrations, flowering, medicinal, stalwart, pharmacist, processing, rumor, extravagance, property, distance, promontory, overlooking.



Part 2, The Plum of White Acre: Chapters 5-11

Summary

Chapter 5

Alma is an inquisitive child and her parents make a point of answering her questions honestly, treating her like an adult even when she was only a small child. Alma proves to be a highly intelligent child, something both her parents take great pride in. Beatrix takes it upon herself to teach Alma, but rarely shows her much affection. For affection, Alma often goes to her mother's servant, Hanneke de Groot. Alma's father, on the other hand, has little but botany to teach his daughter and he is often known to fly into rages, so Alma learns early how to avoid the worse of his moods. However, Henry is known to tell amazing stories about his many adventures from his youth.

Alma is often left to play and explore on her own. For this reason, Alma spends many hours out of doors, searching for unique botanical samples. Alma is often accompanied on these adventures by her pony, Soames. Whenever Alma sees other children, often the children of the servants at White Acre, she will avoid them.

Throughout Alma's childhood there are many visitors to White Acre. They are often scientists and businessmen Henry has sent for. Henry likes to engage in conversation at the dinner table and he likes to surround himself with highly intelligent people. Alma is expected to keep up with these discussions and participate, something she has had little trouble doing since she was a small child. Alma's favorite memory from this time is when an astronomer came to the house. The Whittakers threw a ball in his honor. During the ball, it became so hot that the party moved outside onto the lawn. The astronomer organized the party goes into planets and stars of the solar system. Alma, too, took part as a comet that was allowed the freedom to run among all the astral objects.

Chapter 6

When Alma is only nine, she wakes in the middle of a cold November night to find chaos in the house. A gardener whose wife was known to be promiscuous finally decided he could take it no longer and killed the wife before taking his own life. This has left their child Polly as an orphan. Beatrix decides they must adopt Polly, and she changes the child's name to Prudence. Prudence is very beautiful, but she is not as intelligent as Alma and often has to work harder at their lessons. Beatrix brings in a tutor for both girls as well as spending a great deal of her own time teaching Prudence proper social behavior. Prudence adopts a mask of civility, always proper, never showing much emotion. Alma finds the girl difficult to know and never really tries. Added to this the fact that visitors to the house often found Prudence much nicer to look at than Alma, who



had grown large with an unruly head of red curls, Alma often felt overlooked and ignored.

Chapter 7

In 1816 a volcanic eruption in Indonesia left Pittsburgh in a perpetual fog. That year, Alma's father began buying up rare books as well as property from neighbors who were forced to sell because of the inability to grow a good crop. Alma began cataloging the books with her mother. Eventually, Beatrix left Alma to the entire task. By doing this, Beatrix left Alma to search through crates of books that had not been cataloged properly. Alma found a book meant for married people that described the sexual mechanics of the marriage bed. Alma is initially shocked by this and tries not to read the book. However, her curiosity gets the better of her and Alma reads the book. Alma's sexuality begins to awaken with the reading of this book. For this reason, Alma locks herself in the binding room, a small room off the library that is one of a few in the house that has a lock on the door, and masturbates.

Later that same night, Alma meets George Hawks, a botanical publisher, for the first time. Alma is drawn to George because he is shy and grateful for her help in bailing him out during the heated dinner discussions. That night there is a discussion about the inferiority of the black race led by a notorious guest to their table. Where Alma is distracted and unable to keep up with the discussion, Prudence surprises everyone by expressing an opinion against the noted guest. After dinner, George asks Alma about a paper she has written on the *Monotropa* plant. George tells Alma he wants to publish the paper in his magazine. Later, Beatrix admonishes Alma for her behavior at dinner while praising Prudence.

Chapter 8

Over the next four years, Alma and George develop a close working relationship as George publishes many of Alma's articles. Alma begins to imagine she is in love with George because of their budding relationship and because she imagines he, as a big man, is the only one who would be suited to her. Alma also increases her carnal knowledge as she finds many more books in her father's growing book collection dealing with sexual topics. At the same time, Alma throws herself into her botanical study, even creating an office for herself in the carriage house on the White Acre property.

Chapter 9

White Acre gets a new neighbor. In this family is a young girl, Retta Snow, who is about the same age as Alma and Prudence. One day, this girl wanders onto White Acre and insists that she and Alma become friends. When Alma introduces the girl to Prudence, Retta makes up a song about them as three friends, making Alma feel warm and happy to have a friend at last. Retta is unusual in her behavior, but she draws out the carefree in both Prudence and Alma. Over the next year, Retta befriends everyone in the Whittaker family, even stern Beatrix. Retta also takes to hanging out in Alma's office,



often reading silly magazines while Alma works. It is here that Retta meets George Hawks, but Alma is delighted when he appears to take no interest in her. Alma notices that being around Retta makes Prudence more open, so one day she takes advantage of this openness to tell Prudence that she is in love with George. Prudence takes this with her usual correct silence.

Chapter 10

In 1820, Henry's company is hit, first from the economic recession then from the discovery of quinine by two French chemists. That same year, Henry learns that Sir Banks has died. Henry celebrates his former mentor's passing. That same year, Beatrix becomes ill. Beatrix lingers for weeks, but it is clear that her body is riddled from a cancer that began in her breasts. Alma is with her when she dies and finds herself forced to promise that she will never leave her father's side.

Chapter 11

Alma discovers that in her ill health, Beatrix has left many of the duties of running the household and helping Henry with his business affairs neglected. As the new mistress of White Acre, Alma finds herself overwhelmed with her new duties. As far as the household is concerned, Alma finds herself relying heavily on Hanneke de Groot. With the business affairs, Alma forces her father to sit beside her and help answer a great deal of his correspondence. It takes months and Alma is forced to neglect her own work. Therefore, when she finds Retta in her early one morning, she is surprised to learn that her loyal friend has been staying there quite often waiting for Alma. Retta tells Alma she is getting married. When Alma learns it is George Retta is to marry, Alma is crushed. She nearly harms Retta in her heartbreak. Alma then tells Prudence and is shocked when Prudence accuses her of only thinking of herself. Prudence then shares the news that she, too, is to be married to their former tutor, Arthur Dixon. Alma is properly chastised. Alma attends both weddings and celebrates with her friend and sister, but is deeply saddened to be left behind. When Alma expresses the fear that she will always be alone, Hanneke de Groot assures her that her time will come. In the meantime, Alma decides to focus on the study of moss.

Analysis

Alma has an unusual childhood in the fact that she is left mostly to her own devices. At the same time, Alma's parents treat her more like a small adult than a child, increasing her intelligence by allowing her to participate in the philosophical and intellectual discussions that take place almost daily at their dinner table. Alma looks back on her childhood with great pleasure despite the fact that her mother was not affectionate and her father's affections were often fleeting. It is a difficult childhood for a child in the fact that she never knew hugs and kisses, never knew the pleasure of human contact. This suggests to the reader that there will come a time when Alma will crave this sort of human contact.



Alma's life changes when her mother adopts the orphaned child of a promiscuous woman. The child Prudence named is extremely beautiful and attracts the attention of the many visitors of White Acre. Prudence, however, grows up a cold girl who is clearly afraid of displeasing her adopted parents. For this reason, Prudence and Alma never have the type of relationship that other sisters might have had. Alma never really reaches out to Prudence, except on a few rare occasions when she speaks of her love for botanical publisher, George Hawks.

Alma discovers the mysteries of the marriage bed through books her father unwittingly purchases from bankrupt neighbors. These books open a whole new world to Alma and leave her with desires she does not fully understand and can only dream of fulfilling. It is similar to giving hope to a blind man that he might one day see again. The possibility exists that Alma might one day find love in a man's arms, but is unlikely in part because she is very intelligent, very large, and very unattractive. Not only this, but Alma is the only child of a strong willed man who needs her to remain in his company. This foreshadows a great deal of unhappiness in Alma's future, especially when added to the fact that both Alma's sister and her friend marry, but Alma remains without so much as a beau.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Alma avoid other children when she is a child and is out exploring botany? How might her childhood have been different if she had become friends with another child?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Alma dislike Prudence? Why does Prudence act so cold around Alma and other family members?

Discussion Question 3

How does Prudence's inclusion in the family change things for Alma? Is this for the better or the worse?

Vocabulary

Labors, religious, passion, conversion, excessive, discovery, phylum, committed, undervalued, profoundly, varied, generous, telescopes, planetary, galaxies, cathedrals, limestone, estuaries, lingering, miniature, tributaries, landscape, clusters, infinitesimally, appearance, diminutive, fjords, correctly, insulation, perfected, complaint.



Part 3, The Disturbance of Messages: Chapters 12-20

Summary

Chapter 12

More than twenty years have passed. Alma has written two books on mosses and has begun work on a third. Alma is a well-respected expert in the small world of bryology, something she finds somewhat amusing. Alma has never married. She remains at White Acre to care for her elderly father, Henry. George and Retta remain married, though it is not a happy marriage. Retta has never been able to carry a child to term. George never seems to approve of Retta's behavior. Retta has begun to show signs of mental instability and often has fits that require George to ask for Alma's help. When Retta attempts to start a fire in her bedroom, George asks Alma to arrange for Retta to go to the hospital. Alma arranges for Retta to be placed in the Griffon Asylum, a new type of mental hospital in Trenton, New Jersey. It is a sad day when Alma and George deliver Retta to the hospital, as Retta is clearly not in her right mind, but they both agree it is the best for her.

At the same time, Prudence remains married to the tutor, Arthur Dixon. Together they have six children. Prudence and Arthur have become deeply involved in abolition to the extent that Arthur has published several pamphlets on the subject and Prudence insists her family live in the same poor conditions as most former slaves in the area.

Chapter 13

The whole community is well aware of Prudence and Arthur's beliefs. An article came out ten years ago that revealed that Prudence and Arthur gave away the full amount of Prudence's dowry and that they consciously make the choice not to use products from the South that might promote the continuation of slavery. Henry and Prudence argued over this article and Prudence has not stepped foot on White Acre since. Alma occasionally visits Prudence, taking gifts for her and the children, but Prudence always gives them away. It makes Alma uncomfortable and caused her to visit less and less often.

Chapter 14

A month after Retta is admitted to the hospital, Alma gets an urgent request from George that she visit his shop. When Alma arrives, George shows Alma an exquisite collection of lithographs of common and rare varieties of orchids. The artist is an unknown man named Ambrose Pike. Ambrose Pike, reportedly, has been traveling in Mexico for many years and only recently returned to his native Boston to make the lithographs. Ambrose wants George to print them. George is so excited that he had to



share it with Alma, who also becomes quite excited. In fact, at little urging from George, Alma writes to Ambrose and invites him to White Acre for a visit. From the moment Ambrose arrives, Alma feels a connection to him. Ambrose is the first non-biologist who shows an interest in her work..

On the night of Ambrose's arrival, he has dinner with Alma, Henry, and George. Henry seems determined to test Ambrose, but Ambrose appears unruffled and meets everyone one of Henry's challenges with grace and calm. In the middle of the night, Alma wakes and finds her father in conversation with Ambrose about a vanilla plantation he has in Tahiti. The plants are not flowering. Ambrose has come up with a plan for the plantation workers to hand pollinate the plants. When Ambrose leaves the room after explaining his plan, Henry suggests they send him to Tahiti to implement the plan. Alma, on the other hand, suggests that they keep Ambrose at White Acre so that he might make a book of lithographs of all the exotic plants at White Acre.

Chapter 15

After Ambrose accepts the job of creating the book of lithographs, he and Alma become nearly inseparable. Not only that, but Ambrose cleans the greenhouse that contains the orchids so well that Alma is inspired to bring the staff numbers of White Acre up to par and have the entire estate restored to its previous pristine condition.

Over the summer, Alma decides to make a visit to Retta. Ambrose goes along with her. When the visit is over and they are on the way home, Ambrose admits to Alma that he once had something of a break down in college that required him to be admitted to a hospital for psychiatric care. Ambrose tells Alma that he felt as though if he stopped eating and drinking he might see the face of God and be elevated to a higher plane. Alma is shocked by Ambrose's admission, but she tries to understand. In the weeks following Ambrose's admission, Alma begins reading Boehme and other such writers in hopes of understanding what he told her, understanding who he was. Ambrose catches her one night and tries to better explain himself to her. Finally, Ambrose asks if he and Alma can go somewhere private where they can try to communicate without words. Alma takes Ambrose into the binding closet because it is the only place with a lock. They sit in the darkness holding hands for a long time. Alma believes that she can hear Ambrose speaking to her without words as she experiences a sexual climax. Alma also believes that she has managed to reply to Ambrose.

Chapter 16

Soon after their experience in the binding closet, Ambrose asks Alma to marry him. Alma tells her father and he gives his approval, though it is cloaked in riddles and innuendo. Alma goes to Prudence to ask her advice about the wedding night, forgetting that her sister is the daughter of a promiscuous woman who was killed by her own husband. It is an ugly conversation that leaves Alma saddened. She is surprised when Prudence sends her a lovely nightgown. Alma also receives a letter from Ambrose's mother that seems unusually grateful that Ambrose has found a respectable woman to marry after losing a love in youth.



Chapter 17

Alma and Ambrose are married in a quiet wedding at White Acre. On their wedding night, Alma expects Ambrose to want intimacy, but instead he falls asleep holding her hand. Alma lies awake all night and is miserable the next day. When this happens several days in a row, Alma decides that Ambrose must not know what is expected of him. For this reason, she strips naked and joins him in the water closet one evening when he goes to take a bath. However, Ambrose is so clearly horrified by Alma and her nakedness that she runs away, ashamed. Alma sleeps in her office, but Ambrose finds her there and explains to her that he thought she had understood that their marriage would be a celibate one. Henry chastises Alma, telling her that she should have expected this and that she needs to make a quick decision about what to do with Ambrose. For this reason, Alma arranges for Ambrose to go to Tahiti.

Chapter 18

Alma hears nothing from Ambrose for three years. Alma falls into a depression and spends much of her time trying to figure out who Ambrose was. Finally, Hanneke tells Alma that she must grow up and face the future with a stiff back. Alma realizes the truth of this and goes back to her study of mosses. In the spring of 1851, Alma receives word that Ambrose died of an infection in Tahiti. Alma is heartbroken and feels guilty for sending Ambrose to his death.

Chapter 19

Not long after Ambrose's death, Dick Yancey brings Ambrose's suitcase to Alma. Yancey tells Alma to burn it. Instead, Alma opens it and finds drawing after drawing of a beautiful black man, most of them nudes. When Alma sees these drawings, she finally realizes that Ambrose was a homosexual. This knowledge brings no solace to Alma as she begins to obsess over the man in the pictures and Ambrose's clear affection for him. Alma also becomes obsessed with the idea that everyone knew except her.

Chapter 20

At ninety-one, Henry Whittaker is approaching death. Alma nurses him. She often sends away the servants who are helping her to protect them from hearing her father's delirious rants and inappropriate stories. It is on his death bed that Henry Whittaker admits to the knowledge that Ambrose was a homosexual and his own experiences with that type of behavior while on board Captain Cook's ship. Alma watches over him like an angel, however, devoted to him to the end.

After Henry's funeral, Alma learns that she has inherited the house, the business, and everything that came with it. Henry left nothing to the servants or to Prudence. When Alma tells Hanneke this, she tells Alma that she should do something for Prudence. Then, Hanneke tells Alma how Prudence was in love with George Hawkes when they were young, but gave him up because of Alma's feelings for him in the hope that George would turn his affections to Alma. When Alma hears of this sacrifice Prudence made for her, she decides it is time to be a good sister. Alma visits with a lawyer and



then visits Prudence, convincing her that Henry left White Acre and a great deal of his money to Prudence in order to turn the estate into a school for black children. Alma also tells Prudence that the business has been left to Dick Yancey and their father's pharmaceutical partner. Alma has been given the carriage house, its contents, and enough money to support her travel plans.

Analysis

Alma grows older on White Acre, never leaving her childhood home and never marrying. Instead, Alma has devoted her life to her father and her study of mosses. It is a lonely existence, but Alma has accepted her fate and the truth that she will never know love. Alma is content, even as she watches her sister and her friend in their marriages.

Retta's life is not as pleasant as it should have been given how innocent and kind she was. It is clear in Alma's reports of her marriage that George never really loved Retta and she was never the kind of woman he wanted to be with. This leaves the reader wondering why George would marry such a woman when he had another, better choice with Alma. Alma is not jealous anymore. She often helps George with Retta like any good friend would do. Therefore, it is Alma that George turns to when Retta completely loses her sense of reality and needs to be put in a mental hospital. This actually gives the reader hope that George and Alma might have some sort of love affair, but this possibility disappears with the appearance of Ambrose Pike in the novel.

Ambrose Pike is an unusual character in the fact that he appears to be as innocent and carefree as Retta ever was. Ambrose is the male version of Retta and he brings out the same sense of concern and affection in Alma as Retta did. Therefore, when it turns out that Ambrose is something of an oddity in the fact that he believes he is some sort of angel stuck on earth, the reader is not completely surprised. The reader wants to reach into the novel and warn Alma that this man could only mean pain for her because she will always be in a position where she will have to care and protect such a weak man.

Alma falls in love with Ambrose, but she does not allow herself to feel her affection for him until he asks her to marry him. Alma has been burned once before and it is clear that she is not prepared to be hurt again. Again the reader can see trouble coming for Alma, but also wishes her well. Alma has never had real affection in her life and it seems that her time has finally come. Unfortunately, Alma soon realizes that Ambrose is not sexually attracted to her and never intended to share physical intimacy with her. Alma falls into a depression even as she sends Ambrose away. Ambrose's death crushes Alma, but she is a strong woman, much like both her mother and father, and she survives this blow. However, learning that Ambrose was homosexual is a deeper blow that the reader worries Alma will never truly recover from. Alma has been made a fool of in front of all who were supposed to love her.

With the death of her father, Alma begins to see that there was affection in her life and to understand the people around her. Alma learns that Prudence really is a warm and caring person, but she has always had to hide that because of her biological mother's



mistakes and her fear of losing the adopted family she gained. At the same time, Prudence did all she could to make her family happy, including giving up the man she loved for Alma. This puzzles Alma, but it brings her and Prudence closer together, creating a bond that will last most of the rest of their lives.

Discussion Question 1

What is a lithograph? Why does Ambrose Pike send his lithographs to George? What does Ambrose want George to do with these?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Alma feel so close to Ambrose nearly from the moment they meet? Why does Alma refuse to send Ambrose away? Why does she feel a need to protect him?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Yancey tell Alma to burn Ambrose's belongings? What disturbs Alma about these belongings? Why does she keep them?

Vocabulary

Remain, collapse, fractured, extraordinary, brave, beneficence, exactly, possessions, confused, salaries, abolitionist, provisions, unpredictable, instructions, endowment, generous, maintain, property, intact, trickery, documents, summarize, handsomely, tremendous, politely, simple, controlled, unwilling, ethical, largesse.



Part 4, The Consequence of Missions: Chapters 21-26

Summary

Chapter 21

Before she takes a train to Boston, Alma has a simple wardrobe prepared for her with coins sewn into the hems. This is the first time in her life that she has left Pittsburgh. From Boston, Alma sails to Tahiti. It is a long journey, and Alma gets to know the sailors on her ship very well. At the same time, Alma sees many wondrous sights on the journey.

Chapter 22

When Alma arrives in Tahiti, she hires a wagon to take her to the mission at Matavai Bay where she knows Ambrose lived. When she arrives, Alma tries to find the minister in charge, Reverend Welles, but he does not appear to be there and no one seems willing to help her. Alma waits all day near her things, afraid of having them stolen. When Welles finally arrives, he takes Alma to church services that are run by one of the local women. When Alma returns to her things, they are gone. Welles explains that this is quite normal and most of her things will likely be returned to her. Welles then takes Alma a mile down the beach to the small cabin where Ambrose lived. During the night, a dog comes into Alma's cabin and barks at her and never stops. Alma simply sleeps through it. A boy brings Alma the eyepiece of her microscope.

Chapter 23

Alma slowly becomes familiar with her new surroundings. She begins joining the woman of the village in their daily bathing in the river. Alma begins to learn Tahitian as well. There is a group of wild boys who live near the village who do not seem to have a family. These children run wild day and night. Alma is under the impression that these boys are the ones who stole her belongings and are responsible for the few items that show up from time to time. The only item Alma ever gets back that does not disappear again is Ambrose's valise. The dog, whom she learns was called Roger by Ambrose, becomes a regular visitor to her cabin.

Alma spends a great deal of her time exploring the island and looking for the man from Ambrose's drawings. Welles even takes Alma up into the hills to show her the cemetery. Here is where Welles and his wife buried four of their children before his wife left with their one surviving daughter. This is also where Ambrose is buried.

Chapter 24



The dry season comes. Food sources run low and everyone seems simply listless and unwilling to do anything. Alma continues to search for the man in the drawings and learn more about the local people. With Christmas comes the rainy season. Everything is wet and the lizard population explodes. Alma decides to ask the gang of boys to show her the remote sections of the island. For weeks they explore every inch of the island, but Alma still does not find the man from the drawings. When the rainy season ends and her explorations have shown her nothing, Alma opens Ambrose's valise to discover the paper has disintegrated. Alma begins to wonder if she came to Tahiti on a fool's mission.

Chapter 25

Alma is preparing to arrange transportation off of Tahiti when she hears yells outside her cabin. One of the boys tells her Tomorrow Morning has arrived. Alma has no idea what the boy means until she sees the man from Ambrose's drawings come ashore from a small boat. Alma recalls that these words were written on each of the drawings and she realizes it is the man's name. There is a great celebration in the village and Alma learns that Tomorrow Morning is a missionary, an adopted son to Welles, who has converted the island of Raiatea to Christianity. It takes some time, but Alma finally manages to get a quiet word with Tomorrow Morning. She begins to tell him who she is, since no one else is aware that she is Ambrose's wife, but he already knows who she is. When she asks to speak to him about Ambrose, he asks her to go somewhere with him the following day. She quickly agrees.

Tomorrow Morning takes Alma to a remote section of the island where they paddle their small boat into a cave where they must wait for the tide to recede. As they wait, Tomorrow Mornings tells Alma his life story. Tomorrow Morning then tells Alma how close he and Ambrose began and that Ambrose died as a result of grief marks he cut into his forehead and the amputation of his fingers, an act he committed on himself over Tomorrow Morning. Alma is saddened by this news, but realizes that Tomorrow Morning also grieves for Ambrose. When the tide finally recedes, Tomorrow Morning takes Alma to a high cliff where there is a beautiful waterfall. However, what Tomorrow Morning really wants to show her is a cave where rare mosses grow. Ambrose had told Tomorrow Morning how much Alma would like this place. They spend the night with Tomorrow Morning allowing Alma to fulfill a desire she has harbored since she was sixteen. The following morning the return to the village.

Chapter 26

On the last day of Tomorrow Morning's visit, there is another celebration. This time the woman engage in a traditional game called Haru raa puu. Alma is drawn into the game where she is rudely tackled and beaten by the other women. Alma falls into the river and one of the other women sits on her. For a moment, Alma accepts that she is going to die and welcomes it. However, a part of Alma is insulted and does not want to die. Alma fights for her life and pushes away the woman sitting on her to return to the surface of the river.



Analysis

Alma continues to be obsessed with Ambrose and with finding out who he was. Alma wants to understand Ambrose better so that perhaps she can understand their relationship better. However, when Alma travels to Tahiti, she finds herself far out of her comfort zone and unsure how to proceed. It shows great strength of character that Alma is willing to leave home and do something different. It also shows great strength when Alma is able to adjust to a way of life that is very different from the one she has always known. In the end, Alma finally begins to get to know herself in a way that she might never have done before.

Alma searches for nearly a year for the man who Ambrose drew with such affection. Alma has no success and begins to think she will never find out what Ambrose's relationship was with this man. However, the man finally comes to Alma and she discovers he is a highly respected member of the village and their church family. Not only this, but she learns that Ambrose loved this man like she loved Ambrose, eventually killing himself over the affair. It explains a great deal to Alma, but still leaves her somewhat unsatisfied as far as his feelings for her go.

As Alma searches for answers to Ambrose and their relationship, she begins to learn things about herself. Not only does Alma realize she is strong, but she discovers that she has a strong will to live. This realization will surprise Alma, but it will also lead to an epiphany that has been just beyond her reach for years.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Alma go to Tahiti? What does she hope to find there?

Discussion Question 2

What family connection does Alma have to Tahiti? Why is this important at this point in the novel?

Discussion Question 3

What was Ambrose's relationship with Tomorrow Morning? How does this help Alma understand Ambrose better?

Vocabulary

Hesitation, magnificent, approval, contingent, expression, comradely, giantess, stinging, surfaced, surrendered, unrelenting, negotiable, information, mercifully, vanished,

remained, opponent, summoned, pleasant, remained, attempting, insult, vernacular, deserve, immobilized, halting, impossible.



Part 5, The Curator of Mosses: Chapters 27-31

Summary

Chapter 27

Alma leaves Tahiti and travels to Holland. On the long journey, which is made longer by her insistence on taking Roger, she writes a paper over her new theory on the 'struggle for existence'. Alma has come to believe that only the strongest of organisms survive and that these often adapt to their surroundings in order to increase their chances of survival. It is a unique theory that has never been suggested before and Alma knows it will be controversial, but she is excited by it just the same. When Alma arrives in Amsterdam, she goes to the Hortus Botanicus where her mother's family have been the directors for generations.

Chapter 28

Alma asks to see the current director, Dees van Devender, her uncle. Alma presents her thesis to him and asks him to review it. If he likes it, Alma hopes he will give her a job at the Hortus Botanicus. When Alma leaves, Roger insists on remaining with her uncle. The following day, van Devender sends for Alma and tells her, through tears, that she thinks like her mother.

Chapter 29

Dees van Devender gives Alma a job at the Hortus Botanicus as curator of mosses. Dees also allows Alma to move into the family home and gives her an office two doors down. Alma settles happily into her job, creating a cave of mosses that is similar to the cave Tomorrow Morning took her to see. At the same time, Dees van Devender tries to get Alma to publish her thesis, but she refuses. Alma feels the theory is not complete because she cannot solve the Prudence Problem. The Prudence Problem is when weaker organisms sacrifice themselves for the stronger ones, such as Prudence giving up George for Alma, or a stranger drowning in the river to save a drowning child. Dees argues that it is not necessary to solve this problem, but Alma insists it is.

In the summer of 1858, Retta dies, quickly followed by George Hawkes. Hanneke also passes away. A short time later Dees becomes ill and dies the same day. Roger, so distraught by the loss of his master, stops eating and soon follows Dees to the grave.

Chapter 30

A year later, Charles Darwin publishes his *On the Origin of Species*. Alma is very excited to read this and she reads it very carefully as soon as she receives a copy. Darwin's theories are the same as Alma's but his writing is more creative. Alma is



pleased that her theories have been published even if they were not by her. However, Alma is disappointed both that Darwin did not solve the Prudence Problem and that his work is met with much criticism. At the same time, Alma becomes aware that another man, Alfred Russel Wallace, had written of the same theory. Alma begins to follow both Darwin and Wallace's work closely.

Years pass. Alma settles into her work, finally publishing her third book on mosses. Alma never tells anyone about her thesis, but continues to follow the works of Darwin and Wallace. When Darwin dies, she becomes deeply saddened and regrets never having met him. For this reason, Alma decides to invite Wallace to speak at the Hortus Botanicus.

Chapter 31

Alma is quite pleased when Wallace arrives in Amsterdam. Alma bides her time, allowing Wallace's many fans to distract him during his time there. However, on his final day in Amsterdam, Alma finally finds time alone with Wallace. They visit her cave of mosses. Alma then takes Wallace to her office and shows him her thesis. Wallace is quite impressed with it, but wonders why Alma never published it. When Alma explains it, they discuss the problem in detail. Wallace has more of a mystical bend and he finds a like mind in Alma. Afterward, Alma goes to the Hortus Botanicus, quite content with her life.

Analysis

Alma feels a desire to be around family, so she travels to Holland where she hopes to meet and work with her uncle and his family. Alma uses as her calling card a theory about the struggle for existence to her uncle. The uncle loves the ideas Alma presents and urges her for years to publish. Her theories are highly controversial, however, and she worries how they might be accepted, especially in the religious world. Not only this, but Alma has found a problem in her theory that she cannot solve. In Alma's theory, the strong destroy the weak in order to survive. However, Alma has noted in human behavior a pattern in which some of the weaker will sacrifice themselves for others, such as Prudence's choice to give up George in hopes that he might choose Alma instead. It is a weakness that puts a hole in the heart of Alma's theories.

As Alma settles into a good life in Holland, living and working with her uncle, she finds some happiness after the fiasco of her marriage to Ambrose. Alma never marries and is destined to be alone. However, she finds happiness in her work. When Darwin publishes his *On the Origin of Species*, and it echoes perfectly Alma's own theories, she is happy rather than destroyed that he beat her to it. In fact, Alma never goes public with her theories, instead hiding them away and waiting for Darwin and Wallace to find an answer to the problems she has been struggling with for years. No one ever solves the problem, but Alma finds a sort of kinship with Darwin and Wallace that makes her feel fulfilled on a higher level than love, marriage, and family ever would have. In this way, it appears that Alma has found contentment in her life at long last.



Discussion Question 1

Who is Darwin? Why were his theories so controversial in his time period? Are they considered controversial in modern times?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Alma never publish her theories? What might have happened if she had published before Darwin?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Alma feel a kinship with Wallace? What does Wallace think of Alma's theories? Why?

Vocabulary

Thoroughly, affixed, pleasant, generous, fascinated, continents, deserted, dromedary, pokey, divided, memorizing, features, forgiveness, cruelties, desire, educational, conversationalist, delightful, unfettered, converse, passions, inquired, eccentric, surrounding, requisite, occupied, microscopes, specimens, activity, lanky.



Characters

Hanneke de Groot

Hanneke de Groot is Beatrix's personal maid at the time she marries Henry Whittaker. For this reason, Beatrix takes Hanneke with her when she moves to Philadelphia with Henry. Hanneke serves as housekeeper at White Acre for the rest of her life. Hanneke also becomes something of a maternal figure to both Alma and Prudence in their childhoods because Hanneke is more willing than Beatrix to show affection to the children. It is also Hanneke who finally tells Alma that Prudence gave up Henry in the hopes that he would marry Alma instead. This motivates Alma to give White Acre to Prudence before she sails to Tahiti to try and understand Ambrose.

Beatrix van Devender Whittaker

Beatrix Whittaker is a Dutch woman Henry decides to marry when he realizes it is time to settle down. Beatrix is a very intelligent woman who grew up in a family of botanists. Beatrix is very tough and straight-laced, raising her children in fear of disappointing her, never showing them much affection. While Beatrix raises strong, intelligent daughters, she also raises daughters who live a life without affection or love in their lives. Beatrix dies of cancer when Alma and Prudence are in their late teens.

Dees van Devender

Dees van Devender is Beatrix's younger brother who is only ten when she sails away to America. When Alma decides to travel to Holland to find her mother's family, it is to Dees van Devender she goes in search of not only family, but a job. Dees van Devender reads Alma's thesis on the struggle for survival and finds it to be genius. Dees encourages Alma for years to publish the thesis, but she never does.

Tomorrow Morning

Tomorrow Morning is a young black man who was born and raised at Matavai Bay in Tahiti. Tomorrow Morning has become the adopted son of Reverend Welles and has taken his teachings to other islands where he has converted the locals to Christianity. Tomorrow Morning is also the reason that Alma has come to Tahiti because when Ambrose died, she found many naked drawings of Tomorrow Morning done by Ambrose. Alma wants to understand the nature of Ambrose's relationship with Tomorrow Morning. Tomorrow Morning takes Alma to see a cave filled with mosses that Ambrose told her she would like. While there, Alma and Tomorrow Morning talk extensively about Ambrose and Alma learns how Ambrose died.



Reverend Welles

Reverend Welles is an Englishman who was sent to Tahiti to open a mission and convert the locals to Christianity. Welles had a hard time upon his arrival, but quickly adjusted his methods in order to help in recruiting the natives. Welles' wife originally traveled to Tahiti with him, but after losing four children and realizing he one surviving child needed civilization, she returned to England. Welles, however, has chosen to make his life in Tahiti. Welles befriends Alma upon her arrival, but he proves to be somewhat inefficient in helping her learn more about Ambrose.

Ambrose Pike

Ambrose Pike is a brilliant artist who sends a group of lithographs to George Hawkes in an attempt to have them published. Alma invites Ambrose to visit White Acre and immediately feels a connection with him. When Ambrose asks Alma to marry him, she falls deeply in love with him only to discover that he only wants a celibate marriage. Alma sends Ambrose to Tahiti to avoid her own disappointment and the rumors circulating among her servants. When Ambrose dies of an infection in Tahiti, Alma is devastated. Alma travels to Tahiti to learn more about her husband, eventually coming to the conclusion that Ambrose was simply too gentle to survive in such a harsh world.

Retta Snow Hawkes

Retta Snow is a young girl about Alma's age who moves into a home near White Acre and sets out to befriend both Alma and Prudence. Retta is a silly girl whom Alma comes to love deeply. However, when Retta marries George Hawkes, she breaks Alma's heart. Alma remains friends with Retta because she believes it is the proper thing to do. Retta suffers in a difficult marriage lacking love, suffering multiple miscarriages and stillbirths until she eventually goes insane. Alma helps George place Retta in a mental hospital where Retta will eventually die.

George Hawkes

George Hawkes is a botanical publisher who is a frequent guest at White Acre. George is a large man, but he is very shy. Alma draws him out. In exchange, George begins publishing Alma's articles on plants. Alma believes herself to be in love with George partly because of their growing friendship and in part because he is the only man she can imagine could love someone as large and ugly as she is. For this reason, Alma is shocked when she learns George is to marry Retta. More than twenty years later, Alma learns that George was secretly courting Prudence, but Prudence turned him down in hopes that he would marry Alma instead. Rather than marry Alma, George marries Retta and lingers in the bad marriage for more than twenty years before finally admitting Retta to a mental hospital. George dies shortly after Retta.



Prudence Whittaker Dixon

Prudence is the daughter of a gardener and a promiscuous mother. When Prudence is nine, her father kills her mother and then himself. The Whittakers adopt Prudence. Beatrix is a difficult woman who does not show much affection, but is quick to show displeasure. For this reason, Prudence learns to hide her feelings as well as attempt to obscure her great beauty. Alma and Prudence never really establish a sibling bond, in part because of Prudence's cold exterior and in part because Alma is jealous of the attention Prudence gets. In the end, Prudence marries their tutor, Arthur Dixon, and becomes an abolitionist, causing Henry to cut her off. Alma, too, avoids Prudence because she makes her uncomfortable. However, when Alma learns that Prudence once loved George and gave him up in the hopes that he would marry Alma, Alma gives Prudence White Acre to turn into a school for black children.

Henry Whittaker

Henry Whittaker was born the poor son of an orchard man. Henry dislikes his father's acceptance of his poverty and decides that he will do better than his father. Henry uses the only thing he knows, botany, to begin stealing and making money. Henry then goes into service for Sir Banks, the botanist who runs the Kew, a botanical garden outside London. When Henry realizes that a medicinal tree in Peru could make him and Banks a large amount of money if grown in the right place, he takes his idea to Banks. Banks, however, laughs at him. This angers Henry and he decides to do it on his own. Soon Henry is a very wealthy man.

Henry moves to Philadelphia where he begins a pharmaceutical plant business. Henry has contracted several illnesses from his previous travels, so he remains at his new home, White Acre, and encourages the most brilliant minds of the times to come to him. White Acre is often filled with people and dinner discussions are often technical and passionate. It is in this atmosphere that Alma grows up.

As Henry grows older, he stops having as many people in his home and begins to rely more and more on Alma. In the end, Henry reveals his great affection for his only daughter by leaving the total of his estate to her.

Alma Whittaker

Alma Whittaker is the daughter of a brilliant entrepreneur. Alma grows up in a home filled with intellectuals, often participating in discussions that should be above her intelligence when she is only seven or eight years old. In this world, Alma grows and becomes a very well educated young woman. Eventually Alma will become a botanist, an expert in mosses.

At nine, Alma is upset when her parents adopt Prudence, the daughter of a gardener who has killed his wife and himself. Alma finds Prudence to be less intelligent than



herself, but far more beautiful. There is never a real competition between Alma and Prudence, but there is still a sense that Prudence will always be favored in some way. For this reason, there is never any real affection between Alma and her sister.

Alma has spent most of her life alone by the time she reaches adulthood. Alma learns about sex, just like everything else, from books. It causes Alma to dream of the day she will be married, but that moment does not seem to be forthcoming for her. It is not until Alma is nearly fifty that she finally meets a man who wants to marry her. Alma, however, is disappointed and ashamed when she discovers her husband wants a celibate marriage. Alma sends him away, but she will spend years grieving him and wishing she could understand him better. Not even learning that her husband was a homosexual helps Alma understand him better until she meets his lover.

Alma spends most of her professional life trying to understand why some mosses flourish and others do not. When Alma nearly drowns during a traditional Tahitian game, she finally realizes that there is will for survival in nature that causes some stronger organisms to change, to alter their very structure, simply to survive over the weaker organisms. Alma spends a year writing a thesis about this idea. However, she never publishes it because she cannot solve what she calls the Prudence Problem. Alma cannot understand why some organisms, especially humans, will often sacrifice themselves for other organisms, such as Prudence's decision to give up George for Alma, or a stranger drowning in order to save a child.

When Darwin publishes his *On the Origin of Species*, Alma is surprised to find that he has put into more graceful words her own theories. Alma becomes excited to see how Darwin answers the Prudence Problem, but he never does. Alma follows Darwin's works as well as that of another scientist with the same theory, Alfred Russel Wallace. When Darwin dies, Alma arranges to meet Wallace because she wants to meet the man she has shared this theory with for so many years. When she shows Wallace her thesis, he is shocked that she never published, but agrees with her puzzle over the Prudence Problem.



Symbols and Symbolism

Jesuit's Bark

Jesuit's bark is a drug made from the bark of the cinchona tree that can lower a fever and treat the symptoms of malaria. Henry Whittaker makes his fortune growing and selling the drug made from these trees. It is not until the 1820s that two French chemists discover quinine and finally cut into Henry's profit from the cinchona trees.

Moss

In her grief over George's decision to marry Retta, Alma finds herself searching for a purpose in her life. While going over some articles she had written for George's botanical magazine, she realizes that no one has ever bothered to truly study moss. This becomes Alma's lifelong occupation, studying moss and recording the multiple varieties of it. It is also on moss that Alma bases her thesis on the struggle for existence.

Orchid Lithographs

Ambrose Pike sends to George Hawkes a collection of lithographs that he made of orchids he found in Mexico during a decades long expedition there. These lithographs are the best George has ever seen and he is so excited about them that he invites Alma to see them. It is this that leads to Alma inviting Ambrose to White Acre.

Ambrose's Valise

Ambrose has lived out of his luggage for so long that when he arrives at White Acre, he is frightened of losing his valise. After his death, this same valise is delivered to Alma by her father's agent, Dick Yancey. Inside, Alma finds multiple nude drawings of a black man with only the words Tomorrow Morning written on them. These drawings inspire Alma to go to Tahiti to find the young man.

Cum Grano Salis

Cum Grano Salis is the first of many books Alma discovers in her father's newly acquired book collection that discusses the activities of the marriage bed. These books awaken Alma's sexuality and contribute to her crush on George Hawkes.



Darwin's On the Origin of Species

On the Origin of Species is a book by Charles Darwin that introduces the idea of evolution. When Alma reads Darwin's book, she recognizes her own theories in it. However, the book explains it all in a much better fashion than she could have written.

Greenhouses

On his estate, White Acre, Henry Whittaker has built multiple green houses in which he grows many varieties of exotic plants brought to him from all over the world. This is also the world that Alma grows up in and the same greenhouses Ambrose inhabits as he prepares to make an illustrated catalog of all the plants on White Acre.

Microscope

Alma often uses a microscope to look closely at the plants she is studying. This becomes a very important part of Alma's work when she begins to study mosses. However, her microscope is stolen when Alma goes to Tahiti. She never recovers it.

Tweezers

Alma often uses tweezers to remove unwanted growths among her mosses, especially after she begins the Cave of Mosses in Amsterdam. Alma continues to do this work even after she grows old and is unable to see. Alma uses touch to continue to groom her mosses.

Torch

When Alma is eight, an astronomer comes to her home. During a ball, the astronomer makes a model of the solar system with the living guests of the ball. Alma is made a comet and given a torch as she runs among the celestial bodies. It is one of the best memories of Alma's childhood.



Settings

White Acre

White Acre is the estate in Philadelphia that Henry Whittaker builds soon after his arrival. The home and its grounds are lavish because Henry wants the world to know how rich he truly is. When volcanic eruptions leave most of the world in a dusty fog, Henry buys up the properties of his neighbors in order to increase the size of White Acre. Alma lives on White Acre from her birth until her fifties, never leaving longer than her short trips to visit Retta in New Jersey.

Kew

Kew is a botanical garden just outside of London. Henry's father is an orchard man at Kew. Henry, too, works at Kew under Sir Banks until he is caught stealing the exotic cuttings Banks has brought, or been given, from around the world to sell to Banks' enemies. Henry spends most of his adult life trying to outdo Banks and Kew.

Hortus Botanicus

Hortus Botanicus is the botanical gardens in Amsterdam that Beatrix von Devender's family has run for multiple generations. After leaving Tahiti, Alma goes here to look for a job and a connection to her family. Dees von Devender, Beatrix's little brother and current director of the gardens, gives Alma the title of Curator of Mosses, a job she will hold until her death.

1800s

The novel is set in the 1800s. This time period is an exciting time for scientific discovery, including the subject of botany. However, the study of mosses was not a blazing field at the time, allowing for a woman like Alma to become an authority without the community discounting her thoughts because she is a woman. It is also during this time period that Charles Darwin published his controversial theories on evolution, theories that would turn the scientific community on its ear.

Tahiti

Henry will first visit Tahiti as a member of Captain Cook's third voyage around the world. Much later, Henry will finance the start of a vanilla plantation on Tahiti. It is here that Alma sends Ambrose after their disastrous marriage and where she will later go in hopes of learning something about her husband that will help her understand why he treated her as he did.



Themes and Motifs

Loneliness

Alma grows up in an adult world where her parents applaud the search for knowledge, but they rarely share physical affection. Alma does not miss the physical part of human contact as she is growing and absorbing all the knowledge around her. However, when Alma is a teenager and accidentally discovers several books describing the activities of the marriage bed, she begins to crave physical contact. Alma even falls in love with a man who is a frequent visitor to her home and begins to imagine he loves her as well. When this is revealed to be untrue, Alma learns to accept that she will more than likely be alone for the rest of her life.

Alma grows into middle age content in her intellectual work and the company of her elderly father. However, this all changes when Ambrose comes into Alma's life. Alma feels an instant connection to Ambrose despite his often odd behaviors. Alma wants so desperately to be loved, that she sees affection in everything Ambrose does. However, Alma eventually comes to the realization that Ambrose, though a gentle and kind man, has his own burdens. Ambrose sought Alma out to help him deal with his own secrets rather than to finally offer her the human contact she has craved all her life.

When Ambrose breaks her heart and Alma sends him away, she grieves for a long time for the love she thought she had finally found. Alma feels her loneliness after her marriage to Ambrose more profoundly than she ever did before. When Ambrose dies, Alma wants desperately to understand him even after learning his secrets. For this reason, Alma leaves her home for the first time to travel to Tahiti. There, Alma meets a man who loved Ambrose as she did, but who broke his heart. Alma comes to some kind of understanding of Ambrose, but at the same time she begins to understand her own heart. In the end, Alma seeks comfort from family rather than love and lives out her life content in the knowledge that while she lived a lonely life, she was never truly alone.

Ambition

Ambition is an important theme at the beginning of this novel. Henry Whittaker is a precocious teenager who cannot stand the poverty he lives in with his family and dislikes his father's tacit acceptance of their poverty. For this reason Henry vows to never live a life like his father. Henry wants to take his fate into his own hands, to change his own fortunes in a way his father never did.

Henry is caught stealing but manages to convince Sir Banks, the director of the Kew, that he is too valuable to hang. Henry is sent on a voyage around the world with Captain Cook. While on this trip, Henry is smart by observing all he can so that Banks will truly believe him to be invaluable. Henry is rewarded when Banks sends him on a botanical exploration trip to Peru. In Peru, Henry learns about Jesuit's bark, its ability to cure fever



and the symptoms of malaria, and decides that if it was grown closer to England the importer could make much more money. Banks laughs at Henry when he brings this idea to him, but this only spurs Henry to greater ambition. Henry goes into business with the Dutch East India Company and makes a fortune.

Not satisfied with his fortune, Henry continues to look for lucrative deals for the rest of his life. By his death, Henry's company will be invested in hundreds of small businesses as well as his large botanical pharmaceutical ventures. It is Henry's ambition that allows him to do what he does and give his daughter the life she lives.

Controversial Scientific Theories

All her life, Alma studies botany. When she realizes she will more than likely never marry and have children, Alma throws herself into the study of mosses. As Alma studies mosses, she becomes more and more aware of irregularities that are not explained by nature as she understands it. However, it is not until she leaves the comfort of her home and ventures out into the world that Alma begins to understand what that one thing, that one theory that will explain those irregularities.

Late in life after a near death experience, Alma realizes that all organisms fight for the right to survive. In order to do this, some organisms will actually change their basic nature in order to survive changing environmental conditions. It is a radical theory, one that Alma knows will not be easily accepted by society. However, she believes that it can be applied to all organisms, even humans. The only problem Alma cannot find an answer to is why some humans will sacrifice themselves for others, even weaker humans. This Alma calls the Prudence Problem, based on Prudence's decision to give up George for Alma. Alma never solves this problem, therefore she never publishes her paper.

Many years after Alma writes her thesis on the struggle for existence, Charles Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin's theories on evolution are exactly the same as Alma's own theories. Darwin's theories are accepted with both praise and scorn in his own age, with many religious leaders denouncing it because it does not allow for the idea that God created man, not that man evolved as a natural part of a struggle for existence. Alma sits back and reads the debate, following the future work of both Darwin and another scientist who has published the same ideas. In the end, knowing these two men share her theories helps Alma feel as though she is a part of something bigger than herself.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person point of view. The narrator follows two characters closely, first Henry Whittaker and then his daughter Alma Whittaker. The point of view also includes some authorial voice in which the author speaks directly to the reader and tips the reader off to important moments in time or to moments that will seem insignificant at first, but prove to be highly significant later in the novel.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot. The point of view gives the novel something of a historical feel, like novels written in another generation for a more sophisticated audience. The point of view also allows the reader to understand when something of importance is happening, even if it seems innocuous. The point of view also allows the reader to understand Alma's father, which in turn helps the reader understand Alma better.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is simple English. There is a little sophistication to the language that gives the novel a historical feel. The characters in the novel are highly educated and are living in a time period where language was spoken with a certain attention paid to the way it sounded, therefore the dialogue can seem stiff to readers not accustomed to such a period novel. However, the language works well with the characters and the setting of the novel.

The language of this novel works well because it fits with the characters and the setting. The language is not highly complicated and does not include words that might confuse those not familiar with certain terms. There are a great many botanical words used in the novel, but each of these is explained within the text in terms that are not demeaning to the reader and therefore work well within the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into five parts and thirty-one chapters. Each part covers a specific section of Alma's life, from her father's adventures before her birth to her childhood to her work in the final decades of her life. The novel contains both long passages of narrative as well as short sections of dialogue, presenting the story in both scenes and covering large periods of time with just a few words and sentences.

The novel has one main plot and multiple subplots. The main plot follows the life of heiress Alma Whittaker and her journey to find meaning to life. One subplot follows Alma's relationships with the various members of her family. Another subplot follows

Alma's unhappy attempts at finding love. Another subplot follows Alma's work and her unique discoveries. All the plots come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

Alma Whittaker, born with the century, slid into our world on the fifth of January, 1800.
-- Narrator (Prologue paragraph 1)

Importance: This line introduces the main character of the novel.

For the first five years of her life, Alma Whittaker was indeed a mere passenger in the world-as we all are passengers in such early youth-and so her story was not yet noble, nor was it particularly interesting, beyond the fact that this homely toddler passed her days without illness or incident, surrounded by a degree of wealthy nearly unknown in the America of that time, even within elegant Philadelphia.
-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote introduces the authorial voice in the narration as well as the fact that Alma would at some point become the main focus of the novel. It also introduces the tone of the novel.

Henry's deliberately expressionless face made it impossible for anyone to read him, so Banks could not have realized how strikingly this final admonition was received.
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 6)

Importance: This quote shows how controlled Henry was, even as a teenager, and how he made a point of never allowing anyone to know what really was going on in his mind. At the same time, Henry was a typical teen and he listened very closely to a man he respected a great deal, also giving the reader some insight into his relationship with Sir Banks.

To be prosperous and happy in life, Henry, it is simple. Pick one woman, pick it well, and surrender.
-- Unknown Portuguese Sailor (chapter 4 paragraph 6)

Importance: This is advice given to Henry by a Portuguese sailor. The sailor's words lead Henry to decide to marry and settle down in America.

Or, to be specific, her name was Polly-Who-Became-Prudence.
-- Alma (chapter 6 paragraph 12)

Importance: This quote not only shows how Beatrix attempted to elevate her new adopted daughter by changing her name, but the less than generous way in which Alma welcomed into her life.

Before Alma had a chance to try to decipher this singular little rhyme (to try to work out who was fiddle, who was fork, and who was spoon), Prudence burst into laughter. This was remarkable, for Prudence never laughed.
-- Alma (chapter 9 paragraph 45)



Importance: Alma makes this comment shortly after meeting Retta and listening to Retta's cheerful rhyme linking them together as three happy friends. This quote shows the reader how reserved Alma has always seen Prudence and how their relationship will change briefly whenever Retta is around.

Alma Whittaker, aged twenty, was now the mistress of the White Acre estate.
-- Alma (chapter 11 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote not only shows the reader how Alma immediately steps into her mother's place upon her death, but how significant a role it is. This also gives a little hint to the way in which Alma will spend her adulthood instead of marrying and making a home of her own.

She had written many thousands of letters in her life-and many of them had been letters of praise or invitation-but she did not know how to begin this one. How does one address true genius?

-- Alma (chapter 14 paragraph 20)

Importance: This quote shows Alma's lack of confidence when she goes to write a letter to Ambrose Pike. This also shows that Alma is already somewhat enamored of Ambrose Pike, foreshadowing the moment she falls in love with him.

Only one month later, they were married.

-- Alma (chapter 16 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote shows how quickly Alma married Ambrose. At first the reader believes this is because the couple is anxious to be together, but will later wonder if it was too rushed and should have been taken slower.

Ambrose had been unable to consummate their marriage not because Alma was old, not because Alma was ugly, and not because he wanted to emulate the angels-but because he wanted little boys with little fingers and little sticks.

-- Alma (chapter 19 paragraph 27)

Importance: These are Alma's thoughts at the moment she realizes that Ambrose was a homosexual. This explains a great deal to Alma, but it also sends her on a journey of discovery in an attempt to understand Ambrose better.

Since her near-drowning in Matavai Bay during that raucous game of haru raa puu, Alma had been balancing on the keenest edge of thought she had ever experienced, and she did not want her thinking disturbed.

-- Alma (chapter 27 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote shows Alma's return to her work and her eagerness to complete her thesis on the struggle for existence.



It was a beautiful book. She wavered, as she read it, between heartbreak and vindication, between regret and admiration.

-- Alma (chapter 30 paragraph 9)

Importance: This quote shows Alma's reaction to reading Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which expresses the same theories she wrote down nearly a decade earlier.