

# **Tales of the City Study Guide**

## **Tales of the City by Armistead Maupin**

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## Plot Summary

This multi-plot narrative follows the complicated lives of a motley group of characters gingerly finding their way through a maze of sex, drugs and longing in 1970's San Francisco. As relationships entwine and sever and as layers of secrets are revealed under other layers of secrets, the narrative explores themes related to human frailty, the nature of family, and the tension between sexual freedom and emotional freedom.

The narrative begins with the decision of the novel's central character, naïve Midwestern secretary Mary Ann Singleton, to make her vacation in San Francisco into a permanent move. After taking temporary refuge with ex-high school friend and sexual free spirit Connie Bradshaw, Mary Ann finds a place of her own - at 28 Barbary Lane, where the landlady is the eccentric, open-minded, and open-hearted Anna Madrigal.

One of Mary Ann's new neighbors, neurotic advertising executive Mona, gets her a job working at her (Mona's) firm, Halcyon Communications, which is run by Edgar Halcyon, whom the narrator reveals is dying of kidney disease. After taking refuge from a stressful day at the office, Edgar takes refuge in a public park, where he meets and begins a romantic affair with Anna Madrigal. Meanwhile, Mary Ann is seduced into an affair with Edgar's no-good son-in-law, Beauchamp (pronounced BEECH-um), who is in turn cheating on his wife (and Edgar's daughter) DeDe with both men and women.

Back at Barbary Lane, Mona's gay, and very romantic, best friend Michael moves in with her and quickly makes friends with Mary Ann, who in turn encounters heterosexual stud (and disillusioned liberal lawyer) Brian, another tenant (who also makes unexpected friends with Michael) and the mysterious, nerdy Norman Neal Williams, who lives in the apartment on the roof.

As Mary Ann creates a new life for herself, as Mona struggles to pay the rent after being fired, as Michael falls in love with an attractive doctor, as Anna and Edgar's affair deepens, and as DeDe struggles to find an identity for herself, the paths of all the characters intersect in increasingly intriguing, often surprising and frequently sexual ways. Mary Ann volunteers at a crisis switchboard, where her fellow volunteer kills himself, leading Mary Ann to seek (non-sexual) comfort in the marijuana-enlightened perspective of Brian. Mona is contacted by a former female lover from New York, who wants to renew their relationship at the same time as conversation with Anna Madrigal reveals surprising truths about the origins of their friendship. Michael's on-again, off-again relationship with the doctor turns out to be more off than on. Edgar learns some secrets from Anna's past, secrets which seem to be at the core of a blackmail attempt by Norman Neal Williams. DeDe becomes pregnant after having an affair with a grocery delivery boy and sleeps with a disgusting gossip columnist in order to keep her secret.

Mary Ann is horrified to discover secret truths about Norman Neal Williams, who in turn discovers truths about Anna Madrigal that Mary Ann takes extreme action to conceal. Michael's efforts to raise some money for himself and Mona end up estranging him even further from his doctor boyfriend. Mona's well meaning attempts to reunite her lover with



her parents end up in ways she couldn't possibly have predicted. Brian has a sexual encounter that once and for all proves to him that his sexual appetites are unhealthy. And, on Christmas Eve, just as Anna Madrigal is hosting a party and DeDe is telling him she's going to have a baby, Edgar Halcyon and Norman Neal Williams both die ... one from illness, one as the result of careless drunkenness on a dangerous cliff.

This is the first of several books in a series following the lives of the same characters through several years in the life of 28 Barbary Lane.



# Chapters 1 through 6

## Chapters 1 through 6 Summary

This multi-plot narrative follows the complicated lives of a motley group of characters gingerly finding their way through a maze of sex, drugs and longing in 1970's San Francisco. As relationships entwine and sever and as layers of secrets are revealed under other layers of secrets, the narrative explores themes related to human frailty, the nature of family, and the tension between sexual freedom and emotional freedom.

"Taking the Plunge" At the end of what was originally intended to be a brief holiday in San Francisco, Cleveland secretary Mary Ann Singleton tells her mother over the phone she has decided to stay. She then calls a friend from high school, Connie Bradshaw, and asks to stay at her place for a while. Connie enthusiastically agrees.

"Connie's Place" As Mary Ann and Connie catch up, Connie pulls out a magazine with an article on a club that hosts co-ed orgies, saying when she sees Mary Ann's shock that "This city loosens people up."

"A Frisco Disco" Connie takes Mary Ann to a nightclub, where Mary Ann is uncomfortable with its sexualized atmosphere. After being propositioned by a "long haired man," Mary Ann goes back to the apartment but is awakened in the middle of the night by Connie's return ... with the same man.

"Her New Home" Mary Ann's search for an apartment ends at 28 Barbary Lane, where the eccentric, warm-hearted landlady Mrs. Madrigal says she can move in immediately. (see "Quotes, Chapter 4"). Connie is upset for a moment when Mary Ann tells her she's moving out but then invites her to Social Safeway, a Wednesday night tradition for single men and women looking to hook up.

"Love with the proper shopper" At Social Safeway, Mary Ann becomes upset by the aggressive sexuality around her. An attractive man comforts her, but her flicker of attraction is immediately doused when Michael, the man's boyfriend, joins the conversation. Mary Ann quickly leaves, rejecting Connie's offer to keep her company.

"Connie's bumner night" That night, Mary Ann is awakened by Connie's angry return from a frustrating night at the clubs. The next day, Mary Ann prepares to move out and go job hunting. She and Connie promise to keep in touch, but "neither one of them believed it."

## Chapters 1 through 6 Analysis

Most of the novel's most important elements are introduced in this section - its central character (Mary Ann), two of its most important secondary characters (Mrs. Madrigal and Michael), its setting (1970's San Francisco), and the prevailing social/moral climate



at that time and place (freedom and experimentation). Stylistically important elements introduced include the short chapters with their frequent cliffhanger endings, the defining of action and relationship more often through dialogue than through narration, and the clever chapter titles. This last is particularly interesting, in that the chapter titles are, at various times, references to popular culture, to old movies and musicals, ironic commentary on events in the chapter, and/or straightforward evocations of emotion and/or event. In this section, "taking the plunge" is a commonly used synonym for taking a risk or for taking the first step on an adventure. Meanwhile, "love with the proper shopper" is a riff on the name of a popular movie of the period with a sexual perspective similar to that of the book as a whole and the shoppers at Social Safeway in particular.

All the book's central themes are also introduced here. Explorations of sexual freedom, emotional freedom (Mary Ann's declaration of independence from her family), and the nature of human frailty (the hunger for meaningful connection in both Connie and Mary Ann) are all fairly evident. The fourth central theme, exploring the nature of family, is perhaps more subtly explored, but is nevertheless there. This takes place as the result of the juxtaposition of the conflict between Mary Ann and her mother and the unconditional welcome of Mrs. Madrigal, who becomes something of a mother figure to Mary Ann in the same way as she "mothers" all the tenants of Barbary Lane (that is, if they let her).

The final key element introduced in this section is a sense of interrelationship, of often surprising connections between people that spring up and/or emerge unexpectedly. The appearances of the man obsessed with lemon candles is a relatively minor example of this, while the glimpse of Michael in Chapter 5 foreshadows his appearance fifteen chapters later, a more significant example. These frequent, sometimes unlikely, connections not only add a sense of constant surprise to the narrative, but they make the thematically relevant suggestion that humanity (in spite of the individual desires and fears that makes everyone feel separate from everybody else) is in fact fully and deeply connected (see "Themes - Human Frailty").



# Chapters 7 through 10

## Chapters 7 through 10 Summary

"The employment line" When she returns to Barbary Lane after a disappointing day job hunting, an upset Mary Ann discovers that Mrs. Madrigal has left a marijuana cigarette taped there as a welcoming gift.

"Enter Mona" While taking out her garbage the next morning, Mary Ann meets Mona Ramsey, another of Mrs. Madrigal's tenants (see "Quotes", Chapter 8), who arranges for Mary Ann to interview for a job at Halcyon Communications, where Mona works. Edgar Halcyon, who describes himself as "the biggest son of a bitch in town," gives Mary Ann a job.

"The ad game" One morning after Mary Ann has been with Halcyon for a while, Edgar arrives for an important meeting with a client to find that Beauchamp (pronounced BEECH-um), the executive in charge of the account and Edgar's son-in-law, is late. For details on the relationship between Edgar and Beauchamp, see "Characters."

"Edgar Blows Up" In the middle of an argument with Beauchamp about DeDe, Edgar, suddenly fatigued, lets the argument go. Later, as Mary Ann has lunch with Mona, Mona reveals that Mrs. Madrigal has invited Mary Ann for dinner. Back at Barbary Lane, Mona tells Mrs. Madrigal that Mary Ann has been asking about her, and assures Mrs. Madrigal that telling Mary Ann anything is Mrs. Madrigal's business alone.

## Chapters 7 through 10 Analysis

As the narrative introduces more of its central characters (Mona, Edgar, Beauchamp), it continues its exploration of its central themes (sexual freedom and emotional freedom). It also moves Mary Ann along her journey of transformation (from innocent in the city to woman of the world ... or at least part of it). It also introduces the repeated motif (image) of a character having sides to themselves that seem, at first glance, to be contradictory. In this case, the motif emerges in the description of DeDe, whose evident wealth and social status seem, at first glance, to be at odds with her pseudo-hippiness. As later developments suggest, however, DeDe is more of the individual than she first reveals to the reader, as well as her family and to herself.

Another new element introduced here is an aura of mystery, or more specifically the aura surrounding Mrs. Madrigal, as her elliptical comments in her conversation with Mona apparently refer to some kind of secret in Mrs. Madrigal's past. While the comments here foreshadow other, similar comments later in the narrative, it's important to note that the nature of Mrs. Madrigal's secret is never revealed - not in this book, at least, though it's revealed in later books in the series. The hints, however, function well to not only lure the reader deeper into the book, but into the rest of the books as well.





# Chapters 11 through 16

## Chapters 11 through 16 Summary

"Anguish in Bohemia" Edgar makes an appointment to see the motherly Ruby Miller (see "Quotes", Chapter 11). Meanwhile, Beauchamp has a drink with his friend Peter, their conversation reminding him that he has to be at a function with DeDe.

"The wrath of DeDe" In the middle of an argument with Beauchamp, DeDe accuses him of having an affair with Mary Ann, saying she saw them together. Beauchamp says they were just having lunch.

"The Landlady's Dinner" During Mrs. Madrigal's dinner, Mary Ann glimpses a photograph of an attractive young soldier in Mrs. Madrigal's bedroom. Conversation with Mrs. Madrigal reveals that there never was a Mr. Madrigal, and that several years previously she changed her name to mark her transition from an old life to a new one. Conversation also reveals that Mary Ann is becoming depressed and frustrated by there being so many more gay men than straight men in the city.

"Rendezvous with Ruby" At Mrs. Miller's, Ruby admonishes Edgar that the reason he's not seeing any "changes" is that he doesn't have true faith. After lying him down on a pool table, she massages his head and prays to Jesus to "heal his failing kidneys."

"The boy next door" After dinner, Mary Ann is visited by Brian Hawkins, another of Barbary Lane's tenants. He tells her Mrs. Madrigal said Mary Ann needed something taken care of, and an amused Mary Ann tells him that Mrs. Madrigal is trying to set them up. Conversation reveals that Brian is straight and that Mona has told Brian about Mary Ann. Mary Ann comments uncomfortably about how there are no secrets in San Francisco, but Brian says exactly the opposite is true (see "Quotes", Chapter 15)

"The matriarch" When he gets home from Mrs. Miller's, Edgar angrily discovers that the drunken Frannie is planning to give a party for a visiting orchestra conductor and his wife in order to gain social status.

## Chapters 11 through 16 Analysis

In this section, the narrative adds layers to its aura of mystery first in terms of Mrs. Madrigal, with her sketched-in story of her past and her complete avoidance of the issue of the identity of the soldier in the photo, both of which foreshadow revelations of truth in future books. Mystery also develops in terms of what Beauchamp is doing with his time away from his wife. It's interesting to note, though, that at the same time as veils of mystery are being drawn over these characters (and, later in the book, over other characters) they're being withdrawn from others - here from the character of Edgar, whose bad temper and general unhappiness now has a defining source—his failing

health. It's also interesting to note the juxtaposition of the two main women in his life - the considerate, if slightly loony, Ruby Miller and the selfish and very drunken Frannie.

Meanwhile, the narrative's habit of surprising readers with unexpected revelations about its characters shows up here in Brian Hawkins who, in contrast to his horny rapaciousness displays a degree of insight into San Francisco life that neither Mary Ann nor the reader sees coming.

The conversation between Frannie and Edgar in Chapter 16 foreshadows events at the party in question (see Chapter 40).



# Chapters 17 through 21

## Chapters 17 through 21 Summary

"Stranger in the park" Conversation between Edgar and his doctor reveals that Edgar only has six months to live, and the doctor wants him to enjoy them. When Edgar takes refuge in a nearby park, he enters into playful conversation with an attractive woman, roughly his own age, who introduces herself as Anna Madrigal.

"Relating at lunch" Meanwhile, Mary Ann and Beauchamp are having lunch. As Beauchamp talks about how unhappy he is with DeDe, Mary Ann becomes increasingly uneasy and attempts to leave. Beauchamp asks her to just spend some time with him and invites her to the family cabin in Mendocino.

"A piece of Anna's past" Back in the park, conversation between Edgar and Mrs. Madrigal reveals that Mrs. Madrigal grew up in the same whorehouse in Nevada where Edgar lost his virginity (see "Quotes", Chapter 19). When he reacts with shock to her comment that she runs a house of her own, she reassures him that she is a "garden variety landlady."

"Mona's New Roomie" Conversation between Mona and Michael (see Chapter 6) reveals that they're old and very good friends and that Michael is lonely and sad after being dumped. Mona suggests he move in with her, and he agrees.

"Their First Date" Edgar and Mrs. Madrigal go for a walk on the beach, where a gang of young people are flying a kite. After learning that Edgar used to enjoy flying kites, Mrs. Madrigal bribes the young people with a joint, tells Edgar the kite is his for ten minutes, and urges him to make the most of it.

## Chapters 17 through 21 Analysis

In this section, the narrative contains two examples of its tendency to interconnect its characters in unexpected ways. The first is the meeting of Edgar and Mrs. Madrigal, which forms the basis of what is easily the most touching, affirming, thematically-illuminating relationship in the book. The second is the reappearance of Michael who, when he first appeared in Chapter 5, came across as a minor character but who now promises to be much more significant (for further commentary on this character's eventual importance, see "Characters").

Mrs. Madrigal's advice to Edgar to make the most of the short time he has in Chapter 21 is a clear echo of the advice given him by his doctor in Chapter 17. Why does he take her advice and not his? Probably because when the doctor merely talked to him; Edgar didn't feel as though he had anybody with whom to enjoy his time. Now that he's found Mrs. Madrigal, he has found a real opportunity for joy, an opportunity he takes advantage of throughout the remainder of the book.

Other important elements here include Beauchamp's evident sleaziness with Mary Ann foreshadowing the frequent reappearances of that sleaziness later in the book, and Mrs. Madrigal's comments about growing up in a whorehouse in Nevada, which foreshadows the development of important narrative elements in other books in the series.



# Chapters 22 through 30

## Chapters 22 through 30 Summary

"Off to Mendocino" At the cabin in Mendocino, Mary Ann is uneasy by the fact there's only one bed. After saying he'll ask for a rollaway, Beauchamp speaks seductively to Mary Ann at dinner about her innocence and attractiveness. When they get back to the cabin, Mary Ann tells him not to worry about getting the second bed.

"Brian climbs the walls" In an effort to get over his frustration with the sexually unavailable Mary Ann, Brian heads for a nearby pickup joint - the Come Clean Laundromat. When he gets there, a friend points out "the one in the orange" as a likely prospect.

"Post-mortem" Conversation in bed between Mary Ann and Beauchamp suggests that Beauchamp was impotent. When Mary Ann tries to reassure him, Beauchamp reacts harshly. Later, as Beauchamp apologizes, narration suggests that he and Mary Ann do finally make love. Still later, after reflecting on how much of a romantic she used to be, Mary Ann sits up and reads a novel.

"Coming clean in the Marina" Brian and the girl in orange eventually agree to go to the girl's apartment. As they leave, they introduce themselves. The girl is Connie Bradshaw.

"...and many happy returns" After having sex with her, Brian learns from an upset Connie that it's her birthday. Brian goes into the kitchen and returns with an improvised birthday cake.

"Mrs. Day at home" DeDe, frustrated and alone, wanders restlessly through her house, looking out at the view and watching San Francisco's once-tame, now wild flock of parrots (see "Quotes", Chapter 27). As she remembers the passionate, erotic fun she had with a married man named Splinter, she decides to call him.

"The Chinese connection" Splinter, it turns out, is too in love with his wife to do anything with DeDe. She learns, however, that Beauchamp's alibi for being away is false - Splinter is a member of the same club that Beauchamp said he was with, and Splinter says there was no meeting that weekend. Now angry as well as sexually frustrated, DeDe calls for a few groceries to be delivered, and seduces the handsome Chinese delivery boy.

"Confession in the nude" Mona and Michael go to a nude beach, where Mona complains about how straight men, including Brian Hawkins, are all repulsive. As they go home, they encounter Mary Ann, back from her weekend with Beauchamp. Mona introduces her to Michael, but he says they've already met, reminding the mystified Mary Ann about their encounter at the supermarket (see Chapter 5).



"Miss Singleton dines alone" Mary Ann tries to distract herself from her anxiety about the truth about her weekend being revealed and her desire for Beauchamp to call her. Meanwhile, DeDe confronts Beauchamp about his lie, but he brushes it off. As he takes their dog for a walk, he puts "an object he had brought with him from Mendocino" in the glove compartment of the car. "A nice touch," he thinks to himself.

## Chapters 22 through 30 Analysis

An interesting element about this section is the fact that structurally, it's defined by a story within a story - specifically, the narrative of the before, during, and after of Mary Ann's sexual encounter with Beauchamp (or in traditional storytelling terms, the beginning, middle, and end). There are several such mini-stories within the overall narrative of each of the book's central characters - this mini-story is a building block for the larger story of Mary Ann's growth from innocence to worldliness. By the same token, there is also a mini-story here that forms a building block for the larger story of DeDe's transformation from a sheltered, but suspicious, lack of genuine identity to a more strongly defined sense of self. For further consideration of parallels between the Mary Ann and DeDe plotlines, see "Characters - Mary Ann" and "DeDe", and for further consideration of "mini-stories" see "Topics for Discussion - What other mini-stories ..."

The encounter between Connie and Brian is another example of how the narrative, with apparent randomness, intersects the lives and experiences of its characters in unexpected ways. Meanwhile, the setting for their encounter is worth a moment or two of examination - specifically, its name, which carries with it several implied layers of meaning. First, the establishment is known not just as a place to wash clothes but to find people to have sex with, and "come" is a euphemism for "orgasm." Second, to "come clean" means to become honest, to reveal a secret. Therefore, the name is ironic because people looking for sex go there pretending to do laundry, only "coming clean" about their real intention when it seems there is the possibility of having sex. Third, in relation to the meaning of "come clean," there is irony in the fact that most if not all the main characters have secrets, from themselves and/or from one another, and sometimes "come clean" about them and sometimes don't. Finally, the fact that "Come Clean" is a Laundromat (ie a place where dirt is washed away) is perhaps a metaphoric commentary on the process that many of the characters are going through in the book - a cleansing of dead dreams, false illusions, and fake truths.

In terms of chapter titles, the only one in this section with an additional layer of meaning is "The Chinese connection," a play on words referring to a famous, Oscar winning movie of the era starring Gene Hackman, "The French Connection."

Finally, for consideration of the possible metaphoric meanings of the parrots, see "Objects/Places - The Parrots" and "Topics for Discussion - In what ways do the parrots ..."



# Chapters 31 through 39

## Chapters 31 through 39 Summary

"Mona vs. the Pig" Mona loses her cool with a sexist client and is fired. Back at home, she reassures Michael that she'll find some freelance work and that Mrs. Madrigal will understand. Michael agrees, commenting that Mrs. Madrigal seems "crazy" about her.

"Where is Love?" In an attempt to cheer Mona up, Michael reads her some comical personal ads, which leads him to muse on how he felt when he moved to San Francisco (see "Quotes", Chapter 32-1) and how frustrated he is now. Later, Mona ironically recalls assuring her mother (a high-powered real estate agent) that everything is fine. This leads Mona to a realization of her feelings about Mrs. Madrigal (see "Quotes", Chapter 32-2), and goes down to tell her about being fired.

"If the shoe fits" At a bar in the Castro (see "Objects/Places"), Michael has a drink with an attractive man (Chuck) who reveals, through conversation, that he has a fetish for the kind of shoes Michael is wearing.

"Sherry and Sympathy" Mrs. Madrigal tells Mona to cherish her relationship with Michael (see "Quotes", Chapter 34), adding that she doesn't mind if Mona tells Michael about her (what, exactly, is not revealed). Mona eventually reveals that she was fired by Edgar Halcyon, saying she's glad to be out of that job and is all right for money. Mrs. Madrigal doesn't really believe her.

"The rap about rape" DeDe tells her mother (Frannie) that she's sure Beauchamp is having an affair, showing her the scarf she found in the car which she recognizes as Mary Ann's (see Chapter 30). Later, at a socially important lunch, the hostess insists the women there "rap" (share their experiences) about rape, and DeDe makes up a story about being raped by a grocery delivery boy. When she gets home, she again calls for groceries to be delivered, and is again visited by the Chinese delivery boy.

"Romance in the rink" At a "gays only" night at a roller skating rink, Michael follows an attractive blond man but accidentally runs into him. The blond man helps him get his balance back and asks him to join in a couples only dance, introducing himself as Jon.

"Coed steam" Brian goes to a bathhouse (see "Objects/Places") to participate in a co-ed orgy (see Chapter 2). There, a woman with whom he banters about vegetarianism and activism invites him to her room.

"Hillary's room" In the woman's room, however (the woman's name is Hillary), Brian is shocked to discover that she is convinced he's gay, and in denial of his sexuality. In spite of his increasingly angry protests, she doesn't change her mind, and eventually asks Brian to leave.



"Breakfast in bed" As Michael and Jon are waking up after their first night together, Mona brings them croissants and coffee. After Jon goes, Michael reveals to Mona that Jon is a gynecologist, and when she worries that he'll move out, assures her that he will always love her and be there for her.

## Chapters 31 through 39 Analysis

There are several noteworthy elements in this section. First, there is the development of the narrative's thematic focus on the nature of family, with Mona's apparent discomfort with her mother juxtaposed with both her evident comfort with Mrs. Madrigal and the latter's comments about the value of Mona's relationship with Michael. A related point here is that the various references to the closeness of the relationship between Mona and Mrs. Madrigal foreshadow revelations in later books about the true, surprising nature of that relationship.

The second noteworthy element is the introduction of Jon, whose on-again, off-again relationship with Michael is a key element in the latter's emotional journey not only in this book but in later books in the series. The third is the development in the Beauchamp / DeDe / Mary Ann love triangle as here, the reader finds out just what it was that Beauchamp hid in the car at the end of Chapter 30 (see "Objects/Places - Mary Ann's Scarf"). How, exactly, DeDe's discovery will affect further developments in the love triangle is revealed in the following section.

The fourth noteworthy element is the increase in the number of titles with multiple meanings. "Where is love?" is the title of a wistful song from the British musical "Oliver!" sung by an orphan boy abandoned by the world. "If the shoe fits" is the first part of a saying that essentially suggests if something feels right, or appropriate, do it. "Sherry and Sympathy" is a play on the title of a famous play and movie, "Tea and Sympathy," in which a troubled young man finds comfort in a near-romantic relationship with an older married woman. For further consideration of these and other titles with multiple meanings, see "Topics for Discussion - Consider the various titles ..."





# Chapters 40 through 45

## Chapters 40 through 45 Summary

"The maestro vanishes" At Frannie's party (see Chapter 16), Frannie is shocked to learn that the conductor / guest of honor has disappeared. Meanwhile, DeDe is embarrassed by the presence of Splinter and his wife.

"Frannie freaks" As Frannie vents her frustration to an unsympathetic Edgar, Beauchamp chats nastily with his drugged out friend Peter. Later, DeDe shouts to Frannie, who has locked herself in the bathroom, that a society writer has promised to put a long column about the party in the paper. Frannie comes out of the bathroom, relieved.

"The case of the six batons" Edgar calls Mrs. Madrigal with conversation revealing that she had called him on Mona's behalf and that he had accused her of interfering. She accepts his apology, and they make a date. Meanwhile, Michael comes home from a night cruising for sex and tells Mona that he encountered the missing conductor at a bathhouse, carrying a bag with, among other things, six batons.

"Back to Cleveland?" Narration describes how Mary Ann fills her days with mindless activity in an attempt to forget that Beauchamp wants nothing to do with her. One night, as she's sharing dinner with Michael, she reveals that she's thinking about going back to Cleveland.

"Michael's pep talk" As Michael tries to convince Mary Ann to stay, her mother calls, hinting that it's time to come home. Mary Ann reacts sharply to her mother's assumptions and accusations, saying everything is fine. Soon afterwards, Mona tells Mary Ann to stop looking for happy endings everywhere and that she has to "make things work" for herself. She gives Mary Ann an address ...

"War and peace" As he walks with Mrs. Madrigal, Edgar says he'd take Mona back if Mrs. Madrigal asked him to, saying he knows Mona means a lot to her. Mrs. Madrigal says she wouldn't interfere. Later, as they talk about what it was like to grow up in a whorehouse, Mrs. Madrigal describes some superstitions she acquired (see "Quotes", Chapter 45), and narration describes how Edgar feels that "she not only sensed, but shared, his pain."

## Chapters 40 through 45 Analysis

Several narrative elements or motifs recur in this section. These include the unexpected encounters between characters (ie between Michael and the missing conductor), the cliffhanger chapter endings (the momentarily mysterious phone number that Mona gives Mary Ann), and the multiple-layered chapter titles ("War and Peace" is also the name of a famous, and very long, Russian epic novel).



In terms of the journeys of the characters and developments in their relationships, important elements to note are Edgar's growing impatience with Frannie; the subsequent growth of emotional connection between Edgar and Mrs. Madrigal; the parallel growth of connection between Mary Ann and Michael, and the re-assertion of Mary Ann's independence. All these elements are, to varying degrees, manifestations and/or developments of the narrative's central themes - sexual freedom (the conductor, Michael), emotional freedom (Edgar and Mrs. Madrigal), human frailty (Edgar's and Mary Ann's vulnerability) and the nature of family, which is perhaps the most notable of the themes apparent in this section, as both Edgar and Mary Ann move away from traditional families (either of marriage or of birth) and towards emotional security with their families of choice - in Edgar's case, Mrs. Madrigal ... in Mary Ann's case, her friends at Barbary Lane.



# Chapters 46 through 55

## Chapters 46 through 55 Summary

"Once more into the breach" Mary Ann arrives to start her volunteer position at the Bay Area Crisis Switchboard, where she meets Vincent, a fellow volunteer who assures Mary Ann that he'll handle the callers who are genuinely suicidal, adding that most people call just to talk.

"Fantasia for two" After a movie date, Michael tells Jon a funny story about an ex lover. Jon realizes the story is a joke, and Michael explains that he's trying to make himself more attractive. Jon kisses him for a long time.

"The mysterious caller" During a playful, relaxed day at the beach, Edgar confesses to Mrs. Madrigal that he's dying. Mrs. Madrigal admits that she thought something like that was going on and then comforts him by asking frankly how much time they have. Later, her end-of-the-day bath is interrupted by the arrival of a woman looking for Mary Ann - a woman who, Mrs. Madrigal realizes, looks a lot like Edgar.

"So where was Beauchamp?" The woman is DeDe, who returns Mary Ann's scarf, explains where she found it, and quietly asks whether she has been with Beauchamp since. Mary Ann insists she was with him only once, and DeDe believes her. Back at home, DeDe indulges in comfort food and reads a letter from her friend Binky, writing from a weight loss farm.

"What the simple folk do" Michael, dressed in costume as the rambunctious Greek god Pan asks Mary Ann to go with him on a night out, their conversation revealing there's a new tenant on the roof. Mary Ann asks why Michael isn't going with Jon, and Michael explains that Jon has season tickets for the opera (which he can't stand). Eventually, Mary Ann says she can't go with Michael because she's due to work at the switchboard.

"Intermezzo" At the opera house, Beauchamp and Peter snort cocaine, and conversation reveals that Peter is gay and he wants Beauchamp to go to a pickup club with him later. Later, Edgar muses mournfully to his friend Booter about the passing of time.

"Vincent's old lady" As Michael talks himself into having a good time (see "Quotes", Chapter 52), Vincent confesses to Mary Ann that his "old lady" (wife) has left him. Suddenly he runs into the bathroom and locks the door. Mary Ann, worried that he's going to hurt himself, shouts for him to come out, but he doesn't. And then her phone rings ...

"The anniversary tango" Mrs. Madrigal reminds Mona it's the third anniversary of her moving into Barbary Lane. When Mona comments that she's glad she chose the place, Mrs. Madrigal says the place chose her and hints there's more to the story ...



"Bells are ringing" Mary Ann, still shouting for Vincent, answers the phone and is nauseated by a man talking dirty to her. As she vomits into a garbage can, Vincent comes out of the bathroom and reassures her that it's better that the guy call them rather than some random woman.

"The landlady bares her soul" Mrs. Madrigal tells Mona that she planned their meeting three years previously because she heard about one of Mona's highly successful ad campaigns (a swimsuit campaign in New York), thought she was an interesting person, and wanted to have her at Barbary Lane. As Mona accepts the compliment, she and Mrs. Madrigal drink a toast to "home." Back at Barbary Lane, Mary Ann calms herself by aggressively cleaning her house.

## Chapters 46 through 55 Analysis

Mary Ann's journey from innocence to wisdom begins its next phase in this section as she meets the troubled Vincent (whose comment about depression implies that he cut off his own ear and finger) and is surprised by the lack of anger in DeDe. The portrayal of the latter in this section is perhaps one of the most intriguing moments of character development in the narrative, as DeDe's actions are singularly unexpected, but nonetheless real in terms of where she is as a character. Also, developments and hints in the relationship between Mona and Mrs. Madrigal continue to foreshadow revelations in later books about that relationship, while his relationship with Peter continues to hint that Beauchamp does not cheat on DeDe with just women. Finally, Jon's actions at the end of his conversation with Michael about the monkey suggest that he (Jon) finds Michael attractive even without Michael's attempts to make himself seem more so. This attraction is tested later in the narrative when Michael's behavior seems at odds with Jon's sense of propriety.

Meanwhile, there are several titles with additional layers of meaning in this section. "Once more into the breach" is a paraphrase of a famous Shakespearean play about a warrior king leading an increasingly discouraged army into an increasingly unwinnable battle. "What the simple folk do" is a quote from the Broadway musical "Camelot" - specifically, a song in which King Arthur and Queen Guenevere discuss "what the simple folk do" for pleasure. "Bells are Ringing" is the title of yet another Broadway musical; this one about a vulnerable telephone answering service operator secretly in love with one of her clients. "Intermezzo," aside from being a musical term for a linking movement between major movements of a symphonic work or sonata, is also the name of a famous romantic film starring Leslie Howard and Ingrid Bergman.



# Chapters 56 through 65

## Chapters 56 through 65 Summary

"At the fat farm" Reflecting on how fed up she is with her life, DeDe checks in to the fat farm for her "\$2500 transformation" and readies herself for her weigh-in.

"Michael's shocker" Out for lunch at a hotdog stand with Mona, Michael reveals his plan to earn some cash - entering an underwear dance contest at a local nightclub. Meanwhile, Edgar arranges to meet Beauchamp later that day, at which time he is going to reveal something "in strictest confidence" ...

"The family myth" After meeting Beauchamp, Edgar meets Mrs. Madrigal at a hotel. After making love, Mrs. Madrigal tells Edgar the mythic story of the name "halcyon" (see "Objects/Places"). Edgar comments that his father must have had more imagination than he thought - the family name was changed from Halstein.

"DeDe triumphs" At the end of two weeks at the fat farm, DeDe is ecstatic to discover that she has lost almost twenty pounds. On her return trip to San Francisco, she celebrates her triumph ... but then suddenly realizes she's missed her period.

"Boris steps in" One lazy morning Mary Ann wakes up to a visit from Boris, a stray cat (see "Quotes", Chapter 129). As she attempts to play, he runs upstairs towards the mysterious rooftop apartment and its equally mysterious new tenant. Meanwhile, as Michael and Mona have breakfast, Michael tells Mona he would prefer Jon not know about the dance contest.

"Renewing vows" Beauchamp meets DeDe off the plane, seems stunned by her transformation, and tells her as they drive home that he's been spending time with Edgar and missed her deeply.

"The man on the roof" Mary Ann chases Boris up to the roof, where she meets Norman Neal Williams, a large man living in the small rooftop apartment. Conversation reveals that Norman is a salesman of organic vitamins, but narration suggests Mary Ann thinks nothing about him is "organic."

"That ol-time religion" Mona goes to a gospel church, where her private efforts at connecting with the spirit are made embarrassingly public by a loud, enthusiastic minister. Back at home, she reflects on how distant she feels from her mother while feeling closer than ever to Mrs. Madrigal. When the phone rings, she's surprised to hear the voice of D'orothea, moved back to San Francisco and missing her.

"Child's play" Mary Ann joins Norman at a restaurant for brunch and is surprised to see him accompanied by a precocious young girl named Lexy. After Norman explains that he's a friend of Lexy's father, he asks Mary Ann to go with him to an old detective movie, and she agrees.



"What are friends for?" Also at brunch, DeDe revels in Beauchamp's assurances that things are getting better between them. Later, while Beauchamp is walking the dog, DeDe calls her friend Binky to ask for the name of someone discreet who can tell her whether she's pregnant. Binky gives her a name - Jon Fielding.

## Chapters 56 through 65 Analysis

Plot lines develop through the shifting of relationships in this section. These shifts start with Edgar's conversation with Beauchamp, the content of which is never revealed but seems to involve Edgar confessing his health status and telling Beauchamp he is soon to be the head of the company. This idea is supported by events in Chapter 100, when Beauchamp is portrayed as imagining how he will redecorate Edgar's office. Other shifts include the change in DeDe's relationships with both herself and her husband after her visit to the fat farm (where narration describes her encountering a "movie star" who bears a powerfully hinted-at resemblance to Elizabeth Taylor) and the discovery that she might be pregnant. There is also the surprising return of D'orothea to Mona's circle and the introduction of Norman Neal Williams, who plays a significant part in propelling and defining Mary Ann's transformation from innocence to worldliness.

On another level, there are several shifts in relationship foreshadowed in this section. Michael's decision to enter the dance contest and his unease about Jon knowing foreshadow the relationship going sour in the following section. Other elements of foreshadowing include the appearance of Lexy (which foreshadows the shocking revelation of just what her relationship is to Norman (Chapter 110) and Mona's reflection on her closeness to Mrs. Madrigal, which like other similar references throughout the book foreshadows revelations in later books of why that closeness exists.

Meanwhile, another surprising connection between characters emerges when DeDe's doctor turns out to be Michael's boyfriend.

Finally, and perhaps most notably, there is Mrs. Madrigal's story of the origins of Edgar Halcyon's last name - specifically, her story of the two lovers united forever after death. There are hints here that Mrs. Madrigal is actually comforting Edgar about his impending death, implying that after he passes on there will be an opportunity for them to be together again. At this point, it's important to note that "halcyon" is a synonym for happiness and peace, meaning that Edgar's name is illuminative of his journey of transformation. It's also important to note that a "madrigal" is the name of a stately, sedate style of music. The use of the name here is obviously ironic, in that Mrs. Madrigal may have her stately moments, but "sedate" she certainly is not. The true meaning of her name is revealed in a later book in the series.



# Chapters 66 through 70

## Chapters 66 through 70 Summary

"The beach boys" Michael, getting some last minute tanning before the contest, is joined in the courtyard by Brian. Conversation indicates that they have a lot in common in that both are searching for sex and meaning in relationships.

"Ebony idol" At the restaurant where he works, Brian connects with a beautiful black woman who agrees to go for a drink with him and reveals that her name is D'orothea. Meanwhile, in the competitive atmosphere of the change room at the bar, Michael nervously prepares for the contest.

"D'orothea's lament" Over drinks, D'orothea tells Brian that she's a model, and that a passionate affair with an ad executive with whom she was working on a swimsuit campaign in New York ended when the executive suddenly decided to move to San Francisco. Now, she says, she wants to resume the relationship but doesn't know how to go about it. Brian intuits that the executive is a woman, and D'orothea confirms his suspicions.

"The winner's circle" When it's Michael's turn to dance, he loses himself in the music and dances well but then becomes upset when he sees a disgusted Jon in the audience. After winning the contest, Michael cries in Mona's arms.

"Fiasco in Chinatown" After the movie, Norman takes Mary Ann for Chinese food. At the restaurant, she's humiliated when she realizes the sink is outside the washroom, and the waiter yells at her to wash her hands. Later, Norman apologizes, and Mary Ann reassures him that she knows he meant well. They kiss, and his clip-on tie comes off in her hand.

## Chapters 66 through 70 Analysis

Notable elements in this section include the title of Chapter 66, which is an obvious and ironic reference to the famous 60's musical group of the same name. Meanwhile, the beginnings of the friendship between Michael and Brian portrayed here foreshadows the increasing closeness of that relationship in Chapter 96, a relationship that goes even deeper in later books in the series. Perhaps the most important piece of foreshadowing here takes place at the end of Chapter 70, in which Mary Ann's inadvertent removal of Norman's tie foreshadows the climactic moment of Chapter 12, in which his tie again comes off in her hand as he falls to his death.

Also in this section, there is another title with an additional layer of meaning.

"D'orothea's lament" is a play on the title of "Adelaide's Lament" from the musical "Guys and Dolls," in which an entertainer "laments" the lack of development in her longstanding relationship.





# Chapters 71 through 77

## Chapters 71 through 77 Summary

"Starry starry night" Vincent decides it's "time to split" (kill himself), realizes that to slit his wrists would be unfair to Mary Ann, and decides on "a method that would lessen the horror" for her.

"The news from home" On her way to the switchboard, Mary Ann visits a lonely and depressed Michael, who talks to her wistfully about his longings for a relationship, "someone to buy a Christmas tree with." After she goes, he is shocked to receive a phone call from his mother, announcing that she and his father are coming to visit.

"A place for strays" Edgar visits Mrs. Madrigal's home for the first time. After they make love, and after they receive a passing visit from Boris the cat, and after assuring Edgar again that Mary Ann is away, Mrs. Madrigal tells Edgar another story (see "Objects/Places - Atlantis"). Narration reveals that as Edgar leaves, he's being watched by Norman Neal Williams.

"Hanging loose" As she heads for the switchboard, Mary Ann runs into Brian, who invites her to his place for a joint after her shift; an invitation she coldly refuses. When she arrives at the shelter, she discovers Vincent has hung himself with a sample of his "old lady's" macramé.

"Nightcap" When she returns to Barbary Lane, Mary Ann remembers Brian's invitation and goes upstairs for that joint. Brian listens sympathetically and then tells a long story about his own sense of disillusionment that concludes with his suggestion that he feels he would have understood Vincent.

"Words of comfort" The next morning, Mary Ann is again contemplating a return to Cleveland when she receives a visit from Norman, who had heard about what happened from Brian and brought some flowers. As they share coffee, they talk a bit about Mrs. Madrigal, and Norman reveals that Brian had said that she used to work in a book store in Long Beach.

"The clue in the bookshop" Narration describes how Norman discovers a shop run by a man who bought it from Mrs. Madrigal years before. As Norman leaves, he passes Mona, out walking to lunch with D'orothea. Mona recognizes him, saying she knows he watches her. Later, at lunch, D'orothea tells Mona she wants to be back in a relationship with her.

## Chapters 71 through 77 Analysis

The novel's thematic focus on the nature of family re-emerges here with the news that Michael's family is coming to visit. The actual appearance of his well meaning but





ignorant parents in the following section clearly portrays the appeal, at least for Michael, of his family of choice over his family of origin. This appeal is clearly echoed in the tensions between Mary Ann and her mother and the implied tensions between Mona and hers, and the preference of both women for the motherly company of Mrs. Madrigal.

Meanwhile, Mary Ann is propelled sharply along her journey towards wisdom not only by Vincent's suicide but by her conversation with Brian, through which she learns he seems to have more depth than she had originally assumed. Another narrative line that unveils a surprising layer of truth is Norman's apparent investigation of Mrs. Madrigal - up to this point, he had been portrayed as strange, but not necessarily menacing, which he certainly becomes here.

Titles with multiple layers of meaning in this section include "A Place for Strays." This can be seen as a reference to Boris the Cat, the tenants of Barbary Lane (who, in one way or another, have strayed not only from their families of origin but from themselves), and even those souls lost to themselves and each other in the sinking of Atlantis but who have found themselves and each other in San Francisco. Also, "Hanging loose" is simultaneously a popular expression of the time referring to both physical and moral relaxation, and a darkly ironic description of Vincent's method of suicide. "Starry starry night" is the name of a famous painting by Vincent Van Gogh and also served as the title for a romantic ballad in the 1970's inspired by that painting. The irony here is that Vincent, like Van Gogh (note the similarity of first names), also cut off his own ear in a fit of depression. Finally, "The clue in the bookshop" seems to carry with it a deliberate echo of book titles featuring those famous teen detectives Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys.



# Chapters 78 through 83

## Chapters 78 through 83 Summary

"Mona moves on" Mona tells Michael she's moving out to be with D'orothea. Michael's hurt reaction quickly turns into anger, leading to a sudden sharp quarrel that just as suddenly turns remorseful, for both him and Mona.

"At the gynecologist's" DeDe is examined by Jon, who tells her she's pregnant. She confides her situation and her uncertainty over whether to have an abortion. He tells her to call him when she's made up her mind.

"The diagnosis" The first few lines of a shocked conversation between Frannie and DeDe suggest that they've found out about Edgar's illness, and they're angry about not being told sooner, but narration reveals that they're in fact talking about Frannie's beloved Great Dane, whom the vet says has about six months to live. Later at lunch, a friend reassures her, saying the dog has had a full life. Frannie's mood brightens.

"The Tollivers invade" Michael's parents tease him about having "moved [Mona] out" in order to not shock them. Later, when they go out for dinner, Michael is painfully embarrassed when half a dozen roller skating men wearing nun's habits cruise by.

"Trick or treat in suburbia" Mary Ann goes trick or treating with Norman and Lexy. While Lexy is off collecting candy, Norman reveals some painful details about his life. Mary Ann comforts him, and Norman hints he'd like different kinds of comfort from her.

"Chip off the old block" His father's ignorant comments about homosexuals, which he calls "fruits," make Michael increasingly irritated. Later, Michael's father, who doesn't know his son is gay, assures Michael that both he and Michael's mother are both proud of him and are sure he'll get his life on track, "long as you can keep those fruits away." Michael wryly comments that he's not their type.

## Chapters 78 through 83 Analysis

The main thematic focus of this section is the exploration of various kinds of family. These include the family Mona is attempting to form with D'orothea, which Michael sees forming at the expense of the family she has formed with him; the family DeDe is carrying in her uterus; the ignorance of Michael's biological family, and, in a perhaps comically ironic way, the "family" bond that Frannie has formed with her Great Dane. This last is narrated in a particularly telling way, in that the writing of this section clearly indicates that Frannie has much more of an emotional investment in her relationship with her dog than she has in her relationship with Edgar, her husband. In short, this section contains some of the most important observations in the novel on its central theme relating to the nature of family.



# Chapters 84 through 89

## Chapters 84 through 89 Summary

"DeDe's growing dilemma" At a function with Beauchamp, DeDe confides in her shocked friend Binky that she's pregnant, that Beauchamp isn't the father, and that the baby's true parentage would be obvious; the implication is clear that Lionel, the Asian grocery delivery boy, is the father.

"Mrs. Madrigal and the Mouse" Mrs. Madrigal calls Michael down to her apartment and anxiously asks whether he knows why Mona left. Michael assures her that it wasn't because of anything to do with Mrs. Madrigal.

"The Shadow knows" Even though DeDe tries desperately to get away, nasty social columnist Carson Callas pesters her with questions, eventually revealing that he knows about the baby and hints that he will keep quiet if she sleeps with him.

"How to cure the munchies" After a long hard shift at the restaurant and unable to sleep, Brian heads to an all night diner where he picks up a waitress. Later, however, as she's driving them out to her place, Brian thinks he's been through all this before.

"The hungry eye" Norman's breakfast is interrupted by a phone call from a pushy female client. Conversation reveals that her name is Mrs. Ramsey (Mona's mother?), that she has been waiting thirty years for some answers to the questions she's hired Norman to investigate, and that Norman has discovered that Mrs. Madrigal's name (Anna Madrigal) is not only false, but an anagram. For what, he doesn't say. Later, and aware that his money is running very short, Norman calls someone named Paul and arranges to participate in a film shoot, for which he insists on getting paid in advance.

"Trauma in a Travel-Eze" When Brian arrives at the waitress' (Candi's) home, his feeling that he's been there before is confirmed when he meets her roommate, with whom he's also had sex. Later, after making love with Candi and rejecting her lonely offer to drive him home, he discovers that she is Cheryl's mother.

## Chapters 84 through 89 Analysis

This section is full of encounters and revelations that simultaneously propel the various narrative lines in which they feature forward and foreshadow later developments in those same narratives. DeDe's inner conflict about the baby is a painful but necessary component of her journey of transformation. Brian's encounter with the waitress is similarly painful and similarly necessary as he moves from aimlessness to a sense of purpose, which emerges in later books. Mr. Williams' conversation with his client moves him further along his journey towards the desperate actions he takes in Chapter 112, and foreshadows both the fatal results of that action and the revelations of truths about

Mrs. Madrigal's identity in later books. His reference to a "film shoot" foreshadows Mary Ann's discovery about the truth of his relationship with Lexy in Chapter 110.

Titles with layers of meaning include "DeDe's growing dilemma" a punning reference not only to her choice but the "growing" baby inside of her triggering that choice, and "The Shadow knows," a reference to a famous radio program in which a strange vigilante called The Shadow seemed to psychically know truths about his prey that no one should have known.

For consideration of questions relating to Mrs. Madrigal's name, see "Topics for Discussion - As Norman Neal Williams points out ..."



# Chapters 90 through 98

## Chapters 90 through 98 Summary

"And baby makes three?" After a sexual rendezvous with Carson Callas, DeDe feels sure he'll keep quiet about her pregnancy (see "Quotes", Chapter 90). Back at home, she asks Beauchamp about having babies, and he rejects the idea outright.

"Ties that bind" At the office, Mary Ann packages up a gift for Norman—a regular tie to replace his clip on one. When Beauchamp stops by to ask her to go for a drink, she rejects him coldly.

"New York, New York" Mona listens with increasing impatience as D'orothea has yet another long conversation with friends back in New York. Meanwhile, Brian reflects on the strangeness of his sex life and suddenly decides to go down and visit Michael.

"Full moon in Seacliff" Jon, bored at a dinner party thrown by older, rich, pretentious gay men, suddenly leaves and goes to a bath-house (see "Objects/Places").

"Norman confesses" On a walk with Mary Ann, Norman confesses his anxiety about being with her, comparing himself to the younger, sexier Brian. Mary Ann reassures him, which leads him to confess that he's not a vitamin salesman and that he's going to come into a lot of money.

"What D'or won't tell her" Mona and D'orothea argue about their relationship, about Mona's lack of involvement in D'orothea's life, and about their respective relationships with their parents. This leads D'orothea to blurt out that her father works in a Twinkie factory, and Mona to accuse her of thinking Mona can't relate to black people. D'orothea insists they end the conversation, but narration reveals that Mona has no intention of letting it go.

"Michael's visitor" As they smoke some powerful marijuana, Michael listens as Brian rambles on about how things are changing, how he feels like he's being left behind, and how he thinks it would be fun to go cruising for sex together (see "Quotes", Chapter 96). Michael agrees, joking that it might be fun to "break up a couple."

"Three men at the tubs" Driving to the bathhouse, Jon endures the joking comments of a friend who suggests that Jon is trying to avoid his feelings for Michael. At the tubs, Jon searches for a sexual partner, eventually having sex with a man who turns out to be Beauchamp.

"Cruising at The Stud" Michael and Brian have less luck on their cruising expedition, both of them ending up alone and Brian particularly frustrated by his encounter with a woman with a lot of attitude. They decide to go for coffee at an all night coffee shop.



## Chapters 90 through 98 Analysis

Developments in various sorts of intimate relationships define most, if not all, of the action in this section. There is the sexually intimate but emotionally shallow (not to mention somewhat surprising) relationship between Jon and Beauchamp, which is, by the way, another example of unexpected path crossings that take place between the characters. There is also the rapidly deteriorating relationship between Beauchamp and DeDe, shaken by Beauchamp's increasing selfishness and DeDe's increasing desire to know her own mind and live accordingly.

Then there is the awkward friendship that Mary Ann strives to develop with the vulnerable but unstable Norman, who clearly wants the relationship to be something substantially more and whose simultaneous desire and secretiveness makes the relationship increasingly dangerous for both of them. There is also the emotionally volatile relationship between the needy Mona and the curiously secretive D'orothea. Finally, and perhaps most notably and entertainingly, there is the unexpected friendship between Michael and Brian, one of the rare examples in narrative (fiction, theatre, film, television) of an open, non-threatening, relationship between a gay man and a straight man.

There are several notable title references in this section. "And baby makes three," a play on the cliché phrase describing the emergence of a baby into the lives of a young married couple, while "ties that bind" is an ironic use of the phrase that commonly denotes some kind of bond between people. "New York, New York," an obvious reference to the song made famous by Frank Sinatra singing the praises of New York City, while "Three men at the tubs" is a reference to a comic play about gambling popular in the early days of the 20th Century, "Three Men on a Horse" ("tubs" is slang for "bathhouse").



# Chapters 99 through 104

## Chapters 99 through 104 Summary

"She is woman, hear her roar" DeDe, aware that Beauchamp came in at four in the morning and having endured a gossipy phone call from Binky, goes for a walk to think (see "Quotes", Chapter 99), and later calls Jon to tell him she wants to have the baby.

"The doctor is in" Beauchamp calls Jon in the hopes of arranging a noon hour sex date, but Jon brushes him off. Later, at the office of Halcyon Communications, Beauchamp inspects Edgar's office, imagining how he'll redecorate it when he's boss. Still later, Mary Ann confides in Michael about her unease with Norman. Michael suggests they break into his apartment and look around - he knows where Mrs. Madrigal keeps the extra keys. Mary Ann refuses, but keeps wondering.

"Not even a mouse" Narration describes the approach of winter and how Mary Ann excitedly receives an invitation to Mrs. Madrigal's Christmas party. Michael, however, is less enthusiastic, expressing his unhappiness about Christmas (see "Quotes", Chapter 101). Mary Ann, who now calls him Mouse just like Mona does, cheers him up by going with him to buy a Christmas tree.

"Enigma at the Twinkie factory" Mona tracks down the man she believes to be D'orothea's father and is surprised to find that the man who meets her is as white as the sugar dusting his uniform.

"Anna crumbles" Edgar tells Mrs. Madrigal a man named Williams has called with what Edgar is convinced is an attempt to blackmail him about their affair. He assures the increasingly worried Mrs. Madrigal that he's too happy with her and time is too short to give in. Mrs. Madrigal urges him to reconsider, says she's a liar, and tells him Williams is talking about something worse than Edgar thinks.

"The baker's wife" Awkward conversation between Mr. Wilson and Mona reveals that D'orothea hasn't connected with her parents in years. Further conversation reveals that Mona's father left her mother when Mona was a baby, a piece of information that softens Mr. Wilson to the point that he agrees to come for dinner on Christmas Eve.

## Chapters 99 through 104 Analysis

DeDe's decision to have her baby marks the climax (to this point) of transformation from being a protected daughter and manipulated wife to strong-willed, independent woman, a transformation that continues in later books in the series. The climax of her story foreshadows the climax of Mary Ann's similar story taking place in the following sections - again, for more on the relationship between the Mary Ann and DeDe narrative lines see "Characters - Mary Ann" and "DeDe."



Other important elements in this section include evidence in Chapter 100 that Edgar has told Beauchamp about Edgar's health condition and increasing levels of both surprise and mystery in the Mona/D'orothea storyline. There is also the perhaps surprising depth of Michael's dislike of Christmas (again, see "Quotes" p. 211), further hints about Mrs. Madrigal's mysterious past and the connection with Mona that exists in that past, and the increasing sense that Norman Neal Williams is dangerous. This sense, in turn, foreshadows the narrative's climax in Chapters 110 and 111.

All these elements clearly play out the narrative's thematic focus on the nature of human frailty and failing. All the characters in this and the following sections come face to face with intense need and vulnerability and also with both mistakes and the consequences of their actions, in ways they certainly haven't in the narrative to this point and perhaps even in their lives. In other words, this section marks the beginning of the narrative's climactic exploration of its central theme - that people's flaws exist alongside their own greatnesses and those of others, and how people live their lives and relate to others depends on whether they connect more with either the flaws or the greatness. An example of this principle, easily one of the most vivid in the book, is Edgar's choice to face down Williams' blackmail attempt rather than give into it. He acts with greatness out of his celebration of the joy he has found as the result of his relationship with Mrs. Madrigal, a vivid contrast to the seedy neediness of the deeply, perhaps pitifully, flawed Norman Neal Williams.

Chapter title references include "She is woman ...", a paraphrasing of the lyrics of "I Am Woman", a popular, almost notorious, feminist pop music anthem of the era, and "The doctor is in," an ironic use of a cliché phrase denoting the presence and availability of a physician. "Not even a mouse" is a quote from the famous poem "The Night before Christmas" and also contains a play on Michael's nickname, Mouse. "The baker's wife" is the name of both a fairy tale and a Broadway musical, telling the story of a young married couple's struggle to build a new life together in a small community.





# Chapters 105 through 110

## Chapters 105 through 110 Summary

"Old flames" Brian searches for a date for Mrs. Madrigal's party, striking out with both Candi and Cheryl but eventually getting a yes from Connie Bradshaw.

"A lovers' farewell" Jon and Beauchamp have lunch at the restaurant where Brian works and are served by him. Conversation reveals that Jon is uncomfortable about what they're doing to DeDe, eventually telling Beauchamp that DeDe is pregnant.

"Edgar on the brink" Edgar, painfully aware that he's in the final stages of kidney failure, calls Mrs. Madrigal and insists upon seeing her the next day, saying he wants to see her before confronting Mr. Williams.

"Breaking and entering" When Michael calls to invite Mona to Mrs. Madrigal's party, he's surprised to learn that Mona is making dinner for D'orothea and her parents. Mona reveals that she's discovered some strange pills in D'orothea's bedside table which D'orothea refused to identify. Meanwhile Mary Ann, worried about Norman, who has refused all invitations to the party, breaks into his apartment, and looks through the suitcase where he supposedly keeps the vitamins he's supposed to be selling.

"At the Grove" Edgar shows Anna (Mrs. Madrigal) into a forested retreat (The Bohemian Grove) for the well-to-do male citizens of San Francisco. After they make love in front of a fireplace, Edgar asks whether Mrs. Madrigal would have "told him" if Williams (whom they both now seem to know is the same Williams at Barbary Lane) hadn't come along. She tells him it wouldn't have been necessary, and he tells her she's beautiful. He then invites himself to her party, saying he'll come by after he's finished with Williams.

"Art for art's sake" Mary Ann, her mind a "hellish blur of remembered images," goes to a museum (see "Quotes", Chapter 111) for a few hours and then arranges to meet Norman. They walk along a footpath high on a cliff, and Mary Ann reveals that she knows Norman has been photographed having sex with Lexy!

## Chapters 105 through 110 Analysis

Explorations of relationships, desires and frailty all reach their peak in this section, the first of two sections that make up the narrative's climax. DeDe's storyline has already climaxed in her decision to keep her baby. Now the narratives of the other characters reach their climaxes.

Brian's desperation to avoid loneliness leads him to both extreme choices and extreme confrontations (with Candi and Cheryl), which in turn lead him to the climactic realization that his life in San Francisco to this point has been shallow and unhappy and that it's time to make some changes. Jon's awakening conscience leads him to "break up" with



the callous, selfish Beauchamp, a climax of their mini-narrative line. Jon's awakening continues in the next book of the series. Edgar's celebration of joy and of Mrs. Madrigal who brought him to a new awareness of joy, reaches its near death climax, their conversation at the Grove again hinting at the deep dark secret at the core of both Mrs. Madrigal's current life and Norman Neal Williams' blackmail attempt.

Mona's desperation to bring SOMETHING about her relationship with D'orothea to a full, involving life leads her to both the misguided surprise dinner and the discovery of the pills, a discovery that proves the old adage that if you don't want to find something painful, don't go looking where you shouldn't. Their story climaxes in the following section. Finally, Mary Ann's well-meaning desperation to help Norman leads her to an extreme action which in turn leads to her discovery of an extreme truth, which in the following section leads her to what many would say is her most extreme choice of all. Their story begins its climax at the end of Chapter 110 and concludes in Chapter 112.



# Chapters 111 through 115

## Chapters 111 through 115 Summary

"Guess who's coming to dinner?" Mona and D'orothea bicker as they wait for the dinner guests that D'orothea doesn't know are her parents. When they do arrive, Mona is shocked to discover that Mrs. Wilson is also white. An upset D'orothea explains her situation (see "Characters - D'orothea") and begs Mona to assure her that she still loves her. Mona does so, confessing that after she found D'orothea's medication she was convinced D'orothea was dying.

"The confrontation" When Mary Ann confronts the drunken Norman and as he sways on the edge of a cliff, he proudly protests that he's not a "chickenshit child pornographer" but is soon to be a successful private investigator. As he runs away, he slips off the cliff and lands on a cracked ledge. As Mary Ann reaches to help him, he slips away from her and into the water, leaving his clip-on tie in her hands. She races back to the museum and calls for directions on how to get back to Barbary Lane on public transport.

"The party" At Mrs. Madrigal's, Brian, Michael and Connie banter as they wait for Mary Ann. Meanwhile, Mrs. Madrigal hints to Michael that she's expecting someone who hasn't shown up yet. Soon afterwards, Michael is happily surprised to see Mona, who jokes that D'orothea is having "a white Christmas" with her parents.

"Saying goodbye" Mary Ann arrives, apologizing for being late and saying, when asked by Mrs. Madrigal, that she hasn't seen Mr. Williams in several days. Later, Mrs. Madrigal has a happy reunion with Mona - happy, that is, until Mrs. Madrigal tells Mona that the other guest she's expecting won't be coming. "He's already left us." Meanwhile, Edgar slips into a coma as DeDe tells him she's going to make him a grandfather. Edgar says that if it's a girl, he wants her name to be Anna.

"The Golden Gate" On New Year's Day, on a mountaintop where they can see San Francisco's famed Golden Gate Bridge, Mary Ann shows Michael where her final confrontation with Norman took place. She anxiously explains that she didn't call the police about what happened because of something else she found in her search of Norman's apartment - a thick file on Mrs. Madrigal, which she says she burned.

Meanwhile, at Cypress Lawn Cemetery, "a woman in a paisley turban" (Mrs. Madrigal) places a joint on a newly dug grave. "Have fun," she says. "It's Columbian."

## Chapters 111 through 115 Analysis

At the beginning of this section, the narrative contains the most effective and engaging example of a technique employed throughout the narrative, and indeed employed in several narratives. This is the practice of interrupting a scene of high intensity with another scene, triggering an intense desire in the reader to move forward and find out



what happens next. The technique is used with particular effectiveness here, in that the interrupting scene (between D'orothea and Mona) is itself of intense narrative interest.

Meanwhile, the climactic confrontation between Mary Ann and Norman is notable for several reasons. First, there is an intense sense of desperation in the words and actions of both characters, a desperation that seems at times to be at work in the other characters, but suppressed or even denied. Here the sense of emotional energy is quite raw and compellingly narrated. Second, the repeated foreshadowing involving Norman's clip on tie finally pays off in an unexpected, perhaps even darkly comic, way. Finally, there is Mary Ann's (controversial?) choice to not tell the police about Norman's death. An important point to note here is that Mary Ann clearly chooses Mrs. Madrigal over legal concerns. In other words, her actions indicate, in no uncertain terms, that her loyalty now lies with her so-called "family of choice" ... a powerfully vivid evocation of one of the narrative's central themes. For further consideration of this aspect of the narrative, see "Topics for Discussion - Do you agree with ..."

The intensity of the confrontation between Mary Ann and Williams is very effectively juxtaposed to the delicacy of the goings on at Mrs. Madrigal's party - the friendship between Michael and Brian, Mrs. Madrigal's reunion with Mona and gentleness with Michael, and above all the tenderness of her comments about the missing guest (who is clearly Edgar). This tenderness carries on into the scene between Edgar and DeDe, in which DeDe's newfound sense of self and will is clear and unequivocal in spite of the gentleness and mutual vulnerability of the context in which it takes place.

Finally, there are a couple of chapter title points to make. "Guess who's coming to dinner?" is the name of a then-revolutionary film about the marriage between a black man and a white woman. "The Golden Gate" is, as mentioned, a reference to San Francisco's famous bridge - but it also can be seen as referring to Mary Ann's entering "the golden gate" of devotion to her family of choice, or to Mrs. Madrigal's gentle gift to Edgar upon his passing through "the golden gate" leading to the world of the spirit. The fact that this chapter takes place on New Year's Day, a time of new beginnings, reinforces the idea that either or both of these meanings is implied by the chapter's title.



# Characters

## Mary Ann Singleton

Of the many central characters in this book's complicated narrative, Mary Ann is perhaps the central character. On a purely technical level, this idea is supported by the fact that the narrative begins and ends with her, focuses on her at greater length, and returns to her more often than any other character. On another level, the idea is supported by the fact that Mary Ann undergoes a journey of transformation greater than that of any of the other characters, except perhaps DeDe (see below). Also, the steps along that journey of transformation are both more numerous and more dramatic than the other characters.

The nature of that journey is essentially that of every central character in literature - from inexperience to knowledge, from ignorance to awareness, from innocence to worldliness. It's important to note, however, that right from the beginning when she tells her worried mother that she's staying in San Francisco, Mary Ann exhibits a powerful streak of self-interest. At times it veers into self-pity (i.e., when she contemplates going back to Cleveland), but at other times it extends to include the well being of people about whom she cares (i.e., when she burns Williams' file on Mrs. Madrigal). For further consideration of this aspect of Mary Ann see "Topics for discussion - Do you agree with ...").

In the series of books that follows this one, in which the further lives of the characters introduced here are chronicled, Mary Ann's self-interest increases to the point that she begins to become selfish. What makes her a fascinating, and ultimately very human, character is that in all the books, her self-interest exists alongside genuine compassion and vulnerability.

## Mrs. Madrigal

The mysterious Anna Madrigal plays a powerfully catalytic role in the lives of almost all the other major characters, albeit to varying degrees. She, like Mary Ann, is a fascinating combination of apparently opposite traits. She has many secrets, but encourages those around her to be open with themselves and with others. She has great compassion and empathy, but has no qualms about manipulating people to get what she wants (ie her manipulating Mona into Barbary Lane). She knowingly has an affair with a married man but worries about the effect that an attempt at blackmail directed at that man will have on his wife. In short, she (like Mary Ann, and most of the other central characters) is a complex, multi-faceted human being whose live and perspective is defined not by sharp lines of behavior but rather by blurred shades of morality thrown into relief by brightly colored passion. In later books, the depth and nature of her secrets are revealed to surprising, sometimes hilarious, often touching effect.



## Michael Tolliver

It's perhaps surprising that in a novel about 1970's San Francisco (see "Objects/Places" and "Style - Setting"), Michael is the only openly gay male character (open, that is, to everyone but his parents). Given that Michael is emotional, playful, witty, lonely, somewhat obsessed with sex, and a good friend to more women than men, it could be argued that he is something of a stereotype. What moves him beyond that status is the depth of his compassion and vulnerability, his willingness to be friends with the straight Brian, and perhaps most importantly, his awareness of/longing for something beyond and beneath the superficiality of his existence. His story in this book is the first step of a journey towards a fuller, wiser sense of self and the world that develops through the rest of the books, a development that coincides with his eventually becoming the central character of the series, displacing Mary Ann.

## Mona Ramsey

The flighty, neurotic Mona is the first true friend Mary Ann makes in San Francisco. She is, perhaps, the most vulnerable of all the characters in the book, in that the others at least seem to have some idea of what they want from, and in, their lives. Mona, it seems, drifts from job to job, drug to drug, philosophy to philosophy, all the while in search of something that would give her life a sense of meaning. It's interesting to note, however, that when she encounters a sense of what that meaning might be (such as when Mrs. Madrigal suggests that her relationship with Michael means more than she thinks), she avoids dealing with it. The same is true of her relationship with D'orothea - Mona wants more, but when more presents itself, she backs away. Again, she is a complicated and very true-to-life character and again becomes more and more connected to a sense of self, albeit in some very surprising ways, later in the series.

## Edgar Halcyon

Conservative businessman Edgar Halcyon is, like everyone who encounters her, transformed by Anna Madrigal. His transformation is perhaps more significant than others whom Mrs. Madrigal encounters, in that she awakens in him a sense of freedom, of passion, of COM-passion, and joy it seems he hasn't felt in years, perhaps ever. This is not to say that he never felt compassion - it's evident, for example, that he cares deeply for his daughter DeDe but is severely limited in terms of how he expresses it. Mrs. Madrigal opens him up to new ways of expressing himself, and he dies with what seems to be a much greater sense of peace and happiness than he ever had while he was alive.

## Beauchamp Day

Beauchamp (pronounced BEECH-um) is Edgar's arrogant son-in-law, a self-centered executive-by-marriage in Edgar's firm and easily the most manipulative character in the



book. Selfish, a liar, self-indulgent and even cruel at times, he is the only character who comes across as being portrayed on only one level - not complex, not multi-faceted, just plain nasty.

## DeDe Day

DeDe is Edgar Halcyon's coddled daughter and Beauchamp Day's neglected wife. Her transformation (from giddy, shallow, vulnerable debutante into a determined, independent, strong woman) is perhaps as significant as Mary Ann's, and in fact travels much the same territory from naivety to a greater worldliness. But because she (DeDe) has what amounts to less page time, that transformation can perhaps best be described as a sub-plot mirroring and illuminating the similar journey of the central character.

## Brian Hawkins

The rampantly heterosexual Brian at first is portrayed as a shallow woman chaser, interested only in good times and good sex. As the narrative progresses, however, he is revealed to have both a conscience and a soul, a disillusioned sense of justice that he avoids dealing with through the reckless pursuit of pleasure. This pursuit also masks a deeper longing for connection with another human being, making Brian similar in many ways to Michael, with whom he develops what at first seems to be an unlikely friendship. They both seem caught up in the giddy superficiality apparently celebrated by society at that time and in that place, and both (later in the series of books) find themselves willing and able to move past that superficiality and into a deeper, still vulnerable but nonetheless wiser, humanity.

## Connie Bradshaw

Mary Ann's friend from high school, now a pleasure-seeking stewardess, provides Mary Ann's first home and introduction to the life and philosophy of '70's San Francisco. She provides a clear and vivid example to Mary Ann of what she doesn't want her life to be.

## Frannie Halcyon

Frannie is Edgar's alcoholic, socially conscious wife. In her self-pity and despair, she is perhaps what Edgar would be if he didn't have a lingering awareness of a long-suppressed desire for a fuller life, or what DeDe would become if she didn't have a developing sense of self and desire to be something other than shallow.

## Jon Fielding

The devastatingly attractive Jon becomes Michael's boyfriend, or at least starts to. He has too much difficulty getting past Michael's carefree aimlessness and his own concern





about his professional reputation to fully engage in an open, emotionally vulnerable relationship. Later in the series, however, he comes around, eventually moves in with Michael, and still later, becomes the first main character to die of AIDS.

## **D'orothea Wilson**

D'orothea is perhaps the most overtly physical manifestation of one of the book's central themes - the way a person's true identity is concealed beneath layers of secrets. In D'orothea's case, her beauty truly is only skin deep, since she disguises both her true physical and spiritual nature beneath a medicated darkening of her pigment. Her decision to resume her natural skin tone can perhaps be seen as a metaphoric representation of the transformations being experienced by most of the central characters - specifically, the embracing of their true selves.

## **Norman Neal Williams**

It would be easy to dismiss, perhaps even hate this character. Manipulative, devious, a child pornographer and, above all, in pursuit of the beloved Mrs. Madrigal, Williams could easily be perceived as simply a pool of darkness in the midst of a troubled but generally sunny and life affirming narrative perspective. The compassionate reader, however, will sense in him the same things that Mary Ann does - a loneliness, a desperation, and a need for affection all too real, all too common to the other characters, and ultimately all too human. Williams, it could be argued, is on the same search for love and connection that the other characters are. It's just that he resorts, for whatever reason, to more corruptive (and corrupted) ways of getting them.

## **Booter, Ruby, Peter, Vincent, Binky, Lionel, Lexy, Carson Ca**

These characters appear briefly at various points in the narrative and are given greater or lesser degrees of page time. Each is vividly portrayed, and each is very different, ranging in character, age and attitude from the elderly, uptight conservative Booter to the middle-aged and free-spirited Candy to the precocious child Lexy. All these characters, however, are united by a central purpose - to trigger realization and change in the lives and experiences of the central characters.





# Objects/Places

## San Francisco

This hilly, architecturally beautiful California city has for decades been a symbol of freedom, rebellion, and celebration. It was never more so than in the 1970's, the time at which the narrative is set (see "Style - Setting").

## 28 Barbary Lane

This rambling old house, broken up into several apartments, is home to most of the narrative's central characters - Mary Ann, Mona, Michael, Brian, and Mrs. Madrigal. As described in narration and as viewed by the characters, it is an oasis of compassion, safety and friendship in the desert of the harsh real world.

## Halcyon Communications

The advertising business run by Edgar Halcyon is a hub of activity in the real-world lives of several of the characters - Edgar, Beauchamp, Mary Ann, Mona (early in the narrative) and D'orothea (later in the narrative). It can perhaps be seen as representing the cold, money-and-success obsessed real world that all these characters (and several others in the book) are desperate to either survive or escape.

## Mary Ann's Scarf

During his weekend affair with Mary Ann, Beauchamp steals her scarf and then hides it in the car for DeDe to find. Why he does this is never made entirely clear; perhaps he's simply trying to upset his wife as he's that sort of guy. In any case, the scarf is a catalyst for the deepening deterioration of Beauchamp and DeDe's marriage and, in a strange way, also a catalyst for a mutual respect between DeDe and Mary Ann that, later in the series of books, develops into a powerful alliance and a strong friendship.

## Bath-houses

For the past several decades, gay men have gone to steam-baths and/or athletic clubs to find other men with whom to have sex. In fact, several such businesses make no pretense of being anything other than a place where people can have anonymous, no-strings-attached sex. The 70's were, perhaps, the era in which bath-house sex was most popular.



## The Come Clean Laundromat

This is where Connie and Brian meet and agree to have sex. As discussed in "Chapters 22 through 30, Analysis," the name has several layers of meaning.

## The Parrots

The parrots observed by DeDe in Chapter 27 (see "Quotes", p. 60) are a real life phenomenon in San Francisco. "Once upon a time they had belonged to human beings. Then, somehow, they had fled their separate cages to band together in this raucous platoon of freedom fighters ... their screeching ... was regarded by many locals as a hymn to the liberated soul." For further consideration of the metaphoric value of the parrots, see "Topics for Discussion - In what way do the parrots ..."

## The Castro

The gay population of San Francisco is, in the novel and in reality, centered around this community within the community. Filled with gay-oriented businesses, clubs and shops, the Castro's sense of freedom and fun is an important element in the lives of several of the characters in the book.

## Atlantis

The ancient city/continent of Atlantis was, according to legend, populous, culturally and socially advanced, and arrogant. Also according to legend, an act of nature (an earthquake or volcanic eruption) caused it to sink into the sea without a trace. Mrs. Madrigal's reference to Atlantis (see "Chapter 73") is just one of a vast number of references throughout history and literature to the mysterious, mythic, magical character of the famous continent and its destruction.

## Norman's tie

Throughout the narrative, Norman Neal Williams wears a pre-tied necktie, held to his collar by a plastic clip. Such ties are often perceived as being false, a perception that suggests Norman's tie is a metaphoric representation of the falseness of the image he presents to the world. The fact that he dies at least partly as the result of that falseness (his tie comes off in Mary Ann's hand as he's falling from a cliff) develops the metaphor further, suggesting that his death is, on some level, the result of his falseness.



# Themes

## Sexual Freedom

The theme of sexual freedom manifests from the novel's very early stages (Chapter 2, with Connie's reference to the city loosening people up) to its very last (the light banter between Connie, Brian and Michael at Mrs. Madrigal's party in Chapter 113 - interesting, isn't it, that Connie is involved in both). It is a thematic manifestation of one of the central philosophic principles of the novel's setting in time - anything goes, when it comes to breaking down the boundaries of what has been, for decades, a repressive society.

The theme of sexual freedom plays out in the lives and experiences of every central character, relationship, and narrative line - all the characters, to one degree or another, experience it, are challenged by it, are troubled by it, or some combination of the above. In many of the characters (Brian, Mona, Michael, even Connie), there is the sense that freedom comes with a price - a loss of the emotional intimacy that, deep down, they crave. In others (Edgar, DeDe), sexual freedom is a catalyst for personal empowerment and self-discovery, while in still others (Beauchamp, Jon, Mary Ann) free sexuality is a kind of dirty secret. For the almost mystically enlightened Mrs. Madrigal, sex seems almost like an opportunity to connect intimately not only with other people, but with the spirit at work in the world, though she's far too liberal to limit that spirit to the name "God". In fact, in Mrs. Madrigal this theme unites with the novel's second major theme - the individual's need for emotional and spiritual freedom.

## Emotional Freedom

For some of the characters (Mrs. Madrigal, Edgar, DeDe) sexual freedom is, at least for a while, a catalyst for emotional freedom. For Edgar and DeDe in particular, once they realize they have freedom to express themselves through a sexual relationship, they realize they have the freedom to express themselves period. But for many others (Michael, Mona, Brian, D'orothea, Jon) sexual freedom is a placebo that fails to address their real need for emotional freedom. All these characters long for a sense of meaning and significance not only in their sexual relationships and their sexual partners, but in their lives as a whole.

This is also true of Mary Ann (and, to an extent, Norman Neal Williams), but in her case she doesn't channel her longing into the temporary fulfillment of frequent, anonymous orgasms. Right from the beginning, when she declares her decision to stay in San Francisco, her longing for emotional freedom is expressed in other ways - declaring independence from her past life, learning to speak her mind, learning to act on her desires (even when they take her in the wrong direction, as is the case with her affair with Beauchamp). It's interesting to note here that Mary Ann rarely, if ever, chastises herself for being with a married man. She worries about it; she waits anxiously for him to



call; she becomes angry when he doesn't, but she doesn't second guess her decision and she doesn't doubt herself. She takes responsibility for what she's done and for her reaction to its aftermath and goes on with her life. This is real emotional freedom and maturity, which many of the characters (Mrs. Madrigal and, by the end of the narrative, Edgar both excepted) don't quite come around to, at least, not in this first book of the series.

## The Nature of Family

There are examinations and/or explorations of several biological families in the narrative. These include the Halcyon/Days (Edgar, loving to his daughter and exasperated with his wife, disillusioned Frannie, lonely and confused DeDe, manipulative waster Beauchamp), the Singletons (determined Mary Ann and her well meaning but cloying mother), the Ramseys (Mona and her controlling mother), and the Tollivers (Michael and his oblivious, homophobic parents.) All are essentially dysfunctional, riddled with problems that can all essentially be traced to a lack of genuine communication and open affection. By clear contrast, and as the narrative vividly points out, the non-biological family at Barbary Lane ("the family of choice", as it's called in some circles) is portrayed as being more loving, more compassionate, more accepting, and above all more like home. This is expressed overtly in the relationship between Mrs. Madrigal and Mona and more subtly in the relationships not only between Mrs. Madrigal and her tenants but between the tenants and each other. It also plays out in the portrayal of 28 Barbary Lane (see "Objects/Places") and in the frequent references, mostly by Mrs. Madrigal, to "home" and "family." The book seems to be taking the thematic stand that in a world where everyone, at one time or another in their lives, feels lonely and unhappily "different," the "family of choice" can be, and probably is, more welcoming and more nurturing of individuality than the biological family. For further consideration of this question see "Topics for Discussion - Do you have what you would describe as ..."

## Human Frailty

For the most part, all the characters in the book are portrayed with an open-ness to and empathetic respect for, their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In both the book's subject matter and its thematic perspective, while the frailties and failings of a human being may cause pain to themselves or others, s/he is no less worthy of care and compassion.

All the characters make choices and/or have attitudes that readers may well be inclined to judge negatively, but with a few notable exceptions (Beauchamp being the main one) these choices and attitudes are all portrayed as originating with the simple, honest desire to connect truthfully with another human being. Even Mary Ann's decision to not tell the police about Norman's death, which the vast majority of readers would probably say is morally wrong, comes about because she feels so strongly about Mrs. Madrigal. She does the wrong thing, but for the right reasons. D'orothea, in pretending to be someone she's not and making a lot of money as a result, seems to be doing the wrong



thing for the wrong reasons, but what reader can't identify with her evident, and sympathetically portrayed, desire to be a success? DeDe has an affair and gets pregnant, but in a personal declaration of independence, decides to take responsibility for both her actions and for the life she is bringing into the world ... the right thing for the right reasons under perhaps the wrong circumstances.

The list of examples could go on and on, but ultimately the point is this. As it celebrates sexual freedom, as it hints at the possibility of emotional freedom, and as it reveals the value (necessity?) of the chosen family, the novel looks at all its themes, all its characters and all their actions (again, except Beauchamp) with the unblinking, uncompromising, non-judgmental gaze of wisdom, compassion, and unconditional love.



# Style

## Point of View

For the most part, the story is narrated from the third person subjective point of view. The third person narrator, while describing events in a relatively objective manner, offers selective insight into the mind, perceptions and experiences of the character who is the focus of a particular chapter and whose life the events are affecting. For example, the first six chapters are narrated from the point of view of Mary Ann, whose opinions and reactions and thoughts are the only ones described. There is little or no insight into Connie, an otherwise important character in this section. Likewise, when DeDe (for example) is the central character in a chapter, even if she's relating to Mary Ann or Beauchamp, it's her thoughts and reactions portrayed, not theirs. It also happens, on occasion, that a chapter shifts point of view - the first part of a chapter can, for example, focus on Brian and his perspective, then on Mona and hers.

In terms of the overall point of view, the story's central perspective, there is a clear sense of a narrative compassion, at times even tenderness, towards all its main characters (with the exception of Beauchamp, who is portrayed with no redeeming qualities whatsoever). There is a definite link between point of view and thematic content in that the novel's thematic focus on human frailty is both defined and illuminated by the sympathy, empathy, warmth and humor with which its events and their effect on the characters are described.

## Setting

There are two key components of the book's setting - time (the mid-1970's) and place (San Francisco). In terms of the former, the '70's were a period of expanding freedoms, of relaxation of once-strict moral and sexual codes, and above all of behavioral revolution. Groups whose behavior and power had been restricted for decades (women, blacks and other non-Caucasians, gays and lesbians, the young) were, as the result of the social unrest of the 1960's, experimenting with and expanding the boundaries of what they could do, what they wanted to do, and how they felt about it all. Nowhere in America, and perhaps even the world, was this sense of experimentation more widespread and more celebrated than in San Francisco, which for decades and for whatever reason became a beacon for anyone and everyone seeking freedom from whatever they believed oppressed them.

What TALES OF THE CITY does, however, is look beyond the superficial celebration allowed by the setting of time and place into the beginnings of a deeper concern, a deeper wondering about the meaning beneath the surface expressions of sensuality and joy. Even while it's being celebrated, the atmosphere of liberty inherent in the book's setting is a catalyst for the initial stages of a wondering about and a longing for something that might actually last. These wonderings and longings are alive, albeit to



varying degrees, in the characters of the book, propelling them through not only this particular narrative but the several narratives that follow, which interestingly enough portray the setting of the story changing, at least in some ways, in the same way as the characters who live there.

## Language and Meaning

The first thing to note about language is how the story is told almost entirely through dialogue. There is relatively little prose narrative, with events, characters and relationships being portrayed more by what people say to one another and how they say it than by narration describing it. This gives the narrative a sense of intimacy and immediacy, a sense of lives being lived rather than discussed by an author. The second thing to note is how the writing vividly, thoroughly, and effectively evokes the time and place in which the narrative is set. Anyone who lived through and/or experienced the 1970's, even in places other than San Francisco, will recognize (probably with some embarrassment) the attitudes and trends of the era. The third thing to note is that while all these other things are going on, language is also defining a certain sense of atmospheric mystery, or mysterious atmosphere. Again, this emerges almost entirely through dialogue, through what people DON'T say as much as what they do say. Particularly vivid examples of this technique can be found in conversations involving Mrs. Madrigal - specifically, her conversations with Mona (in Chapters 33 and 55) in which dialogue hints that Mona knows something about Mrs. Madrigal that Mrs. Madrigal keeps secret from most people. This is also true of Mrs. Madrigal's conversation with Edgar (Chapter 103), where the meaning behind her statement that Williams is talking about something worse than what Edgar thinks is never revealed. This sense of mystery, leaving the reader hanging and hooking him/her ever deeper into the narrative, also relates to the narrative's structure.

## Structure

On one level, the book's narrative structure is essentially linear, moving in a straightforward progression of time and event from start to finish. While there isn't really a single, individualized line of plot connecting all the chapters, there is a sense of narrative momentum that perhaps relates more to character than to story - specifically, the transformation of Mary Ann and some of the other characters from babes in the woods to more seasoned veterans of the hunt for identity and security.

Within that overall structure, several chapters narrate events taking place at the same time but at different locations involving different people. This creates a sense of how individual lives within a community diverge and intersect, of momentous events occurring alongside the commonplace, and of layers of circumstances all connected to a larger, perhaps even universal (certainly thematic) process of change and transformation.



On another level, the book is structured like a mystery novel, with chapters often ending with what is called a cliffhanger, a moment of high intensity and/or of dramatic choice that leaves the reader eager to learn what is going to happen next. An important point to note here is that the book was originally published as a series of columns in a San Francisco newspaper. This explains why the chapters are so short and so numerous and why there are so many cliffhanger endings - the author clearly wanted his readers to be hooked, like viewers become hooked on soap operas or other television dramas, and therefore structured his work to maximize the potential for hooking.





## Quotes

"Mary Ann Singleton ... came to the city alone for an eight day vacation. On the fifth night, she drank three Irish coffees at the Buena Vista ... and decided to phone her mother in Cleveland." Chapter 1.

"Connie's apartment was a potpourri of plastic Tiffany lamps and ankle deep shag carpeting, needlepoint Snoopy pictures and 'Hang in There, Baby' kitten posters ...macramé plant hangers and - please no, thought Mary Ann - a Pet Rock". Chapter 2.

"Mary Ann: Do you have any objection to pets? ... Mrs. Madrigal: Dear, I have no objection to anything." Chapter 4.

"Mona: I used to have curtains ... but ... like ... who am I hiding my body from? ...I mean ... you know ... nobody's really hiding anything from the Cosmos. Beneath the rays of the White Healing Light, we are all ... like ... capital N Naked. Who gives a shit about the little n?" Chapter 8

"For all the lies she required, Ruby Miller might as well have been Edgar's mistress." Chapter 11.

"Brian: We've all got secrets in this town. You just have to dig a little deeper for them." Chapter 15

"Edgar: Why did you let me go on like that? Mrs. Madrigal: I wanted you to remember who you were then. You don't seem too happy with who you are now." Chapter 19

"Mrs. Madrigal: Mona ... lots of things are more binding than sex. They last longer, too." Chapter 24

"She looked up from an article on Cher and peered at [Brian] through cobalt-blue contacts. Chewing the cud of her Care-free sugarless, she sniffed out the new bull had pawed his way into her pasture." Chapter 25

"In [DeDe's] opinion, the parrots were annoyingly arrogant. You could buy the most beautiful one in town ... but that wouldn't make it love you. You could feed it, care for it, and exclaim over its loveliness, but there was nothing to guarantee that it would stay home with you. There had to be a lesson there somewhere." Chapter 27

"Michael: When I moved here three years ago, I had never seen so many faggots in my whole goddamned life! I didn't know there were that many faggots in the world! Jesus! I thought all I had to do was go to a party and pick somebody out. Everybody wants a lover, right ... I thought I'd be snapped up in six months. At the very most!" Chapter 32-1

"More and more it seemed that Mona's REAL mother was a woman so in tune with creation that even her marijuana plants had names." Chapter 32-2



"Mary Ann: Michael, there's no stability here. Everything's too easy. Nobody sticks with anybody or anything, because there's always something just a little better waiting around the corner." Chapter 44

"Mrs. Madrigal: Ladies of the evening consider [cut flowers] to be a sign of impending death. Beauty cut down in its prime and all that." Chapter 45.

"That's what we're here for ... battered wives, gay teenagers, senior citizens with questions about social security, child abusers, rape victims, minorities with housing problems ...' [Vincent] rattled off the list like a Howard Johnson's employee reciting the twenty eight flavors." Chapter 46

"You're hot, [Michael] told himself. Remember that ... and hold your head up later when your parents call from Orlando and wonder if you've met any 'nice girls' ... when the beautiful and aloof Dr. Jon Fielding furrows his Byronesque brow and declines to step out of his white porcelain closet." Chapter 52

"Mona: Nobody's happy. What's happy? Happiness is over when the lights come on." Chapter 53

"[The cat] ... was beautiful, independent and loved. He belonged to no-one in particular ... but he moved freely through a wide circle of benefactors and friends. Why couldn't she do that?" Chapter 60

"What's next, [Mary Ann] wondered. What will come along to take the place of free clinics and crisis switchboards and alternative newspapers and macrobiotic everything?" Chapter 75

"Riding the elevator to the penthouse, [DeDe] felt almost noble ... she had sacrificed something, bitten the bullet ... for the sake of her marriage, for the sake of the Halcyon family name." Chapter 90

"[Brian] laughed out loud at himself. Either he was a masochist or God was a sadist." Chapter 92

"Brian: There must be some place in this fucking city where they've got straight chicks and gay guys." Chapter 96

"All her life, [DeDe] had done as she was told. She had moved, without so much as a skipped heartbeat, from the benevolent autocracy of Edgar Halcyon to the spineless tyranny of Beauchamp Day ... she had never done anything for herself." Chapter 99

"Michael: It's a conspiracy ... to make single people feel lonely ... I get so sick of the We People ... they never say I ... they wallow in the first person plural because they remember how shitty it was to be a first person singular." Chapter 101



"Michael: It's a conspiracy ... to make single people feel lonely ... I get so sick of the We People ... they never say I ... they wallow in the first person plural because they remember how shitty it was to be a first person singular." Chapter 101



## Topics for Discussion

In consideration of the analysis for Chapters 22-30, what other "mini-stories" or sub-plots within the larger narrative lines in the book can you define?

In what way do the parrots (see "Chapter 27", "Objects/Places" and "Quotes - p. 60) represent the various characters in the narrative?

Consider the various chapter titles defined as having multiple layers of meaning. What relationship can you see between the titles, the songs/musicals/sayings they're based on, and the events in the chapters headed by those titles?

Do you have what you would describe as "a family of choice"? What common characteristics and/or interests bring and keep you together? What are the differences of feeling and relationship between this family and your biological family?

As Norman Neal Williams points out, "Anna Madrigal" is an anagram. Later books not only reveal what the name is an anagram for, but the reason for both the original phrase and the anagram. In other words, rearranging the letters of Mrs. Madrigal's name reveals the truth of her identity. Spend some time playing with those letters and see if you can figure out the truth. A hint: the anagram involves gender.

Do you agree with Mary Ann's choice to not inform the police about Norman's death in order to protect Mrs. Madrigal? Why or why not? What do you think you would do if you were in a similar situation - that is, having to choose between obeying the law and protecting a loved one from potential harm?

Have you ever found yourself in a place or a situation that felt more like home than home? What are your memories of that circumstance? What specifically felt so welcoming? How did your relationship with your other "home" change?