

Toning the Sweep Study Guide

Toning the Sweep by Angela Johnson (writer)

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Plot Summary

Emily is a young African American girl who lives with her parents, her mother Diane and her father, in Cleveland, Ohio. From the time she was born, Emily has spent her summers in Little Rock, California, living at her grandmother Ola's house in the California desert. Diane spends some or all of the summer with Emily at Ola's.

When Emily is about fourteen years old, her grandmother Ola is diagnosed with cancer. Ola decides against aggressive therapy and decides that she will die gracefully and without most medical care—a decision that leaves Diane exasperated and sad. Emily and Diane travel to Ola's house where they spend about two weeks packing up, preparing to move Ola to Cleveland, Ohio, where she will spend the rest of her life. Ola's house has many belongings and almost all of these are boxed up and given to friends and neighbors, or sent to goodwill.

The novel's principal timeline concerns itself with these two weeks of packing. During this time, Ola visits often with Martha Jackson, an older woman who has provided foster care to wards of the State of California for dozens of years. One of Martha's foster children is David Two Starr, a sixteen-year-old American Indian. David has been a foster child at Martha's for at least ten years. Emily and David are close friends and spend a lot of time together. David often encourages Emily to find out about her family history. While the three generations of women pack together, they share many stories.

The most significant story discussed is the death of Charles Lundon Werren, Ola's husband and Diane's father. Charles and Ola had lived in Alabama until 1964. That year, Charles finally had saved enough money to purchase a brand new luxury automobile. Shortly after purchasing the car, Charles was murdered and the car was vandalized, apparently as an act of racial hatred. A few days later Ola and fourteen-year-old Diane departed Alabama and moved to California, taking with them only the automobile and a few boxes of belongings. Ola had abandoned her house and everything in it. Later, Diane had grown up, got married, and moved away from the desert that she never really liked. Ola had remained there ever since. Much of Emily's time is spent filming and documenting Ola's life and home in the desert with a video camera borrowed from Martha. As the novel concludes, the three generations of women prepare themselves to leave the California desert, probably forever.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary

Emily, the narrator and principle protagonist of the novel, is a fourteen-year-old African American girl who lives with her mother, Diane, and father in Cleveland, Ohio. She recently has learned that her maternal grandmother, Ola, has been diagnosed with cancer. She writes her grandmother a letter, mentioning that at her school they have been saying the Pledge of Allegiance to a blank wall because the flag is at the cleaner's. Ola writes back and invites Emily to visit her in the desert.

In Chapter Two, Emily relates how her mother Diane and her grandmother Ola had left Alabama in 1964 right after Emily's grandfather's funeral. Emily's mother tells her various family stories as they travel from Cleveland, Ohio, to Little Rock, California, by airplane. Emily imagines her mother at fourteen or the same age that Emily now is. They both have long legs and big feet. Emily notices her mother praying, and this surprises her because the family is not religious: Ola is semi-atheist and Emily has never given it much thought.

In Chapter Three, Ola picks Emily and Diane up from the airport in Los Angeles. Ola drives a 1964 Buick that remains in excellent shape. Ola, in her mid-60s, has copious grey hair that she wears in dreadlocks. She wears a scarf over her head and likes to drive fast. Diane and Emily are a little nervous about Ola's driving. They drive into the desert. Diane finds the desert uncomfortable and does not like it. Ola and Emily find the desert pleasant, embracing, and beautiful. Emily recalls how Ola had visited Cleveland only once in fourteen years. However, Ola has traveled a lot, having visited Jamaica, Africa, India, and Greece. Diane asks if Ola has started packing yet.

Chapters 1 - 3 Analysis

The initial chapters introduce all three of the principle characters of the novel, including Emily, the narrator, Diane, her mother, and Ola, Diane's mother and Emily's grandmother. These three African American women form the core narrative foci of family and legacy. The family's story is related throughout the rest of the novel; Diane (and to a lesser extent Ola) struggle to come to terms with the death of Ola's husband in 1964). The novel's principle timeline is set in the early 1990s; the principle setting for the novel is the Mojave Desert, centered on the tiny town of Little Rock, California. Ola has lived there since 1964. Ola and Emily love the desert but, for reasons that are never fully explained in the novel, Diane finds it forbidding. The novel's agitating force is Ola's illness—cancer. Her cancer is treatable but probably will prove fatal over the next few years. For this reason, Ola has decided to move out of her house and go live with Diane's family in Cleveland. At this point in the novel, Diane expects Ola will take courses of chemotherapy to combat the cancer. The reason Diane and Emily have come out is to help Ola clean out her house, move everything out of it, and get it ready

to rent out. They will then accompany Ola on the trip back to Cleveland. The Buick is a powerful symbol that runs throughout the novel.



Chapters 4 - 6

Chapters 4 - 6 Summary

Diane and Emily help Ola pack. Ola plans to give almost everything away but she wants to go through it first so that old and worn things can be discarded first. As they work, Ola talks about Martha Jackson, her close friend. Martha has a video camera and has spent many hours taping various things. Ola hopes that Martha will make some videotapes for her, so she can watch them later and remember her friends. Emily calls Martha and asks.

In Chapter 5, Martha brings the video camera to Ola's house. Instead of using it herself, she teaches Emily how to use it and then leaves the camera and several blank tapes. Emily starts by doing a video interview with Martha, right there in the front yard. Martha recalls how she first met Ola in 1964—after criticizing the choice of yellow for a house, Martha then joined Ola in painting. They have been close friends ever since. Martha then visits with Ola and leaves, mentioning to Emily that David Two Starr, her foster son, is excited to visit with Emily again.

In Chapter 6, David calls on Emily at night, waking her up by whistling outside her window. He comes in while she dresses and then they go for a motorcycle ride through the desert. David drives to an old abandoned house and notes that it is where Ola had found him (after almost running him down in her speeding automobile) and his siblings when he was four years old, abandoned and hungry. Ola had taken him to Martha. Emily tries to interview David but he is quite shy in front of the camera. Emily realizes that in reality, she knows very little about her grandmother's life. After a long time, the two return to their respective homes. In the morning, Diane talks about raising Emily and how she had always felt unprepared as a mother.

Chapters 4 - 6 Analysis

These chapters transition the novel from the introductory travel passages into the desert portion which consumes the remainder of the narrative. David Two Starr and Martha Jackson, two minor characters, are introduced. Martha is probably African America, though her race is not specified; David is an American Indian whose tribe originates, apparently, in Arizona. Martha is a foster parent (she apparently is unmarried) and has raised David for twelve years. David recalls how after his father vanished Ola had found him and his siblings and taken them to Martha. David has lived with Martha ever since. David and Emily have been summer-time friends since they can remember; their relationship is that of brother-and-sister, for the most part. There does not appear to be any romantic inclination between them. Throughout the novel, David shows a strong predilection for owning new and high-end things, including motorcycles, computers, and so forth. His income must be significant but the source of it is not described.



Chapters 7 - 10

Chapters 7 - 10 Summary

Ola tells Emily about moving from Alabama to California. In Alabama, she lived near her own mother and knew everyone in the area. California was foreign, a "safer planet, but another planet" (p. 33). She talks about the death of her husband and the negative impact it had on her and, especially, on Diane. Later, Emily looks through old black and white photographs of her grandfather and remembers the stories she has heard—how he had saved for years to have enough money to buy the convertible Buick that Ola still drives. How he had loved the car only a few days before he was murdered and the car was vandalized by having the words "uppity nigger" (p. 35) painted on it. Diane has never managed to move beyond the hate crime. Ola had been two months pregnant at the time but had miscarried. Later, Emily video tapes her grandmother.

In Chapter 8, Emily sleeps in. When she awakens she discovers the house is full of Ola's friends—Martha and four women that Emily collectively calls the 'aunts'—the Title sisters. The six women have been close friends for decades. Emily listens to them tell old stories and laugh. The aunts' youngest sister had died young; Emily believes they still mourn her passing.

In Chapter 9 Emily thinks about the desert—dry, hot, and big. Emily and Ola pack and talk about different hair styles. Emily remembers looking through clothing and hats at Ola's house years ago, playing dress up. Later, Ola confides in Emily that she doesn't want her hair to fall out and therefore will not take a course of chemotherapy. Diane is glad that Ola can confide in Emily—Ola and Diane do not have the same closeness.

In Chapter 10, Diane talks about bringing Emily to visit Ola during the summers, year after year. Emily always loved Ola's house and the desert and when the summer ended and she had to go home she always cried and cried. Eventually, Diane stopped planning the departure with Emily and informed her only when it was time to leave. Diane is glad that Emily loves the desert, but Diane feels differently. She finds the desert to be full of loss and tragedy and associates it with the death of her father.

Chapters 7 - 10 Analysis

These chapters develop the characters of Emily, Diane, and Ola, and establish the family legacy of grief over the death of Emily's grandfather—and also the family legacy of strength and overcoming adversity. They also introduce one of the novel's principle themes—that of the desert as home. Ola and Emily love the desert and find it peaceful and inviting. The lack of clutter, the wide open spaces, and the heat all make them feel safe and cared for. Diane, on the other hand, finds the desert to be empty of empathy and associates it with the emotional loss caused by the death of her father.



The murder of Charles Werren clearly is a hate crime, motivated by racial animosity in 1964 Alabama. Though the police 'investigated' no murderers were ever found. Ola left Alabama the same day as her husband's funeral and never went back. Within the novel, California becomes a racially safe haven that contrasts to Alabama full of racial hatred and violence. The act of violence perpetrated on Charles is actually the only point in the novel that race is mentioned explicitly—Charles is African American, as is his family. From the time of the move to California, race becomes more-or-less insignificant within the narrative. The convertible Buick, vandalized at the time of Charles' murder, carries Ola to California and serves her well over the next twenty-five or so years. It is the car that Diane and Emily learn to drive in as well. No mention is made of how the racial slur painted on the car was removed, or even when it was removed. The car is therefore a physical continuation of Charles—a symbol, of his position in the family. That Ola finds the Buick the most difficult object to give away is understandable not because it's an old car, but because her husband bought it right before his death.

Note that Chapter 10 features an unusual narrative style—the entire chapter is attributed to Diane's voice; for this chapter, Diane acts as the narrator and Emily does not interject. This interesting technique allows for a multiplicity of voices within the novel and allows events to be viewed from disparate viewpoints.



Chapters 11 - 13

Chapters 11 - 13 Summary

David has taught Emily how to drive, and the fourteen-year-old girl likes to stay up until everyone else is asleep and then 'steal' Ola's car and drive it through the desert at night, or to practice parallel parking. On this night's drive Emily finds an old rusting water tower. There is no other traffic on the road. Recently, Emily has found a stash of Ola's prescription medications—some for pain—and realized that Ola is much more ill than she lets on.

In Chapter 12, Ola and Diane tease Emily about taking the car and thinking that her activities have gone undetected. Ola is proud of the care she has taken of the car and also likes that Emily has learned to drive it. Diane mentions that, back at home, Emily's father is going to buy her a pet iguana. Later, Diane takes Ola to the doctor and Emily continues to clean the house. She finds one box that contains all of Charles's things in it and she looks through old letters, notebooks, and photographs. Emily thinks about Minnie Jacobs, a neighbor in Cleveland, who has told her about a South Carolina custom concerning death. After someone died, "a relative would get a hammer and hit a sweep, a kind of plow, to let everybody know" (p. 65). This was called toning the sweep. Emily believes her grandfather might be a restless soul that could be freed by toning the sweep for him.

In Chapter 13, Ola announces that she will not take a course of chemotherapy and Diane is upset. Emily cries and for part of the day David comforts her. Later, Martha, Ola, and Emily visit Roland's house. Roland is an artist that lives apparently alone in a house that is constructed underground near a spring. The area around his house, unlike the rest of the desert, is lush green. Emily films the oasis and then goes inside. Roland tells her the lush green vines are kudzu grown from clippings Ola brought from Alabama. In Alabama, kudzu is an invasive and destructive species—here in the desert, it is constrained to the oasis. Roland has painted a picture of Ola and gives it to her as a present.

Chapters 11 - 13 Analysis

The riots discussed on p. 71 occurred in Los Angeles in April, 1992. As this historic event is noted as being fairly recent the novel's principle timeline can be dated to late 1992 or early 1993. The kudzu described is, in Alabama, killing the local plants and is considered a biologically destructive invasive species. Ola brought it because she wanted something from home to remind her of old times and kudzu is an unusual choice for that as it widely is hated in the south.

Chapter 12 presents the principle conflict of the novel—Emily realizes that Diane has never been able to 'let go' of her murdered father. To Emily, this conflict is expressed as



the notion that Charles is a restless spirit who has not been able to depart the world because of Ola's and Diane's grieving. She recalls hearing of one death ritual that might let Charles finally go. Had Emily or Diane been raised religiously, then perhaps the typical religious rituals might have helped years ago. However, Emily now reaches back into her shared cultural heritage to envision a modern enactment of an ancient ritual of toning the sweep, or essentially sounding the plow blade, to signal someone's death. This thought of Emily's proves to be the major dramatic turning point of the novel. Note that Emily has discovered the water tower (her sweep) in Chapter 11 (p. 56).

The conflict reported in Chapter 13, that Ola will not take chemotherapy, is difficult but hardly is the major dramatic action. Emily accepts it; Diane does not. Diane and Ola squabble about it for the remainder of the novel, but Ola is probably correct in assuming that chemotherapy might extend her life a little bit, but only at a heavy cost of additional sickness. Plus, she doesn't want to lose her hair. This is a personal choice and Ola has made it. It is now up to Diane to accept it.



Chapters 14 - 20

Chapters 14 - 20 Summary

There is a small store fairly near to Ola's house and Emily has gone there her whole life. She visits the store and talks with Sally Hirt, the proprietor. Sally and Emily exchange small talk and pleasantries and Emily catches Sally up on Ola's situation. The talk turns to the death of Charles and Sally mentions that Diane has been the one to discover Charles' corpse. Realizing Emily had not known that, Sally calls Diane after Emily leaves to apologize. That night, Emily and Diane hold hands and go to sleep.

In Chapter 15, Emily sleeps outside in the desert with only a blanket. She dreams of her grandmother. In Chapter 16, the packing is finished and most of Ola's belongings have been given away to friends. The remainder will be donated to goodwill. Ola and Emily chat in the afternoon; Emily explains she is a vegetarian because she doesn't want to make any animals suffer. Emily asks about Karma, wondering if Ola somehow provoked the bad things in her life such as cancer. Ola rejects the notion: it's "a horrible disease. Nothing else" (p. 87).

In Chapter 17, Ola recalls when Diane called her on the telephone to announce Emily's birth. She recalls various things about Emily's growing up; things that a grandmother would focus on. She remembers watching Emily 'steal' the car for a nighttime drive and watching Emily sneaking around with the video camera taking film.

In Chapter 18, Emily discusses her deep emotional bond with the desert. Then, Ola goes to her farewell party with Martha, Roland, the aunts, and all her other many friends. Emily deliberately stays behind. Then, she takes the Buick and drives into the desert to the old water tower she has found. As she drives she recalls David telling her about attending a powwow in Arizona and how he felt he had found his roots and become connected to a historical legacy. When Emily arrives at her destination she realizes that her mother Diane has followed her there in Roland's car.

In Chapter 19, Diane and Emily look at each other and Emily suddenly experiences all of her mother's emotional loss and grief. Diane confides that Charles had toned a sweep when his father had died; then discloses that she had never been able to say goodbye to her father. Diane concludes "It's time to tone my daddy to Heaven" (p. 99). Without a sweep, Emily has selected the old water tower—important to the desert as a sweep was to Alabama. The two women use hammers to strike the metal, toning the sweep for Charles. After the ritual, they return to the cars and then go to the party. Emily spends most of the day making video tapes of the celebration.

In Chapter 20, Emily again realizes she will miss Ola's house and the desert. Diane checks the house once again to make sure everything is ready for departure. Ola will give the Buick to Martha and they will fly home to Cleveland.



Chapters 14 - 20 Analysis

Chapters 14 through 20 are all fairly short chapters—some only a few pages in length. The material differentiates between the narrative agitating action—Ola's cancer—and the narrative's primary conflict—Diane's inability to come to terms with her father's death. The narrative's dramatic climax comes in Chapter 19 when Emily and Diane tone the sweep, or ritually release Charles from their grieving. This is not to say they will no longer grieve for him, only that they have come to terms with his loss. The novel suggests that Diane has somehow known about Emily's plans for some time—David Two Starr suggests Diane has learned of Emily's plans in a vision. Whether or not this is true, Diane does seem instinctively to know that Emily needs her help. Thus Chapter 18 sets up the narrative climax by Diane's following of Emily. Emily chooses a water tower because the water tower represents necessity in the desert, just as the sweep, or plow, had represented necessity to her ancestors who were farmers. This appears to make good sense to Diane, too. Meanwhile, Ola—having come to terms with Charles' death many years before—celebrates her own life with her friends at a nearby party. After Diane and Emily tone the sweep for Charles they join Ola's party. Charles has been released, symbolically, for Diane and Emily by their ritual. Ola demonstrates he has been released by her, symbolically, by giving away her convertible Buick. The three generations of women have thus taken their own disparate paths to a common conclusion as the novel draws to a close. Note that Ola's cancer is not resolved in the narrative.

Chapter 17, like Chapter 10, is not told in Emily's voice. Here, Ola remembers various things, mostly about Emily's growing up. This technique of construction allows Ola's viewpoint to be represented without Emily's filtering.



Characters

Emily

Emily is a fourteen-year-old African American girl; she is the narrator and the principle protagonist of the novel. Emily describes herself as typical in most respects. Physically she has long legs and large feet. She is an only child, the daughter of Diane and her unnamed father. Emily and her parents live in Cleveland, Ohio, and have since her birth. Every summer of Emily's life, her mother has taken her to spend the summer with her maternal grandmother Ola Werren, who lives in a small yellow house in Little Rock, California, in the middle of the California desert. Emily is a vegetarian, believing it is morally wrong to eat animals. She is also a daydreamer; during winters in school in Cleveland, she daydreams often of the desert. During summers at her grandmother's house in the desert, she daydreams of various things. Emily naturally is somewhat introverted but personable and feels respect and a certain awe for her grandmother Ola. Within the narrative, Emily's only friend is the fifteen-year-old American Indian boy named David Two Starr whom she has known since before she can remember. Emily and David are so close their relationship is like that of siblings, as on one occasion she dresses in front of him without thinking much about it.

Emily has a strong relationship with her parents and her grandmother and clearly values family above everything else. Emily's mother's father was murdered in 1964 and his body was discovered by Emily's mother Diane. That event caused obvious emotional trauma to the family and the novel's principle dramatic action centers on Emily's quest to know her grandfather and Diane's quest to accept his death. The narrative climax comes when Emily envisions a symbolic or ritual mourning for her grandfather and enlists Diane's help in carrying it out as they travel to the remote desert and band on an old water tank, the metallic clanging harking back to an old custom of toning the sweep, or plow blade, for the dead.

Diane

Diane, born Diane Werren, is an African American woman born in Alabama in 1950. Physically, she has long legs and big feet. She is an only child of Charles Landon Werren and Ola. Diane lived with her parents in Alabama until she was fourteen years old. At that time, her father was murdered near his new automobile, and the car was vandalized by having a racial pejorative spray-painted on the side. Diane's mother Ola then moved to Little Rock, California, taking Diane with her. The mother and daughter lived there for a few years until Diane was about eighteen years old at which time she left home and made her own way. Over several years, Diane worked odd jobs, lived where she could, and experienced the 'hippy' counter-cultural movement in the San Francisco area. At some point later, Diane met and married an unnamed man, Emily's father. In c. 1979 Diane gave birth to Emily, her only child, at the age of about twenty-nine. Diane has been married to her husband for about twenty-years and they enjoy a



solid, traditional relationship. From the time of Emily's birth, Diane has traveled every summer back to Little Rock to visit Ola for a few weeks or months. As Emily became older, some summers Diane would stay for only a few days. Apparently, Diane's husband rarely visits Ola. Diane's principle difficulty in the novel revolves around her life-long attempt to come to terms with her father's murder. She comes to accept it and finally finds some sort of peace though she never manages to adapt to the desert that has given her mother such solace. Toward the end of the novel, Diane participates with Emily when they band metal against an ancient water tower, effectively toning the sweep in a modernized sense. This activity seems to give both Diane and Emily a sense of closure. Diane also struggles with her mother's decision not to pursue chemotherapy to treat her newly-diagnosed cancer. Diane works as a part-time teacher at a Cleveland-area college.

Ola Werren

Ola, born c. 1935 (probably in Alabama), an African American woman, is about sixty years old at the time of the novel. The novel's motivating force comes from Ola's recent diagnosis with an unspecified form of cancer; but a cancer that could potentially be treated by aggressive chemotherapy. Ola is described as being short, with a frail appearance (at least, as judged by her fourteen-year-old granddaughter). Ola rarely wears shoes and likes to drive fast and crazy everywhere she goes. She married Charles Lunden Werren in Alabama, sometime in the late 1940s. Together they had one child, Diane. Ola and Charles appeared to enjoy a successful, traditional family experience in Alabama until 1964. At that time Charles purchased a new luxury automobile after years of saving. The purchase apparently angered some locals who retaliated by murdering Charles in a race-related act of violence. Ola took her daughter, the car, and a few boxes of belongings and drove away from Alabama for good. Ola settled in Little Rock, California, in the middle of the Mohave Desert. There, Ola painted her house yellow and raised her daughter Diane for a few years before Diane set off on her own in the late 1960s to experience the counter-culture movement in San Francisco. Ola lived in Little Rock from 1964 to the early 1990s when she was diagnosed with cancer. Ola plans to leave her house and move in with Diane's family in Cleveland, Ohio. Ola has long, grey hair that she wears in dreadlocks. She loves her hair and claims that losing her hair is one of the major reasons she has decided against chemotherapy.

Ola enjoys a wide network of close friends who are quite supportive and giving. She appears to be very popular with numerous individuals. Ola is a great example of a strong female character who has survived incredible hardship and discrimination to rise to a position of social prominence. Emily mentions Ola has worked at several odd jobs and held a career in California State government for several years. At the time of the novel, Ola appears to be retired.



Charles Lunden Werren

Charles Lunden Werren, an African American man, was born abt. 1931 in Alabama. In the late 1940s he met and married Ola and about 1950 they had their only child, Diane. In 1964 Charles had saved enough money to purchase a new Buick. A few days later he was murdered and his car vandalized in a race-related hate crime. Charles' corpse was discovered by Diane, his fourteen-year-old daughter. Charles does not actually appear in the narrative but is referred to often. He was a devoted husband and father and obviously financially successful. His death impacted his family negatively in a major way and their grieving continues on until (and beyond) the novel's principle timeline in the early 1990s.

Emily's Dad

Emily's father is unnamed in the novel—she refers to him only as dad. His race is not specified but he likely is an African American; likewise his age is indeterminate but probably he is in his late 40s. He works a normal, permanent job that does not allow him summers off. Thus, he remains in Cleveland when his wife and daughter, Diane and Emily, respectively, travel to visit Ola in California for the summers. During the novel he calls occasionally and apparently purchases, or plans to purchase, a pet iguana for Emily. Within the narrative he is a reliable and traditional father and a role model for Emily and her friends.

Martha Jackson

Martha Jackson is an older woman living near Ola in Little Rock, California. She is noted as being very tall and fairly thin; Emily compares her walk to a sort of swimming motion as her long arms swing through a peculiar arc as she walks. Emily notes Martha has coal black hair that she keeps cut so short it stands up. Martha met Ola and Diane only a few days after they moved to Little Rock. At first she criticized Ola's choice of yellow for the exterior of her house—but within minutes joined Ola in painting. Since that time Martha and Ola have been best friends. Martha is a veteran foster mom, having raised dozens and dozens of children over the past twenty or thirty years. While most children stay with her for only a month or a year, one child, David Two Starr, has lived with her for fifteen years. Emily notes that Martha has owned numerous cars over the years, all of which have been wrecked by foster children. Martha also owns a video camera. The novel offers few other biographical details about Martha, whom Ola calls Mart. Emily views her as old and notes that she has very black hair. Martha's race is not specified. She apparently is unmarried or widowed. Throughout the novel she assists with Ola's packing and cleaning and clearly will greatly miss Ola once she moves away.



Roland

Roland is a male neighbor and friend of Ola. Few biographical details are offered about him. He appears to be older, perhaps fifty or sixty, and lives in a peculiar underground house near a spring that makes his garden a tiny oasis in the middle of the desert. Roland principally grows kudzu from cuttings Ola brought from Alabama in 1964. Roland is an artist and completes a painting of Ola that he gives to her as a memento. Roland helps Ola pack and clean a little bit and helps organize a going-away party for her; Ola refers to him as a kind and gentle man. He appears to be one of Ola's closer friends and apparently is the only male friend she has. His race is not mentioned.

The Aunts

The Aunts are a group of five sisters, four living, all unmarried, of the surname Title. Despite their collective appellation, they are not related to Emily's family. They are Rachel, about sixty-five, Margaret, about sixty-two, Ruth, about sixty-one, Sara, about fifty-nine, and the deceased youngest Grace Ann who died of pneumonia at an apparently young age. At one point in the novel Emily mistakes Rachel for Martha Jackson, from behind, because they are of the same height and build, and they both have coal black, short hair. Ruth was the first, or one of the first, women working on a road crew in California. At least one of the sisters worked for the California State government where she met Ola. The four living Title sisters are close and have a vast circle of acquaintances, including Ola. They help Ola pack and clean and also help organize a going-away party. The aunts play a fairly minor role in the novel.

David Two Starr

David Two Starr is a fifteen-year-old American Indian boy who lives as a foster child with Martha Jackson; he has lived with her for at least thirteen years and, according to Emily, she is Martha's favorite. David's Indian tribe apparently hails from Arizona, as he travels there at some point to participate in tribal activities. This event strongly influences David as he comes to realize he has deep cultural roots that extend beyond his absent parents. David and Emily have been close friends since before either of them can remember; in the narrative he is presented as a sort of older brother. He teaches her how to drive, talks to her about cultural, social, and racial heritage, and helps her learn to explore and love the desert. Emily notes that he is profoundly silent, speaking few words and seldom. There does not appear to be any romantic feelings between David and Emily.

Sally Hirt

Sally Hirt, unmarried, is probably fifty or sixty years old and runs a local grocery store in Little Rock, California. She has known Ola for about twenty or more years. Sally is usually happy, gregarious, and informed. She appears only briefly in the novel but plays



a central role in the plot development because she tells Emily that her mother, Diane, had been the one to discover her grandfather's (Charles') corpse after he had been murdered in a racially-motivated hate crime. By 'outing' this skeleton in the closet, Sally allows Emily to speak to Ola about old events and actually helps the mother and daughter become closer and come to terms with an old family tragedy.



Objects/Places

Alabama

Charles Lundon Werren and Ola Werren live in Alabama at the beginning of the novel. The area is described as lush, heavily wooded, and beautiful. Their daughter, Diane, is born there. However, in 1964 Charles is murdered and Ola subsequently leaves Alabama forever. Within the novel, Alabama is representative as a place of racial hatred and injustice.

Cleveland, Ohio

Emily lives in Cleveland, Ohio, with her mother Diane and her unnamed father. Emily apparently has lived in Cleveland her entire life. The city and their home in Cleveland is described in only the vaguest passing terms. It appears that neither Diane nor Emily have much interest in or attachment to Cleveland, except that is where Emily's father lives. Within the novel, Cleveland functions as a sort of distant anchor vice the desert's magic allure.

Little Rock, California

Ola Werren lives in the town of Little Rock, California. There does not appear to be much to the town except a few widely-spaced houses, a distant store, and an apparent police presence. Most of the novel's minor characters live in or around Little Rock. The town itself is described only in vague terms.

The Desert

The California desert surrounding Little Rock is the dominant setting of the novel. The desert is presented in a very positive way; Emily finds it beautiful, comforting, inspiring, and inviting. She feels at home in the desert. Within the novel, the desert never is presented as dangerous or forbidding. The huge, open spaces of the desert inspire confidence, artistry, and emotional bonding for nearly all of the characters in the novel.

Ola's House

Most of the novel's principle timeline transpires within Ola's house, a small and fairly nondescript house in the middle of the desert somewhere near Little Rock, California. Ola's house is yellow, has a few bedrooms, and apparently no air conditioning. Often the doors are left open and the floor appears to be level with the ground. The yard had a few trees. The house offers long-range vistas of desert scenery. Ola lives in the house from 1964 to the early 1990s; she plans to rent the house out after she departs.



The Buick

In 1964, Charles Lundon Werren purchased a brand new Buick, considered at the time a luxury automobile. Someone or some group of people subsequently vandalize the automobile and murder Charles, apparently angry that an African American man would have such a nice automobile. Ola and Diane move cross country in the car to California, and there Ola drives the car for the next abt. twenty-five years. Diane and Emily both learn to drive by using the car, and Ola claims to take excellent care of it. Within the novel, the Buick symbolizes the positive struggle of Charles and, perhaps, the racial hatred of others.

Grandpa's Things

During the novel Ola packs up her many belongings preparatory to moving to Cleveland. Among the things she packs is a small box (e.g., p. 64) full of her deceased husband's few things. Ola makes sure that Emily finds the box when she is alone so that she has time to look through some of her grandfather's belongings. Ola demonstrates keen insight in allowing her granddaughter to discover her grandfather through exploration rather than through a sort of show-and-tell experience. The various mundane objects allow Emily to connect, emotionally, with the grandfather that died long before she was born.

Toning the Sweep

Emily explains toning the sweep as the act of hammering on a plow blade, also known as a sweep, to cause a mournful tolling that symbolically releases a deceased person from their earthly sorrows. According to Emily, toning the sweep was a customary action in parts of the south for several generations. Emily and Diane perform a similar action by banging on an ancient water town in the desert—symbolically releasing their grief about Emily's grandfather's death.

The Desert Oasis

In Chapter 13 Ola, Diane, and Emily visit a desert artist named Roland who lives in a sort of underground house burrowed into a hill. The location features a small freshwater spring that drains away into a river. Because of this, Roland's house is surrounded by a desert oasis that has been taken over by kudzu imported by Ola from Alabama. The tiny desert oasis functions as a counterpoint to the desert's emptiness and vast expanses.

The Video Camera

Early in the novel Ola borrows a video camera from Martha, her friend. She intends to use the video camera to make a video about her house and maybe be her friends so

she can remember them after she moves away. Emily takes over the filming job and spends numerous hours filming the area, her mother and grandmother as they pack, and even making video interviews of her grandmother's friends and activities. Within the novel, the video camera empowers Emily to dig into her grandmother's life as a sort of investigative reporter and allows her to shed her natural reticence of being nosy.



Themes

Family

All three of the novel's primary characters, and two of the novel's minor characters, are genetically related. Charles Landon Werren, born abt. 1931 and died 1964, married Ola in the late 1940s. They are both identified as African Americans. Their only child, Diane Werren, was born abt. 1950 in Alabama. When Charles is murdered in 1964, Ola and then-fourteen-year-old Diane move to Little Rock, California. About three years later, Diane leaves home for good and eventually marries an unnamed man and together they have Emily in the late 1970s, living in Cleveland, Ohio. The race of Emily's father is not specified but is implied to be African American. Ola, Diane, and Emily are the principle actors and protagonists in the novel. The Werren family forms the principle family unit and includes all of the significant characters; the family's major events—the murder of Charles, the marriage of Diane, the birth of Emily and the cancer of Ola, drive the narrative plot. Most of the novel's interactions focus on the three generations of women as they prepare for Ola's move to Cleveland. By nearly any standard, the dominant theme of the novel is the nuclear family and the influence that it has on family members throughout the generations.

The Desert

Ola Werren moves to the California desert—around a small town called Little Rock—in 1964 after the murder of her husband. She secures a small house for herself and her fourteen-year-old daughter Diane. Ola paints the house yellow, sets up a small greenhouse, and then spends the next about twenty-five years living in the desert, integrating with the community, and becoming peaceful in her new environment. Moving from the lush country of Alabama only heightens Ola's amazing transition into the desert. In this transition, Ola leaves her past behind and creates her future—she lives two lives in the novel and somehow comes to peaceful terms with her painful past. Emily finds the desert beautiful, engaging, and inviting. She has 'grown up' in the desert, spending several summer months of every year of her life in the desert. Her narrative focus on the desert and its (to her) wonders form a consistent and dominant theme in the narrative. While most of the characters in the novel live in the desert by choice and find in its vast expanse a peaceful existence, Diane does not like the desert. The tension between Diane's experience and Emily's experience in the desert forms one of the more interesting sub-plots in the novel.

Legacy

The Werren family struggles with a legacy of violence and racial hatred. The single event that defines the family's struggle occurs in 1964 when the family patriarch, Charles Landon Werren, is murdered because he is a successful African American man



trying to live a productive life free of fear in Alabama. That event sends the fatherless Werren family to distant California, leaves Diane Werren scarred for life, and causes Emily Werren to be brought up amidst sorrow, anguish, and thinly-veiled secrecy. Rarely does the family discuss the murder, perhaps through shame, perhaps through sorrow, perhaps through deliberate forgetfulness, but rarely does the family act free of its shadow. On the other hand, Charles and Ola also leave a legacy of nuclear family values, Ola fosters a loving home that is open to all, and struggles her entire life to remain free of feelings of vengeance and victimhood. Likewise, Diane forges a nuclear family and raises Emily with strong family values, strong devotion to her forebears, and a strong sense of family and belonging. This fusion of external damage and internal strength leaves a well-defined family legacy of love, tolerance, openness, and forward-looking hope. The family unit and its legacy forms an integral and compelling theme within the novel.



Style

Point of View

The novel is recounted from the first-person, limited point of view. Some passages (for example, Chapter 10) are presented as an extended monologue of a specific character—in a sense, these chapters are narrated by individuals other than the principle narrator of the novel, Emily, a fourteen-year-old African American girl. Emily is present in most of the scenes of the novel and is one of the novel's main protagonists. Emily, as the narrator, renders a highly subjective structure but appears to be entirely reliable. In addition to standard plot narration, Emily interprets many events, especially those events that happened before she was born. Emily appears to view the world as consisting of two places—a distant urban environment in Cleveland, Ohio, which does not appear to interest her; and the desert of California where she finds a deep-rooted connectedness to the land, the people, and the culture. While Emily self-identifies as an African American the identity does not appear very deep or significant to her. She realizes her family comes from a history of racial violence and blatant discrimination but within the principle timeline of the novel these racial issues appear largely nonexistent. Emily's point of view, therefore, is a complex mix of past grievances, present struggles, and future hopes at a point of delicate transition from a bleak past to a bright future. While the point of view is specific to the narrator, the book clearly presents the same point of view in a much larger context of cultural race relations in North America.

Setting

The novel presents a single contemporary setting but does refer to two other settings of significance. The dominant setting of the novel is in Little Rock, California, in the early 1990s. While Little Rock is named it hardly figures in the narrative development which instead focuses on the California desert that sprawls for hundreds of miles around the specific locale. Nearly all of the characters in the novel, especially including Emily and Ola, strongly identify with the desert. They see in it a simplicity and a reliability that cannot be found in urban settings. To them, the vast empty expanses are engaging, powerful, and inspiring. Emily finds the sun and the heat cathartic and reassuring. The fact that Ola's greenhouse is an artificial oasis in the desert only serves to highlight what Emily and Ola love about the desert—it's nothingness is not threatening but inviting, like a blank canvas upon which any life can be depicted. Other characters, most notably Diane, dislike the desert and find it hostile, intimidating, and monotonous. Within the narrative structure, Ola's yellow house in the desert, surrounded by far-flung neighbors and friends, is the principle setting. Secondary settings include Emily's house in distant Cleveland, Ohio, where she lives most of the year. The house is not described and Emily hardly ever refers to it, indicating how little value she places on it beyond the fact that it's where her father is. The other secondary setting is a nondescript suburban region of Alabama where Ola and Charles Landon Werren live for several years prior to Charles' racially-motivated murder.



Language and Meaning

Within the novel language is used in a very traditional manner; the book contains standard English and uses typical punctuation and construction. The language is appropriate for middle- or high-school students and should pose no special barrier to interpretation. Occasional words or phrases are used in an atypical manner but such use always is explained. For example, the significant phrase "toning the sweep," which informs the novel's title, is explained in considerable detail. Meaning in the novel can be derived at several levels and forms a subtle and complex layered reading experience. The characters generally are assumed to be African American, though few are so specified; most of the characters are women who come from poverty or working-class backgrounds. Many of the characters come from nontraditional families or violent pasts. Because of this, the narrative plot's obvious meaning is only the merest surface of meaning that can be extracted from a careful reading of the novel. Clearly, the novel's significant reception and literary award derives from this multiplicity of meaning that will allow a wide variety of readers to engage the narrative at varying levels of connection.

Structure

The 103-page novel, or novella, is divided into twenty enumerated chapters of varying length. The novel's principle timeline covers about two weeks of time in the California area of Little Rock in a sprawling desert region. The novel's dominant focus is on a family of African American women who span three generations. The protagonists in the fiction are the three women in the family tree. Charles Lundon Werren, born abt. 1931 and died 1964, married Ola in the late 1940s. They are both identified as African Americans. Their only child, Diane Werren, was born abt. 1950 in Alabama. When Charles is murdered in 1964, Ola and then-fourteen-year-old Diane move to Little Rock, California. About three years later, Diane leaves home for good and eventually marries an unnamed man and together they have Emily in the late 1970s. The race of Emily's father is not specified but is implied to be African American. Ola, Diane, and Emily are the principle actors and protagonists in the novel. Ola's recently-diagnosed cancer and the family's past victimization by racially-motivated violence are the novel's antagonizing influences. In the narrative, Ola's cancer is not resolved and acts as a sort of disturbing force that leads to change. The novel's rising action and narrative climax focus on Diane's and Emily's coming to terms with the violent death of their father and grandfather, respectively, and their final grieving and acceptance of it by banging steel upon an old water tower in the desert—a modern-ish equivalent to the older practice of toning the sweep, as explained in the novel.



Quotes

"My grandma Ola says that yellow is the first color she ever remembers seeing. It was just there, she says. Her mama dressed her in yellow, and back in Alabama there were yellow curtains in the kitchen. Their house sat between two willows. They were yellow in spring" (p. 1)

"I didn't know that Mama believed in God until I heard her in the bathroom in the airport praying. Just praying like she did it all the time—talking to God like he was her friend Caroline and they were having lunch downtown. She acted like she knew God, had spoken to him before and everything" (p. 5).

"I can't imagine Ola knitting me anything. She does send me pamphlets on world hunger and the environment. And she sent me a T-shirt from Jamaica when she went there to a reggae festival. Ola has sent me beads from Africa and incense from India, even a case of olives from Greece 'cause she remembered that I hadn't tried them. "You have to try everything if you want to live in this world" is what she always says" (p. 11).

"I like Martha Jackson. I can't remember when I didn't know her. You get used to people, I guess. She's always sending me videos in the mail. I got one of nothing but people's feet. She set the camera up outside a grocery store and just filmed feet for hours. Daddy sat up and watched it with me" (p. 15).

"Martha Jackson's hair is the color of coal and she must be about my grandmama's age. She cuts her hair short, and sometimes it sticks straight up, but she doesn't care. She's probably one of the tallest people I know, and walks like she's swimming, and that's all the time. She doesn't have a car. Every car she gets lasts about a month. One of her foster kids always ends up wrecking it. It's not something she worries about, though" (p. 18).

"I turn over and smile at the foot of the bed. "Hi, David," I say, then roll out to get some clothes. I find my jeans under the bed and a T-shirt on the dresser. I don't feel uncomfortable dressing in front of David. I used to take baths with him, and he's asking me where I found size one hundred tennis shoes, so I don't think he even notices" (p. 25).

"Mama says they didn't have a clue about raising me. Since Ola lived thousands of miles away and my dad's parents were dead, there weren't any relatives around us to give them advice. Most of my parents' friends were just starting to have their own kids at the time, so they weren't any help. Mama keeps reading, and I look at her feet that are shaped like mine" (p. 30).



"When the sheriff looked into my grandfather's car, he found a bottle of milk, an Alabama road atlas, and a straw baby. The straw baby was for the baby my grandmother was supposed to have in seven months, but didn't. She lost it like she lost my grandfather. Suddenly and sadly. My grandfather will smile forever beside the Buick convertible, but he will never be in living color for me....I walk back to the kitchen, and Ola is still sitting by the tree. I plug into the outlet by the door. I tape Ola under the tree. In color" (p. 35-36).

"Ola says that the aunts are the desert to her. She says that they are wild and free, that they have to live in the desert. They couldn't be happy in the city or the suburbs. Ola says that she couldn't be happy in those places either, and I wonder how she's going to stand living with us" (p. 40-41).

"The boxes are full of hats and scarves. I used to go into Ola's room and spend the day there trying on every hat and scarf she had in the place. They were everywhere in her room. She had pegs on the walls and doors just for the hats and scarves. I'd daydream there for hours" (p. 45).

"Mama talks....When she was younger, Emmie hated leaving the desert. It was no good warning her beforehand that vacation was almost over and we'd be going home to her daddy in a few days. Telling her only made it worse. She'd take time out to cry about it for at least two hours every day before we actually left" (p. 50).

"Ola says she'll teach me to drive the Buick before we leave for Ohio, but I'm way ahead of her. I've taken the car out twice and driven it a little way down the road—past the convenience store near the crossroads. I'm doing it again tonight" (p. 55).

"Ola asks me in the morning, at breakfast, how my driving lessons are going. Mama's leaning against the table, drinking coffee.

"Well, my girl, you going to answer your grandmama?"

I just look at them. They look at me and start laughing. I figure they know all about me taking the car the whole time.

'She rides real smooth, don't she, baby? Never given me any trouble at all. I keep her tuned'" (p. 61).

"Ola decided at the doctor's office yesterday that she wasn't going through with the chemotherapy. Mama isn't talking" (p. 68).

"Martha reminds Roland about the picnic, and we climb into the Buick and then wave to him and Jake until they're out of sight. In a few minutes the house living in the hillside is gone, disappeared from camera view, and we're driving through the desert again.



I sit in the front passenger seat while Martha drives. Ola falls asleep in the backseat beside the painting, her scarf blowing in the wind" (p. 75).

"Mama comes into my room when I'm just about to go to sleep. I scoot over and let her in the bed.

'You having a good time here, Emmie?'

I find Mama's hand in the dark and squeeze real hard.

'I talked to Miss Sally today, Mama. I taped her. I think she was into it...'

'She called and told me, 'Baby.'

I say, 'Yeah,' and squeeze her hand tighter, then move over so she can have more room. She's asleep before I am as the curtains blow in the night breeze" (p. 80-81)

"I will dream of the desert forever; it will never leave me. Ola says that it doesn't have to. She says the house in Little Rock is mine to come to whenever I want. That won't be for years, though, because she's never coming back to it. I know I can't come back to it while she's alive" (p. 91).

"Mama's arms are long. They flow when she moves. The wind seems to take them. She sits down on the hard ground and looks off into the desert again. Her face relaxes as she watches Jake chase imaginary birds. He floats in the wind, his furry body looking like a fluff of dust in a breeze. I sit down in the dust beside Mama" (p. 97).

"When she goes tomorrow, Ola will leave three Joshua trees in her front yard and one in the back, a greenhouse full of kudzu that would cover the world if it could, and a 1964 Buick convertible that will now fly through the desert without her.

The desert hasn't really woke up yet. My feet still feel cool in the dust. I have a funny feeling in my stomach.

Mama used to say, 'Don't look back. It'll make you an easier person, able to live in this world.' Uh-huh.

By the time the moving van hauls onto the highway, the sun has broken on through" (p. 103).

Topics for Discussion

Within the novel, Charles Lundon Werren and Ola Werren are explicitly noted as being African American. It follows that Diane Werren also is African American. A few other characters are inferred to be African American; David Two Starr is American Indian; Emily considers herself African American. Race for other characters is not specified. How is the African American experience portrayed in the novel?

What race do you imagine for Emily's father? What evidences can you find in the novel to support your opinion?

The narrative suggests that Charles Lundon Werren was murdered because he purchased a brand new Buick, a sort of luxury car. What evidences does the narrative present that strongly suggest the murder was racially motivated?

When Ola Werren and her daughter Diane leave Alabama, they leave their fully-furnished house behind, simply walking away, taking only a few boxes of memorabilia and some clothing that will fit in their automobile. Why does Ola walk away from her house, belongings, and life?

When Diane Werren moves to the California desert at age fourteen she becomes very uncomfortable and eventually comes to hate the desert. By age about eighteen she leaves home for good. What aspects of the desert does Diane so dislike?

All of the novel's major characters - Ola, Diane, and Emily - are female. Does the novel have anything to say about the male experience, or does it only explore the female experience?

At the novel's climax, Diane and Emily use metal objects to whang on the legs of an old water tower in the middle of the desert, making loud noises. What are they trying to do? Are they successful?

What cultural practices do you and your family participate in that are symbolically equivalent to toning the sweep? Why do you think most people derive comfort from ritual and symbolism?

Is Ola making a mistake by declining aggressive chemotherapy treatment for her cancer? Why or why not? Discuss.