

# **Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith Study Guide**

**Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith by Anne Lamott**

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## Plot Summary

Anne talks about her childhood at length. She is the child of atheists but likes it when she has the opportunity to attend church. She says she pretended church was foolish to please her father who was raised by missionaries in Tokyo and despised Christianity. Her mother sometimes attends midnight mass but Anne's opportunities to attend church are largely limited to when she goes with a Catholic friend or her grandparents.

*Traveling Mercies* is actually a series of essays about Anne's life. The first is the longest and gives the reader a look at her childhood and her early years roughly to the point when she gives up the alcohol and drugs. Thereafter, there are a series of essays, each offering a brief look at some particular aspect of Anne's life.

The essays cover a range of topics but center on her son, Sam. Anne almost has an abortion when she becomes pregnant with Sam—her second pregnancy. The first pregnancy did end with an abortion. She talks to a minister who tells her she should imagine she has just made the decision to have the abortion and gauge what her reaction would be. Then she is to imagine she has decided not to have it and compare that reaction. She says that advice was sound and she decides not to have the abortion. She later uses this same tactic to decide whether Sam can go paragliding at seven years old. When she considers that she has refused permission, she is elated and uses that to make her decision.

Anne and Sam go to Mexico on vacation to swim with the seals, visit friends and interact with those in their church, St. Andrews. Anne calls it a "funky" church and says the people there become her family and she knows she can always find her way home from there. She is a writer by trade and has periods when she is having trouble writing, making the finances tough. She deals with a potentially serious blood disorder with Sam but it turns out to be nothing. She worries about her own health because her father died of melanoma. His death leaves a giant hole in her life and it is some twenty years before she admits she is a person without a dad and it is not going to change. She admits then she has always tried to mold men into her father's image and none of them are capable of filling that place in her life.

Anne claims to be a Christian but admits she is a bad Christian. She says some friends call her "Christian-ish." She refers to God as "he or she" and admits at the end of the last essay that she is not even certain to whom she is praying when she says, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." She says the two most important prayers are "Thank you" and "Please." The essays are sometimes humorous, sometimes poignant and all have a lesson most readers will understand and relate to.



# Overture: Lily Pads

## Overture: Lily Pads Summary and Analysis

Anne talks about her childhood at length. She is the child of atheists but likes it when she has the opportunity to attend church. She says she pretended church was foolish to please her father who was raised by missionaries in Tokyo and despised Christianity. Her mother sometimes attends midnight mass but Anne's opportunities to attend church are largely limited to when she goes with a Catholic friend or her grandparents.

Anne says her parents are intellectuals and all their friends are intellectuals. Their attitude is that only the ignorant believe. Anne says she prayed at night because she knew someone was listening and that she always believed. She also says she never told a soul.

Anne retreats frequently to the home of her best friend, Shelly. Anne and her family live in a castle while her parents' marriage falls apart. Her mother wants to go to law school and is trying to hold the marriage together, and is exhausted from the effort. There are parties and Anne says it is common for someone to be necking with someone who is not his wife while his wife is in another room necking with someone else. If she tells her parents, they blame it on the alcohol as if that is an excuse. She says the children have easy access to alcohol and both alcohol and drug abuse is common. During the sixties, three in her neighborhood die of overdoses, one commits suicide and one drowns. Anne says her parents have no problems compared to a friend, Pammy, whose mother is usually passed out. Pammy and Anne gravitate to the home of Shelly who has a little sister the same age as Pammy. Shelly's mother, Lee, is a practicing Christian Scientist who offers her children and their friends, love, support and prayer. Anne recalls Lee lying in bed beside her quoting scripture until Anne could fall asleep.

By the time she is sixteen, Anne is no longer spending time with Shelly though she and Pammy go to the same high school and become friends. She is more attached now to a girl named Bee and her mother, Mimi. She and Bee are tennis champs in the sixteen and under class, but Anne begins showing up for practice and meets with a hangover. She says she would have quit but loved Bee and Mimi, who called her a second daughter. When she finishes that final year in the under sixteen class, she does quit and gives away her racquet though she joins the tennis team in college.

Anne's favorite teacher becomes a Christian and Anne is angry, picking apart everything the teacher says. She is backed up by Pammy and the two girls "practically memorize" texts that will support their arguments. Anne is an excellent student and her parents are angry when she brings home a B minus. Anne says it was years later that she discovered a B minus is actually a good grade. She is accomplishing these grades despite the fact she is often drunk, stoned or hung over.



During college class, Anne reads a book by Kierkegaard called "Fear and Trembling." She reads about Abraham's decision to follow God's direction when he is supposed to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Anne says it is that story and the sudden understanding of Abraham's reasoning that prompts her to make a "lurch of faith." By the time Anne is twenty-three, she is out of school, writing, cleaning houses, teaching tennis and has stopped talking to her father about God because it makes him impatient. Anne's mother is now an attorney in Honolulu, her older brother lives with a girl, her father is fifty-four and her younger brother is eighteen. On a particular morning, Anne, her father and Steve are walking along the beach waiting to hear the results of her father's CAT scan. She says they will learn he has a tumor, that he will die in just two years and that the time in between will consist of surgery, radiation, nursing and her father reverting to the mental capacity of a "friendly toddler."

At twenty-eight, Anne is living with a friend, writing some, drinking a lot, showing signs of bulimia and seeing two married men, both providing cocaine for her growing habit. She says she still sometimes believes in "something," but describes it as a "patchwork" God with a little Eastern, a little Western, and everything else except Jesus added in. Despite that, she is in serious trouble. One day, in desperation, she calls on a new priest at a nearby church. They talk and she says she soon reports progress—that she is seeing only one of the two men, and she is not meeting him at x-rated motels but is insisting on nicer meeting places. She says she feels she has some standards again—they are low standards, but there are standards. It will be four years before she is sober.

When she is almost thirty, Anne is living in a small apartment and becomes pregnant. She barely knows the father who is married, has an abortion and a few days later begins bleeding heavily. She does not call for help but notes she feels a strong presence in her room. She supposes it is her father because she has felt him often when she was afraid or lonely, but realizes it is Jesus. She says the experience "spooked" her but the next morning he was gone. She has been stopping at a neighborhood church, listening on to the music but refusing to stay for sermons. Shortly after her abortion, she does stay for a sermon. She says it seemed ridiculous but she feels a powerful presence "holding me like a scared kid." She leaves before the benediction and races home but knows God is with her. She hangs her head, says, "Fuck it, I quit," then "All right. You can come in," and says that is the moment of her conversion to Christianity.

Anne describes the next ten years of her life as a series of slides in a slide show. She becomes pregnant by a man she barely knows and who is not interested in becoming a father. Pammy, who has been unable to conceive herself, urges her to have the child. She names the boy Sam. Pammy is diagnosed with cancer. It goes into remission but returns just as she and her husband adopt a daughter, Rebecca. Pammy dies at thirty-eight. Anne has become a true member of her church. She says she stays close because no matter how lost she becomes, she can find her way home from there.

It is interesting Anne's mother claims not to believe in God but attends mass at an Episcopal church. It is also interesting Anne herself outwardly claims to be following in her parents' footsteps but even at a young age admits she likes going to church. She



describes the Catholic church where she sometimes goes with a friend as a "religious bus station." She also attends with her grandparents and says the services slake her thirst to some degree.

There is also a first look into Anne as a person. She says strange boys sometimes ride by on their bicycles "shouting racist insults about my kinky hair." She says her father's friends would point to her and say "there must have been a nigger in the woodpile." She says she does not know what that means but it is actually a reference to the fact a Negro must have been part of her ancestry. Anne is angry her father does not stand up for her when this happens and she is also confused by her father's reaction. She says her brother is grounded for a week the one time he uses the word "nigger," and that her father does not say anything to his friends for the phrase.

Anne talks about the inconsistencies in beliefs. She says the best drugs on her college campus came from the students who called themselves Jews rather than Jewish people as Anne had been taught. Anne visits a friend whose mother is a Zionist. While she claims there is nothing at temple for her, she will not let her children go out on Friday nights—she says there is no way they should be "gallivanting on the Sabbath."

When Anne is falling into the depths of alcohol, drugs and men, she at least shows a few moments of common sense. She says she knew it was not smart to drive as much as she was drinking so she got rid of her car.



# Part One, Mountain, Valley, Sky

## Part One, Mountain, Valley, Sky Summary and Analysis

In "Knocking on Heaven's Door," Anne is waiting for a plane to leave St. Louis. The plane trip is set against her memory of a "miracle" in her church. She says a gay man named Ken Nelson is dying of AIDS when he joins her church. A woman named Ranola, who was raised to believe Ken's lifestyle—and Ken himself—were an abomination, finally reaches out to him and they stand side-by-side with Ranola supporting Ken when he cannot stand. Anne says she believes that moment of connection was a miracle. At the airport, Anne is among a group of passengers who forced to wait for the opportunity to board the plane. When they do, they wait on the plane for another hour. Finally, they begin the taxi down the runway but stop. The captain says two people have demanded to be allowed off the plane. FAA regulations require the plane then be searched again to be certain the two did not leave behind a bomb. When they finally take off, they hit severe turbulence and Anne is certain she is going to die. She says she knows death for a Christian is just a change of address, but mourns the fact she will never again see Sam. When the plane levels out and the flight continues, Anne says perhaps she has just been part of another little miracle.

Anne takes Sam to Ixtapa, a resort they went to the previous year. This year, Pammy's death remains on both their minds. Anne says she can barely pull herself out of the grief and waits for the pain to lessen. Sam seems to focus on the last time he saw Pammy, three days before her death. At the resort, Anne leaves Sam to play at the daycare and says he acts as if Lazarus has risen each afternoon when she stops to pick him up. She says she does not want to suppress his grief and is at a loss of how to help him deal with it. One day, Anne watches a man with only one leg climb a trapeze set up for guests and swing out, dropping from his swing to be caught by another man. Anne asks if he is going to do it again and he says he has bigger mountains to climb. She sees his leg the next day, on the beach where the windsurfers entered the water.

While lecturing at a writers' conference in Idaho, Sam and Anne see paragliders coming in from a mountain. Sam rushes to be near the landing spot and a paraglider tells them he will give Sam a free ride as a birthday gift. Anne calls this essay, "Mountain Birthday." The paraglider also offers Anne a free ride but she knows she will not be a good paraglider. She does not say Sam can go but also does not say he cannot. She continues to worry over the problem for two days before deciding she wants him to fly—in ten years or so, but not now. Anne and Sam pray God will help them find another way to celebrate and Sam is invited to go with friends on an inner tube trip down a "sleepy little stream." Anne says she can do "sleepy streams" though she still worries some about him.

Anne is seated on the plane next to a man reading a book about the ending of the world by a popular Christian author. Noting the cross around Anne's neck, he asks if she is



born again. She says yes then thinks to herself that her friends wonder about her. They say she is "Christian-ish," but she says she is just a bad Christian. She says despite outward appearances, she is what she just admitted—born again. She says she might have told the man she is "Christian-ish" but that God knows her heart and she does not think an airplane is the best place to tell a lie.

Anne recalls her final days with Pammy. She says they would go out together, Pammy in the wheelchair and "whipping" Anne with her scarf to make her go faster. Pammy told Anne that all she had to do to be sad was to think of Rebecca and all she had to do to be happy was to think of Rebecca. Anne believes she might not have been so sad if she were not still carrying such a huge piece of Pammy around with her—but she is not willing to give up those pieces no matter how painful they are. Her steps toward recovery prompt her to name this essay, "Ladders."

Anne is caught up in the problem of trying to decide what God wants her to do with regard to allowing Sam to go on the paraglide trip. She says she imagines him dropping off the mountain into nothing and rising up to fly—or his spirit rising out of the wreckage at the bottom of the mountain to fly to heaven with Jesus and Pammy. It is interesting Anne wants God to give her a sign but when she comes to a decision, it is because of advice she received years ago about a similar situation. She says she was talking with a minister and told him she was considering an abortion. He advised her to get very quiet, to think about having the abortion, and if that thought brought her peace, she should do it. She says it did not and she gave birth to Sam—who now wants to jump off a mountain. As she is trying to decide whether to let him, she stops to think how she would feel at the moment she let him jump and compared that to how she would feel if she said he could not go. She immediately canceled his appointment and says he was a good sport about it, perhaps even a bit relieved.





# Part Two, Church, People, Steeple

## Part Two, Church, People, Steeple Summary and Analysis

On Ash Wednesday, Anne talks to Sam about the significance of the day and tells him they are going to skip cartoons before school as a sign of their respect for the dead. A short time later, she hears cartoons. She grabs Sam by the arm and sends him to his room crying. She then says there is no feeling worse than having attacked a child. She compares it to having "bitch-slapped E.T." She drops Sam at school and he goes to a friend's house that afternoon. He is then picked up by Brian, his "Big Brother," and Anne goes off to church alone. By the time she's home, Sam is in bed. She has prayed Sam will forgive her and that she will come to trust herself again. Then she goes to bed. She wakes later to find Sam in her bed and when he calls to her in his sleep, she answers, prompting him to fling his arm across her.

Anne says she has seventy-five pounds on Sam and can make him go to church simply because she is bigger. In truth, she has an array of reasons for making him go and she outlines those in her essay, "Why I Make Sam Go To Church." She talks about her church. The people there accepted her when she was in dire need of a church family for support. When she announces she is pregnant, they cheer. All through her pregnancy, she gets gifts—clothes, casseroles and money. Through the following years, when she no longer is in need of the financial assistance, one elderly woman named Mary continues to hand her a small "stash" of dimes. Anne says she usually gives them to the homeless people.

On one particular Saturday, Anne is driving Sam and Josh to Josh's house where Sam plans to spend the night. On the way, Josh says he has changed his mind and wants a quiet evening at home with his mom. Sam is hurt and Anne suggests to Josh that she and Sam might some day back out on plans that include him. She says she hurts for Sam until she realizes Josh does not like the situation either and she "lets him off the hook." When that happens, Josh suddenly changes his mind and wants Sam to come home with him. Anne says what she did not know was when she picked Sam up for church the following morning, Josh would run to the car ahead of Sam and ask permission to go along.

Anne moves next into a story she calls "Traveling Mercies." She says that at her church, they all say "traveling mercies" to anyone who is about to take a trip. It simply is a prayer that the traveler will have a safe and wonderful journey. Mimi is the mother of Bee, the girl Anne played tennis with many years earlier. Mimi is dying and so Anne and Sam start out to visit her. Anne recently purchased a used car and they are at a stop sign when the car makes a horrific noise and dies. Anne and Sam pray, though Sam takes a second to yell at the person behind them, honking and yelling at them. They pray and Anne decides to walk to a tire shop where she just purchased four new tires. The man says he does not work on vehicles but two men in the shop help her tow the



car the six blocks in and they are able to fix it in just a few minutes. Over the next few days, Sam is sick and so they continue to put off their trip to visit Mimi. Finally, Anne makes time to go alone and is there when Mimi dies.

Anne talks of a woman in their church who had always been bright and cheerful until she begins to lose her sight. She leaves the church and the church elders take Holy Communion to her but she wants no part of it. Anne says she approves of the woman's integrity—that she does not allow herself to be cheered up when there is something so totally discouraging in her life. She also notes "It must have been too annoying for everyone to be trying to manipulate her into a better sport than she was capable of being." While Anne talks of her own faith, she also talks of her own human failures and seems to take heart in seeing human elements in others.

She talks of the ritual of church. When Sam is just five days old, Anne takes him to church with her for the first time. She says the people there looked upon her as a chauffeur who brings Sam and his things back to church every week. Over the years, Sam establishes relationships with a number of those people, including Mary. Though Anne no longer needs financial help, Mary continues to occasionally hand her a bag of dimes. Though Anne is not explicit about the meaning those dimes hold for her, she seems to consider them a symbol of the love and care she gets from all her church family. That love and care, according to Anne, is why she makes Sam go to church.

Anne says she has heard bad things happen to distract your attention from a good thing waiting to be born. She says she can believe that when it is someone else enduring the bad but believes it is just punishment for her bad character when it happens to her. In this case she says if she had not had car trouble and if Sam had not gotten sick, she would not have been with Bee when Mimi died.



## Part Three, Tribe

### Part Three, Tribe Summary and Analysis

Anne and Sam go through a period of time in which they both battle illnesses. One morning, Anne wakes with a splitting headache. She has a neighbor named Rick who has lung cancer but has an optimistic outlook on life. When Anne steps outside that morning she sees Rick, who asks if he can help. She asks if Rick can give Sam a ride to school and he agrees. Anne says she is feeling somewhat better but she does not feel like working. She goes to San Quentin beach where she used to spend time with her father. She is enjoying a magazine when a large man arrives listening to a talk show on a radio. Then there is a woman who arrives with two small children. The radio goes off but Anne turns to discover the man has taken off his shirt and is sleeping with his hairy chest and large breasts showing. She finds herself annoyed but then her thoughts travel. She remembers she and Bee once discovered that if they stuck their fingers into their belly buttons, the finger smelled. She said it struck them as hilariously funny and prompted her to wonder if there was some belly-button cleaning product she should have been using. She then recalls Pammy wanted so badly to be a mother but got cancer instead. Anne recalls she was praying for the news that Pammy was cured when the word came Pammy could adopt a baby girl. Anne says she wanted to tell Pammy not to go through with it but it actually gave her friend life.

Anne says she had always told people she is not one of those Christians who forgives—she is one of the other kind. She says it is funny and true but then her lack of forgiveness becomes an issue for her. She says it wears on her to the point she knows she has to do something about it. So she makes a list of everyone she wants to forgive and realizes maybe she is aiming too high. She decides she needs to pick someone and she chooses the mother of one of Sam's classmates. The child is better at schoolwork than Sam and his mother slips Anne some readers. Anne says she took it to mean Sam needed those books and his friend had already moved past them. Anne has trouble remembering school schedules and she does not bake, which prompts this other mother to offer help on those fronts as well, but Anne takes them as putdowns. One day, she will helping Sam put his shoes on and she glances over to the other child's shoes as if comparing shoe sizes. She says it suddenly occurs to her what she is doing and she realizes it is not what this other mother is doing causing the problem—it is what Anne takes from her actions.

Anne is to give two speeches with Grace Paley. Anne describes her as the woman who presented the idea women can be part of the equal rights movement without giving up "traditional feminine things." Anne believes the two of them will have a great time—and create a great show for their audience—with an informal setting where they simply talk together. She convinces Grace, then convinces the event coordinator, and the idea is a total flop. The critics are less than kind and the audience is less than happy with the performance. Anne says she learns through this experience that she has the grace to overcome and endure. On the second night of their event, she and Grace follow the



original plan—each reads some of her own works then presents a pre-written speech. She says what she had wanted was acclaim and what she got was "Grace, lovely and plain in her faded dress and dark socks, smiling at me all night."

Anne talks briefly about her father's life and her memories of being with him on this beach. She says she joined him and others as they stood on that beach protesting death penalties and inhumane conditions. She also remembers her father taught English to prisoners at the prison and wrote about those experiences. Anne says her father's answering machine always said "The freedom train is coming." She says Rick's says "The road to enlightenment is long and difficult, and you should try not to forget snacks and magazines." She says Rick is the same age her father was upon his death—fifty-six. She notes Rick's attitude is he will live each day to the fullest.

Anne seems very laid back and has trouble adapting to Sam's schedule for school. She seems to worry she sometimes lets him down. For example, she mentions Sam is waiting for her one day with a "grim autistic stare." Anne's general dislike of Sam's friend's mother also seems to go deeper than just her ability to have everything together and her tendency to offer unwanted advice. Anne says she wears latex shorts "because she can." She says the woman has not missed a day at the gym since her divorce while Anne and other mothers forget to exercise after the birth of a child. Anne notes she prays about the forgiveness issue and searches for an answer. She does not say whether she gives God the credit when it finally comes.

Anne says she had done the same speech so often she simply wanted the opportunity to do something different. One thing that worried her was the possibility that she—at her most basic, honest level—would fail. This meant "people can see the real you, see what a schmendrick you are, what a fraud." She says what happened was she learned she could ride the wave of criticism and move on.



# Part Four, Kids, Some Sick

## Part Four, Kids, Some Sick Summary and Analysis

Sam has a friend named Ella. Anne says they have been friends since daycare and she sometimes thinks of Ella as Sam's fiancée. Ella's little sister is Olivia. As a baby, Olivia is often sick and more severely than most children. Then she is diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. The child contracts colds and flu bugs easily and often winds up in the hospital when it turns serious. Most children with the disease do not live to adulthood. Anne says Olivia's parents have largely left their normal life behind and are now in regular contact with families of sick children. Anne calls this "the land of the fucked."

Anne talks about Olivia. She is a bright happy child and on one particular September night, Olivia and her family are visiting Anne and Sam to watch an eclipse. Anne has Olivia laughing all evening. She says she is the one who taught Olivia to love chocolate and her parents have never forgotten that fact. When Olivia was born, Ella spent the night with Sam and Anne cooked pancakes in the shape of an "O" as a celebration. The fact Olivia could have a serious lapse at any moment is on Anne's mind. Anne says friends and family cook, clean, help them cry, make them laugh, raise money, care for the kids and walk the dog—whatever it takes to help the family.

Anne has a friend named Neshama who has a "regal little granddaughter" named Akela. Akela is terrified of animals—any animal. The terror is real for the little girl and Anne notes she tries to climb a person like a tree if she so much as sees an animal. When Akela's twin siblings are born, she is suddenly even more afraid because she does not have a parent to pick her up when she sees an animal. It becomes so serious her parents take her to a psychiatrist who teaches Akela to say, "This will pass." She is still afraid but finds herself willing to chant the little mantra to herself and begins to withstand seeing animals. One Fourth of July, Anne is among the guests at Neshama's picnic with Akela. Akela remains indoors because there are several dogs about and some guests have brought their pets. Finally, Neshama insists everyone put their dogs inside so Akela can also be outdoors to enjoy the day. When everyone has complied, someone shows a rabbit to the twins who are enthralled with the little creature. Akela finally agrees to touch the rabbit. A little later, one of the dogs manages to escape. His name is Rudi Kazooti and Anne says he's "a real vaudvillian's dog." He has no tail and when he tucks his head down resembles a football. The twins are again enthralled and Akela is finally encouraged to touch Rudi. She does so and nothing bad happens. Then she touches him eight more times. Anne says everyone cheers for Akela as if she has scored the winning run for the home team.

Anne takes Sam to a substitute doctor when his own pediatrician is out of town. The doctor draws blood and tells Anne it seems Sam could have picked up a parasite from a recent trip to Mexico. Then he says that is not the case and they need more blood. Anne says each time they go for blood a big man named Ira sits on Sam to hold him down while they draw the blood. Then Anne gets a call they need to draw blood yet again and



they have set up an appointment with a San Francisco oncologist. For the next days, Anne's life is in turmoil and she says she discovers God is in the bathroom. It is in the bathroom of the doctor's office that Anne first gives in fully to prayer for Sam's illness. She says she goes to the bathroom again at the mall and finds peace there. At home, some of her close friends join her in her own bathroom as she tries to hide her tears from Sam. She says it is reminiscent of her younger years when she and her friends gathered in the bathroom, but now they are gathering without LSD being involved. Sam is eventually diagnosed as having "a rather uninteresting allergy."

Anne says friends and family are shocked when the diagnosis is first handed down. She compares Olivia's illness to a canvas and says the friends and family rush to try to hold up a corner in order to lessen the load on the family. However, the bottom line is that no one can take that load from Olivia's parents. Anne says the family and friends then gather and have an old-fashioned barn raising. Now, whatever comes, Olivia's parents have shelter.

It seems Anne's main point with the essay about Akela is the adults in Akela's life are willing to do whatever is necessary to help her adjust and fight her fears. Not only do her parents pay for professional help, there are many friends and family members who offer advice—let her interact with my dog, get her a puppy. When she does make a move toward conquering her fear, the family and friends are all behind her.

Anne sets this essay against the story of Elijah. She says Elijah is told by God to eat, then to go to a cave and wait for instructions. Anne says she likes this picture of God—a Jewish mother instructing the children to eat. She and Sam later stop for smoothies and Anne says it is important in all situations to eat. Elijah waits in the cave and hears heavy winds, an earthquake and a fire, but knows none of those are God so he keeps waiting until he hears "the small voice" he recognizes. Anne says she herself finally hears that small voice. She says her prayers were soon answered when she felt a calming patience descend and then with the news Sam's oncology appointment has been canceled and he is fine.



# Part Five, Body and Soul

## Part Five, Body and Soul Summary and Analysis

Anne meets a man she likes but says, in the picture she has seen, his former girlfriend looks very young—about ten. She goes to a movie with friends. The show is about gypsies and Anne notes the old women look like crones while the young women are beautiful. The middle-aged women are just like Anne and her friends—tired and wrinkled from the cares of watching over a family. After watching the movie, Anne says she has decided she is not going to lose five pounds before she sees this man again and is not going to have the baggy eyelids snipped. Instead, she is going to "begin practicing crone hood as soon as possible."

Anne's father dies of melanoma and so she worries excessively when she has a mole. She has an annual "mole check-up" and it is during one of these visits that the doctor says one of the moles is irregular and he wants to remove it and have it biopsied. Anne describes the days of waiting for her appointment. She says when the doctor is cutting it out, he tells her he is "98 percent" certain it is benign. He asks if those odds are good enough for her and she responds he has obviously never worked with her before.

In the next essay, entitled "Thirst," Anne talks of her days of alcohol addiction. She says she woke one day "glued to my pillow by drool" from a hangover. She says she decided she should quit drinking and that resolve lasted until about five in the afternoon. Then she decided completely quitting the alcohol was probably a bit extreme so she decided she could have two beers. She chooses a brand known for its potency and buys two but then supplements them with an array of pills and pot. She says she woke feeling great, told her friends she was on the wagon and heads into the next evening in the same fashion. That evening, she has to have two beers. Within days, she is angry at the fact anyone would try to control her—even herself—and drops off even this slight semblance of moderation. She says a year will pass before she will connect with sober people who help her get sober as well.

Anne says she is thirty-three when she learns to feed herself. She has spent her life as a bulimic with a vicious cycle of binge eating, purging, dieting and poor choices. She sometimes throws up but more often used laxatives. She says her heart is racing or skipping beats and she becomes concerned soon after she has sobered up. She calls an eating specialist, describes her problem and says she has no money. The woman tells her to come in anyway because she is afraid Anne will die. Anne spends most of the first session telling the woman she is not ready to give up her bulimic lifestyle, but she is almost ready to get ready. The woman challenges her to eat a meal then call someone. She points out Anne can always purge later, but to give herself some small amount of time by calling someone. Anne does it and finds she is willing to take a walk with her brother or chat with someone rather than purging. Next, the specialist challenges Anne to figure out what it feels like to be hungry rather than eating at given





times. Anne does this as well and says that through the years she has come to accept the fact she is not skinny and her body has not gotten firmer.

Anne and Sam are in Oaxaca, Mexico, with friends. She has a black one-piece swimsuit that was once expensive and has now been washed too many times and does not fit so well. Anne says she does not want to be that old person who looks back on life and does not put on a swimsuit for a swim in a warm ocean every time she gets a chance, so she puts on the suit and goes out. She does not wear a tee-shirt over her suit. As she is walking, she begins to think of her thighs and butt as two elderly aunts. She says she might be a bit embarrassed by them but she reveres them because of their importance. She says she has a great time then heads to the hotel room for a nap before dinner. As she is waiting for the hotel van to drive her back, four teenage girls arrive "like dogs from hell." They look at Anne and then at each other and she says she is first embarrassed and then knows all four believe there is something wrong with their own bodies as well. She says she apologizes to "the aunties" for her insecure thoughts about them. That night, she takes a little extra time with her appearance before she and Sam go down to eat.

Anne, in her early forties, says she is trying to accept she is "m-m-m-middle aged." She says she can pull a large bit of excess skin from the area around her eyes. She has a candy bar "to console myself" and feels her butt expand as she sits in the theater seat. She does not say what becomes of this man to whom she is attracted.

Anne says she is too young to die but then amends that to say she is too upset to die. She says a person who dies upset will "get a bad room in Heaven with the other hysterics." She says thinking of Heaven reminds her she has God on her side. Anne has what she calls "God's In Box." She writes things she wants to say to God and slips them into this box. During this frightening time, she writes a note to God asking him to help her remember His presence. Anne says one day in church, she is talking to a woman named Marge who has a granddaughter with a tumor on her heart. Anne says Marge does not compare Anne's mole to her granddaughter's condition, but says Anne must be frightened, then prays with her.

It is interesting to note that Anne says even as she begins her sobriety program is looking for "loopholes." She says she thinks there will be some opportunities for drugs and alcohol. For example, a person who is off the alcohol might have the option to smoke pot or she might get a glass of wine on the anniversary of her sobriety. She says it does not work that way, but she holds out that hope for some time and searches in vain for that loophole. She says two of her best friends, both sober, think they find loopholes, shoot themselves in the head and die.

Anne says she would ruin the food she did not eat so it would not tempt her later. With the help of this eating disorder specialist, she stops to analyze her hunger. She says she looks down at her belly as if she might be able to see inside. Then she carries on a conversation, first noting she is hungry and then asking what she might like to eat. The answer might be Cheetoes or frosting and she allows whatever that answer is. After she eats some Cheetoes, she stops to ask whether she is still hungry. When the answer is





"no," she always qualifies that by saying to herself she should not wet the food or throw it away because she might want it later. She says it takes some time, but she eventually overcomes the need for Cheetoes and frosting and wants oranges, bell peppers or rice, though she might just as well decide she wants cookies.

Anne says she knows appearance is not what makes a person but says it is her "Butt Mind" that sometimes points out she is a sad, droopy, dimply butt. When she spends a little extra time on her appearance before going down to dinner, she says it is sometimes necessary to "start with the outside." She says the makeup and clothing need not be viewed as a coat of paint but can be considered a mantilla.

# Part Six, Family

## Part Six, Family Summary and Analysis

Anne talks about spending a day on the beach with her mother. She says she spends most of her time being annoyed because her mother seems so frail and needy. She says things that annoy her include her mother wearing a heavy sweater though the day is warm and that she has lipstick on her teeth. By the end of this essay, Anne admits it is not her duty to regulate her mother's thermostat so she does not need the sweater.

Anne describes her mother as being like "cells in the process of division, which haven't yet settled back into place." She says her mother did not always seem as vulnerable as she does now, and that seems to be what bothers Anne most. She says mother wants to "tie her cord to me." However, Anne does not want to be her "mommy's mommy," she is a mother herself and still wants to have a mom of her own. She says she feels like "sobbing with grief" over how old her mother is. She says she is aggravated when her mother seems to totter and clings so tightly to Anne's hand. Then she says it does not matter to Sam, who loves his grandmother and just wants to help her "find her balance."

Anne is in Houston with a man she loves though she says their relationship was in trouble. She said it is appropriate that it seems everything is "broken." She says it is as if the city just opened to the public and they have not got all the bugs worked out yet. It is in this setting that Anne and her lover are watching movies, eating dinner, falling into bed and then rushing out to take in the sights. Then she is sitting in the Rothko Chapel and knows she is about to make a discovery. She also knows it is not something she wants to know but she continues to sit there while it catches up with her. She says her boyfriend leaves the chapel and she continues to simply sit and think. That is when she finally accepts the fact her father is dead and she is never going to have him back. She cries for a time, almost as if she has just been told her father died when he has actually been gone for twenty years. She says she acknowledges the fact she has had a hole in her life for her entire life and her father's death dramatically widened it.

Anne has always had trouble with her hair. She says it is impossible to tame and all through childhood people would ask if she had stuck her finger in an electric socket. She says most people tease her though her father and several of her "mothers" think her hair is beautiful but most people tease her or make negative comments. Her mother takes her to have it straightened for awhile but she eventually stops that process. When Anne is in her twenties, "industrial-strength mousse" provides an answer but its effectiveness depends on the weather.

Anne says she spends years worrying about her hair and then two things happen. One is she remembers the words of her friend Pammy who said there simply is not time for some unimportant things. The second is that she sees "Shawshank Redemption," and at the end of the movie Tim Robbins' character is standing in the water, his hands toward the sky as it rains. She says if she were in that position, half her thoughts would



be focused on how her bangs were going to look. With those two things in mind, she calls on her neighbor—Marlene. Marlene has dreadlocks and has offered to start dreadlocks for Anne. Marlene and her daughter create the hairstyle and Anne says that eventually her hairstyle becomes accepted.

Anne's next essay is about a trip she and Sam take to the Sea of Cortez. They plan to go on a snorkeling trip to see seals but there are a number of problems. There is no child's size wetsuit and what they have is pink. Sam dons it anyway but the suit does not have arms or legs, meaning there is no insulation. Then Sam loses a flipper and Anne realizes the current is very strong. Considering all those things, Anne returns to the boat with Sam. She says she believes she can make it but is not certain. A guide offers to take Sam out and Anne agrees. She says she worries about him with someone else caring for him, but takes the chance. Anne swims ahead and soon realizes Sam has not joined her. In fact, the guide decides Sam is near hypothermia and returns him to the boat after only a short time in the water. Anne returns to the boat and a short time later two dolphins pop up near the boat, putting on a show for Sam and Anne. On the way home, Sam turns to look behind them and Anne realizes they are being flanked by hundreds of dolphins.

Anne talks of the pictures of her family. She says she wishes they had pictures taken on vacation or in a portrait studio. She says all the pictures of her family have the shell-shocked look of a family in crisis and blames it on her parents' rocky marriage. She does not really seem to mind the fact they did not have vacations or the background from the portrait studio, but seems more focused on the fact they do not have that perfect front she sees in other family portraits. It seems likely what she sees in those photos is colored by her memories.

Anne knows she has been trying to remake the men she meets to fit the empty place left by her father's death. She says it is sort of like an old dog suit—it is not comfortable and it has fleas, and none of the men exactly fill it. She says none of the men she has "taken hostage" will fill her father's place in her life. She says she knows she and her current lover are on "borrowed time," but she somehow has hope for love in her future.

Anne names this essay "Sister," though she does not have a sister. She talks instead of some women who she might refer to as "sister," including Pammy. She also talks about her own hesitancy with regard to having dreadlocks. She said she really thought there might be something wrong with having dreadlocks. She says it seems she is borrowing something that belongs to black people. When she makes the decision, women in her church are concerned about her. She says those women want her to succeed in life. After a while, the style becomes more accepted and she now looks at life through dreadlocks which seem like her own private picket fence.

Anne says she prays when Sam is on the boat and has not been able to make the swim out to the dolphins. She says her first instinct is to pray Sam not feel the hurt but she realizes it is not God's promise to eliminate tears and hurts. Instead, she prays Sam will feel God's comfort.



## Part Seven, Shore and Ground

### Part Seven, Shore and Ground Summary and Analysis

Anne and Sam are on the San Quentin beach one day. Anne says she likes the beach because there are often other children for Sam to play with, their dog Sadie can run, they have room to throw sticks for Sadie and Anne comes away feeling refreshed. One particular day, a man comes onto the beach and hits his dog twice with a stick, then jerks the dog up by the collar so she dangles as if suspended "from a meat hook." Anne gives a half-hearted shout at the man but it is another mother who yells at him to stop or she will call the police. Sam asks Anne why she did not do something to stop the abuse and Anne says she was afraid of the man. Sam follows the other mother to the nearby guard where they report the incident. Later, Sam runs by Anne and slaps her hand, making her drop some small stones she collected. She wonders at the little act of meanness but she laughs at him as he runs down the beach making faces at her.

There comes a period when Anne and Sam are having difficulties. They are short on money, Sam "grows" a sty which gets bigger and bigger, Anne bounces a check and the car develops a backfire. Anne says she drops Sam at her brother's house, puts the car in the shop and is headed home in a "Blues Brothers" car on loan from the garage when she is stopped in gridlock traffic. Meanwhile, Mary—the woman who has periodically given Anne and Sam little bags of dimes—dies. Anne recalls that a short time before her death, Mary told the story of her baptism. She was baptized in the Mississippi River and when they arrived at the designated place there were poles standing up from the river bed forming a circle. The men had waded into the water that morning and set the poles to indicate a safe place to be in the muddy water.

With the troubles on Anne's mind, her friend Neshama calls and asks her to go for a walk. Anne stirs herself to join her friend but dresses nice just because she wants to pump herself up. They walk through a boggy area and their feet are soon covered in mud. Anne says a little mud does not matter and reminds herself Mary was baptized in muddy water. As Anne and Neshama try to climb up a small embankment, both slide down and are soon covered with mud. Anne says she sits for awhile, thinking, and she is not nearly as sad as she had been.

One day, Anne and Sam are on San Quentin beach. They are having Sam's eighth birthday party at a friend's house later that day but for the moment are spending a little time together. They build an "altar" of sand. She says it is elaborate with turrets and moats to keep out the "bad guys" and the monsters and decorated with sea shells, seaweed and sticks. She says he has a knack for building something from "garbage." She recounts that one of his teachers remarked on this ability. She says a plastic container, a strand of embroidery thread, a bent paper clip, a popsicle stick and a ball of foil became an "apparatus for hypnotizing animals, with a spring-lock closure so that any bad guys who stole it could never get it to work." That day on the beach, he runs off looking for something else for his sand creation and comes back with clothespins he



makes into men. When Anne says it is time to leave, Sam objects. He says he has to stay and protect his creation. Anne points out that he knows the tide will come in but Sam is angry. He responds he is going to kick it over and adds, "I hate you." She says she wants to tell him that the best part of their creation was that they made it together on his birthday but does not. Sam walks off for awhile and then returns with a piece of sea glass for Anne. Anne says she carries it with her, and she often says what she said the day Sam gave it to her even though she is not certain to whom she is saying it—"Thank you, thank you, thank you."

As Anne describes the scene of the man beating his dog, she touches only briefly on the fact the man who hit the dog did something wrong. Her main concern seems to be why she did not do something. She notes there were two thieves who hanged at the same time as Jesus and that one of them joined the crowd in tormenting Jesus while the other stood up for him. Anne says she once saw a friend throw himself under the hooves of a horse to save a child and she thought she could do that as well. She says she now realizes she is a coward.

Anne talks about the desire to "pump herself up" when things are not going well. She buys herself some chocolates and says she is still miserable only now she is a bit fatter as well. The next morning, when she is going for a walk, she slips into nice clothes and even wears lipstick. It is all an effort to "pump herself up." She says she later realizes it is not something she can do. She says the spirit only rises when it is "way down." She says that may be so it does not simply fly away too quickly. Despite how the mud covers Anne at the moment, she realizes she feels "soft and clean."

Anne talks of Sam and that he has legs like her father. She calls them "bird legs" but says Sam's will tan whereas her father's were always very white. She says Sam's temperament is changing. He sometimes lashes out at Anne but can be so sweet most people remark he is a good child. He once told Anne, "No one thinks you're funny." She calls those kinds of comments "nonchalant sadism." She says it is his version of a teenager.

She says Sam recently said he does not believe in Jesus but believes in "all the gods." Anne says she believes he did it to torture her. However, at the end of this essay, she says she whispers up what she has previously described as a prayer—"Thank you, thank you, thank you." She is always referred to God as "he or she," but in this case says she is not even sure to whom she is speaking. The reader is left to decide what this means.



# Characters

## Anne Lamott

Anne is the author of this book consisting of a series of essays about various aspects of her life. She is a young girl in the early essays. She has two brothers, one older and one younger, and wants desperately to please her parents. She prays from an early age, but in secret because she does not want to go against her parents' teachings that religion is for the ignorant. She falls into a lifestyle of drinking and drugs and spends the next several years either drunk, high or hung over. She attends college briefly then makes her living by writing, teaching tennis and cleaning houses.

She goes through a series of relationships that include married men and will much later admit she tries to remake those men into images of her father. When Anne becomes pregnant, she has an abortion. She describes the nightmare of bleeding and fear. When she becomes pregnant again, she plans to have another abortion but it is her friend Pammy who says she must have the child. Anne is not certain she is prepared for motherhood but has sobered up and does have the child. She admits she is rather laid back as a mother, forgets he gets out of school early on Wednesdays and does not bake for school parties. She talks of her desire to protect Sam but she also wants him to "fly." It takes her years to come to terms with the death of her father and she worries she is an "erratic" daughter to her mother.

## Sam

Anne's son. Sam is a bright child and Anne talks of his creativity. He can make something of "garbage" and one of his teachers remarks on this gift. She and Sam are close in many ways and Sam has an array of friends. Anne says she makes Sam go to church, not because she is bigger than he and she can make him, but because she wants him to have that contact. She also notes he loves the people there and they love him. By the end of the final essay—Sam's eighth birthday—he is having some growing pains. Anne notes he can be a beautifully-behaved child but he can also be horrible. He says he does not believe in Jesus but believes in "all gods," though Anne says she thinks his only reason for that thought is to torture her.

## Pammy

Anne meets Pammy when Anne is friends with Shelly and Pammy is friends with Shelly's younger sister. Anne and Pammy gravitate to Shelly's home because both girls have bad homes of their own. Pammy's mother is an alcoholic and Anne notes Pammy frequently steps over her mother on the way out the door. Though that might be an exaggeration, Anne also says in later years, Pammy's mother would rant and rave, the girls would say hello to her and she would quietly leave the room. Pammy and Anne become very close and remain best friends after high school. When Anne becomes



pregnant at thirty, it is Pammy who takes her to an abortion clinic. When Anne becomes pregnant again, it is Pammy who encourages her to have the child. Anne notes Pammy holds onto her sense of humor and dignity after her cancer diagnosis. When she undergoes a second round of chemo, she calls Anne for help. Pammy says she wants Anne to shave her head because the hair is so spotty it looks like she found some in the trash can and tried to glue it on. Pam adopts a daughter, Rebecca, not long before she dies of cancer at age thirty-seven.

## **Anne's Father**

Anne's father dies when he is in his mid-fifties though it will be twenty years before Anne fully acknowledges his death. He is rather erratic when Anne is a child and berates her for a B-minus. As he puts it, how much more difficult would it be to make an A? Anne admits she spends most of her adult life trying to make men fit into her father's mold and that it has not ever worked.

## **Anne's Mother**

Anne's mother puts herself through law school and becomes an attorney when Anne is young. She moves to Honolulu and Anne apparently has little contact with her through the years. She returns to California later and Anne notes her mother has a great relationship with Sam.

## **Olivia**

Olivia is the younger sister of Sam's friend, Ella. Olivia is sickly as a baby and is later diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. Anne talks of the child and her attitude toward life, then talks of her own fear that she will get the call that Olivia is back in the hospital.

## **My Catholic Friend**

A young girl who is never named but is simply called "my friend." The two girls picked blackberries together and Anne sometimes goes to church with them. She says the two girls peeled apples once at her friend's house and her father, returning late from a party, came into the girl's room and beat her for not throwing away the apple peels. The next day, the father was cheerful and nothing was said about it.

## **Mimi**

The mother of Bee who was Anne's tennis partner in high school. Anne says Mimi referred to her as her "second daughter" and she spent many hours at Mimi's house. Anne is with Mimi when she dies.



## **Lee**

Shelly's mother. She is a Christian Scientist and it is Lee who tells Anne she is beautiful, smooths her hair and prays for them all—including Anne.

## **James Noel**

The minister at St. Andrew's where Anne goes to listen to music. He is also the man who baptizes her.

## **Veronica**

The minister who takes James' place. It is Veronica who tells the story of the young girl who is lost and cannot find her way home but tells the policeman she can always find her way from her church.





## Objects/Places

### Tilburn

Where the author grew up.

### Tokyo

Where Anne's father was raised by missionary parents.

### Liverpool, England

Where Anne's mother lived until she was twelve.

### Belvedere Lagoon

Where Anne's best friend, Shelly, and her family live.

### Ixtapa

The Mexican resort city where Anne goes with Sam the year before Pammy dies. They return the following year but she considers it might simply be too soon after Pammy's death for her to have fun.

### Sea of Cortez

Where Anne and Sam go to swim with the seals.

### Colorado

Where Anne is giving a lecture and where they celebrate Sam's seventh birthday, though Anne does not allow Sam to accept a paragliding trip.

### San Quentin Beach

Where Anne and Sam go frequently because the beach is usually much less crowded than most commercial beaches. Anne says it is where she and her father spent time, part of candlelight vigils protesting death penalties and inhumane conditions at San Quentin prison.

## **Honolulu**

Where Anne's mother moves to be an attorney after she and Anne's father separate.

## **St. Andrews**

A church where Anne attends as an adult. She describes it as "funky" and says the people there fully accept her and anxiously await Sam's arrival each Sunday.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Anne begins describing her life from the time of her childhood. She talks of her need to please her father with her choices and how that need was the reason for her outward reaction to religion. However, she says she always prayed, even as a child when she did not know what or whom she was praying to. As she ages, she comes to accept religion as a part of her life. She outgrows the need to follow what her parents want and to come to a place where she decides an affiliation with a church is important to her. She says she finds support—financial and emotional—in that body of believers.

Another aspect of this theme is how Anne feels a horrible loss when her father dies. Anne talks only briefly of the illness leading up to his death. Based on this, it seems apparent this subject is too painful to be written about in depth. She does write an essay about an event that occurs some twenty years after his death. She is in a chapel with a boyfriend and notes the relationship is falling apart. She admits it is mostly because she has tried to make this man into her father and that the "suit" she is trying to force on him is uncomfortable. As she sits in this chapel, she finally acknowledges her father is gone. She says it is almost as if she had just gotten the news of his death but says she believes she will finally be able to move on with her life because of her acknowledgement.

It should be noted she feels a similar loss when her best friend Pammy dies but she never fully addresses this loss or her resolution of the loss in this book.

## The Need for Support

Anne talks of her own childhood and the instability of her family situation. She finds her way to a friend's house where she becomes a frequent guest. This friend is important to Anne but seems to be less important than the friend's mother who lies with Anne when she is afraid to go to sleep at night and provides the support Anne is not receiving at home. Later, Anne becomes friends with a girl named Bee and it is another case in which Bee's mother, Mimi, is probably more important in Anne's life. Anne finds herself at Mimi's bedside with Bee when Mimi dies.

Anne meets Pammy through her friend Shelly. Though Pammy is younger than Anne, she will eventually become her best friend and a major supporter. It is Pammy who says Anne should drop the idea of having an abortion when she becomes pregnant with Sam and Anne feels a tremendous loss when Pammy dies of cancer.

Anne is first drawn to St. Andrews church because of the music. She spends Sundays in the nearby market place and sometimes stands in the doorway to listen to the music. Eventually, she stays for sermons and becomes an accepted member of the "funky" congregation. She says that when she announces she is pregnant with Sam, the



congregation cheers. They provide her with casseroles, emotional support and money as she struggles to make it through the pregnancy and the early years before her writing career takes off. She once recounts the story told by their pastor, Veronica, of a girl who was lost and could not tell the police officer where she lived. When the little girl sees her church, she says he can let her out because she can always find her way home from church. Anne says she is like that and that is why she attends St. Andrews.

## The Desire to Do What's Right

Anne has an inherent desire to do what is expected of her or what is right. As a child, she questions what that is because she admits the need to pray from an early age. However, her parents are atheists and deride anyone who practices religious worship. Anne says she likes to go to church with her grandparents and with a catholic friend but she always acts as if she does not like it because it is what she believes her parents expect. She talks also of her belief that she failed her parents if she brought home a grade lower than an "A."

While it may seem Anne did not have the desire to do the right thing as a teenager and young adult, she does eventually see she has to make changes. When she is faced with an impending abortion—which would be her second—she agonizes over the decision. She finally talks to a minister who tells her that in her current situation—with no family support and no financial support—he recommends an abortion. However, he tells her she should imagine she does decide to have the abortion and consider what her reaction would be, and then imagine she does not. It is from gauging her reactions that she decides she will have the baby.

When she is faced with the decision whether she will allow Sam to go paragliding, she asks advice and worries over the possibilities. When she finally decides she will not allow him to go because he is too young, she sits down with Sam and prays God will provide a way for him to celebrate his birthday. Anne has a similar reaction when she and Sam are at the Sea of Cortez planning to swim with the seals. She decides the current is too strong and it would not be safe for Sam to go with her. When he is also not able to withstand the cold temperature, he ends up missing out on the sights. She begins to pray something will happen to make the day happy for him but remembers God does not promise everything will be happy. Instead, she prays Sam will find peace in the situation.



# Style

## Perspective

The book is written in first person from Anne's point of view. The perspective is completely limited but is acceptable because the book is designed to be her understanding of various aspects of her life.

As is the case with any non-fiction work written in first person, there are some places where the reader may wonder if the story is completely accurate. It is human nature to tone down stories that put oneself in a bad light. This does not seem the case with Anne. Instead, she seems to honestly relate the stories of her addiction to alcohol and drugs and her relationships with men. She does go into detail on some points more than others. For example, she talks only briefly about one particular man, otherwise talking about her relationships in general. This actually makes it more believable she is telling the complete truth with the more detailed events.

The reader is left to decide some things for himself. For example, Anne tells of her need to please her father as a child and that she therefore acted as though she was not interested in religion. She later seems to make a commitment to Christianity but ends the book by saying she is not sure "to whom" she prays. It seems to indicate she doubts her own convictions, though throughout the book she takes moments out from stressful situations to pray.

## Tone

The book is written in a fairly straightforward tone but there are many lessons only hinted at by the writer, leaving it to the reader to decide how much—or how little—to make of specific events. For example, she talks of her mother and says her mom is dressed in a sweater though it is warm outside and that she has lipstick on her teeth. She says years ago her mother wore a mask of makeup and it seemed to make her less vulnerable. Then Anne says the reason it bothers her her mother has lipstick on her teeth is that "It tells the whole world, I tried, I missed, I have no idea it's there." Anne does not explain further but leaves it to the reader to make connections on his own. While this could mean a reader simply misses some of Anne's points, it is more likely the thoughtful reader will draw from his own background to make connections applicable in his own life.

It is important for a potential reader to understand this book is not a Christian self-help book. In fact, Anne seems often to doubt her faith and ends the book by saying she is not certain to whom she prays. She is fairly free with curse words, even beyond the point when she becomes a Christian. The bad language is not overwhelming but could put off some readers.

## Structure

The book is a collection of essays. The person looking for a story with a plot is going to be disappointed. The essays are arranged roughly in chronological order though Anne has some flashbacks and foretells some events. This can be distracting. For example, she foretells Pammy's death in the Overture, but later talks of an event that happened while Pammy was still alive. Time is not really an issue and most readers will not have trouble keeping track of what is happening.

The book has seven sections and twenty-five chapters. The sections have between one and six chapters each. The Overture, the longest section, has only a single chapter—Lily Pads. This chapter is fifty-eight pages and offers an account of some specific events in Anne's childhood up to her life at about age thirty. The following sections are entitled, "Mountain, Valley, Sky;" "Church, People, Steeple;" "Tribe;" "Kids, Some Sick;" "Body and Soul;" "Fambly;" and "Shore and Ground." Each title offers a clue to the contents of the essays in that section. The titles offer additional clues and are often thoughtful, insightful views on life. For example, "Knocking on Heaven's Door," is about an incident Anne faces when her plane is delayed and she gets a scare in the air.



## Quotes

"My faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land and in this way I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear," Overture, p. 3.

"Pammy would step over her mother on the way out the door and arrive at Shelly's house just as I did. At my house, no one was passed out on the floor, but my mom was scared and Dad was bored and my little brother was growing fat and my older brother was being called by the siren song of the counterculture," Overture, p. 13.

"I had no big theological thoughts but had discovered that if I said, Hello?, to God, I could feel God say, Hello, back. It was like being in a relationship with Casper," Overture, p. 51.

"The man was wearing shorts, and his stump was visible an inch or two below the hemline—and I've got to say this kicked the shit out of my feeling self-conscious in shorts because of my cellulite and stretch marks," Ladders, p. 74.

"Or you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask this is what I would say. I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds," Why I Make Sam Go To Church, p. 99.

"I tried to will myself into forgiving various people who had harmed me directly or indirectly over the years—four former Republican presidents, three relatives, two old boyfriends, and one teacher in a pear tree—it was 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' meets 'Taxi Driver,'" Forgiveness, p. 128.

"Some people think that God is in the details, but I have come to believe that God is in the bathroom," Hearthcake, p. 161.

"Eventually I lowered my face into the palms of my hands. I know you have bigger fish to fry, I said to God, but I need a little help with this stupidity," Gypsies, p. 172.

"I felt that when I got sober, God had saved me from drowning, but now I was getting kicked to death on the beach. It's so much hipper to be a drunk than a bulimic," Hunger, p. 192.



"On that plane with all these beautiful young girls walking up the aisle as if it were a runway, if someone had exhibited so much as an angstrom of doubt about my beauty, I would have said that they could come kiss my big, beautiful, dimply, droopy butt," *The Aunties*, p. 201.

"Industrial-strength mousse came along in my twenties and I could moussify my hair and bangs into submission with this space-age antifrizz shit that may turn out someday to have been carcinogenic. I used to worry about this but then I'd think, I don't really care as long as they don't take it off the market," *Sister*, p. 230.

"Instead—God must have been in one of her show-offy moods—the next thing we knew the boat was surrounded on both sides by dolphins, literally hundreds of dolphins leaping out of the waves everywhere you looked, in arcs like rainbows, vaulting in and out of the water like aquatic clowns," *Baby*, p. 242.

"Sam really has a gift for making things out of next to nothing. He has magic in those little monkey fingers. He sees things spacially,"  
*Altar*, p. 268.





## Topics for Discussion

Describe Anne's life before she begins going to church at St. Andrew's. What are some of the lowest points? How does she overcome?

What was Anne's relationship with her father? Her mother? What does she finally admit twenty years after her father's death? Why has it taken her so long? What change is there in her attitude when she makes this admission?

What is Anne's reaction when she discovers she is pregnant with Sam? Who talks her into having the child? What is the reaction of the church members at St. Andrews?

Describe Anne's relationship with Sam. What are her concerns when Sam wants to go paragliding? snorkeling? Are these typical concerns of a mother?

How does Anne come to decide whether she will allow Sam to go paragliding? What is Sam's reaction? Do you believe she made the right decision?

What is the resolution when Anne decides Sam cannot make the swim to see the seals? What is it that Anne prays for?

What was Anne's attitude toward God as a child? How does it change over the years? What does she tell the man on the airplane when he asks if she is born again? How are Sam's attitudes changing as he ages?