

# **The Vanishing Year: A Novel Study Guide**

**The Vanishing Year: A Novel by Kate Moretti**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Moretti, Kate. *The Vanishing Year*. Atria Books/Simon & Schuster. 2016.

*The Vanishing Year* is a mystery thriller by Kate Moretti in which 29-year-old Zoe Whittaker attempts to confront and escape the dark secrets of her past. Zoe in her current life is the wife of the handsome and rich 40-year-old Wall Street millionaire Henry Whittaker. Henry is the perfect husband: he is constant, steady, supportive, and attentive, though he is haunted by the death of his first wife, Tara. However, Zoe's past is completely at odds with her present: she was abandoned at birth in the hospital by a teenage mother only to be raised by a loving adoptive mother named Evelyn who got into a bad relationship with a man named Mick. It was only after Evelyn's death and Zoe's having dropped out of college that Zoe and Mick reconnected and Mick got Zoe into doing and selling drugs, but when Zoe stumbled upon a sex trafficking ring of underage girls, she went to the police. Zoe was kidnapped and brutally beaten, but was rescued and went east to New York. There, she worked in a flower shop with her friend Lydia until meeting Henry at a dinner party for which he hired the florist.

In the present, Zoe goes out of her way to avoid running into people she knows. In five years, she has only been recognized twice, and she denied her identity each time. While meeting with a reporter friend named Cash, Zoe is nearly run down on the street by a gray car. When her apartment is later broken into and ransacked, Zoe realizes her past must be catching up with her. At the same time, she enlists Cash's help to track down her birth mother, while Henry grows jealous of the time Zoe is spending with Cash. Arguments and makeup sex become common between Zoe and Henry, though each argument drives them further apart. Cash is successful in tracking down Zoe's birth mother, whom Zoe goes to meet. Zoe's birth mother, Caroline, is the cousin of Evelyn, and wants nothing to do with Zoe because Zoe does not fit into her life. Zoe does learn, however, that she had a twin sister named Joan. Zoe then tracks down her sister only to learn from Joan's adoptive parents that Joan has been dead for three years, having been killed in a hit-and-run in Midtown.

Henry and Zoe decide to go away for the weekend to get away from everything. When Henry is out, Zoe begins to look into Henry's old records and discovers photos from Henry's first wedding. Henry's first wife, she discovers, was Joan – Tara Joan Whittaker, her twin sister. Henry then returns to the house where he overpowers Zoe, ties her up, feeds her sedatives, and rapes her over a period of two weeks. When Henry lets Zoe up to use the bathroom, Zoe bashes his face with a candle and runs to the neighbor's. The neighbor is Penny, Henry's family's longtime help. Penny shoots and kills Henry as Henry goes after Zoe. Zoe learns that Penny's husband, Frank, is quadriplegic thanks to a fire started by Henry as a child. She also learns that Penny was fired when Penny got too close to the truth of things. It is also learned that Henry blamed Zoe for Tara's death, killed the killer, and then sought to kill Zoe – but he decided that she owed it to him to become his wife instead replacing Tara. As the novel ends, Zoe is now dating Cash and

seeing a therapist. She, Cash, and Lydia travel to Lake Tahoe to spread the ashes of Evelyn.



# Chapters 1 – 6

## Summary

In Chapter 1, it is April 2014 in New York. Zoe Whittaker has been dreaming about her biological mother, Carolyn Seever, who abandoned Zoe at the hospital when Zoe was born and Carolyn was 16. Zoe, now 29, also reflects on having been raised by Evelyn, her adoptive mother. In Zoe's dreams, Carolyn is either her savior or her killer. Zoe wonders if Carolyn would be proud of the woman Zoe has become, serving on the board of CARE (Children's Association for Relief and Education). Zoe worries about how the evening's CARE benefit, to be held at the New York Public Library (NYPL), will go off. Zoe's 40-year-old millionaire husband, Henry Whittaker, reassures her it will all work out. Zoe loves how steady, supportive, and decisive Henry is.

Zoe admits to thinking about Carolyn again, but Henry tells her they can talk about it later, and compliments Zoe on how the library setting has turned out. Zoe loves to be praised by Henry. Francesca Martin, the event coordinator at the NYPL, congratulates Zoe on how everything has turned out. Among the 200 guests is a New York Post reporter, invited by Zoe herself. The final speaker for the evening is 20-year-old culinary student Amanda Natese, who benefited from CARE. When a woman asks if Zoe is Hilary Lawlor, whom everyone thinks is dead, Zoe denies she is and grasps Henry's arm for support. She asks Henry to bring her outside quickly. Henry asks Zoe if she knew the woman. Zoe denies it, but knows in reality that the woman was her college roommate, Molly McKay.

In Chapter 2, Zoe wakes up still feeling uncomfortable. Henry is already off to work. Zoe cannot help but think of Molly. Molly, Zoe recalls, could be very friendly or very manipulative. Henry calls to check in on Zoe, and Zoe agrees to try to meet him for lunch. Zoe looks up Molly and her pharmaceutical sales representative husband, Gunther, online. Zoe worries that Molly and Gunther will figure out who she is and she knows she has been too careless lately. Zoe meets up with Cash Murray from the New York Post, telling him he cannot run any photos of her from the previous evening. Cash says it would not be the same, and asks her to meet with him again on Monday to at least review the pictures before the story runs the following Sunday. Zoe agrees. She then goes to meet Henry for lunch. At home, Zoe takes a nap and reads until Henry gets home.

In Chapter 3, the novel shifts back in time to June, 2009, to San Pablo, California. Zoe, at Max's Cocktail Lounge, was angry when she was approached by Mick, who was physically abusive to Evelyn before Evelyn died of cancer. Zoe had to constantly ignore phone calls from college friends and professors who wondered where she had gone and if she would come back to graduate. Zoe was currently dealing with her mother's burial, for which she asked Mick for financial help. Mick met her a week later with 3,000 dollars, saying he had failed her and her mother in the past. He also began to feed her white pills, as well as to have her sell the drug for more money. Using the drugs and



making money made Zoe feel as if she could handle her problems. Zoe began to party with Mick, but became angered when he slept with a girl in her very early teens named Rosie. Zoe quickly learned the girl had been forced into sex trafficking by a man named Jared, so she left Mick behind and quit drugs and drinking. She could not get the girl out of her mind, so Zoe went to the police to confess everything. She saved 11 girls and helped break down the trafficking ring.

In Chapter 4, the novel returns to April 2014. It is Monday morning. Henry is already off to work. Zoe meets up with Cash Murray. His photos of the event are beautiful, and he plans to use six. Two of them feature Zoe, and she asks that only the photo featuring herself and Henry be used. Cash asks about her being mistaken the other night. Zoe explains that college was so long ago anyone could have forgotten. Without thinking, she explains that she went to UCSF. Cash then asks her for details about CARE and her life for the article. Zoe says that she was adopted, and that both her adoptive parents are dead. Zoe also explains that she never tried to find her birth mother. In speaking about the past, Zoe cannot help but wonder if she is being pursued by someone. She does not believe anyone is actually pursuing her, but she worries. Outside, a car almost hits Zoe, but Cash throws her out of the way. A Hispanic cart vendor says that the car, a gray sedan, was waiting and the driver gunned its engine when he saw Zoe. Someone deliberately tried to hit her.

In Chapter 5, not wanting to go home, Zoe decides to go to La Fleur d'Elise, the flower shop she worked at only a year before. There, designer Lydia is thrilled to see Zoe. They go to Sam's for lunch. Zoe explains that she wants Lydia back in her life and that she wants to volunteer at the floral shop; she says that she is often alone because Henry works so much. Lydia thinks Henry is too controlling, but Zoe says he is protective following the death of his first wife in a car accident. Lydia asks if Zoe has been searching for Carolyn, but Zoe says she has not. Lydia offers to help her look, and Zoe asks Lydia to speak to Elisa about volunteer work.

In Chapter 6, Zoe is happy when Henry gets home from work. Dinner is prepared by Penny, the help who feels more like a mother than a hired hand. Zoe tells them about her mishap, but she does not say the car intentionally tried to hit her. Both Henry and Penny are stunned by this. When Penny leaves later, Zoe asks about going back to work at the flower shop to be able to do something. Henry worries about losing Zoe. They have sex and then decide to order pizza. Zoe talks about Lydia and the flower shop again. She wants Henry's approval. Henry tells Zoe that she can do whatever she wants. Zoe also mentions finding her mother, but Henry becomes angry. He says they have built a life together, and Lydia's punk-rock-like lifestyle and Zoe's abandoning-mother are not part of it. Henry thinks Zoe wants too much and that he is not enough for her. Zoe reassures him that he is all she wants, but that she does not want to stay stuck in an apartment forever. Henry worries that Lydia will drag Zoe back into her old lifestyle, or the past. He asks for time before they go back into their pasts. Zoe says she can give Henry time. Henry holds Zoe tightly saying he will not let her go again.



## Analysis

If two things are evident when Kate Moretti's novel *The Vanishing Year* begins, they are that nothing is ever what it seems, and that the past cannot be avoided forever. These two themes will form the backbone of the novel. Both rely heavily on Zoe, as Zoe is seeking to avoid a traumatic and dangerous past while building a new life for herself in the present. The banquet for CARE comes to symbolize the fact that the past is drawing near once more; and the near hit-and-run in turn symbolizes an omen of danger to come. Zoe is troubled by the near-recognition and the near-hit, but she does her best to reassure herself that these things are coincidental and unrelated. They may be coincidental, but they are not unrelated: they speak of the past coming back for Zoe. The past, as Moretti contends chillingly clearly here, cannot be avoided forever. These incidents are not what they appear to be on the surface, and they are not what Zoe attempts to rationalize them to be.

Readers will note that Zoe goes to extensive lengths to parse these events. The novel is told from Zoe's point of view, as everything that is happening to her directly. Thus, only Zoe holds the clues to the mystery unfolding around her. Readers are given privileged access to Zoe's thoughts and feelings – and this allows the reader a kind of unique position from which to consider how these thoughts and feelings might or might not be wrong. The reader is an objective observer, while Zoe is a personally-involved experiencer of events. This is critical because, even given her past – from the drugs to the sex ring to being kidnapped and beaten – Zoe still attempts to rationalize everything out. Readers should note that she explains that she does not believe she is actively being pursued – but that she is worried, at least.

Other areas of worry and concern also open for Zoe that belie the idea that nothing is ever what it seems. Zoe's insistence on talking about wanting to find her birth mother does not sit well with Henry. From first appearances, this is because Henry is happy with the life he and Zoe have built together over the past year. His argument that it is clear Zoe's mother did not want to be in her life is reasonable grounds for wanting to avoid dredging up drama. This makes perfect sense to Zoe, and perhaps to readers, as given Henry lost his first wife to a tragic car accident. Readers should very carefully note this, as many of the loved ones in Henry's life end up in car-related fatalities. This is not mere coincidence, but ominous. What is more, Henry seems to insist that Zoe have no connection to her past whatsoever – including Lydia and the flower shop. Henry does indeed seem to have controlling tendencies, but he does not exert his control in overt, demanding ways. Rather, he plays on the heart and emotions of Zoe to get her to behave how he wants her to. This is a clear sign that he is manipulative, and obviously not the perfect husband Zoe thinks. This in turn reinforces the thematic argument that nothing is what it appears to be

Zoe's unwillingness to consider reality is manifested in how bad her past was. Zoe has essentially reinvented herself, going from drug-addicted drug-dealer to millionaire's wife and upstanding member of the community. Zoe, though she wants to tie up at least one loose end about her life – her birth mother's identity – is relatively happy in her present



life. This is why she is so defensive of Henry, and goes through such great lengths to explain him and justify how he behaves—because she does not want to upset him and risk losing her reinvention of herself. Good people find the way, Moretti argues in the novel, and Zoe knows this: eventually, good people come out on top, and she appears to have done so. She is now willing to do whatever it takes to keep Henry happy and to keep her life as it is now intact. She has had enough instability and unhappiness for a lifetime, and she does not want any more.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Zoe so determined to keep her past hidden? How does this affect her judgment? Can she be faulted for this? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

Despite nearly being hit by a car and being recognized at the CARE banquet, Zoe is not overly concerned that danger might be approaching. Why?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Lydia think Henry is too controlling? Why does Zoe argue that Henry is not? Who seems to be correct? Why? What accounts for the difference in opinion?

## Vocabulary

abating, befuddle, unfathomable, exquisite, minutiae, preened, erudite, conservatively, innocuous, belligerent, facetious, nonchalant





# Chapters 7 – 12

## Summary

In Chapter 7, the novel steps back in time to February 2013. Lydia bailed out of work to go on a date, leaving Zoe in charge of handling a major evening for the flower shop – a dinner at the restaurant, Brulee, in Tribeca. There, setting up flowers, Lydia accidentally knocked over gift bags and agreed to help the man who was handling them put them back together. Zoe was instantly attracted to the man, who introduced himself as Henry Whittaker. Henry asked her to be his date for the evening. Henry is described as being rich, famous, and known as a player. Zoe thanked him but refused to be his date, saying she had a book to read, and quickly left. A short time later, Henry showed up at the florist bearing the book *Anna Karenina*, and a dress. Henry was charming and determined, and Zoe was almost powerless before him. She agreed to go. After the evening, he escorted her home and then began pursuing her over the next few weeks. Henry had fallen for Zoe, while Zoe said she was not from his world and could not be the woman he wanted her to be. Still, Henry pursued, and Zoe surrendered to him. She justified not telling him about her past as he proposed to her in the room where they first met at Brulee. They honeymooned in Europe for two months. The love, security, and stability Henry offered Zoe thrives on.

In Chapter 8, the novel returns to the present, April 2014. Zoe does her best to give Henry time by focusing on her life as it is, such as CARE. Zoe thinks about how she has an old envelope squirreled away with things that belonged to her life as Hilary, even though she was advised by Detective Milton Maslow to get rid of it. The envelope includes pictures of Zoe (as Hilary) and Evelyn, before and after Evelyn got sick. Zoe also looks at her birth certificate, dated May 3, 1985, from Griffin Hospital in Derby, Connecticut. The mother's name was filled out as Carolyn Seever, and the father's name was left blank. It was the nurses who gave Zoe the name of Zoe Griffin. Zoe also comes across one of Henry's old boxes labeled Tara – his dead wife. Zoe decides to look inside, and finds a picture of Tara from the back in her wedding dress, her face barely visible. Tara is beautiful and it makes Zoe jealous. Zoe then calls Cash to ask about how his story is coming along. She agrees to meet up with him. Along the way, she goes to see Henry at the gym, where she sees him flirting with a blonde girl. Zoe knows Henry would not cheat on her, but she does not like to see him flirting. She then meets with Cash. She tells Cash she wants to find her mother, but she does not want him to do it for her. Back at home, Zoe is stunned to find the apartment has been ransacked.

In Chapter 9, Zoe is relieved to find her old possessions have not been touched. She calls Detective Maslow but learns he retired three years before. She refers her case number to see if Michael "Mick" Flannery or Jared Pritchett are out on parole. She explains she testified against them, was kidnapped and beaten, then forwent witness protection only to have her home now broken into. The operator says she will get in touch with Maslow, but in the meantime Zoe must contact her local police. Officer Yates



and Officer Bernard respond. Trey, the doorman, is beside himself because he has been on duty on all day and says he has seen no one. Officer Yates asks Zoe questions. Zoe tells her what she knows, including about her 2009 testimony. Yates explains that she had similar experiences when she was younger, so she became a cop. Zoe relates how two of Jared's thugs abducted her and beat her for three days, demanding to know where "they" were being hidden, and that after five days, she was rescued. Zoe feels as if these things did not happen to her, but to Hilary.

In Chapter 10, everything seems different and strange to Zoe when she returns home. Cash is already there, having returned the wallet she left from their meeting earlier. Cash is stunned to learn what has happened. Zoe is angry that Henry has not yet come home, and is surprised to learn that Cash has seven siblings. Cash reports that in his own investigative work, there is often some kind of link between the adoptive mother and the biological mother, and that is where Zoe should begin. Zoe asks for Cash's help, and Cash agrees. Henry then arrives home enraged, thinking Cash has either destroyed the apartment or is secretly meeting with his wife. Zoe quickly explains what has happened and who Cash is. Henry apologizes and Cash excuses himself. Henry explains he has been in a lock-down meeting. Henry says they should go to their cabin up in Fishing Lake, Pennsylvania, and Zoe agrees to go.

In Chapter 11, despite the drama of the past few days, Zoe is thrilled to be getting away with Henry. She thinks about how the police say they found no sign of forced entry, while Henry thinks Trey was not actually doing his job and someone got in. They arrive at Henry's cabin. It is a beautiful, large stone farmhouse on a hill surrounded by pine forest. Zoe decides to go for a walk to the local general store to pick up venison steaks for dinner. When Zoe goes to pay, she sees her credit card is missing. Back at the farmhouse, Henry reports the missing card. He is suspicious of Cash, but Zoe is not. That night, Henry gives Zoe a three-charm bracelet and a poem. He explains that the tree charm is because she gives him roots and he wants to do the same for her; that the wings charm is his revealing he has no desire to hold her back, and he apologizes for having done so; and that the gladiolus charm is because he loved her at first sight, and because the flower is a symbol of character and strength. It is a simple but meaningful gift, and Zoe is overcome by its romantic nature. Zoe then brings Henry to bed.

In Chapter 12, Henry must make a trip back to the city for a few hours since Japan's market is not closed on Saturdays and because there is a security issue with the agency bonds. Zoe takes coffee, sits out back, and begins to think about the past. She thinks about how Evelyn was always happy and always tried to do her best. Looking back, Zoe cannot recall any friends coming around when Evelyn died, even though Evelyn was forever referring to friends she had. Looking through the house, Zoe is determined to learn more about Tara. Cash texts Zoe as this occurs, wanting her to call him, but the signal is weak. She thinks it is because he has found something about her mother. Henry's office door is locked, so Zoe must jimmy it open since she does not know where the key is. Zoe calls Cash and checks her e-mail as instructed. She is given a link to a genealogy website, where she finds a picture of a beautiful young Evelyn. Cash tells Zoe to scroll down until she finds the name Caroline – a cousin of Evelyn's. Cash sends Zoe a second link to a Facebook page featuring a woman who



looks almost exactly like Zoe, but almost twenty years older. It is her mother. Zoe reels, constantly going back to look at the picture.

## Analysis

The past cannot be avoided forever, Moretti continues to argue in this section of the novel – and even Zoe’s recent past with Henry is no exception to this. The novel shifts back in time a little more than a year to when Zoe and Henry first met, seemingly unexpectedly at an event dinner Henry had planned. Readers should note that Henry relentlessly pursued Zoe, as though drawn to her like a magnetic charge. Despite Henry’s passion, he also offers Zoe a kind of stability and security she has never had before – and this reinforces earlier points made about why Zoe should so heavily value what she has now with Henry to the exclusion of critical thinking. Nothing about Henry is to be considered objectively because Zoe has reinvented herself – and wants nothing to compromise that. This includes even the photographs Cash has taken of her from the event.

However, Moretti also continues to argue that nothing is ever what it seems, and that people only have one life. Zoe considers that she has essentially two lives and that her life with Henry is the second chance. Life, as Moretti will argue much later, is a sum of experiences. Bad experiences are tragic, but they happen. They do not mean a life can be begun over again, nor that it can be changed suddenly. Zoe’s assumption is that she is a different person than who she was. While she might figuratively be a different person – she is no longer a drug user, seller, or criminal – she is literally the same human being. History collects around a person and cannot be avoided as such: life is a sum of experiences. People have only one life, and it is up to them what they do with it, Moretti argues. Zoe has chosen to change her life, true – but her life is still her singular life. If this were not so, she would not have to worry about being recognized or the past catching up to her. She is still the same person, literally, no matter how she “feels” as if things happened to someone else, and not her.

However, everything in the present is not what it seems as the past begins to catch up to her. Zoe’s concerns about Henry flirting with other women are vastly overshadowed when the apartment is broken into and ransacked. Zoe is startled by this. It means she cannot avoid the past anymore and must now in fact reach out to others. The break-in means that the near hit-and-run was not a coincidence, and Zoe is smart enough to acknowledge this now. She calls her old detective and calls the local police to explain her past to them. Henry’s temper is on clear display again when he returns home, though he explains it away as an overreaction given the situation, and Zoe accepts this without question. Even now, with danger appearing from the past and things not being as they appear, Zoe is unwilling to compromise what she has with Henry as the break-in itself is already dangerous enough to the status quo. Readers should note that the charm bracelet given to Zoe from Henry symbolizes his skillful and charming sense of manipulation. Zoe is completely overwhelmed by a romantic and touching gift on the heels of a situation as traumatic as the break-in.



## Discussion Question 1

How does Henry's pursuit of Zoe the year before influence Zoe's unfailing and unquestioning loyalty to him now? Why, despite the growing number of problems between them, does Zoe continue to submit to Henry?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the experience of the break-in like for Zoe? Why especially does it compel her to confront the past? What does this mean for her in the present?

## Discussion Question 3

Why has Henry become angrier and angrier with Zoe as of late? How does Zoe respond to Henry's anger? Why?

## Vocabulary

raucous, banter, coquettish, elusive, doggedness, dubious, profligate, haphazard, harried, opulence, melodramatic, sequential



# Chapters 13 – 18

## Summary

In Chapter 13, Henry calls to let Zoe know he will be back in half an hour. She asks why his office was locked. Henry explains he sometimes rents the place out and does not need people going into that particular room since there are old client files inside. While Zoe waits, she looks up the poem Henry used with the bracelet. It is *Pygmalion to Galatea* by Robert Graves, about a Greek artist who falls in love with the girl he sculpts. When Henry returns, he gifts Zoe with a small black dress and tells her to get ready. They go out to eat at a small local Italian restaurant, reflective of the strong Italian community in the area when the place used to be a factory town. Henry reveals that his father commuted into New York as a lawyer from the area, and Henry and his family are essentially local celebrities because of how good a man Henry's father was. His parents, she learns, died in a car accident. Zoe learns from amused locals that Henry was a troublemaker as a kid, but Henry denies this. Zoe asks Henry about Tara. Henry reveals a little about her, saying that she was timid and kind, while Zoe is outgoing and passionate. Zoe thinks Henry still loves Tara because he has not changed Tara's old room. Henry explains he did not have a choice in when his marriage ended, and that he simply has not changed the room because he has not changed the room. He says he had Penny clean everything last week. Zoe is surprised because the trip seemed last-minute. This annoys Henry, who says he was planning on surprising Zoe anyway. He is also annoyed by the fact that if everything does not fit the script in Zoe's head, he is the bad guy. Zoe goes into the bathroom, feeling drunk. Back home, she wants to get into the bath with Henry, but cannot get off the bed.

In Chapter 14, Zoe and Henry are back in New York. Zoe's credit card has not been reactivated and Yates has nothing new to report. Zoe gets in touch with Cash. Zoe wants to meet her mother, and she wants Cash to go with her. Zoe will call her mother first. Cash warns Zoe that her mother may not want to see her and that it is not uncommon for this to happen. Zoe then calls her mother, Caroline, and explains who she is. She tells her mother that she wants to meet. Caroline says she will think about it and will call back in an hour. Caroline then hangs up. Zoe is stunned by it. Caroline calls an hour later, saying she will give Zoe an hour on Friday.

In Chapter 15, Zoe goes to visit the flower shop. Elisa is thrilled to see her but wants to know why Zoe has decided to come back and work. She wonders if Zoe will leave if Henry says no. Zoe explains that her quitting in the first place was her decision, and Henry never asked her to quit. Elisa reminds Zoe she must live her own life, not anyone else's. Zoe then speaks with Lydia, revealing to Lydia she has found Caroline. Zoe asks Lydia to come with her and Cash. Lydia explains she cannot since it is her mom's birthday. Lydia asks Zoe to call her to tell her how it all goes.

In Chapter 16, Zoe reads Cash's above-the-fold story about CARE in the Post, and is thrilled with how it has come out because it devotes so much space to the actual charity



itself. When Henry gets home, she shows him the article. Henry is jealous of Cash, thinking Cash is interested in Zoe. He is angered to learn Zoe has met with him three times. He tells Zoe he wants to know everything from now on. Zoe says she cannot live like this. Henry tells her to get out then. Zoe does not leave because she has nowhere to go. She thinks back on when Mick walked out on her and Evelyn. Zoe thinks about Evelyn saying it was hard to find a good man. Zoe thinks about how Henry is perfect, from how he worries about her to buying her gifts. Still, she wonders if he is a good man.

In Chapter 17, Zoe spies on Henry at the gym. Henry is flirting with the blonde again. Reid Pinkman, a little younger than Zoe and Henry's ambitious mentee, comes across Zoe. Zoe says she is there to surprise Henry. Reid asks if he will see her that evening at the firm's celebration for Nippon, the Japanese account. Zoe says she'll see Reid that night, knowing Henry did not tell her about the event. She tells Reid not to tell Henry he saw her. Zoe and Cash then meet up for lunch to go over their game plan for Caroline. Zoe explains that she just wants to know she has a connection to someone and that somewhere in the world, someone knows she exists. The plan will be to head to Cash's mom's house in Queens in the morning where they will take his Honda to Caroline's. As she leaves, she runs into Molly McKay.

In Chapter 18, Molly continues to insist that Zoe is Hilary, no matter what Zoe says. At home, Zoe discovers a rose, an apology note, a black cocktail dress, and an invitation to the Nippon dinner at six. Zoe then asks Penny about Henry, as Penny has known Henry since he was a child. Penny says Henry was brilliant and curious, but then stops herself, saying it is not her place to talk about such things. Henry then arrives to pick up Zoe. At the same time they both apologize. Zoe says there is nothing between her and Cash while Henry apologizes for overreacting. Zoe asks if Henry would ever cheat on her. Henry says he never would. At the party, Zoe learns that Henry is to fly to Japan the following day. She also learns from Muriel Peters that no one ever met Tara because Tara was agoraphobic. Zoe feels ignored by Henry for most of the evening and this annoys her because everyone else, even Reid, knows. When she confronts him about it, he is dismissive, saying he was going to tell her later, saying that it is clear that Zoe is chummy with Reid these days, meaning Henry knows about the gym encounter through Reid. Zoe then speaks with Reid, who is drunk. She learns he is actually in his late thirties, not his late twenties, and that he is looking for a wife. He says that he needs a girl who is appreciative and conscious of the world, not girls who behave like teenagers with limitless bank accounts. Zoe notices Henry is now paying attention. On the way home, he says he does not want to worry about his wife with other men. At home, he goes directly into his office. Late that night, Henry comes in to have sex with Zoe. Zoe hopes it is makeup sex, but Henry tells her he will see her in a week.

## Analysis

Author Kate Moretti continues to explore the theme of the past in this section of the novel. Readers should note that Zoe's time in Fishing Lake reveals a number of important things. First, that Henry was apparently a troublemaking kid, though this does





not seem to be anything out of the ordinary for any kid. What is odd is Henry's annoyance with the idea, rather than a humorous recollection of the time period. It is clearly a part of Henry's past he does not wish to speak about. Likewise, Henry's dislike of talking about Tara beyond only limited revelations originally seemed to suggest heartache, but now suggests something as of yet unknown – but strange nonetheless. At the same time, readers should note that Henry's locked office symbolizes a buried past and hidden secrets. Henry explains away the locked office and his explanation is believable – but there is still something strange about a locked office, especially given that Henry should be doing some business while he is away for the weekend. Even more strange is the timely cleaning of everything as though Henry had prepared the trip in advance – but Henry simply turns everything around on Zoe, blaming her because not everything makes sense to her.

Here, Zoe's first-person narration proves essential. Readers are able to see how her mind works and shifts as events change and Henry's explanations grow stranger. Zoe herself is becoming more and more suspicious, as even her unfailing loyalty for Henry begins to flag with the deterioration of their relationship, especially when Zoe knows things are not her fault. Likewise, the frequency with which Zoe becomes drunk – not even being able to make it off the bed to join Henry in a bath – is disturbing as well. Zoe cannot make heads or tails out of such situations, except to say she has had too much to drink. In reality – as readers will learn late in the novel – Henry has been slipping Zoe sedatives to make her docile when she becomes too angered or too active. As Moretti has been arguing all along, nothing is what it first appears. This thematic argument swirls around with Henry as its center. Readers are quickly realizing Henry is not who he plays himself off to be – and when Zoe will learn this is unknown.

At the same time, Moretti continues to argue that people only have one life, and it is up to them what they do with it. Zoe is realizing this, and so decides she will confront her past by seeking out her mother. She actually moves forward in the process, asking for Cash's help. Zoe now finds herself in the strange position of attempting to learn more about one part of her past while doing everything she can to avoid having to relive another part of her past. It is a tricky thing to do, but Zoe believes she can do it. However, Zoe's decision to open up the past does not allow her to pick and choose what comes up. Instead, Zoe's decision to head into the past will be one that will force her confront the past at large, and not just her mother.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Henry still seem so reluctant to talk about Tara? Why does Zoe insist on pushing Henry to talk about Tara? How does Henry respond? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

What strange things occur during Zoe's trip to Fishing Lake with Henry? How does Henry explain these things? Does Zoe believe him? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

How does the marriage between Zoe and Henry continue to deteriorate in this section of the novel? Despite Zoe knowing she is not in the wrong in many of the arguments between them, Zoe is still placating of Henry. Why?

## Vocabulary

impeccable, flippantly, surreptitious, perfunctory, hackles, exasperated, extravagance





# Chapters 19 – 24

## Summary

In Chapter 19, Zoe feels less pressure with Henry in Japan. Zoe asks Cash if he knows what it is like to have no one. Cash is surprised by this because he thought Zoe and Henry got along well at the benefit. It causes Zoe to think about how she grew her hair long, got rid of her nose ring, and began dressing differently at Henry's request. She thinks about how Lydia has told her she is not the same person anymore. Zoe and Cash then arrive in Danbury, Connecticut. When Zoe meets her mother, her mother says she must be quick as she has an appointment. Zoe believes Caroline looks almost exactly like her. Zoe reveals she is married. Caroline asks what Zoe wants from her. Zoe explains that she wants to know what happened and wants a friendship. Caroline says this will not be possible, and that she is going to tell a story not meant to hurt her or scare her off, but to tell the truth. She explains that when she was 17, she fell in love with a boy named Troy "Trout" Fishman, who played drums in a band and stayed with her when he found out she was pregnant. She says that she felt like she was holding him back while he went off to do drugs to escape the burden of being a father at 17, only to have a heart attack and die from the drugs. She explains that she then went on to give birth, got into drugs, ambled around the country, and then straightened her life out when she met Ron, an accountant who is now her husband. She says that Ron does not know everything about her past or that she was ever a mother before. Caroline says that Evelyn was her mother's cousin, married to a man named Tim at the time. Caroline is saddened to learn of Evelyn's death, saying the family drifted apart. Zoe is then stunned to learn she has a twin sister, who already knows about her.

In Chapter 20, Caroline explains that Zoe's sister came to visit her three or four years before. Caroline reveals that Zoe's sister to be named Joan and she gets all of Joan's information for Zoe. Joan lives in Brooklyn. Caroline reveals that had Evelyn known there were two babies, she would have backed out – so Evelyn could only know there was one (Zoe). Caroline reveals she is 46 now and has a son who is six. She also explains that a man called and threatened her, telling her to leave Zoe alone. Caroline says she met with Zoe anyway, feeling as if she owed it to Zoe. She then tells Zoe to never come back. Zoe leaves and gets in the car where Cash is waiting. Zoe explains everything that has happened, including saying that her mom is a bitch and has her own life that Zoe does not fit into. Zoe says that she wants to get in touch with Joan and she wonders if Caroline could be lying about anything. Zoe also wants to know who called and threatened her mother.

Zoe also realizes that she knows nothing about Cash and that their friendship began over his writing an article for the paper about CARE. Cash tells Zoe that he lived on the West Coast, fell in love, got engaged, and came back East with the girl who was an incredible attorney and who wanted him to give up on the childish idea of writing for a living. He explains that things ended with her when he found her having sex with one of her law partners. Zoe explains part of her past to Cash, including having to let the state



bury Evelyn, but does not go into detail much about what happened beyond that. Zoe and Cash get Chinese food and eat at Zoe's. It is then that Zoe and Cash hear someone breaking in through the back door. Zoe calls Henry, thinking he might be home early, but Henry is still in Japan. He says he is coming home at once. Cash then pulls Zoe to the elevator to leave.

In Chapter 21, in the lobby, Zoe tells Walter, the guard, to call the police because someone is trying to break into her apartment. Walter does so at once. Zoe and Cash then go to Cash's apartment so Zoe can make appropriate phone calls. She then calls Officer Yates and explains what has happened. She calls Henry once again who explains he is in L.A. for a layover but will be headed home on the red eye. He tells her it was stupid of them both to hide their pasts, but that they can fix things together by ignoring the past. She tells Henry she is at Lydia's. She spends the night in Cash's bed while Cash keeps watch with a baseball bat. In the morning, Zoe confirms she is going to meet Joan, and reveals the rest of her past to Cash. Cash says it does not bother him, that people make mistakes, and that they clean up their lives. It happens all the time, he says. He asks if Zoe wants company to Joan's, but Zoe says she will go alone. Zoe talks to Yates again, who says Mick does not exist and that no signs of any forced entry were found at the apartment. Zoe is stunned. She then goes to Seventy-Seventh Street to meet Joan. There, she learns from Bernie and Patrice, Joan's adoptive parents, that Joan has been dead for three years.

In Chapter 22, Zoe is stunned to learn that Joan was killed in a hit-and-run car accident. They explain that she married a man she met at a library charity event, and that she died in Midtown without anyone – not even her husband – knowing why she was there. Talking about such things upsets Patrice, so Bernie asks Zoe to leave her number so they can be in touch with her again. Zoe then texts Cash to find out all he can about a Joan Bascio. Zoe then gets a call from Lydia who says that the flower shop has been ransacked. The stainless steel counter has been carved with the word "JAREd." She remembers seeing a "d" brand on the inside of Rosie's mouth. It causes Zoe to faint.

In Chapter 23, Zoe awakens to find Yates overhead. Elisa brings water while Cash is nearby. Henry suddenly appears in the doorway, looking overtired and worried. Zoe is thrilled to see him, and runs to him immediately. Yates recommends taking a hotel in the city, but Henry wants to go to Fishing Lake instead. Yates insists on the city where the police can be present, but Henry insists on Fishing Lake once more. He says he will arrange for security. He tells Yates to catch Jared.

In Chapter 24, Henry and Zoe arrive at the farmhouse. Zoe is exhausted, so Henry serves her tea in bed, fluffs her pillows, and makes sure she is comfortable. They then have sex. Zoe dreams of Evelyn trying to attack her, causing Zoe to wake up with a start. It is clear Zoe is ill, and Henry encourages her to drink orange juice and stay hydrated. He explains that Yates has not yet called. Zoe insists on going back to the city at once, but Henry encourages her to stay in bed. Henry also says he has called a doctor and had an antiviral prescribed. He gives Zoe two pink pills and water to take them down. When Henry goes out, Zoe gets up and goes through Henry's office. When



looking at a picture of herself and Henry on a picnic in the woods, Zoe realizes she is not looking at a picture of herself, but of Joan.

## Analysis

The past cannot be avoided forever Moretti argues through this section of the novel as Zoe charges headlong into the past. The break-ins and brushes with history have taken Zoe to a place where she is not so much afraid anymore, but determined. She needs answers, and she will have them no matter what they are. Readers have been able to trace this stand through Zoe's narration as over the course of the novel, Zoe's language and activities have become less submissive and more assertive. Early in the novel, she did not want Cash's help to find her mother; now, she actively relies on him. Early in the novel, Zoe merely wanted to please and submit to Henry. Now, knowing Henry is in the wrong and is behaving unjustly, Zoe is standing up to him – though this in turn is making him angrier. To do so means dredging the past for information about her family.

Nevertheless, a transformation of sorts in Zoe's character can be seen. Early in the novel, she felt detached from her former life as Hilary, as Zoe had tried to suppress her former life in favor of her current life. But as Zoe has realized, she only gets one life and that life is a sum of the experiences she has had. Because people have only one life, it is up to them what they make of it. Zoe is rapidly coming to accept this. She cannot depend on Henry any longer to make her happy, to save her from the past, or to give her a new life. She must do this herself. It is clear she does not mind asking for help when needed – but much of her life must indeed be in her own hands. She has made a mistake by trying to hide, rather than handle the past. The past has come back for her all the same. Her decision to take on the past by seeking out her mother is demonstrative of her growth in moral courage and in her capabilities as a person. Likewise, note that to Cash the past is the past: people improve their lives and go on to do good things despite mistakes they have made or bad things that have happened to them.

However, Zoe's decision to uncover the past results in a number of startling revelations. First, her mother wants nothing to do with her, phone call aside. Second, Zoe has a twin sister who has died. Third, the twin sister – Joan – was married to Henry. These secrets are found in the locked office, which again symbolizes the buried past and hidden secrets. The past cannot be avoided, Moretti argues clearly here: Zoe's decision to go into the past means she cannot put it away again like before. She has learned terrifying things that she must now deal with. Readers should note the irony in that Zoe's past with drugs is now the thing she least needs to worry about in comparison with Henry. There is great tragedy and irony in the idea that Zoe's seemingly greatest protector should now turn out to be her worst and most dangerous enemy.



## Discussion Question 1

How has Zoe changed as a person between the beginning of the novel and now, especially where it concerns both Henry and the past? What accounts for this change?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Zoe decide to go and meet with her mother? What is the experience like? What does Zoe learn? How and why does this affect Zoe?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Zoe learn about her sister and Henry? What implications could this have for Zoe herself? Why?

## Vocabulary

arborvitae, vehemently, coming of age, apropos, impotently



# Chapters 25 – Epilogue

## Summary

In Chapter 25, Zoe goes through Henry's old things to learn that Joan is Tara. Everything Zoe now owns was once owned by Tara, she realizes. She discovers a hidden shrine in which Henry has taken stalker photographs of her working at the flower shop, and a newspaper clipping from September 15, 2011 which talks about the death of a Tara Joan Whittaker. There is also a card from Tara to Henry, quoting Pygmalion, a clear indication that she knew what Henry was all about and that she was more than just a marble statue designed by Henry. Zoe realizes Tara did not suffer from agoraphobia, but was kept locked away toward the end of her marriage. Zoe also realizes she has to leave, but she is locked in the house. Henry then suddenly appears with a gun.

In Chapter 26, Henry leads Zoe into the bedroom. Zoe demands to know who she is to Henry. He now bears a syringe. He tells Zoe that she is Tara's replacement. Henry reveals that Jared has been out of prison for three years and mistakenly killed Tara to seek revenge on Zoe, which in turn led to Henry seeking out Jared to kill him two years before. He also reveals that Mick died of a drug overdose in witness protection. Henry says he knows everything about Zoe—every hour of the day—all thanks to technology monitoring. Henry says that Zoe is out of control and needs to listen. Henry grasps Zoe and injects her. When she awakens, it is 2:00 in the morning and she can barely move. In an attempt to get away, she smacks Henry in the face, who responds by slapping her. Henry says he will kill her if she does such a thing again. Henry continues to administer syringes to Zoe to make her compliant so he can sexually pleasure himself using her. Days begin to pass as Zoe lopes in and out of consciousness. She begins throwing up as her body begins to reject the drug he is giving her to knock her out. Zoe asks what Henry will do now. He explains that he has told Yates that Zoe has left him and gone to stay in a hotel. Until hunting season, Henry will keep Zoe locked up, then shoot her in the woods as though it was a tragic hunting accident wherein Zoe had returned to reconcile. Zoe decides she must do something, so she begins to speak to Henry as if she were Tara. She gets him to un-handcuff her to use the bathroom, then quickly grabs a large candle and smashes it on his face, spilling blood everywhere. Zoe then rushes out of the house. She runs to the nearest house. Penny lets her in. Zoe begs Penny to call the police or that they must leave. Penny says her quadriplegic husband is upstairs, and she cannot just leave him. She gives Zoe the car keys and tells her to flee and get help. Henry arrives to stop her, but Penny intervenes and shoots Henry.

In Chapter 27, Zoe wakes up in the hospital with Cash beside her. Cash reports that Henry is dead. Zoe explains how Penny saved her life. Cash says that he and Yates put everything together about Tara and Zoe only the day before, and that Zoe has been missing for two weeks. She learns that Henry originally wanted to kill her for inadvertently getting Tara killed, but then decided he wanted a replacement Tara instead, thinking that Zoe owed him. The doctor explains that Tara was an obsession,



not love. It is also learned that Mick testified against Jared before going into witness protection and dying of a drug overdose. Zoe also learns the sad truth that Tara Joan was looking for Zoe the day she was killed. When Penny comes to visit, Zoe thanks her. Penny reveals it was Henry, as a child playing with matches, who caused a fire which caused the house to collapse on Frank, leading to the Whittaker family devoting themselves to caring for Frank and Penny forever. Penny says that she tried to intervene with Zoe, but that she was fired when she got too close. She apologizes for this, and Zoe forgives her. Penny explains that she was always afraid of Frank. She believes the fire may have been retribution for when she told Henry's mother that she caught Henry sawing off the tail of a neighbor's cat with a hacksaw.

In the Epilogue, six months have passed. Zoe, Lydia, and Cash are at Lake Tahoe. Zoe has inherited all of Henry's wealth, and she now lives with Lydia. Zoe is now seeing a psychiatrist named Dr. Thorpe, who tells her that life is a sum of experiences, and who helps Zoe deal with PTSD from the events of her life. Zoe and Cash are in a relationship. Lydia has managed to track down Evelyn's remains. She, Zoe, and Cash go out onto the lake where Zoe scatters the ashes. Zoe realizes she now has a third chance at life.

## Analysis

The past cannot be avoided forever, Moretti argues, and people only have one life which is up to them what they do with. This is as true for Zoe as it is for Henry. Clues now fall into place as Henry is revealed to be a horrendous person who was obsessed with rather than in love with Joan, and who sought to force her into submission the same way Henry now works even harder to attempt to subdue Zoe. Everything now makes sense with respect to Henry: his troublemaking childhood, Penny's distance and being fired, how Henry came to bring Zoe into his life in the first place, and the spate of violent incidents and break-ins that were symptomatic of Henry's rage toward the increasingly defiant Zoe.

Indeed, readers will note that Henry's opposition to Zoe's looking into her past had nothing to do with the life they had built, but everything to do with keeping Henry's secrets hidden. Readers will note the irony that Zoe's desire to keep her past a secret played right into Henry's hands, because Henry himself wanted to keep the past secret as well. An additional irony rests in the fact that Henry killed Zoe's would-be-killer, only to become Zoe's would-be-killer himself.

As Moretti argues through Dr. Thorpe, life is a sum of experiences. You cannot have more than one life, which is why always trying to do better with the life one has is so important. Just because Zoe's past has been full of mistakes and tragedies does not mean she cannot have a good future. Good people always find the way, and Zoe is finding the way forward in life now free of Henry – but not of the past. The past makes us who we are and cannot be avoided – but it can be lived with. Zoe is fast learning this with Cash and Lydia by her side.



Zoe now has the closure that she needs with respect to her past – but she also has a wide open future as well. Readers should note that the scattering of Evelyn’s ashes – her burial – is a symbolic burial of the past for Zoe. The past is put to rest besides Zoe’s PTSD. The burial of the past here is legitimate and honest, requiring no locked office doors or elaborate lies. The truth is at hand, so the past may rest easy.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Penny explain that she never got involved to intercede on behalf of Zoe? Does Zoe forgive Penny? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

What was Henry’s original intent regarding Zoe before he pursued her? Why? What changed his mind, and led him to marry Zoe instead?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do Zoe, Cash, and Lydia head to Lake Tahoe? What is hoped will be gained by their going? Is it? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

abhorred, confirmation, subtly, infantile, coherent





# Characters

## Zoe

Zoe Whittaker, formerly Zoe Griffin and Hilary Lawlor, is the narrator of the novel. 29, beautiful, and with a good heart, Zoe was originally abandoned at the hospital at birth, only later to be adopted by Evelyn. Zoe is deeply haunted by her past of doing and selling drugs, and is seeking to escape not only that, but the danger of breaking down a child sex ring.

Now married to Henry Whittaker, Zoe puts her time and energies to good causes such as CARE – but cannot help but want to learn about her biological mother. Zoe runs afoul of Henry in this respect, who insists their life is perfect as it is and that the past should not be dredged up. Zoe always submits to her husband because she loves him and because she loves the security and stability he provides (especially because she considers herself literally to be a new person). However, as time goes on, Zoe's questions and her friendship with Cash erode the marriage. Zoe also begins standing up for herself, especially after Henry's relentless accusations and guilt trips.

Ultimately, Zoe learns that she has a twin sister named Tara Joan who was previously married to Henry, but was killed by drug men who mistook Tara Joan for Zoe. After Zoe makes this discovery, Henry then kidnaps, drugs, and rapes Zoe until Zoe manages to escape. With Henry dead, Zoe suffers from PTSD and begins dating Cash. Zoe now knows that her life is in her own hands, and that she only gets to have one life.

## Henry

Henry Whittaker is the 40-year-old husband of Zoe. A Wall Street millionaire, Henry is manipulative and smarmy, appearing charming and loving on the surface but in reality being a control freak. Henry was originally a troubled child who did things like playing with matches, leading to the life-changing injuries Frank sustained.

Henry was originally married to Tara Joan, but his obsession with her was ruptured by her death which Henry deduced was intended for Zoe. After Tara's death, Henry killed Tara Joan's killer, then decided to kill Zoe. It was only then that Henry decided Zoe owed him a new wife, so he chose to marry her and mold her into Tara Joan's image as a replacement. Henry is frequently thrown off by Zoe, who is independent and curious about the past, leading to friction and Henry's ultimate decision to kidnap, rape, and plot her murder. Henry himself is ultimately killed by Penny when Zoe escapes.

## Cash

Cash Murray is a New York Post reporter who does a story on the CARE event, through which he becomes friends with Zoe. Reeling from his own broken heart, Cash falls in





love with Zoe while helping her track down her mother. Cash later ends up dating Zoe, gently tending to her and ensuring she has the freedom she was so long denied by Henry.

## **Penny**

Penny is the long-time housekeeper for Henry, having been with the family since he was a child. Penny is afraid of Henry, having known that he is dangerous dating back to when he was a child, cutting off the tail of a neighbor's cat with a hacksaw and disabling her husband with a fire. When Penny gets too close with Zoe, Henry fires Penny. Penny later kills Henry when Henry is coming after Zoe.

## **Lydia**

Lydia is the punk-rock friend and former fellow coworker of Zoe at the florist. Lydia is very much an independent, brash woman who does not hold her opinion back. Lydia believes Henry is abusive and controlling of Zoe, though Zoe denies this. Lydia later travels with Zoe and Cash to Lake Tahoe, as Lydia has helped to track down the remains of Evelyn.

## **Tara Joan**

Tara Joan Whittaker is the twin sister of Zoe who was killed by people seeking revenge on Zoe. By all accounts, Tara was essentially identical to Zoe physically, but was meeker, quieter, and more reserved though intensely brilliant. Tara began to feel trapped later in her marriage to Henry, but she did not allow this to stop her from living her life. Tragically, the day she was set to meet Zoe, Tara was run down and killed.

## **Caroline**

Caroline is the biological mother of Zoe and Tara Joan. Caroline is a deeply selfish woman who got pregnant as a teenager, gave her daughters up, and then later refused to have anything to do with them even as adults because they did not fit into her life. It is Caroline who first gives Tara Joan, then Zoe, information about one another. Caroline tells both girls never to bother her again, as she is now married with a son.

## **Mick**

Michael "Mick" Flannery is the abusive ex of Evelyn who walked out on Evelyn and Zoe, only to show up in Zoe's life years later. Mick got Zoe involved in using and dealing drugs, and later turned witness against other criminals to save himself. Mick went into the witness protection program where he later died of a drug overdose.



## Molly

Molly McKay is Zoe's old college roommate, and serves as a harbinger of bad tidings. Molly recognizes Zoe at the CARE event, though Zoe denies her identity. Molly tracks down Zoe again, only to be denied that Zoe is who she believes. Molly tells Zoe they live in the same city now, and sooner or later, Zoe's identity will be revealed.

## Officer Yates

Officer Yates is the NYPD officer who handles Zoe's case in New York. Yates is a no-nonsense woman who is utterly loyal and committed to the moral ramifications of her job. She is encouraging and kind as needed, especially with Zoe, but hard and confrontational with people like Henry. It is Yates, who working together with Cash, learns about Zoe's past – but by then, it is too late as Zoe has been kidnapped and raped by Henry.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## CARE Banquet

The CARE banquet represents an omen of the past's return. The CARE banquet is organized by Zoe to benefit children in need, but it also exposes Zoe to a great swath of the public. Among those in attendance is Zoe's old roommate, Molly, who instantly recognizes Zoe. Molly is a part of Zoe's past made present, meaning the past will soon return in force, and Zoe will be unable to escape it.

## Near Hit-and-Run

The near hit-and-run represents an omen of danger. When Zoe is nearly hit by a car, a local vendor explains the car intentionally targeted her. This reveals to Zoe that something is not quite right, and that she is facing some kind of danger as she cannot imagine who would intentionally try to harm her, except someone from her past.

## CARE Event Photos

The CARE event photos symbolize Zoe's fear of being discovered. Cash takes a number of pictures at the banquet, and Zoe asks to see them all before they are printed. She does not want pictures of her circulating which can be used to identify her. Such an identification would lead to her discovery and the shattering of the life she has so carefully built for herself, thus forcing her to confront the past.

## Old Possessions

The old possessions Zoe keeps from her previous life symbolize the inescapability of the past. Zoe keeps a number of old documents, such as her birth certificate, and photos of growing up with Evelyn, tucked away in a box and envelope in a closet. Zoe could not bear to part with these things, even though they are clear reminders of the past she does not want to be reminded of or dragged back into. No matter what she does, the past will always be a part of her life.

## Ransacked Apartment

The ransacked apartment symbolizes the return of danger. When Zoe returns home to discover her apartment has been ransacked, it becomes clear to her that someone is indeed after her – especially in conjunction with the near-hit-and-run. This finally causes her to recognize she is in danger, and that she must be more careful.



## Charm Bracelet

The charm bracelet symbolizes Henry's charming manipulation. After Zoe has been rattled and made vulnerable, Henry swoops in with a touching, romantic gift in order to gain even more control over her through manipulating her emotions in such a traumatic state. It works. Zoe falls for the bracelet, and this ultimately makes her road out from under Henry much harder.

## Locked Office

Henry's locked office symbolizes hidden secrets and the buried past. Henry locks the office at the farmhouse because he claims he rents the place out and does not want people going through certain things. In reality, it is where he keeps old wedding photos, documents, and his stalking shrine that reveal the truth about the past, about Tara Joan, and about Zoe. The locked room is Henry's attempt to lock away the past – but Zoe manages to break through it anyway.

## Cash's Investigation

Cash's investigation into Zoe's mother represents the opening up of the unavoidable past. By looking into Zoe's mother, Zoe is forced to confront her mother and the fact that her mother actually wants nothing to do with her. It also exposes her to the fact that she had a twin sister and indirectly led to Tara Joan's death.

## Sedatives

Sedatives symbolize control. When Henry is unable to manipulate, work his charms, or guilt Zoe into submission, he actually uses medication to do so. When she starts asking too many questions or gets too defiant, he slips her pills that give the feeling of being drunk, requiring her to lie down or be brought home. Henry later feeds Zoe a constant stream of sedatives when he kidnaps her so that he may rape her over a 14-day period – an absolute violation of Zoe's person and absolute control on the part of Henry.

## Evelyn's Burial

The burial of Evelyn symbolizes the burying of the past. When Zoe scatters Evelyn's ashes, it provides not only closure to that part of Zoe's life, but allows her to symbolically move on beyond the past. The genuine burial and the genuine close of events with Henry mean that Zoe may now look to the future rather than always looking behind her.



# Settings

## New York Public Library

The New York Public Library is where Zoe decides to host the CARE event banquet. The NYPL is a very public, very attention-getting venue that turns the focus of millions on the evening. It is at the NYPL that Zoe has an encounter with Molly who recognizes her, while Zoe denies being Hilary. It is from the NYPL that Zoe heads home with Henry, determined to find a way to mitigate the damage done to her carefully constructed life of hiding from her past.

## Manhattan Apartment

The Manhattan apartment is where Zoe and Henry live. It is a massive apartment, so much so that it even has a second entrance. It is elegant, well-decorated, and very much feels like home for a year for Zoe. Only when Henry begins trying to scare Zoe does the apartment begin to feel dangerous and no longer like home, as Henry stages break-ins and ransacks the place to give it the appearance of no longer being safe. Henry then preys upon Zoe's fears at home to become the figure of the knight in shining armor that will continue to keep her safe despite the danger. The Manhattan apartment ultimately transforms from a place of safety for Zoe to a place of dangerous imprisonment.

## Fishing Creek

Fishing Creek is a small, rural town in Pennsylvania located an hour and-a-half from New York. Fishing Creek is where Henry and his family originally came from, and it is in Fishing Creek that Henry owns a large old stone farmhouse he refers to as a cabin. Zoe and Henry visit Fishing Creek a number of times, including a final, fateful time in the novel in which Henry kidnaps Zoe and rapes her over a period of 14 days. It is in Fishing Creek that Zoe escapes to Penny's house, and it is in Fishing Creek that Penny shoots and kills Henry.

## The Hospital

The hospital is located in New York, and is where Zoe is taken following Fishing Creek. It is in the hospital that Zoe recovers and learns more about the past, including why Henry originally targeted her and then later married her. It is in the hospital that Zoe grows closer to Cash, and thanks Penny for saving her life. It is also in the hospital that Zoe begins to realize the past is now done with, and the future can truly be her own.

## Lake Tahoe

Lake Tahoe is a vacation spot on the border of Nevada and California. Lake Tahoe is a place Zoe vacationed with Evelyn while Zoe was a teenager. It is back to Lake Tahoe that Zoe, Cash, and Lydia go at the end of the novel to scatter the ashes of Evelyn. Lake Tahoe thus becomes a place where the past itself is buried, and a place where Zoe realizes she can now fully look to the future as her own.



# Themes and Motifs

## The Unavoidability of the Past

Author Kate Moretti argues that the past cannot be avoided forever in *The Vanishing Year*. The past is very much a part of one's life in the present, no matter how much one tries to suppress the past or hide from it. Zoe's entire present life is predicated on hiding from the past, but she must eventually come to face that past.

In the past, Zoe was abandoned as a baby at the hospital, only later to be adopted by Evelyn. Following Evelyn's death, Zoe dropped out of college, fell in with Mick, did and sold drugs, and then later turned witness for the state to break up a child sex ring. For this, Zoe was kidnapped and beaten, only to later go into hiding to avoid having anything to do with her past – though she did not actually go into the witness protection program. Zoe carefully monitors all she does, doing everything she can to minimize the chance she will be recognized. Only twice in the ensuing five years is she recognized.

Despite Zoe's fear of the past and her desire to stay away from Jared, Mick, and their thugs, Zoe is plagued by unshakable interest in her mother. Zoe wants to know who exactly her mother was, why she was abandoned, and if a connection can be made in adulthood with the woman. Zoe is able to find her mother with Cash's help, but she gets more than she bargained for. She learns that her mother genuinely wants nothing to do with her – but also that she has a twin sister named Joan – Tara Joan, the first wife of Henry.

Learning about Tara Joan exposes Zoe to the deadly past Henry has. She learns that Henry had originally intended to kill her after killing the murderer of Tara Jane; and that Henry decided he felt like Zoe owed him a replacement Tara, so he married her instead of killing her. Henry's past is something which, like Zoe's, could not stay in the past. Confronted with the truth, Henry can only seek to kill Zoe – but he is killed himself instead by Penny. With Henry gone, Zoe now has her future ahead of her and a chance to live a happier, healthier life.

## People Have Only One Life

People only have one life, and it is up to them what they do with it. Zoe considers she has had two lives – a former life, and her current life, and that the two are not the same. Because of that, she zealously guards her present life, but does not realize that changes and reinventions do not dissociate one part of life from another.

Zoe, early in the novel, revels in her life as a millionaire's wife. She is satisfied in every way possible. When she thinks about the past at all, she considers that the things in the past happened to her incarnation as Hilary, and not herself as Zoe. This is how far removed she feels in that she no longer feels like the same person anymore. However, Molly's recognizing Zoe at the CARE benefit throws Zoe into a panic.



Between Molly's recognition and the near hit-and-run, Zoe realizes that something is off. She begins to realize that changes in hairstyle, address, and class do not necessitate a brand new life. People only have one life, and Zoe has been using her life in the present trying to hide from, and hide in turn, the past, rather than living the present in defiance of the past. When the apartment is broken into, Zoe is stunned. When the flower shop is also attacked, Zoe is nearly traumatized. The past has returned with a vengeance, and no life changes can do anything about it.

However, with Henry dead, Zoe realizes she may now breathe free. She learns that all the shadowy characters out of her past life are dead and gone, now including Henry. Because of this, Zoe can take her life into her own hands and try to live in spite of her past. The time Zoe spends at Lake Tahoe reminds her that life can be better, and that the past can be lived in spite of. As Cash notes, everyone makes mistakes and experiences tragedies, but these do not have to define the future.

## Nothing is as it Seems

Nothing is ever what it seems, argues author Kate Moretti in her novel *The Vanishing Year*. *The Vanishing Year*'s status as a mystery thriller denotes that there will be duplicity from the very start. Zoe's early revelation that she has a past she is both trying to suppress and hide from only underscores the fact that things are not what they seem because Zoe herself is not what she first seems to others.

Zoe notes early on that she loves her life as it is now with Henry. Henry is a perfect husband, and Zoe has the perfect life: she is rich, well-cared for, and involved in good causes. She wants for nothing, except the desire to avoid her past at all costs. The stability, security, and steadiness of Henry are also things which Zoe appreciates dearly, for she did not have such things in her life before Henry. At the same time, Zoe wants to learn more about her past – specifically the mother who abandoned her at the hospital when her mother was only 16. Because of this, Zoe hopes she can reconnect with, and have a friendship with her mother now that they are both older. Zoe is also seemingly targeted by ghosts from her past, as someone – most likely Jared – is now trying to kill her.

However, nothing is what it seems to be. Henry's nature as steady, protective, and stable turns out to be a charming mask for his controlling nature and paranoia. The luxurious life Henry has given Zoe turns out to be nothing more than a gilded cage meant to keep Zoe in a box and under Henry's control. Zoe's mother gave Zoe up not because she had no choice and was a desperate teenager, but because Zoe's mother genuinely did not want her in her life. And the ghosts of Zoe's past turn out not to be ghosts at all – but Henry himself in the attempt to force Zoe back under his control.

Zoe's encounter with her mother also shatters things as they seem to be. Zoe imagined all her life she was an only sibling – but she learns she has a twin sister. It is revealed that Zoe's sister was Henry's first wife – and that Henry was cruel and controlling of her as well. He did not love her, but was obsessed with her. His marriage to Zoe had





nothing to do with love as it first seemed to Zoe – but had everything to do with holding Zoe responsible for Tara's death.

## Life is a Sum of Experiences

Life is a sum of experiences, the author illustrates in *The Vanishing Year*. Moretti makes this argument through Dr. Thorpe, Zoe's psychologist, at the end of the novel. The idea that life is a sum of experiences is in keeping with previous themes of the past and of people only having one life to live.

As Cash explains to Zoe when Zoe reveals her past to him, everyone makes mistakes and goes through tragedies but people reinvent themselves and go on to live better, happier, and healthier lives. Things cannot be erased in life, but they can be learned from, and can help people to grow. Zoe has been looking for a perfect life with a perfect set of circumstances – but her experiences have made her who she is, and she would not be the same without that set of experiences in life.

Cash himself has had his own series of difficult life experiences. Cash was demeaned and cheated on by his ex-girlfriend, and Cash's own life has been far from perfect as a result. Still, Cash carries on. His heartbreak makes him more sympathetic and sensitive to others, such as Zoe. Cash has been able to learn and grow from his experiences, and in turn, he is able to help Zoe to do the same thing.

Zoe learns that she cannot undo or erase parts of the past. She learns that she cannot hide, or hide from, the past either. The things she has dealt with make her who she is, and so she comes to appreciate things like time at the lake, and time spent with Lydia and Cash all the more dearly. Because of her experiences, Zoe comes to appreciate the genuinely good parts of life all the more dearly. She recognizes that she is a stronger, more capable person because of what she has been through despite how much she has suffered, and how she still suffers.

## Good People Always Find the Way

In the novel, Zoe encounters a number of different characters – some good, some bad. Much of the novel is dark, and the good seem to always suffer at the hands of the bad, but in the end, the good always survive.

Despite being abandoned as a baby, Zoe is adopted by a loving if eccentric mother. Zoe, so early in life, has already suffered at the hands of an uncaring mother – only to survive and live happily with Evelyn. When Evelyn dies and Zoe drops out of college, Zoe falls in with the preying Mick – who in turn leads Zoe down a path of drugs and danger. Zoe has a wake-up call when she meets a very young girl involved in a child sex ring – a girl who through no fault of her own has been forced into the trade. Because Zoe decides to act, the girl – and ten others – are saved and freed. Zoe and the girls – clearly the good – find their way.



Zoe, for her efforts however, is kidnapped and brutally beaten. She is rescued after several days and goes on to live a better life in New York. Life seems to get better when she falls in with Henry – but this only lasts for about a year. Henry's true nature and the truth of his past show through. Henry emerges as a bad man rather than Zoe's savior. Zoe only seems to suffer under Henry, but she fights back and, with Penny's help, is able to outlast Henry. Zoe is therein able to have the chance to live a happier, better life. She is a good person, and she has survived.

Cash and Penny also provide good characters who have escaped from under the thumbs of bad and cruel individuals to survive and live better lives. Cash's fiancée not only belittled his love of writing and his dream of being a reporter, but she also cheated on him with one of her law firm partners. Penny's husband was nearly killed in a fire set by Henry as a child, and Penny has had to live her entire life centered around a bedridden, quadriplegic husband thanks to Henry – while always living in fear of him and working for him. Penny's decision to intervene to kill Henry to save Zoe also saves herself from Henry. Because of this, Penny herself now may live in peace, free of Henry.



# Styles

## Point of View

Kate Moretti relates her novel *The Vanishing Year* from the first-person limited perspective from the point of view of main character and principal protagonist, Zoe. Because only Zoe knows the full details of her past – things kept hidden from everyone else – it is only natural that Zoe should tell her own story. This gives readers a unique, firsthand glimpse into the thoughts, feelings, and history of Zoe – and the reader experiences and understands things the way Zoe experiences and understands them.

This perspective in turn allows readers a unique place from which they may consider and evaluate Zoe's thoughts and feelings, and how these might or might not be wrong in the context of what is known. Here, the reader becomes an objective observer, whereas Zoe remains a personally-involved experiencer of events. The limited aspect of the narrative allows readers to learn and know things only as Zoe knows and learns them. This creates a kind of suspense, as neither readers nor Zoe know what is coming next – and lends to the genre of the novel as a mystery thriller.

## Language and Meaning

Kate Moretti's novel is related in language that is simple and reflective. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the novel's identity as a mystery thriller lends itself to fast-paced events which require the writing to move quickly. The feeling of motion is aided by short, to-the-point language that clearly says what it means and quickly advances the events of the novel – from sex scenes to near hit-and-runs to break-ins to kidnappings. Second, the reflective nature of the language represents Zoe's questioning nature regarding her past, and then later, mysterious events as they unfold relating to Henry and Tara Joan. Consider, for example, in Chapter 4 where Zoe briefly contemplates her situation following the near hit-and-run: "While I don't think I'm actively being pursued, the idea of hiding is long ingrained, the thought of going back claws at the back of my throat" (45). Or, consider how Zoe reflects in brevity on the idea of a past life and where she is now in Chapter 9: "I say it all, quickly but flatly, dispassionate, almost like it happened to someone else. Which is true, when you think about it. It happened to Hilary" (100).

## Structure

*The Vanishing Year* is divided into 28 chapters, including an Epilogue. For the early part of the novel, the chapters veer back and forth between the present – April 2014 – and the past. Step by step, chapter by chapter, puzzle pieces regarding Zoe's past are filled in until everything going on in April 2014 makes sense. From that point on, the novel remains rooted in the present as Zoe struggles to make light of the past with respect to the present.



The simple and straightforward approach to the construction of the novel allows readers to follow Zoe's journey, learning things as Zoe learns them along the way. Step by step, the past and the present mystery are both revealed until events climax and begin to settle into falling action in chapters 26 and 27. The denouement is found in the Epilogue, as events of the novel move forward six months and show where Zoe, Lydia, and Cash now are in their lives.



## Quotes

In five years, this has happened only one other time. One other incident of being discovered, of being found out...

-- Zoe (Chapter 1)

**Importance:** At the CARE benefit at NYPL, Zoe is nearly recognized by her old college roommate, Molly McKay. It is only the second time in five years this has happened. Zoe is very careful about her past, and knows she has been getting too careless lately. She does not want her past coming back to haunt her, but as it turns out, it will be impossible to prevent.

While I don't think I'm actively being pursued, the idea of hiding is long ingrained, the thought of going back claws at the back of my throat.

-- Zoe (Chapter 4)

**Importance:** Zoe's decision to leave her old life behind was, in part, because she had helped to break up a drug and sex trafficking ring, saving 11 young girls. To the present day, Zoe worries whether or not the past will catch up to her. While she does not think anyone is actually actively after her, she still does worry enough to be guarded about her past.

He was after her.

-- Hispanic cart vendor (Chapter 4)

**Importance:** After meeting with Cash and trying to do away with the thought that someone might be after her, Zoe is nearly hit by a car outside. She is saved by Cash. She learns from a nearby cart vendor that the car deliberately tried to hit her – gunning its engine and rushing toward her. Zoe is stunned. This means someone is actually after her.

Someone has come back for me.

-- Zoe (Chapter 9)

**Importance:** When Zoe returns home from meeting with Cash about her desire to find her mother, she is stunned to find the apartment has been upended. Everything has been ransacked or destroyed. Zoe instantly realizes the car was not merely coincidental, as the ransacked apartment clearly means someone has come for her.

I say it all, quickly but flatly, dispassionate, almost like it happened to someone else. Which is true, when you think about it. It happened to Hilary.

-- Zoe (Chapter 9)

**Importance:** Here, Zoe relates the story of her past to Officer Yates after the apartment is broken into and ransacked. Zoe considers that she is telling someone else's story. In many ways, she really is: she is no longer the person that she was, or so she has



convinced herself. But putting the past out of mind does not mean the past does not exist. Zoe's statement here is a statement of irony: she may have reinvented herself and changed her life, but the past will always be a part of her even if the past was a different part of her life.

It's her. You've found her.  
-- Zoe (Chapter 12)

**Importance:** Zoe reacts here to news that Cash has found her biological mother. Zoe is stunned and thrilled. She is amazed to see how much she looks like her mother, but 16 years younger. Zoe now begins to consider that she wants to meet her mother.

She might... not want to see you. It happens a lot. Just be prepared for that.  
-- Cash (Chapter 14)

**Importance:** When Zoe reveals she wants to meet her mother, Cash gives her a sobering dose of reality. Cash explains that it is possible that Zoe's mother may not want to see her. He explains this happens routinely, and that Zoe has to be ready for anything. These situations are never easy –and given Zoe's current state of affairs – nearly being run over and having her apartment broken into – things are going to be tense anyway.

He's nearly perfect. But is he good?  
-- Zoe (Chapter 16)

**Importance:** When Zoe and Henry have a real fight over Cash and the newspaper article, it causes Zoe to think about the past. She thinks about how Mick walked out on Evelyn, and how Evelyn said it was hard to find a good man. Zoe also thinks about how Henry is a perfect man – from his worrying about her to his always buying her gifts. But Zoe begins to wonder if Henry is actually even a good man, let alone anything else.

I guess my goal is just to have a connection, that's all. Just to know it's there.  
Somewhere in the world, someone knows I exist.  
-- Zoe (Chapter 17)

**Importance:** Here, Zoe explains to Cash why she wants to meet her mother. With Evelyn gone, Zoe has no real family. She wants to meet her biological mother to know she has a connection in the world, to know that someone cares about her, that someone knows she exists. Family is meant to be security and safety, and Zoe is looking for security and safety now.

I had twins, Zoe. You have a sister.  
-- Caroline (Chapter 19)

**Importance:** Zoe is stunned to learn that she has a twin sister. Caroline refused to tell Evelyn about Joan or Evelyn would never have taken Zoe. Zoe is later stunned to learn



that, not only does she have a twin sister, but that her sister is dead from a hit-and-run. Zoe is deeply troubled by this.

I'm going to have to help myself.  
-- Zoe (Chapter 24)

**Importance:** When Zoe realizes she is probably being slipped drugs by Henry to make her ill, and knowing no one else will be able to help her, Zoe decides she must help herself. Here, she takes her life into her own hands by managing to get up, get dressed, and going through Henry's office. There, she learns that Tara Joan was Henry's first husband, and Zoe must now confront Henry alone.

Sometimes life gives you a third chance. Who knew?  
-- Zoe (Epilogue)

**Importance:** At the end of the novel, Zoe is now dating Cash and has re-initiated her friendship with Lydia. All along, Zoe believed her life with Henry was a second chance, that she could finally move beyond the past – but the second chance turned out not to be what she had hoped. Now, she has a third chance at life with Cash and Lydia, and she is determined to make it count.