

The Widower's Tale Study Guide

The Widower's Tale by Julia Glass

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Plot Summary

Septuagenarian Percy Darling still grieves for his wife, Poppy, who drowned in their pond many years ago. Percy compares everything in his life today to the good life he shared with Poppy in the 1960s and 1970s. Percy raised their two daughter, Clover and Trudy, who were teenagers at the time of their mother's death. He tried to be a good father but marvels at how Trudy could become a respected oncologist while Clover ended up divorced without custody of her children and working in a pre-school now housed in the barn on his property. Percy is delighted with one family member, his grandson, Robert, a Harvard student with whom he has a close relationship.

Percy has a difficult time adjusting to the changes taking place in his community and the world at large but surprises everyone when he begins dating a much younger woman named Sarah who has a young boy named Rico. Sarah is a stained glass artist with a fiercely independent streak, so she baffles Percy when she unexpectedly marries a former boyfriend. Percy learns that she needs healthcare insurance because she has breast cancer and has married even though Percy offered to pay for her medical expenses.

Percy's world crashes even further when Robert faces charges related to a campus eco-terrorism act that destroyed Percy's house and the neighboring one in a huge fire. Robert is expelled and goes to live with Percy during his period of punishment and retribution. In spite of all his disappointments and heartaches, Percy's love pushes through and he will help Robert redeem himself and possibly even let Sarah back into his life.



Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

Summary

Percy Darling has donated the barn on his Matlock, Massachusetts, property to the Elves and Fairies preschool which has been refurbished. The donation was made in exchange for a job for his divorced and unsettled daughter, Clover, whose two children live with their father in New York City. Percy is especially fond of his grandson, Robert, a student at Harvard. Robert is the son of Percy's other daughter, Trudy, an oncologist who works in Boston. Robert visits Percy frequently and helps him adapt to new technology so that Percy can send email and browse on his laptop.

Clover browses the newspaper and tells Percy about some vandalism in which a local car was filled with corn husks and a big sign glued to the windshield hawking the use of ethanol. Clover asks Percy if the preschool can build a tree house in a tree near the new school and he agrees. Percy has adapted to all the changes at his home but hates to give up on his habit of swimming nude in his pond now that the school is on the property. Percy also likes to run every day and he bemoans the intrusion of modern houses into the historic town of Matlock. Percy takes pride in his historic home which is a smaller version of his neighbor, Laurel Connaughton's, home.

Since Percy can no longer swim in the nude, he goes to an outdoor gear store to buy swim trunks. While there, he purchases a pair of trunks with big pink pineapples on them and strikes up a charming conversation with the sales clerk, Sarah. When he returns, he encounters a groundskeeper named Celestino waiting for a ride at Laurel's house, so Percy invites him over to sit on the porch to wait for his ride. Percy thinks about his daughters: Clover, who has a history of bad choices and failed relationships, and Trudy, a noted Boston oncologist, and wonders how different things might have been if their mother had lived.

In Chapter 2, landscaping business owner, Tom Loud, picks up Celestino from Percy's house and drops him at the train station where Celestino heads to Lothian where he rents a room in a house owned by an old woman. Celestino is one of Loud's best workers and gets prime landscaping jobs. Celestino had come to America with his father who worked for an archaeological excavator named Mr. Lartigue in Guatemala. When Mr. Lartigue moved back to Cambridge, he brought Celestino to live with his family and learn things he would have never had access to in his home country. Celestino fell in love with Dr. Lartigue's daughter, Isabelle, and he lived a privileged life. When Mrs. Lartigue learned that Celestino and Isabelle were having sex, she banished him from the house and from their life. Celestino escaped to New York City where he lived for four years before having the courage to return to Boston.

In Chapter 3, Trudy reminds Robert via email about Clover's upcoming birthday and asks that Robert's girlfriend, Clara, pick out a gift of earrings because she has good taste. Robert lives with his Costa Rican roommate, Turo, a charming free thinker who is



dedicated to ecological and environmental issues. Turo hosts campus meetings for radical activists and tries to recruit new members to the cause.

The family gathers at a Thai restaurant for Clover's birthday and Robert thinks that she seems happier than he has seen her for quite awhile. Robert recalls overhearing discussions between his parents about his aunt Clover and how they disapprove of the way she lives her life and the poor decisions she has made. He also remembers aunt Clover staying at their house periodically when she was in distress. Unlike his parents, Robert always felt compassion for his aunt. Because they were so close, Clover had given Robert one of her rings as a symbol of their bond and he still has it in a dresser drawer.

During the birthday dinner, the topic of the increasing incidences of local vandalism comes up and Percy questions Robert on his thoughts. Robert admits that he is taking a course on the politics of immigration but he is not radical about anything.

Robert recalls overhearing a heated discussion between his mother, Trudy, and aunt Clover one day when aunt Clover accused Trudy of having an abortion because she did not want an imperfect child. Robert never said anything to his mother about what he had heard.

In Chapter 4, Robert, Turo, Celestino and preschool teacher, Ira, begin building the treehouse at Elves and Fairies. Percy finds a note from Laurel under his door, inviting him for cocktails to discuss a plan to benefit the historical society. Percy goes for his daily run and cannot help but mourn the downturn in library use since the advent of online technology. As a former librarian, Percy is especially upset at this trend, compounded by the fact that he had met Poppy in a library. He still thinks of her all the time and even mentions her name when he is exasperated, in pain or feeling joy.

When Percy returns home from his run, he swims in his pond, emerging just as the preschoolers are being picked up by their parents. Percy recognizes Sarah as the woman who sold him the swim trunks. She has arrived to pick up her son, Rico. Sarah invites Percy to her art studio where she creates stained glass. Later that day, Percy goes to Laurel's house and they talk about the local vandalism that is now expanding to other towns. Percy deflects Laurel's flirtations and she eventually tells him that she wants to organize house tours to benefit the historical society and Percy surprisingly agrees.

Percy recalls buying his house when he and Poppy were young. It needed a lot of work but they loved the house and the process. He also remembers the night that Poppy died. They had had an argument just before guests arrived for dinner. Poppy had had too much to drink during dinner and had gone out for a walk after their guests left. Percy had gone to bed and never went looking for Poppy in spite of Trudy's saying that she thought someone was calling outside. The next morning Percy was awakened by Trudy because she and Clover needed a ride to tennis lessons and Poppy was not home. Poppy's drowned body was discovered at the pond.



Percy visits Sarah in her studio where she also lives with her young son, Rico, whom she adopted in Guatemala. Percy treats them to dinner at a diner and then drives home happier than he has been in awhile. A few nights later, Percy has Sarah and Rico to dinner at his house. Later that night, Percy is filled with feelings that he could fall in love again. The next day Sarah invites him to go with her and Rico to the Fine Arts Museum in Boston the following weekend. Percy and Sarah are very attracted to each other and they make love for the first time when Rico is away for a weekend. They decide to keep their relationship quiet at least or a little while.

Analysis

The reoccurring theme of radicalism is introduced in these chapters. College is a time when young people are exposed to larger ideas about the world and Robert is pulled into his friend's, Turo, passion about eco-terrorism. Robert experiments but does not have the intensity that Turo experiences. The author provides some foreshadowing of these events through the newspaper articles about vandalism to local residents and their property. Percy finds these events humorous now but by the end of the story, the vandalism escalates to criminal levels with a personal element that will change Percy.

It is interesting that the author chooses to juxtapose this element of radicalism and violence near Percy's measured, calm and steady life. Percy is the complete opposite of what the radicals represent and he assumes he is untouched by it. Percy bristles at all the changes taking place in his life, such as different types of houses being built in his historical community and the fact that big box stores have replaced local vendors. Percy struggles to find his place in his world now since his recent retirement from the Widener Library at Harvard. Even when he does his morning jog, he bemoans the fact that the local library is fading and nothing is like it used to be. For someone who has spent a lifetime categorizing information and events, Percy is uncomfortable in a world that is changing so fast.

The author also introduces the thread of sibling rivalry in this section. Percy's daughters are about as different as it is possible to be. His older daughter, Clover, has lived her life with no real plan or goals. Her personal life is not as tidy as it could be and she struggles with being divorced and having her children live in a different city with her ex-husband. By contrast, Percy's younger daughter, Trudy, is an eminent oncologist who practices in Boston. By all appearances, Trudy has control of a very measured life but the author will reveal that she has vulnerabilities as well. The author provides some foreshadowing when it is brought up that she has had an abortion, a topic that will prove her to be human and flawed later in the story.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways are Percy's daughters, Trudy and Clover, different?



Discussion Question 2

What is Percy's state of mind regarding the state of the world and all the changes occurring around him?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Robert conflicted about his love for his aunt Clover and how his parents feel about his aunt?

Vocabulary

blithely, hyperfastidiously, commendable, spendthrift, vindication, oncologist, pertly, fruition, languished, litany, detritus, partake, enticingly, sardonic, rebuke, hapless, proliferated, barre, demur, esteemed, futile, bisected, treacly, onerous, stoic, bulbous, inebriated, alluvial, enclave, procure, bucolic, intrepid, folly, monastically, coercion, coalition, complacence, melodic, catastrophe, bourgeois, sabotage, dismay, centripetal, visceral, missive, demise, naive, maws, expunge, gnarled, facade, wanton, soiree, effusion, monogamist



Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8

Summary

The preschoolers are thrilled with the new treehouse and the school owner, Evelyn, invites Ira and some of the others to a cocktail party next weekend to celebrate. Clover is assertive with her new friendship with Ira, too, and it makes him a little bit uncomfortable. Ira overhears Robert talking to Turo who tells Robert that he has to decide what matters in his life. Sensing Robert's reticence, Turo wants to know if Robert wants him to move and Robert states that he does not but he does not want Turo to use his car anymore for his outings.

When Ira returns home, his partner, Anthony, pokes fun at Ira's job because it is in an upscale town. Anthony is a high-end divorce attorney in Boston but he also does pro bono work for the unfortunate. Anthony shows Ira a newspaper article about another incidence of vandalism in Matlock. Apparently, the vandals have called their group the DOGS which stands for Denounce Our Greedy Society. Anthony thinks it is funny because he is also opposed to the wealthy liberals that populate some small towns.

Ira is happy to be in Matlock, though, after having lost his job at a preschool in nearby Lothian where he was forced out for being gay. The father of one of the students did not want his child to be around him and threatened to withdraw his child's hefty tuition money if Ira remained. The administrator had no choice but to let Ira go. Anthony and Ira had a huge fight because Anthony thought he caved in; that he should have fought for his job, legally if necessary.

In Chapter 6, Robert accompanies Turo and his gang on an early morning raid where they damaged a home and pool in an upscale area. Robert regrets his actions and Turo tries to deflect his anger and asks Robert to meet him for dinner that night. Robert has a fight with Clara because she found the ring Aunt Clover had given him when putting away clothes in his sock drawer and assumed Robert had meant to give it to her. When Robert tells her the truth about the ring, Clara is angry when he will not let her wear it because it would be presumptuous. Clara rushes out and Robert does not go after her.

In Chapter 7, Celestino's boss gives him the special job of taking care of indoor plants for clients who are away from home for any length of time. This is a big nod to the trust placed in him. Robert and Turo invite Celestino to dinner at a pizza restaurant because Robert wants to talk to him about growing up in Guatemala as source material for a school paper. Celestino talks about his family and village and also tells them about living with the Lartigue family but withholds information about being in love with Isabelle. Conversation turns to Celestino's taking care of Laurel Connaughton's grounds and inside plants and Turo is very interested in details about her upscale house and that she lives alone there. Robert has to leave but Turo and Celestino stay for awhile and Turo questions him about his life with the Lartigues, especially Isabelle. Turo does a quick



online search for Isabelle and finds that she is going to be part of a panel discussion at Harvard soon.

In Chapter 8, Laurel engages a group of high school girls to clean and polish Percy's house prior to the home tour. Percy and Sarah are spending much more time together. Percy loves their lovemaking sessions, especially Sarah's breasts, and he is startled when he feels a lump in one when they are showering together one day. Sarah is not interested in Percy's wish that she see a doctor, stating that she has always had cystic breasts and the lump is nothing to worry about.

Later that day, Percy has lunch with Clover who wants to hire a lawyer to try to get shared custody of her kids. Percy tries to dissuade her because of how expensive it would be and that she would have to move back to New York. He also does not think that any judge will shake up the kids' life with Todd, Clover's ex-husband. Clover is adamant, though, because Todd has fallen in love with another woman and Clover does not want her to have influence on her children. Clover asks Percy to talk to her kids about it when they come for Thanksgiving and tells him that she is going to meet with Ira's partner, Anthony, about her legal situation.

One day, Percy visits Trudy in her office, a place he has never visited before. It is clear that she is very successful and very busy but she takes a couple minutes to talk to him. Percy wants to ask about Sarah's condition and hopes that Trudy could talk to her on Thanksgiving. Trudy deflects and tells him that Sarah needs to see her physician who can get her a referral for more tests. When Percy sees Sarah for dinner one night, he brings up the topic of her breast lump again and asks for assurance that she has had confirmation from a doctor that her breasts are fine. Sarah tells him that she cannot afford health insurance so she has not had the situation checked out by a physician. Percy offers to pay for a visit to his doctor and Sarah says she will consider it.

Analysis

A thread of discontent begins to form for Robert who does not want to be involved in Turo's midnight missions any longer. While Robert can appreciate Turo's passion for righting things that he believes to be wrong in the world, he does not always agree with Turo's methods. This shows Robert's evolution as a character in the growing maturity he exhibits.

Robert is not the only character who struggles with the beliefs of those around him. Anthony, for example, lives in contrast to his true beliefs. Anthony is a high-powered divorce attorney who makes a good living representing wealthy people in their cases, however, Anthony's real inclinations lie with the unfortunate people who are struggling in society so he does pro bono work to help them. Anthony has a hostile attitude toward the wealthy so he finds it amusing that so many wealthy people in the Matlock area are being targeted by vandalism. It could be said that Anthony is a hypocrite but in his mind, working for wealthy clients allows him to do the work for those who are too unfortunate to pay so it is justified in his mind.



The author introduces the heartbreak and inequity that can be associated with homosexuality in revealing Ira's situation with his former employer. Prejudice and narrow thinking of a child's parent forces the administrator to fire Ira. He not only has to find a new job, but he is also scarred by the prejudice and hate that prompted it. Ira has a tendency to try to hid his homosexuality and this incident does not help him feel more confident in who he is as a person. Ira also feels that he has let Anthony down because he did not fight for his job. Ira is simply not a contentious person; he is more wounded by the incident than fired up about it.

The author provides more foreshadowing when Turo takes a real interest in Laurel's house. He is unusually interested in Laurel's house and the fact that she lives there alone. This will prove to be of great importance by the end of the story.

The author continues to show Percy's personal evolution, as he has fallen in love with a younger woman named Sarah. The nearly 20-year age difference points out that people of different ages can be in love, but the definition of love has changed since Percy was a young man. Sarah is an independent, stubborn woman used to running her own life and she resents Percy's involving himself in places that she thinks should be off limits. She especially resents Percy's persistence in urging her to get medical attention for a lump in her breast. He also offers to pay for medical expenses because she has no health insurance but Sarah is used to taking care of herself so they have a standoff in this area as well. Relationships are about understanding underlying needs and motivations and both of them need to appreciate things about the other that are below the surface.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Anthony so upset when he learns that Ira has been fired from his job?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Sarah so defensive when Percy persists in questioning her about the lump in her breast?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Percy believe that Clover should not attempt to get shared custody of her kids at this point in time?

Vocabulary

serendipity, cadence, banish, self-deprecating, perciatelli, noblesse oblige, pro bono, provocation, congenial, puritanical, kinetic, paranoia, bigotry, autistic, symposium, equilibrium, castration, fiefdom, imperious, ostentatiously, pungently, plumes, grotesque,



bifurcated, lovelorn, presumptuous, docile, benevolent, adamantly, charismatic, iguana, arborist, impoverished, cynic, stigma, magnanimous, ocelot, elude, visceral, ersatz, lurk, pelt, unvanquished, discrete, dolts, induce, quixotic, inertia, admonitions, buoyant, cannonade, squalor, voyeurs, acanthus, aphorisms



Chapters 9, 10, 11 and 12

Summary

Clover brings Ira a bouquet of tiger lilies for connecting her with Anthony who has given her some legal hope regarding her custody situation. Ira deflects Clover's attempts to tell him details about her situation because he does not really want to get involved. Later, at the gym, Ira shares Clover's appreciation to Anthony who thinks that Clover is not being realistic about her situation. A few days later, Ira encounters Celestino as Ira is walking home with his arms filled with grocery bags. Celestino helps him carry the bags and Ira invites him in for coffee and to meet Anthony who tries to engage him in conversation but with little success.

One evening when Ira stays late at work, he encounters Turo stowing a canoe underneath the preschool. They chat about school for a little while until Ira has to return to his classroom and Turo remains seated on a nearby log.

In Chapter 10, Robert and Turo are in Percy's cellar looking for skis to take advantage of new snow right before Thanksgiving break. Turo is curious whether anybody ever uses the cellar anymore or if it is just for storage. Robert's dad, Douglas, is in Percy's kitchen cooking for the holiday tomorrow. Percy arrives with Sarah and he introduces her to the guys. Robert finds Turo out by the pond criticizing all the huge homes of the wealthy people in the distance and their uncontrolled use of light and electricity. Trudy arrives later and is very happy to see Robert because they have not been together for awhile.

Robert had gone on two more midnight missions with Turo after the one where he vowed he would quit, but he is beginning to think that their small missions will not really have much impact on their victims. He does feel that Turo will probably be able to accomplish great things, though, because he is so passionate. Later, Robert goes to town with Trudy to buy wine for the holiday. Trudy questions Robert about his break-up with Clara because she really likes Clara but Robert does not want to discuss it.

During the drive home, Robert asks his mother if she really had had an abortion. She tells him that she did have an abortion when Robert was seven-years-old. The baby would have been born with Down Syndrome and she and Douglas did not think they could manage that. She is incredulous that Robert is interested, but tells him that the baby had been a girl. Trudy rants about how Clover violated her privacy which she resents because Clover has made so many mistakes in her own life. When they return to Percy's house, Trudy storms in and says nothing more to Robert.

In Chapter 11, Percy has called Sarah for three days and she has not returned his call. Percy learns that Sarah has been given a diagnosis of breast cancer. He looks for her at the preschool but learns that other parents have been bringing Rico. Percy talks to Ira who says that Sarah is going through testing and that people are prepared to help once



she has surgery. Ira asks Percy to talk to Sarah about talking to Rico about her disease so he is prepared and Ira promises to do that.

Percy had been able to get Sarah in to see a colleague of Trudy's right after Thanksgiving and it turned out that she needed a biopsy. Percy offered to take her for the procedure and to pay for it as well. The biopsy reveals a malignant tumor requiring more tests and surgery. Percy drives Sarah home and encourages her to talk, and she tells him that a part of her blames Percy for the troubles she is experiencing. Even though that is not rational, Sarah says that she needs a break from Percy.

One night Percy takes Robert to dinner and offers to pay for a vacation for him and Turo during winter break but Robert declines because he has to study for exams. Robert does ask to borrow some money, though, because something got messed up with Turo's bank and he does not have rent money. Percy is glad to finally have a problem he can solve.

A few days later, Percy is finally able to connect with Sarah who tells him that her tumor is complicated which means more surgery followed by much more treatment. She does not know how she will begin to pay for everything and is angry at Percy's demands that she not worry about that now. Sarah has an appointment to see Trudy who might be able to help figure out the insurance situation.

In Chapter 12, Celestino thinks about the dinner he shared with Robert and Turo a couple weeks ago and how Turo had walked him home afterward. Celestino had told Turo all about Isabelle and a couple weeks later, Turo dropped by Celestino's boarding house to see if he wanted to go out for dinner at a local bar. Turo tells Celestino that he had attended the Harvard seminar Isabelle gave and Celestino is too shocked to say much. Turo admits that he followed Isabelle home so he knows where she lives and he gives the information to Celestino.

One Sunday, Celestino goes to the church where he had attended with the Lartigues and sees Mrs. Lartigue but Isabelle is not with her. After the service, he heads to a diner for coffee and, when reaching in the pocket of his coat, pulls out the scrap of paper with Isabelle's address.

Analysis

Turo's activities are becoming more and more suspicious to those around him as the author leads the reader toward what must be an event that will change the course of the story. Ira encounters Turo putting a canoe under the barn's storage area. It is unusual that Turo would be at Percy's house without Robert so Ira's suspicions are doubly aroused. Even when he is with Robert, though, Turo continues to behave suspiciously. When he and Robert search for skis in Percy's cellar, Turo is just a little bit too interested in how the cellar is used and whether anyone else uses it. In these instances, the author provides foreshadowing for a major destructive event in which Turo participates.



In addition to the canoe and cellar events casting suspicion on Turo, his attitude and comments regarding all the electricity being used by the wealthy families near Percy's home at Thanksgiving just further drive home his stance on the inequalities in society. Turo is unrelenting in his passion for making things right and balancing out what he considers to be inequalities. Robert's character is evolving and showing more maturity in that he is weary of Turo's intensity about things that Turo will probably have no impact on. Robert admires Turo's passion and thinks that he is capable of great things someday, but he wishes that Turo would channel his intensity into something more achievable.

The relationship that Robert has with his mother is evolving too. He learns that what he had overheard his Aunt Clover say years ago, that Trudy had had an abortion, is true. Robert is curious about his mother's decision but is not judgmental. It is Trudy who is more upset about the revelation, probably because she expects that Robert will think she is flawed and that is painful for her. In reality, Robert will probably just view his mother as a mortal human being who makes difficult choices and mistakes, but that is a shift in the parent-child relationship.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the people in Clover's world think that she is unrealistic in her renewed child custody expectations?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Trudy react so angrily when Robert asks her about having an abortion?

Discussion Question 3

Is it easy to understand why Percy feels rejected when Sarah will not talk about her cancer or let him comfort her in any way?

Vocabulary

inexplicable, pas de deux, morbid, squeamish, furtive, itinerant, tedious, surrogate, decoupage, prismatic, primordial, tiramisu, sous-chef, benevolent, bemused, puree, terse, collusion, phantom, deteriorate, courtly, artisan, vice versa, sophomoric, redundant, protocol, sumptuous, hierarchy, lambent, vexations, ghastly, protocol, admonished, feeble, codger, extenuating, succulent, gullibility, apparitions, conniption, condescended, homoerotic



Chapters 13, 14, 15 and 16

Summary

Ira and Anthony attend a wedding of two of their gay friends on Christmas Eve. Anthony wants to talk about the two of them getting married but Ira deflects him. Anthony persists, though, stating that he thinks they need a big celebration but Ira will not commit. On Christmas Day, they go to Clover's in the afternoon for a party with her family and a few friends. The only one not in attendance is Trudy who could not come at the last minute. Robert tells Ira that he wants to decorate the treehouse in the Woodstock theme for the upcoming preschool fundraiser. Ira asks about Turo and Robert says he had other plans but Ira is sure he saw Turo in the woods as he and Anthony drove to the party today.

Ira sees Sarah for the first time in a month at the preschool after the holidays. She tells him that her cancer treatments are about to start and that her ex-boyfriend, Gus, will be helping take care of Rico. Percy does not know anything about Gus but Sarah wants Ira to know since Ira is a big part of Rico's life.

In Chapter 14, Percy takes Sarah to her first chemotherapy session at Trudy's office. Percy tells Trudy that he will pay for anything Sarah needs but Trudy cannot talk about Sarah's confidential patient information. Percy spends time with a friend at an art museum while Sarah has her treatment. Percy first learns about Gus when Rico mentions that he will be going to Gus' house tomorrow. Percy has been led to believe that Gus is Sarah's cousin and he does not understand why Sarah has not introduced him to Percy yet. Percy takes Sarah to her chemotherapy sessions but she will not let him keep her company while she is there so he finds things to do in the city while he waits for her.

Percy invites Sarah and Rico to move in with him for awhile to help manage through this trying time but Sarah insists on keeping her independence. Sometimes, though, Sarah and Rico would go to Percy's for dinner and she and Percy would lie in bed and talk while Rico watched TV. Percy does not ask Sarah how she is paying for her medical expenses.

One day Percy is surprised to receive a letter from Maurice Fougere, Evelyn's husband, a local eccentric who wants to buy Percy's house. The money would help him pay for Sarah's medical bills but she does not think he should ever sell his beautiful home.

In Chapter 15, Celestino finally meets Isabelle again when he goes to her apartment and sees her coming down the sidewalk. Isabelle is shocked to see him and tells him that she and her family tried to find him after he ran away from their home. Isabelle is uneasy so they go to a cafe to talk and he tells her he had loved her but he senses her discomfort with that information. Celestino also notices how much she has changed, how she looks much more affluent than he is.



Isabelle admits that she had been in love with Celestino too but that so much has changed over the years. Isabelle tells Celestino that she will be leaving for France soon for a job and did not plan on having much of a life here before she left. Celestino feels awkward when Isabelle pays the check and when she asks for his phone number because he has no phone or email. Isabelle has to leave to go to work but promises that they will see each other again.

The next night Celestino calls Isabelle and she shares her concern that he is in the country illegally and offers the help of an attorney. Celestino is insulted but agrees to meet her for dinner later in the week. When they meet, Isabelle admits that she had used Celestino to subvert her father's pure intentions for him, not considering how she had toyed with Celestino's feelings. She states that they cannot go back in time and that they have no future together, news that devastates Celestino. Before they part, Isabelle gives him the contact information for an immigration attorney.

Celestino heads to Laurel's house to tend to her inside plants and he sees Robert and Turo decorating the preschool treehouse in Percy's yard. Turo accompanies Celestino inside because he is curious to see how upscale it is.

In Chapter 16, Sarah continues her cancer treatments and Percy delights in caring for her when she allows it. Clover has an attorney in New York even though Percy does not know how she is paying him. Trudy tells Percy that Sarah is doing very well with her treatments but when she gets a fever and a cold, she has to spend the day at a hospital for medication and observation. Percy takes Rico to a science museum as planned. Rico reveals that Gus is not Sarah's cousin; he is her husband.

Percy has dinner with Robert to ask what he thinks about Percy selling his house. Robert is shocked but tells Percy that he should do what he really wants to do with his life. Robert tells Percy that he plans to spend the summer in New York, interviewing for internships. He will be staying with Todd and the kids.

Percy calls Sarah to tell her that he must see her but she tries to evade him saying that her day will be devoted to Rico. He decides to challenge her on the phone and demands to know her situation with Gus and why she has hidden it from him. Sarah admits that she is married to Gus so she can get his healthcare benefits and a loan to pay for treatment before the benefits kick in. Percy is angry and wants to know why Sarah did not give him the chance to marry her and take care of her. Sarah hopes she will get better but she may die and she needs to think about who will take care of Rico and Gus is a better candidate than Percy because he is almost 20 years younger.

Analysis

The theme of homosexuality is important in this section because Ira and Anthony attend the wedding of two gay friends. Anthony would like to marry Ira but Ira is still hesitant to live as a married gay couple because of the societal stigma attached. Being gay has



already cost Ira a job and he is not sure that he is capable of managing through what might come their way if they were to be married.

The suspicions about Turo continue to escalate as Ira states that he saw Turo in the woods on the way to Clover's Christmas party even though Turo had told Robert he was going out of town for the holidays. Clearly, Turo is up to something and the author leads the reader closer to the point of revelation about his activities.

Secrets abound with Turo but Sarah has been keeping important secrets of her own. Percy was led to believe that Gus was Sarah's cousin when he is actually her husband. She has been keeping Percy in her life to a limited degree which frustrates him but it is all she can give him right now. The author leads the reader to the inevitable crash of Percy learning that Gus is not Sarah's cousin, he is her husband.

Family dynamics are always complicated and this is evidenced in one situation by Clover and Trudy's strained relationship. Trudy has always lived a very structured, orderly life and has a difficult time hearing about Clover's life filled with ups and downs. Trudy is now angry at Clover because Robert had overheard Clover talking about Trudy's abortion. Trudy had wanted this information to be kept secret and Clover has violated her trust by voicing it.

Discussion Question 1

Why would Ira deflect Anthony's hopes to talk about wedding plans for the two of them?

Discussion Question 2

Is Percy justified in his anger to learn that Gus is not Sarah's cousin, he is actually her husband?

Discussion Question 3

Why would Isabelle be so concerned that Celestino is in America illegally and offer him legal help?

Vocabulary

indelicate, besmirched, nymphlike, gaudy, molting, neuroses, manic, countercultural, newfangled, cynic, cajoled, sardonically, eco-terrorist, niche, dismal, idiosyncratic, projectile, diminishment, tiresome, hostile, regalia, striated, dank, deja vu, lair, synonymous, pummeled, litany, eureka, vexed, ire, ruthlessness, umbilical, heady, bravado, aloof, quaint, litany, sabotage, subvert, fickle, tepid, iridescent, placate, maudlin, grappled



Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22

Summary

Turo shows Robert a YouTube video of some of the DOGS' midnight missions and Robert is shocked to learn that there are several groups of the DOGS in the region. Robert and Turo head to New York for internship interviews. Turo will be staying with another friend and Robert is relieved because he is weary of Turo's intensity over the DOGS. Robert feels strange in Aunt Clover's apartment since she no longer lives there but he enjoys spending time with his cousins, his uncle and his uncle's fiancée.

Robert's interviews go well and a week later, he and Turo head back to Harvard. That night, Robert gets an instant message from Turo telling him that another midnight mission is coming up and Robert is expected to be there.

In Chapter 18, Ira, Clover and the others continue their planning for the preschool's Woodstock-themed fundraiser night. Clover reveals to Ira that her ex-husband has remarried and that she learned the news from Trudy and Douglas. Clover is further outraged because she has learned that her favorite nephew, Robert, will be living with her ex-husband and his new wife during his internship in New York. One night Sarah calls Ira to tell him that she and Gus are married and that Gus really loves Rico and has known him for a long time. She also tells him that she hopes that Percy will remain in their lives but they are on a hiatus for now.

In Chapter 19, Maurice shows up at Percy's house on the day of the preschool fundraiser. After a quick tour, Maurice gives Percy an envelope containing an offer for the house. Laurel comes over when she sees Maurice and invites him to join the historical society. Maurice leaves and Laurel tells Percy she is going to New York to see her grandchildren.

Sarah has called Percy to tell him that she has asked someone else to drive her to her medical appointments. She tells Percy that she does not want their relationship to be over but Percy can see no way to continue given that she is married to another man. Percy asks her to call him to tell him about her medical progress, but that he would not be calling her.

In Chapter 20, The night before, Robert had helped Turo prepare for the next midnight mission. He and some others rolled newspapers into huge logs that were then stuffed into some massive semi tires. Early this morning Robert got a text from Turo telling him to be ready to go on the mission at 5:00. Robert has a cold and has to study for exams so he does not want to go. He texts Turo who will not accept his lack of participation. Turo calls Robert at 5:00 when he has not shown up but Robert does not answer his phone.



Ira gives Anthony a tour of the preschool prior to the evening fundraiser. Soon, the evening kicks into full gear and everyone is dancing and having a great time. Soon, Ira flips the switch and the treehouse is alight with black lights and psychedelic art. However, no one is looking because everyone is mesmerized by the sight of two flaming large dark objects floating on the pond. Suddenly, two more flaming objects appeared at Laurel's house and a floodlight switches on revealing a huge banner mocking the people for dancing while their childrens' planet burns. The banner catches fire and soon the house is ablaze. Before long, the trees separating Laurel's house from Percy's are also on fire and Percy's house is next. Laurel's house burns to the ground and Percy's house sustains major roof and window damage.

The authorities question the preschool staff and Ira reports that Turo has been seen around the house a lot lately with no real reason to be there. Clover adds that Robert is his best friend and Robert has not been himself lately. Percy cannot tolerate the accusations against Robert and he rushes from the preschool.

Robert had taken a study break at a cafe with a new girl but now it is 1:00 a.m. and he sees police officers waiting when he arrives at his apartment. Just as he is arrested, Robert sees Percy bounding up the stairs, telling the officers that Robert is a good boy.

In Chapter 21, Anthony represents Robert and his parents pay his bail to get out of jail. Anthony drops him off at home but his parents are not there. Robert has an alibi in that he was with the new girl during the time of the fire. All Robert can think about is Turo once telling him that when someone gets caught, the DOGS will be huge and now he knows that he is the one to be caught. Anthony says he will have to get Robert a criminal attorney but he will do everything he can to keep Robert out of prison.

In Chapter 22, Percy buys a small house in nearby Vigil Harbor. He becomes very involved in Robert's legal proceedings. Robert admits that he participated in Turo's events without coercion although he was not a member of the DOGS. Robert has had his phone and computer taken away so he has not had any contact with Turo and does not know where he is. The police tell Percy that Turo had slept in his cellar and stored things under the barn. Percy tells Robert that he understands what drew him in to Turo's thinking, but participating is beyond inexcusable.

Percy invites Laurel to lunch and she tells him that Maurice has bought her land so she will not be rebuilding. Percy gives her a packet of letters written by the couple who had built hers and Percy's houses. The police had found them during their investigation of Percy's house. Laurel is pleased with the find.

The terms of Robert's suspended sentence are that he live with Percy and cannot venture past 50 miles away without Percy or his parents. He is also to have no Internet access and Percy had to drive him to meetings with his parole officer. He can enroll in a nearby state college when he is permitted to do so. Percy has also invited Celestino to live with Robert and him and they settle into a life of work and recovery. Percy is surprised to hear from Sarah one day when she calls. He had last seen her a month



ago when she had breast removal surgery. They catch up on their lives and talk about seeing each other at Ira's upcoming wedding.

Percy is apprehensive about seeing Clover at the wedding. They have not spoken since she wrote him a letter indicating that she was not sorry for letting the authorities know the truth about Robert. Clover feels that Percy loves Trudy and Robert more than he loves her and her children. Percy had wanted to reply, telling Clover how she had disappointed him over the years but Trudy's husband, Douglas, talked him out of it.

Robert is allowed Internet access in Percy's presence and one day they see an email from Turo, saying that he had just heard about what happened to Robert. Turo had not expected Robert to take the fall for the fire but he had never lied to Robert who had free will about his participation. Robert is visibly upset and Percy tells him that he has to forward the email to his parole officer.

Robert and Celestino are bonding by spending so much time together. They have started French lessons and Percy is glad to see Robert's joy coming back. Robert is not allowed to attend Ira's wedding so Percy dresses in his typical flamboyant style and drives the truck into town as the boys continue their work at his house.

Analysis

The story line of Turo and Robert reaches a climax when Turo's midnight mission results in the destruction of Laurel's house and part of Percy's house. Radicalism always goes to extremes and destruction never solves anything. Unfortunately, radicalism does not breed loyalty among its members as evidenced when Turo lets Robert be arrested and face charges even though he was not physically part of this mission. Robert believed in Turo but he should never have participated in any way.

What is surprising in the aftermath of the destruction is how easily Aunt Clover gives up Robert to the authorities. She is angry at Robert for his decision to live with her ex-husband and his new wife while studying in New York and she wants to punish him for what she considers his disloyalty. Family dysfunction can extend far and deep and clearly Clover needs some help in balancing what is happening in her own life with how she responds and reacts to others.

Family can be a great support, however, as evidenced by Percy's taking Robert into his home and helping him work through the period of punishment and recovery. Real love from an authentic person can look beyond the immediate offense to the loved one's redemption and that is what Percy is doing for Robert. This puts Percy in a difficult spot with Clover who claims that he loves Trudy and Robert more than he loves her and her children. Percy also has to reconcile his relationship with Sarah even though he is not sure how he plans to do that. All Percy knows is that his life is nothing but change now and he is learning to lean into it rather than resist it.



Discussion Question 1

Why is Robert getting tired of Turo's midnight missions?

Discussion Question 2

Has Sarah made ethical choices regarding Gus and Percy and her relationships with them?

Discussion Question 3

Why would Clover give up Robert to the authorities so easily?

Vocabulary

miserly, grimace, appalled, avatars, loathing, hiatus, pacifist, glint, au revoir, ecumenical, rambunctious, mullions, perturbed, ascertain, ironclad, cockamamie, hither, yon, dowries, precocious, estrus, interminable, incendiary, compost, cantilevered, sparring, beguiling, convoluted, gullible, insolence, impunity, cloying, braggart, coercion, tacit, insurgents, stalwart, clandestine, cuckold, paranoid, betrothed, rebuke, winnowing, disingenuous, miasma



Characters

Percy Darling

Percy Darling is the protagonist in the story, the widower in *The Widower's Tale*. Percy is a 70-year-old man who has recently retired from a long career as a librarian at the Widener Library at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Percy lives in a nearby upscale town called Matlock in an historic house that he and his deceased wife bought when they were newly married. Percy is a measured person who likes routine and research and finds himself struggling with all the changes occurring in his life lately, beginning with his retirement.

Percy became a widower when his wife, Poppy, accidentally drowned in the pond on their property when their daughters were teenagers. He has never really gotten over losing Poppy and speaks to her in his mind all the time. Percy tries to be a good father but his daughter Clover tries his patience with her frenetic lifestyle, and his daughter Trudy is distant and controlling which prevent him from being really close to her.

Percy surprises himself by falling in love with a younger woman named Sarah but struggles with the differences in how they each view relationships, partly due to the nearly 20-year age difference.

Clover

Clover is a forty-something year old woman who teaches at a preschool called *Elves and Fairies*. Clover is the older daughter of Percy Darling whose barn has been renovated to accommodate the school. Percy gave the barn to the school in exchange for a job for Clover who is very unsettled in her life. Clover has always had a volatile history of making the wrong decisions for herself. Her most recent disappointment is a divorce from her ex-husband who lives in New York and has custody of their children. Clover is hurt that her children would rather live with their father than with her but her volatility is unsettling for them.

Clover also has issues with her sister, Trudy, who has become more successful as an oncologist with a settled way of life. Clover thinks that people do not understand her and she tries so hard but impetuosity is difficult for people to grasp. Clover can be mean-spirited and spiteful as in the example of giving Robert up to the authorities because she is mad at him for living with her ex-husband while he is studying in New York.

Trudy Barnes

Trudy is Percy's younger daughter and mother of his favorite grandchild, Robert. Trudy is an eminent oncologist who practices in Boston. Trudy is a very busy woman who



leads a structured life. Consequently, she has little tolerance for bad decisions and poor choices, especially related to her sister, Clover.

Trudy has raised her son, Robert, to follow in her footsteps to study to become a doctor and Robert has always idolized her. Their relationship changes when Robert learns that Trudy had once had an abortion when it was revealed that the child would have had Down Syndrome. Trudy is devastated when Robert finds out because she thinks this will change his view of her.

Robert Barnes

Robert is Trudy's son and Percy's grandson. Robert is fun loving, has a good sense of humor and is especially close to his grandfather. Robert attends Harvard University, studying to become a doctor. Robert's friendship with roommate, Turo, teaches him about being passionate about things you believe in as well as putting limits on the intensity with which you follow those passions. Robert's involvement in eco-terrorist activity negatively impacts his life and probably the course of his future but he tries to stay positive about the altered course of his life.

Ira

Ira is a teacher at the Elves and Fairies preschool. Ira is gay and was fired from a previous teaching job because one of the parents did not want his child to have exposure to a gay teacher. Ira is in a relationship with a lawyer named Anthony who wants to marry Ira but Ira is not sure he can manage the hostility that they may encounter as a gay married couple.

Anthony

Anthony is Ira's partner who works as a high-end divorce lawyer in Boston. In spite of his career, Anthony's sympathies lie with the underprivileged and he also does pro bono work. Anthony has wanted Ira to marry him for awhile and the two finally make that commitment by the end of the story.

Arturo "Turo"

Turo is Robert's friend and roommate at Harvard. Turo has a lot of passion for causes where he thinks the wealthy and privileged take advantage of those who are less fortunate. He gets involved with an eco-terrorism group and even pulls Robert in to the activities. Turo's loyalties lie with the radical group and he lets Robert take the fall for the crime of burning Laurel's house.



Clara

Clara is Robert's girlfriend at college. They break up when she finds the ring that Clover had given to Robert and thinks that it is meant for her. When she refuses to take it off, Robert accuses her of being presumptuous about the state of their relationship and she is wounded by the honesty.

Celestino

Celestino is a young man who works for a landscaping company. He was born in Guatemala and came to the United States with a benefactor who worked in archaeological excavation.

Sarah Straight

Sarah Straight is a 50-something year old woman who is independent, stubborn, proud, intelligent and forward thinking. She is a stained glass artist who also works part-time at a sporting good store. She is mother to a young boy and falls in love with Percy, a man 20 years her senior. She is diagnosed with breast cancer and marries a man just for his healthcare insurance benefits.

Rico Straight

Rico is Sarah's little boy. He attends the Elves and Fairies preschool.

Poppy Darling

Poppy Darling was Percy's wife who accidentally drowned in the pond on their property. Even though she had been dead for many years, Percy still talks to her in his head and invokes her name when he is overwhelmed by his life.

Laurel Connaughton

Laurel Connaughton is Percy's neighbor in Matlock. She owns the larger of their two houses that are historic places in the town. Laurel had romantic designs for Percy but when he is not interested, she backs off. She creates a historic house tour to raise money for the historical society. She is understandably shocked and angry when her house is burned down as part of an eco-terrorist act.

Todd Barnes

Todd is Trudy's husband and Robert's father.

Tom Loud

Tom Loud owns the landscaping company that employs Celestino.

Mr. Lartigue

Mr. Lartigue was an archaeological excavator who met and employed Celestino's father in Guatemala. He became Celestino's benefactor and brought him to the United States to live with his family.

Isabelle Lartigue

Isabelle Lartigue is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lartigue who had brought Celestino to the United States and let him live in their home. During his time there, Isabelle and Celestino fell in love and Celestino has never stopped loving her.



Symbols and Symbolism

The pond

The pond on Percy's property symbolizes change in Percy's life, and how he has learned to accept and lean into it instead of fight it. The pond is the site where his wife, Poppy, accidentally drowned. This event would probably make most people avoid it, however, Percy swims in the pond every day in warm weather because it relaxes him. Perhaps he feels closer to Poppy when he is swimming there.

DOGS

The DOGS symbolize the radical initiatives that are unleashed on the wealthy in society and the excesses they take for granted in their lives. DOGS is the acronym for Denounce Our Greedy Society, the eco-terrorist group to which Turo belongs. Dogs are often thought to protect one's house and property, so the name given to the eco-terrorist group may symbolize the group's believe that they are protecting something too.

Percy's swim trunks

Percy's new swim trunks symbolize how he is accepting his life's changes, but he is also have some fun and showing a bit of rebellion by buying the most outrageous trunks he can find. The trunks have big, hot pink pineapples on them which makes both him and Sarah, who sells him the trunks, laugh. Percy needs the swim trunks because having the new preschool is now on his property means he can no longer swim nude in his pond.

Ring

The ring in Robert's drawer symbolizes familial love. Clover had given a ring to her nephew, Robert, when he was younger because they loved each other very much and she wanted him to have something to symbolize their affection. The ring is dear to Robert and he ends his relationship with Clara after she finds it and refuses to remove it from her finger.

The barn

The barn on Percy's property symbolizes life through educations and artistic expression. It had been his wife, Poppy's, dance studio where she gave lessons. It has recently been renovated to house a preschool, giving new life and new lessons to the abandoned space.



Percy's house

Percy's house symbolizes the secure life he had with his wife, and his daughters view the house as a symbol of stability in their own lives. When the house is damaged, Percy knows that life as he knew it is over and he moves on, finding a smaller home to fit his new future.

The love letters

After the fire, the authorities find a packet of love letters written by the couple who built Percy's house a couple hundred years ago. Laurel had a serious interest in the couple and the house's history as well as wishing to have a romantic relationship with Percy. When Percy presents her with the letters it is a symbolic gesture of love, even though it is not what she would have ultimately preferred, she accepts the gesture as it is given.

Stained glass

Sarah's stained glass art symbolizes a different way for Percy to view the world because up until he met her, he saw the world through clear glass and an unimpeded view.

Library

The town library symbolizes Percy's life, as it was once well kept, well used, and well liked by the town, but as time moves forward and technology advances, the library is used less and falling into disrepair. Although Percy has not "fallen into disrepair" per se, his happy, stable life with his wife and children has moved forward and changed dramatically.

Percy's entire adult life has been spent employed at the Widener Library at Harvard. His choice of employment symbolizes the well-thought out and researched way he has lived his life. Fortunately, his retirement allows him to see the world outside the confines of academia and he has another chance to add more dimension to his world.

Fire

The fire that destroys Laurel's house and part of Percy's house is obviously destructive; it not only destroys Laurel's home but also the friendship between Robert and Turo. It even temporarily destroys Robert's relationship with his family, showing that more than the physical was ruined in the wake of Turo's actions.



Settings

Matlock, Massachusetts

Matlock, Massachusetts is a small town and an enclave of wealthy residents.

Boston, Massachusetts

Boston, Massachusetts, is the capital of the state and the site of Harvard University where Robert attends and also the location of Trudy's medical practice.

Elves and Fairies Preschool

The Elves and Fairies Preschool has recently taken up residence in a renovated barn on Percy's property.

Packard, Massachusetts

Packard, Massachusetts, is located near Matlock and Percy goes there to shop.

Vigil Harbor, Massachusetts

Vigil Harbor, Massachusetts, is Poppy's hometown and the location of Percy's new house at the end of the story.



Themes and Motifs

Family

The Widower's Tale is a story about family and the interpersonal dynamics that exist to create it. Percy married Poppy and they had two daughters, thinking that they would be a happy unit forever. Poppy's death altered the dynamic, but a family remained. Today, Percy struggles with relating to his two daughters and thinks that it should be easier since he is essentially the one who raised them. That does not necessarily guarantee knowledge of a child who becomes an adult, plus the dynamic of parent and child alters when the child also becomes an adult. Percy does his best at keeping his family together through phone calls, visits and dinners because it is important to him that the family remain intact.

Percy is also good at cultivating inter-generational relationships with his grandchildren, especially Robert, not only because it keeps him young but he enjoys being with them and knowing about their lives.

A broken family is something painful to see and even more painful to experience as evidenced by Clover's life. She still mourns the married life she had and is bitter that her children live with her ex-husband in New York. Clover never intentionally set out to have a fragmented family but it happened and she suffers the pain of it every day.

Family also takes on different forms as exhibited by Sarah and Rico and Ira and Anthony. Sarah is a single woman who wanted a child and adopted Rico to make their own little family. Ira and Anthony marry and create a family of two gay men which is a non-traditional, yet emerging family model.

Homosexuality

The role of homosexuality in the novel exhibits some of the challenges that society's varying attitudes toward homosexual people and relationships. Prejudices are powerful and ugly as Ira experiences while employed at his former preschool job. When a parent of one of the preschoolers does not want his child to be around Ira, the school administrator terminates Ira because the angry parent threatens to pull his child and his tuition money. This would be devastating to a small school, yet Ira's life is instead devastated in the process.

Not only does Ira lose his job, he faces anger and impatience from Anthony who thinks Ira should have fought back. Anthony is an attorney and that is his mindset; however, Ira is not a contentious person and he is too hurt and wounded to even think about going to legal battle over the matter.

Anthony wants to marry Ira for some time but Ira deflects because he is sure that they will attract prejudice and hatred as a married gay couple and he is not sure he can



manage it. Eventually, though, they do marry at the end of the story and there is hope that Anthony's love and commitment will help strengthen Ira's resolve.

As an interesting note, Percy is not at all sure he believes in gay marriage but he takes his cue from Robert and attends the wedding to support Ira and Anthony. Knowing Ira and Anthony as people has helped Percy understand that there are real human beings behind the gay marriage issue and there is no place for broad judgments on the subject.

Radicalism

The author shows through Turo and Robert's experiences that radicalism can quickly get out of control and have far reaching effects. The undercurrent of radicalism begins immediately in the book and runs to the climax at the end. At the beginning of the novel, pranks such as filling a car with corn cobs are nuisances but no one is harmed and no real damage is done. However, when Laurel's house is destroyed toward the end of the novel, lives are in danger and crimes have been committed.

It is broadly understood that college students explore new ways of thinking and the time is perfect for finding a passion or a path in the world. Turo, however good his intentions to right societal wrongs, takes the thinking and activity to the extreme. Nothing is ever solved through destruction. If anything, more negativity will now surround Turo's organization now because of what they have done.

What started out for Turo and Robert as something bordering on humorous evolved into dangerous, criminal situations. Fortunately, Robert showed some maturity and pulled himself out of Turo's activities but not until he took the fall for the destruction of Laurel's house. Turo showed no loyalty to Robert by disappearing when the criminal charges came down and Robert learns an important lesson about the nature of friendships in the bargain. Robert is highly unlikely to ever resort to radicalism in the future, while Turo does not seem to have learned his lesson yet.

Change

The author shows through Percy's experiences how anyone can adapt to change if they open their mind to it. Percy's life is all about change ever since he retired and he struggles with all the adapting he has to do. Percy has dedicated his life to a career as a librarian at the Widener Library at Harvard. His world has been very structured and measured, so when he retires and is cast into a world full of change, it really throws him.

Retirement on its own is a major change that a person must adapt to and Percy tries to fill his time with jogging, swimming and being with his family. He also has more time now to really look at his life and his surroundings. He is saddened by the loss of the personal touch in local businesses and even bemoans the building of new houses that stand out in stark contrast to the historic houses in his upscale town.



Percy soon finds that he is able to lean into change and even begins a new romantic relationship with a single woman with a small child. Percy makes major adjustments, too, by allowing his barn to be renovated to accommodate a preschool. The level of activity and new people introduced into his world are at first startling for Percy but by the end of the story he has embraced change and everything that comes with it.

Social class

Much of the novel focuses on the distance between social classes and how debilitating it can be. Social strata are important in the story from the beginning as Percy ruminates over the changes that are taking place in his upscale community. He does not like some of the things that seem to lessen the value of where he lives and some of those elements are varying social class issues. Percy is fortunate to have had a prestigious, well-paying career as a librarian at Harvard and has been protected in an upscale cocoon. The town where Percy lives is known for being an exclusive enclave uncluttered by strip malls and fast food restaurants.

When something or someone out of the ordinary appear in this world, it alters the social class. For example, Turo, Robert's friend, comes from a third world country and does not have the money and advantages that Robert has. Celestino is another example; he came from a poor family in Guatemala and moved to the United States and lived with his benefactors, the Lartigue family. When Celestino connects with Isabelle Lartigue years later, it is clear that they cannot continue a relationship because he is a day laborer and she works in a university setting. The class differences are too great to make for a workable relationship.



Styles

Point of View

The author writes from the points of view of four characters in the story: Percy, Ira, Robert and Celestino. This allows for a more personalized perspective of the story. To make it even more interesting, the author writes Percy's chapters in first person narrative while the chapters written from the perspectives of Ira, Robert and Celestino are written in third person narrative.

The story as told from Percy's perspective is told from the first person narrative point of view. This means that the author tells the story directly in Percy's own words. As the narrator, Percy uses the pronoun of "I" throughout because the story is being told just as he sees it or experienced it. For example, the author writes, "I knew that I ought to feel an instinctual fatherly joy--here she was, safe and hopeful at the very least, possibly even content--yet most of the time I had to repress a certain resentment that she had made such a wreck of her life and then, on top of that, made me feel responsible for her all over again" (6).

With the third person perspective chapters, the author provides thoughts and feelings of that character. For example, the author writes, "The more Celestino lived on his own, the more he felt, and was ashamed of it, that each person stands alone and ought to be responsible for himself alone" (41).

Language and Meaning

The Widower's Tale is set in modern day, so the author uses terminology, euphemisms, and other references common for the twenty-first century.

The dialogue of the characters is appropriate to their age and gender too. Percy's style of speaking is more formal and his vocabulary is large as would be expected from a librarian. Robert and Turo, however, have the informal speech patterns and slang of college-aged men.

The author also captures mood well as Clover's exasperation with her life takes over. She tries to be calm but the author gives her measured restraint in what she says and how she says it. Sarah is also a very vivid character with language. Sarah is in a different generation from Percy and her style shows in her abrupt, clipped language while he takes more patience and care with how he talks to her.

Structure

The novel is structured so that the primary focus is on Percy's situation, observing how his character develops and adapts to the major changes that occur in his life in his later

years, particularly following the death of his wife. When the story begins, Percy is resisting the changes that go along with retirement, but by the end of the book, he has grown closer to his family members and even initiated a romantic relationship with a younger woman.

The author also develops the other characters through chapters dedicated to their points of view. Furthermore, this provides alternative perspectives on the same events to give the story a more well-rounded presentation, informing readers more accurately.



Quotes

I have it on commendable authority that dying is hard work, requiring diligence, stamina, and fortitude. Which I intend to maintain in ample supply until the moment of truth arrives."

-- Percy (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

Importance: Percy yells out to a kid who taunts him for jogging at his age. Percy's answer reveals his state of mind and his perspective on the world which he finds increasingly difficult to navigate.

Dad, I've heard all this before. It's sweet. You and Mom lived in a different time, believe me. But you know what? Let it go. Because listen, can I tell you something, Dad? You are turning into a crank! You've always been on the verge, but now it's finally happening.

-- Trudy (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: Percy whines about all the changes in his life so much that it is becoming tiresome for his family. They love him but his complaints, many of which are unfounded, have begun to get on their nerves.

You DO NOT know what it's like! You had that ABORTION because you couldn't deal with a little uncertainty! Maybe even ONE PERFECT CHILD is more than you ever wanted! Don't you DARE give me advice about being a MOTHER!

-- Clover (chapter 3 paragraph 4)

Importance: The relationship between Clover and Trudy has been strained for awhile because Trudy passes judgment on Clover's life. Clover reaches her point and yells back at Trudy who she feels is incapable of giving parental advice because Trudy had had an abortion due of potential complications with the child.

Because he has money. And two more children--those perfect little Aryan twins--yet to add their aid-free tuitions to the coffers. Let's see. Has he agreed to finance a new set of play equipment? A minivan for field trips to the science museum?

-- Ira (chapter 5 paragraph 4)

Importance: Ira learns that he has lost his job because the father of one of the students does not want his child to be around Ira because Ira is gay. Ira is angry and cuts to the core of the matter and why he has been terminated--the parent has money to pay full tuition for his children which will help keep the school running. If Ira were allowed to stay, the man would withdraw his children and the lack of the tuition money would negatively impact the school.

Ira, you've let yourself be bought out, for fuck's sake! I have to ask myself why you'd cave in so fast. Are you really that spineless?

-- Anthony (chapter 5 paragraph 8)



Importance: As Ira's partner and an attorney, Anthony is outraged about Ira's termination but he cannot help but feel that Ira did not behave as strong as he thinks he should have in the situation. Anthony is looking at the situation analytically while the experience was emotionally shocking for Ira who probably stood up the best he could in the circumstances.

Oh God oh God even if we aren't caught, I am NEVER doing this or anything like it ever ever EVER again. I am MOVING to the library tomorrow.

-- Robert (chapter 6 paragraph 4)

Importance: Robert cannot believe that he has agreed to help Turo in another one of his midnight escapades of violence and destruction. At first, he had admired Turo's passion to right some of the world's wrongs, but Robert realizes now that destruction and vandalism are not the solutions. This will mean a rift in the friendship between Robert and Turo but Robert has to live by his own code, not that of someone else.

Percy, is this about your wife? About Poppy? Because you couldn't save her, you want to save everyone else you possibly can? You're terrified that at any hint at mortality for someone you love, it's your job to be the crusader?"

-- Sarah (chapter 8 paragraph 6)

Importance: Sarah is resisting Percy's persistence that she get checked for the lump in her breast. She is an independent woman and used to taking care of herself so she resents the intrusion into the way she is managing her health. She tries to find a reason for Percy's interest and does not understand that in Percy's world, if something seems to be wrong, it should be investigated before it grows into something that might not be able to be managed successfully. The age difference between Percy and Sarah shows in how they process situations differently.

I had never honestly considered before how challenging your work must be, how much courage and steadiness it takes. Not the medicine, but the vulnerability of all those people who depend on you, daughter. How you hold them all together.

-- Percy (chapter 10 paragraph 8)

Importance: Percy has a newfound respect for Trudy after his first visit to her office and he has seen how admired she is and how much comfort she provides. He had gone to see her for her expertise in hopefully guiding Sarah but he learned much more about his daughter than her medical genius.

You want to give me something? Give me the eighteen years that separate us, Percy. Give me those years, just that many, in which to raise my son. Hang on to the decade or more that you've got left, fine, squander those years whatever way you like, but let me live to be seventy. And God help me if I'm half as patronizing when I get there.

-- Sarah (chapter 16 paragraph 5)

Importance: Percy is angry at Sarah for keeping her marriage to Gus a secret and for taking away the option of his marrying her even though he had always said he would



never marry again. He wants to be in Sarah's life, but she has to look at things realistically because she may die and she needs someone who could raise Rico. Percy is too old to do that so Gus is the only real solution. Sarah vents at Percy's self-centered views and his audacity to be hurt by a situation that he never really examined. He is only thinking about how he feels, not the real life for which Sarah must plan.

Turo's a believer in acting out your passions. He's dedicated to saving the earth. I mean, you know, working for people who do more than just talk about the environment, the habits we have to change. Like that.

-- Robert (chapter 17 paragraph 2)

Importance: Robert tries to explain Turo's radical behavior to his cousin. Robert believes in Turo's code of ethics, but does not approve of his methods of trying to achieve his objectives and make his points.

Okay, Gus and I are married--but it's so I can have his incredible health insurance. My treatment is going to be long and expensive. Gus has known Rico since he was tiny, and he really cares about him. They really care about each other. I mean, they're genuine friends. We're all... friends.

-- Sarah (chapter 18 paragraph 8)

Importance: Sarah has made the decision to marry Gus even though they are not really in love. Percy, especially, does not understand why she made this choice, but in marrying Gus, she has health insurance to cover massive financial obligations and Rico has someone constant in his life. Having cancer makes Sarah look at her life differently, especially because she may die and needs to know that Rico will be cared for by someone he knows and loves.

Oh, Poppy.

-- Ira (chapter 22 paragraph 2)

Importance: Even though it has been several years since Poppy died, she is still at the forefront of Percy's mind. Whatever happens, good and bad, Ira has a tendency to invoke Poppy's name just to have her near - at least in his heart and mind.